# An exploration of the perceptions and experiences of non-attenders and school staff within a secondary school context.

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# Abstract

Regular school attendance has been identified as being of paramount importance for social, economic, educational and emotional well-being. However, UK schools have experienced high levels of school non-attendance for several years.

Government legislation and research highlight the importance of early intervention to combat non-attendance. They also emphasise the need to involve pupils in decisions affecting their lives. However, despite much research into non-attendance, currently there is a paucity of research eliciting the views of non-attenders, particularly non-clinical samples and those at the early stages of non-attendance. There is also a lack of updated qualitative research around school staff experiences of working with non-attenders.

This study gained an understanding of the perceptions and experiences of secondary school non-attenders during their early stages of attendance difficulties particularly regarding support they had been offered or used. The study also explored the views of secondary school staff regarding their experiences working with non-attenders and their perceptions of the support available to help these pupils attend school regularly. Semi-structured interviews were undertaken with twelve pupils and six staff members and their perceptions were analysed using thematic analysis.

The study revealed that there are several factors impacting on pupils' unwillingness to attend school, particularly those negatively influencing their sense of school belonging and academic self-concept. Despite supportive strategies in place, non-attenders do not always perceive them as effective. However staff face clear challenges to implement more supportive measures. The key findings emphasised the importance of using an interactionist and systemic perspective to support non-attenders rather than a within-child or family perspective. School issues included a lack of opportunities to gain pupils' views, poor pupil-teacher relationships and ineffective school systems.

The research provides useful recommendations for educational professionals and educational psychologists to promote attendance through collaborative working, pupil participation and early intervention.

Declaration of word count

The word count (exclusive of appendices and list of references) is  38, 013 words


Declaration of own work

I hereby declare that, except where explicit attribution is made, the work presented in this thesis is entirely my own.

Signed



**Chenelle Beckles**

**May 2014**

In order to protect the anonymity of all persons involved in the study, pseudonyms have been used for the name of the school and for all pupils and staff that participated in the study or those who are mentioned.

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# GLOSSARY OF TERMS

This thesis frequently uses terms relating to school absence from the education and psychology domain. This glossary therefore serves to provide the definitions of the terms as they are used in this thesis.

| Terms | Definitions |
|---|---|
| *School attendance* | For the purposes of school attendance registers, the school day consists of two sessions (morning and afternoon) and pupils are marked absent or present for each session. These marks are converted to indicate the percentage of school sessions each pupil attends. Pupils are expected to attend school every day and therefore expected to achieve a percentage as close to 100% as possible. |
| *Non-attendance* | Pupil absence from school for an entire school day or part of the school day. |
| *Attendance difficulties* | Pupil absence from school due to challenges or problems (e.g. at home or at school) affecting their ability or willingness to attend. |
| *Authorised absence* | Pupil absence where permission has been granted by the school in advance or retrospectively (by subsequently accepting the explanation provided). For example [1]authorised holidays, exclusions, medical appointments, illness and study leave. |
| *Unauthorised absence* | Pupil absence without permission from school. For example no explanation for absence provided, unsatisfactory explanation provided and unauthorised holidays. |
| *Early and earlier stages of non-attendance* | Pupils at the beginning stages of the non-attendance spectrum who show emerging or initial signs of possible attendance difficulties. These pupils typically show occasional or sporadic absence to avoid certain days or lessons. |
| *Severe stages of non-attendance* | Pupils at the severe end of the non-attendance spectrum who have been absent from school for a significant period of time (E.g. 0-60% attendance at school). Some of these pupils eventually attend an alternative education provision as a result, for example, home education or education provision for vulnerable pupils. |
| *Persistent absence* | Government guidance referring to pupils who miss 15% or more school sessions within the school year (i.e. they have 85% attendance or less). This threshold is aimed to help |

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[1] Pupils are only permitted to take a leave of absence for a holiday in exceptional circumstances for a maximum of 10 days in an academic year. However for the holiday to be authorised, an application must be made in advance and can only be granted entirely at the head teacher's discretion.

| | schools identify and support pupils at the earlier stages of non-attendance. |
|---|---|
| *Truancy* | Pupil absence without the knowledge or permission from parents or school. |
| *School refusal* | Pupil absence or reluctance to attend school due to them experiencing severe emotional distress when attending or attempting to attend school. |
| *School phobia* | When a child has a specific irrational fear of the school environment causing them not to want to attend school. |
| *Parentally condoned absence* | Pupil absence caused by parents who collude with their child's non-attendance or parents who keep their child at home for their own benefit (e.g. for company). |
| *Separation anxiety* | When a child and sometimes the parent has an irrational and excessive fear of separating from each other which can cause the child not to attend school. |
| *Clinical samples* | Pupil participants in research who meet the criteria for emotional or psychological disorders such as anxiety disorder or depression. These pupils typically attend alternative educational provisions (e.g. home education, anxiety disorder centres, school refusal programmes or specialised clinics for school refusal behaviour). |

(Thambirajah et al., 2008, Taylor, 2012, DfE, 2013).

# CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

This study explored the perspectives and experiences of pupils with attendance difficulties and their school staff within a secondary school context. It was particularly centred on pupils who were at the early stages of non-attendance in order to capture their perspectives prior to their attendance difficulties possibly becoming more entrenched. The objective was to obtain their views in order to understand how to best meet their needs early to minimise the possibility of long term non-attendance. The research also aimed to explore the views of school staff to understand their experiences of managing non-attendance within their school. The study intends to contribute to the practice of educational professionals by raising awareness of the complexity of managing non-attendance and considering effective early intervention approaches to support non-attenders.

Non-attendance rests on a spectrum ranging from occasional reluctance to attend, to complete refusal (Thambirajah, Grandison, and De-Hawes, 2008). Research indicates that pupils' non-attendance issues progress along this spectrum throughout their school years. Therefore non-attenders in Years 10 and 11 have significantly lower attendance making it more difficult, and sometimes impossible, to resolve the attendance issues. This therefore highlights the importance of pupils being supported during the earlier stages of their non-attendance to avoid further complex issues (Taylor, 2012). Schools have often been criticised for their high levels of unauthorised absence. However this resulted in schools authorising absence more easily. They tended to accept plausible explanations from parents but this did not resolve the issue of pupils' non-attendance. Thus, government guidance has now evolved towards schools focusing on overall absence (Taylor, 2012).

Many different terms and definitions exist to characterise aspects of non-attendance. Historically, research has focused on categorising non-attendance into school refusal or truancy according to typical behaviours. However this is not helpful when supporting pupils as studies have illustrated that these describe pure cases whereas pupils can display some or lack some of the behaviours associated with truancy and school refusal (Lauchlan, 2003). Rather, the government and educational professionals have been advised to concentrate on improving attendance generally

rather than concentrate on particular labels for the associated behaviours (Taylor, 2012).

It is not uncommon for children not to want to attend school at some point during their school career but the majority of pupils are able to resume regular school attendance (Elliot and Place, 2012). However there are a minority of pupils that are frequent non-attenders and during the last three decades, the high proportion of non-attendance has been a concern to successive UK governments (Reid, 2014a). This has resulted in the establishment of government schemes, such as Connexions, Education Action Zones, Sure Start and Excellence in Cities, to contribute towards raising attendance (Reid, 2012a). The continued government concern regarding non-attendance is underpinned by their aim to "end child poverty in the UK by 2020" since research illustrates poor short and long term outcomes for pupils with low attendance (Walker and Donaldson, 2010 p. vii). Regular school attendance has been shown to be paramount for academic achievement, and improves the chances of pupils engaging in further education or employment after secondary school (Taylor, 2012). In the long term, non-attenders risk being socially excluded and having a lower socio-economic status (SES) therefore they have been considered a vulnerable group in need of early support (DoE, 2012).

Thus, as part of the current government agenda to prevent poor outcomes for vulnerable young people (Walker and Donaldson, 2010), they have prioritised raising attendance levels through robust amendments to legislation and guidance. These emphasise schools' responsibility to maintain and promote high attendance by intervening early (Taylor, 2012; DfE, 2013). Too often intervention takes place when the problem is likely to have become entrenched and therefore more complex to resolve (DfE, 2011). However, intervening during the earlier stages of attendance difficulties can present challenges, particularly as it can be difficult to identify pupils in need if they do not overtly demonstrate problems when in fact they are at risk (Walker and Donaldson, 2010). This makes the task of early intervention difficult for school staff who are devoting many resources to combat non-attendance. The situation however is that the national scale of the issue is complex and the dedication from schools to improve attendance is preventing the issue from exacerbating rather than significantly improving attendance (Reid, 2014a).

Non-attendance is a complex phenomenon which, to understand completely, requires an awareness of multiple influencing factors within the realms of sociology, psychology, education, social policy, legislation and many other areas (Reid, 2014a). Research studies indicate that the causes of absence are multi-dimensional typically caused by factors within the pupils' school environment, home environment or psychological difficulties (Reid, 2008a; Claes, Hooghe, and Reeskens, 2009). Factors such as poor teaching, poor teacher-pupil relationships, poor parental attitudes towards education, family discord, low self-esteem and low academic self concept have all been linked to poor attendance (Reid, 2008a; Reid 2014b). However there are also wide ranging factors across other areas which have been identified as influencing non-attendance. For example economic and social disadvantage, schools having insufficient resources to effectively manage non-attendance, poorly coordinated multidisciplinary practice amongst school staff and professionals, and the paucity of research into good management practice (Reid, 2014b). Therefore, it will require a systemic approach to assess pupils' individual needs and circumstances in order to identify appropriate interventions.

Educational Psychologists (EPs) have been identified as well placed to support schools with this approach not least because of their role in working systemically to create change within schools and families (Lewis, 1995). Pellegrini (2007) identified aspects of preventative and collaborative work which EPs could engage in at the individual, group and systemic level to promote attendance within schools. Indeed at least one Educational Psychology Service (EPS) has launched a project to raise awareness of non-attendance with school staff and agencies (West Sussex County Council EPS, 2004). This consists of joint training sessions with Education Welfare Officers (EWOs) and collaborative working with other agencies to help schools recognise some school factors which may cause non-attendance. However there is little research in the UK around EPs current working practices, knowledge and training needs regarding non-attendance. One large scale study was undertaken in 2000 by the Department for Education and Employment evaluating the working practices and training needs of EPs. Service users emphasised their desire to have more preventative support from EPs and also more school based services to support children with emotional needs. There was recognition that the EP service needed to balance their work from being more reactive to being more proactive and

preventative. Additionally, there was recognition for EPs to ensure social inclusion of children within mainstream schools (DFEE, 2000). This presents a case then for EPs to work more closely with schools to help them implement preventative and early intervention approaches to improve attendance. However the limited time available from EPs makes this more difficult (Elliott and Place, 2012).

The current political and economic climate is such where key services within local authorities have had to undergo austerity measures resulting in reduced financial budgets, staffing reductions and in some cases disbandment of services altogether. This has left many EPSs and Education Welfare Services (EWS) stretched to where the demand for their services often outweighs the capacity for staff to meet these demands. As a current Trainee Educational Psychologist (TEP) I have witnessed the adverse effects of these financial constraints on prioritising preventative work with non-attenders. Discussions with EPs, EWO colleagues and school staff further emphasised my observations and concern that non-attenders tend to be prioritised when the attendance issue becomes deep rooted often due to the lack of capacity for key agencies to be involved earlier. Therefore these deep rooted attendance issues tend to be more difficult to resolve. School staff discussed their challenges in improving non-attendance with limited support from external agencies. Typically school staff are the sole professionals managing non-attendance during the earlier stages and may enlist help from external agencies during the more severe and complex stages. This study is therefore apt since it explored the views of school staff working with non-attenders particularly during a period where many resources, including external agencies, are being reduced.

My interest in conducting research regarding pupils with attendance difficulties stems from my previous work experience. As an EWO, I worked with several schools to find the best ways to support pupils with attendance difficulties and their families. Often, there were many instances when these children's attendance fluctuated and some were never able to fully reintegrate into the mainstream school system. I also found that schools often implemented supportive strategies for non-attenders when the issue was at a severe stage rather than intervening earlier which made the process of reintegration more difficult. In addition, whilst working with other professionals to devise intervention plans, it often felt as though the pupil's views regarding their non-attendance were not fully considered. Rather, the government pressures on the

school to increase their attendance tended to place the school and professionals in a position to seek a quick resolution such as prosecuting parents which often did not resolve the underlying issues affecting attendance. Similarly, in my role working as pastoral care leader in a secondary school, I found there to be a lack of guidance and resources to support school staff in tailoring an intervention plan to support non-attenders. These personal experiences prompted me to focus my study on exploring the perceived experiences of pupils displaying school attendance difficulties and also the school staff working with these pupils.

British educational policies and legislation recognise the benefit of pupil participation in decision making processes affecting them and require schools to consider ways to implement this (Shevlin and Rose, 2008). There has also been considerable research indicating the personal value for pupils when they are consulted regarding their school experiences and how this can act as a protective factor against long term non-attendance (Fielding and Bragg, 2003; Tillery, Varjas, Roach, Kuperminc, and Meyers, 2013). However, there is still limited qualitative research regarding the views of non-attenders particularly those at the early stages of the non-attendance spectrum. Existing research has focused on clinical samples or children with severe levels of non-attendance. Considering research and government guidance highlights the benefits of implementing early intervention strategies to promote attendance, it would appear important to consider the views of those pupils at the earlier stages. This would help to understand their experiences from their perspective and thus add to the existing knowledge of appropriate support strategies to address their needs.

School staff hold the main responsibility of managing non-attendance and are therefore the main gatekeepers to pupils' access to additional support within the school context. They are also in a crucial position to implement any supportive changes to their school systems to facilitate higher attendance. However there is limited research into their experiences and perspectives in managing non-attendance (Reid 2006a, Reid, 2014b). It seems important then to consider their perspectives as this will help develop an understanding of how educational professionals can work together to support non-attenders particularly at the earlier stages of non-attendance.

This study is based on a sample of Year 8 and 9 non-attenders at the early stages of non-attendance with attendance levels between 77-87%. The research was conducted within one secondary school whose recent Ofsted report (March, 2013) highlighted that their pupil achievement, leadership and management and the quality of teaching required improvement.  Pupils and staff from this school were interviewed to consider their perspectives and experiences within their school context.  This adds relevance to the EP role since the main aspects of their role involves working systemically within a school context. The objective of the study was to use the findings to provide updated information relevant to the current financial, social and political context for educational professionals to better support non-attenders using early intervention approaches.

The following chapter provides an overview of the current situation and existing research regarding attendance difficulties in British schools. It also provides information on the complexity of managing non-attendance including the impact of different terminology and limited perspectives. The importance of gaining pupil views about their school experiences is also discussed. Chapter three provides details of the methodology used to conduct this research including the ethical considerations and analysis of data. Chapter four presents the findings from the research with pupils and Chapter five presents findings from the research with staff. Chapter six provides an overall discussion of the findings including the implications and recommendations for educational professional practice and finally ends with a conclusion of the research.

## CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

## 2.0     Introduction

This chapter provides an overview of literature in relation to school non-attendance. It will initially discuss the UK governments' response and guidance to effectively promote and maintain high school attendance levels. The importance of early intervention approaches will then be considered as well as the difficulties and costs involved in implementing this approach. Subsequently, the dominant conceptualisations of non-attendance and the complexity involved in this is presented as well as further discussions regarding previous research with non-attenders. The importance of gaining pupil views to improve non-attendance will then be considered as well as inclusionary approaches to support this. Information on the importance of using an interactionist perspective to manage non-attendance will then be discussed. Subsequently, good practice models and strategies to support non-attenders are considered before discussing previous research into staff perspectives of managing non-attendance. Finally a summary of key points and rationale for the study is provided followed by the research questions.

## 2.1     The Importance of School Attendance

Compulsory full-time education has been established in Britain since 1906 (Landsdown, 1990). It has been acknowledged as being in the welfare interest of all children as it is not just an opportunity to acquire formal qualifications but rather to acquire holistic development preparing them for life (Le Riche, 1995).

### 2.1.1  The UK government response and guidance to improve non-attendance

For several years, British schools have experienced high levels of school non-attendance. This has continued to be a concern and priority for successive UK governments to help schools improve or maintain high attendance levels (National Audit Office (NAO), 2005; Taylor; 2012, DfE, 2013). As part of these governments

drive to improve school attendance, millions of pounds have been spent over several years since 1997. This has included funding to local authorities and schools in order to promote better attendance management initiatives such as behaviour and attendance consultancy support for schools, Behaviour Improvement Programmes, electronic registration systems for more accurate monitoring of attendance, and establishing sanctions for non-attendance through increased emphasis on parental fines and prosecutions (NAO, 2005).

Additionally, legislation such as The Education (Pupil Registration) (England) Regulations 2006 and The Education Act 2002 emphasise the legal requirement for schools to ensure each child in the UK attends school by accurately recording and monitoring attendance. To support schools and professionals with this task, the government has provided guidance on effective attendance management practices (e.g. DfES, 2005; NAO, 2005; DCSF, 2008; Taylor, 2012; DfE, 2013). They highlight the importance of schools establishing clear attendance policies and communicating these to staff, students and parents so that they are aware of school expectations and consistent boundaries can be put in place. Guidance also emphasises schools contacting parents on their child's first day of absence to establish the reason for absence and promote early identification of pupils who may need additional support. Schools have also been encouraged to promote attendance through reward schemes and offering more vocational curricula to encourage attendance amongst pupils who may struggle to access more academic curricula. Sharing knowledge and resources between schools has also been encouraged as well as effectively liaising with the EWS to gain more specialist advice and improve school management practices. The government has suggested that schools regularly review their attendance policies and practices and establish clear points at which the EWS and other agencies may need to become involved to ensure better attendance such as supporting interventions or issuing penalties to parents. In particular, schools have been advised to establish and maintain a strong school ethos that values regular attendance and to use early intervention approaches to support non-attenders prior to their attendance difficulties becoming more complex.

Although research reports suggest that attendance improvement has been marginal over the last thirty years (Reid, 2014a), through this latest phase of government guidance and multi-agency efforts, attendance in England has shown some, albeit

slight, improvement since 2008 (DfE, 2014). Currently, overall school absence remains at 5.3%. Moreover, 22.4% of this overall absence represents 310,580 persistently absent (PA) pupils who missed 15% or more school sessions (DfE, 2014). It is this PA group that presents the most concern for the UK government, prompting them in 2011 to reduce the PA threshold from 20%, of school sessions missed, to 15%. This was aimed at encouraging schools to intervene earlier in combating attendance issues (DfE, 2011).

### 2.1.2  The importance of Early Intervention

The importance of early intervention is well documented in research and government advice in relation to supporting vulnerable children and young people (e.g. DCSF, 2010, Walker and Donaldson, 2010). Early intervention refers to 'intervening as soon as possible to tackle problems that have already emerged for children and young people' (DCSF, 2010, p.8). Thus it targets children with identified problems to provide them with support prior to their difficulties becoming more entrenched. It has been recognised as beneficial for children from pre-birth to 18 years old therefore it is not only helpful for young children. The benefits have been noted in many areas such as improving literacy, numeracy and anti-social behaviour in children and young people (DCSF, 2010).

### 2.1.3  Early Intervention to avoid consequences of non-attendance

In managing non-attendance, research suggests that early intervention is six times more likely to produce successful outcomes for pupils rather than when they have reached the severe stages of non-attendance (Reid, 2002). This is at least partly due to the likelihood of more complex factors affecting non-attendance by the time it reaches the severe stage compared to during the initial stages (Reid, 2012a).

The value of early intervention to improve school attendance can be observed when the short and long term consequences of non-attendance are considered. Throughout the last few decades researchers have highlighted the inextricable link between regular school attendance and educational attainment at every stage of the

school system (Scottish Council for Research in Education (SCRE), 1995, DoE, 2012). PA Pupils tend to achieve considerably lower GCSE results than their high attending peers (DfE, 2011). Short-term consequences of non-attendance also include distress and social isolation for the pupil. Additionally, families typically experience legal, financial and daily routine difficulties creating conflict within families (Kearney, Pursell, & Alvarez, 2001).

The long term consequences of non-attendance includes pupils being unlikely to engage in any education, employment or training (NEET) following their secondary education (Taylor, 2012) and are high risk for long term unemployment (Kearney et al., 2001). Therefore, long term, they tend to become more socially excluded and have a lower socio-economic status thereby creating the probability of intergenerational poverty (DoE, 2012). Students with long term non-attendance may also experience mental health problems (e.g. separation anxiety disorder, social phobia, and depression) (Lyon & Cotler, 2007), and poor social and marital relationships (Kearney et al., 2001; Brandibas et al., 2004). Researchers have also documented that long-term non-attendance can serve as a risk factor for dangerous and risk-taking behaviours such as suicide attempts, teenage sexual behaviour, violence and substance misuse (Kearney, 2008). This presents a cost not only to the individual but also their family and society and highlights the importance of intervening early to support non-attenders (Pellegrini, 2007).

### 2.1.4 *The cost and difficulties of early intervention for professionals*

Government legislation such as the Education Act 2002, the Education and Inspections Act 2006 and government guidance emphasise the importance and responsibility of local authorities and schools to promote early intervention in improving non-attendance (DCSF, 2009). This is because school staff and professionals within children's services are the key professionals who are most likely to identify pupils with attendance difficulties during the earlier stages (DCSF, 2010).

However the task of implementing early identification and intervening early to support non-attenders presents with several difficulties. For example, some non-attenders have difficulty articulating their concerns and anxieties causing parents

and staff to lack an understanding of their difficulties (Thambirajah et al., 2008). This can cause authentic reasons for their non-attendance being masked with explanations of minor illnesses such as headaches (Elliott and Place, 2012). This can also lead to parents being erroneously considered as condoning their child's absence. Another key issue is that non-attenders can present with defensive aggressive behaviour which serve to mask their underlying anxieties about attending school. Conversely, some non-attenders are well-behaved and therefore may go unnoticed by staff for lengthy periods of time (Thambirajah et al., 2008).

Additionally, the prevention and improvement of non-attendance is not without its own costs to schools and local authorities. At least one study by Reid (2006a) illustrated that school staff consider this task to be demanding on their resources. They highlight the disproportionate amount of time spent dealing with attendance issues often with few positive outcomes, particularly with PA pupils.  Indeed, the task of reducing school absence has been recognised as a progressively complex and demanding social difficulty that has been a concern to UK governments for several years (Reid, 2008b). However, the financial cost benefit and the benefits for children and adolescents' long-term outcomes have been shown to outweigh the cost of implementing early intervention approaches (DCSF, 2010). Thus, existing guidance advise schools and children's services to adopt a streamline approach to embed early intervention as a core part of their practice (DCSF, 2009; DCSF, 2010; Anderson, 2013).


## 2.2    <u>Conceptualisations of school non-attendance</u>

School non-attendance can best be conceptualised as a spectrum ranging from occasional reluctance to attend, to complete refusal (Thambirajah et al., 2008). Typically, non-attenders have been found to progressively worsen along this spectrum with each school year. This makes it increasingly difficult to combat attendance difficulties in Years 10 and 11 and highlights the importance of early intervention (Taylor, 2012). School non-attendance appears to emerge most during school transition stages such as upon entry to primary and secondary school (Pellegrini, 2007). Research suggests that school non-attendance is heterogeneous and common across gender, race and socio-economic status (SES) (Pellegrini,

2007). However, some studies (e.g. Attwood and Croll, 2006; DoE, 2012) have identified low SES as a potential risk factor for some non-attenders. The estimates of the prevalence of school non-attenders in the UK have been found to vary between 1 and 5% of all school children (Pellegrini, 2007). The reason for this variation is predominantly due to the varied definitions, terminologies and conceptualisations that exist (Thambirajah et al., 2008).

### 2.2.1 Dominant conceptualisations of non-attendance

Research into non-attendance across many countries has mainly focused on categorising it and distinguishing it between truancy and school refusal (Lauchlan, 2003). Historically, truants have been considered pupils without any major psychological issues who prefer not to attend school and often engage in delinquent behaviours (Elliott and Place, 2012). Researchers have considered truants not to feel excessive anxiety or fear in relation to attending school. Rather, they lack an interest in the curriculum, are unwilling to conform to the school's expectations and engage in preferred activities outside of school (e.g. anti-social activities with their peers). They are also considered to conceal their absence from their parents (Elliott, 1999). Studies (e.g. Attwood and Croll, 2006) have associated risk factors for truancy as low socio-economic family status, lack of parental engagement with school work, pupils' negative attitudes towards teachers and the low value they hold regarding education.

Comparatively, school refusers are deemed to desire attending school but they typically struggle due to anxiety and fear (Elliott and Place, 2012). Berg, Nichols, and Pritchard (1969) were one of the first researchers to suggest key distinctions between school refusers and truants such as the fact that they tend to stay at home with their parents' knowledge and not engage in significant anti-social behaviours. Additionally, anxiety, depression and social difficulties have been associated as particular risk factors for school refusal (Berg, 1996). However, other researchers have used other terms and definitions to categorise non-attendance such as parentally condoned absence, school phobia and separation anxiety which adds to the complexity of understanding non-attendance (Thambirajah et al., 2008).

### 2.2.2 The complexity of categorising non-attendance

Categorising non-attendance into such distinct groups has proven to be problematic as they describe pure and discrete cases whereas cross-cultural studies have shown pupils can have a combination of these behaviours. Crucially, researchers have suggested that school phobia and separation anxiety may actually be components of school refusal (Kearney, 2008). Similarly, long periods of school refusal may be erroneously considered parentally condoned absence when in fact parents have unwillingly conceded in their attempts at pleading to their child to attend school (Heyne and Rollings, 2002). Pupils have also been found to show a combination of truancy and school refusal behaviours (e.g. Bools, Foster, Brown, and Berg, 1990; Egger, Costello, and Angold, 2003). Furthermore, both truancy and school refusal can be manifested without the presence of any disorders and can be associated with factors such as bullying, social isolation and family conflict (Place, Hulsmeier, Davis and Taylor, 2000). Thus, some researchers (e.g. Kearney and Silverman, 1993) have opted to use the term school refusal behaviour to refer to all non-attenders irrespective of the cause of their non-attendance which adds to the ambiguity of terms used amongst professionals.

Therefore the value of categorising non-attendance into the aforementioned categories is questionable if we are to consider its' usefulness in responding to any issues affecting attendance (Lauchlan, 2003). Researchers have argued that categorising attendance possibly exacerbates the difficulties of adequately supporting pupils since it encourages professionals to view the issues as ensuing from within the child and their family and deflects any responsibility from the school environment (Pellegrini, 2007). Therefore, throughout this thesis the term non-attenders will be used to refer to pupils who experience difficulties attending school or remaining in school for an entire school day.

## 2.3 <u>Previous research with non-attenders</u>

Although a wealth of cross-cultural research on school non-attendance exists, the majority has neglected researching two areas: (a) the non-attenders' views and (b) non-attenders at the earlier stages of the non-attendance spectrum. Some studies

have centred on clinical samples of non-attenders where they are at the severe stages of the spectrum. These pupils typically attend a specialist clinical institution due to psychological or psychiatric symptoms such as clinical anxiety or depression. The main objective of these studies have been to test and evaluate clinical trials and therapeutic interventions rather than seeking pupil views of their educational experiences (e.g. Last, Hansen and Franco, 1998 ; Tolin, Whiting, Maltby, Diefenbach, Lothstein, Surrey et al., 2009; Heyne, Sauter, Van Widenfelt, Vermeiren, and Westenberg, 2011). This is contradictory to government legislation and guidance regarding the importance of professionals gaining pupil views in matters affecting them such as The Children Act 1989 and Special Educational Needs Code of Practice (DFES, 2002).

Most other studies that have actually sought the views of non-attenders have still concentrated on pupils at the severe end of the spectrum who attend an alternative educational provision (e.g. Attwood, Croll and Hamilton, 2003; Riley and Docking, 2004; Attwood and Croll, 2006; Nuttall and Woods, 2013; Gregory and Purcell, 2014). Considering the government legislation and guidance on implementing early intervention to manage non-attendance (DCSF, 2010; DfE, 2009), it seems important to consider gaining the views of non-attenders at the earlier stages of non-attendance in order to understand how to best support them during these stages.

However only a few studies (e.g. Malcom, Wilson, Davidson, and Kirk, 2003; Reid, Challoner, Lancett, Jones, Rhysiart, and Challoner, 2010) have attempted to gain some perceptions of pupils with less severe non-attendance levels. Malcom et al. (2003) conducted a large scale study with 528 mainstream secondary pupils and 662 mainstream primary pupils regarding their perceptions of absence. Amongst these pupils, 27% of primary pupils and 16% of secondary were considered poor attenders with truancy behaviour (missing school at some stage without parental knowledge). School related factors encompassed the main reasons for their low attendance. Primary students mainly mentioned bullying, boredom and disliking teachers. Secondary pupils also highlighted these issues as well as problems with lessons, the size and complexity of their school, anticipation of trouble, frustration with school rules, having no friends and peer pressure to truant. Reid et al. (2010) conducted focus groups with a cross section of 78 primary pupils from mainstream and

alternative education (Pupil Referral Units) with high and low attendance. Consistent with the study by Malcom et al. (2003), bullying was considered the main reason for non-attendance as well as poor pupil-teacher relationships. Additionally, pupils from the PRU cited school as 'boring and irrelevant' (Reid et al., 2010, p. 472) compared to their mainstream counterparts and valued tailored learning approaches which were considered successful for their reintegration.

Although these studies may have captured the views of some non-attenders during the earlier stages of non-attendance, their responses have been amalgamated with more severe non-attenders. Additionally, this information is limited as it tends to only focus on the reasons pupils provide for their non-attendance. What appears to be lacking is an in-depth exploration of their views regarding their educational experiences and the management of their non-attendance.

## 2.4    The Importance of Pupil Voice

The importance of gaining children's views regarding matters affecting them is well documented in international and national legislation. The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) was ratified by the UK in 1991 and highlighted the right for children to participate in decision making affecting their lives. Subsequently, in 2002 the United Nations Special Session on Children was the first of its kind to officially include children and young people's views on how 180 nations of the world can work together to improve their well-being (UNICEF, 2002).  The Children Act 1989 and the Special Educational Needs Code of Practice (DfES, 2002) also requires local authorities and educational professionals to seek children's views regarding the decision making about their public care and education respectively (Billington and Pomerantz, 2004). The importance of pupil participation and consultation has also been specified in educational policies such as 'Every Child Matters' agenda and Ofsted inspections now include pupils' views on their school (Ofsted, 2005). Most recently the new Children and Families Act (2014) reinforces the importance of professionals seeking the voice of children with Special Educational Needs (SEN) in matters that affect them.  Thus, seeking pupil views is embedded as a core part of the EP role as it is underpinned by these legislations and guidance.

Therefore, 'pupil voice' is becoming more recognised for its importance in creating effective change within school systems. The concept is for pupils to be invited to discuss their views on school matters (Arnot, McIntyre, Pedder and Reay, 2004). School staff can then use this information in order to make any necessary systemic changes and continue to monitor and evaluate their effectiveness (Flutter, 2007). Pupil voice then, helps to shift the historical concepts and theoretical developments that children are passive recipients of social and cultural change. Rather researchers argue that children are competent participants who can present ideas relevant to decisions about their lives (Bragg, 2007).

## 2.5    Gaining pupil views to promote attendance

### 2.5.1  Understanding non-attenders subjective perceptions

Relevant to understanding the importance of gaining pupil views is the early work of the psychologist George Kelly. He explained that to understand an issue it was crucial to seek the views of the people most concerned as it is vital to understand their self-perceptions and those of their environment (Kelly 1955). Each individual has their own unique perceptions as others have not shared the precise experiences or perceived all experiences in the same way. It presents an argument for seeking pupils' views to ascertain their individual perspectives in order to better understand their situation (Roller, 1998). Researchers have highlighted that the susceptibility for adult-child conflict happens when there is a mismatch in their perceptions when the adult erroneously assumes that the child's perception is an exact replica of their own (Gersch, 1992; Roller, 1998).

If we apply this to pupils experiencing attendance difficulties then, it would seem important to seek the views of non-attenders; it not only allows us to merely recognise how things are, but rather how pupils perceive things to be. This is more important because it is their subjective perceptions which influence their actions. Therefore, understanding their perceptions is invaluable to finding solutions to resolve attendance issues; any other perspectives, especially those from outside the school such as external professionals, may highlight some possible solutions but

they may not be effective when considering the pupils' perspectives (Flutter and Ruddock, 2004). Indeed, the guidance regarding early intervention highlights that in order for early intervention to be successful, children and young people need to be involved in the process (DCSF, 2010).

### 2.5.2 The personal value of gaining non-attenders views

Research has also illustrated the personal value to pupils when they are consulted. It has been found to improve personal characteristics such as their self-respect, sense of responsibility for their own lives, trust in adults and self-esteem (Fielding and Bragg, 2003). It has also been shown to facilitate a more democratic and inclusive school ethos and to enable improvements in teaching and learning (Flutter and Ruddock, 2004). These are personal and school characteristics which have been identified as impacting on attendance. For example, poor teaching, low self-esteem, low academic self-concept and rigid academic curriculums which marginalise those who are unable to access it are all factors which are linked to higher non-attendance (Corville-Smith, Ryan, Adams, and Dalicandro, 1998; Reid, 2014a). Furthermore, schools have been recognised as institutions where the hierarchical structure of staff holding the positions of authority in relation to pupils, causes extensive effects of power imbalance (Robinson and Taylor, 2013). However, this is not a recent occurrence, as literature by Giroux (1981) dating back several years pointed out that school values and processes serve as organisational restraints which result in pupils feeling powerless in their school environment. Thus, one of the main aims of gaining pupil views is to redress this power imbalance and promote empowerment (Busher, 2012, Robinson and Taylor, 2013).

These characteristics facilitate pupils feeling a strong sense of school belonging whereas non-attenders tend to have a low sense of school belonging. School belonging can be conceptualised as 'the extent to which students feel personally accepted, respected, included, and valued by others within the school social environment' (Goodenow, 1993, p. 80). Therefore for pupils to feel that they have a strong sense of school belonging, they need to feel emotionally attached and secure within their school community through feeling valued and valuing the community (Hamm and Fairclough, 2005). The importance of belonging is highlighted in early

psychology work by Maslow (1943). He devised the hierarchy of human needs where he proposed that the need for belonging has to be met in order for us to fully self-actualise. Thus, for non-attenders, if their school belonging need is met, they are likely to have more positive school outcomes. Indeed, a good sense of school belonging has been acknowledged as a protective factor against long term non-attendance (Tillery et al., 2013). It positively influences key personal values such as academic motivation and self-efficacy (Goodenow, 1993). Researchers have advocated that school staff are the key to pupils feeling a strong sense of school belonging such as through their pupil-teacher relationships and through promoting an inclusive school ethos and community (Tillery et al., 2013; Hamm and Fairclough, 2005).

This discussion of the psychological complexity of non-attendance illustrates the vulnerability of non-attenders and the need to acknowledge and address the many facets impacting on their non-attendance. Non-attendance is a complex phenomenon and requires professionals to "determine and resolve the various combinations of social, psychological, and institutional factors that are involved to a lesser or greater extent in each individual case" (Reid, 2014a, p. 4). Thus consulting non-attenders about their school experiences will help to gain their subjective reality in order to best support them.

### 2.5.3 Inclusionary approaches to gain pupil views

However researchers have criticised the attempts of educational professionals to consult some pupils in schools. The approaches used are often tokenistic whereby pupils' views are not fully taken into account but rather pupils are considered passive recipients of decisions rather than active co-producers (DCSF, 2008). Shier (2001) proposed a five level model of participation (Figure 2.0) as a guide for understanding how effective approaches are in promoting pupil voice.  The model recognises that pupils may be reluctant to express their views for many reasons such as low self-esteem or poor communication skills. Thus it advocates for adults to support them in this process.

**Figure 2.0: Adapted illustration of Shier's (2001) model of pupil participation (from DCSF, 2008)**

**Levels of participation**

Children share power and responsibility for decision-making

Children are involved in the decision-making process

Children's views are taken into account

Children are supported in expressing their views

Children are listened to

increasing empowerment and responsibility
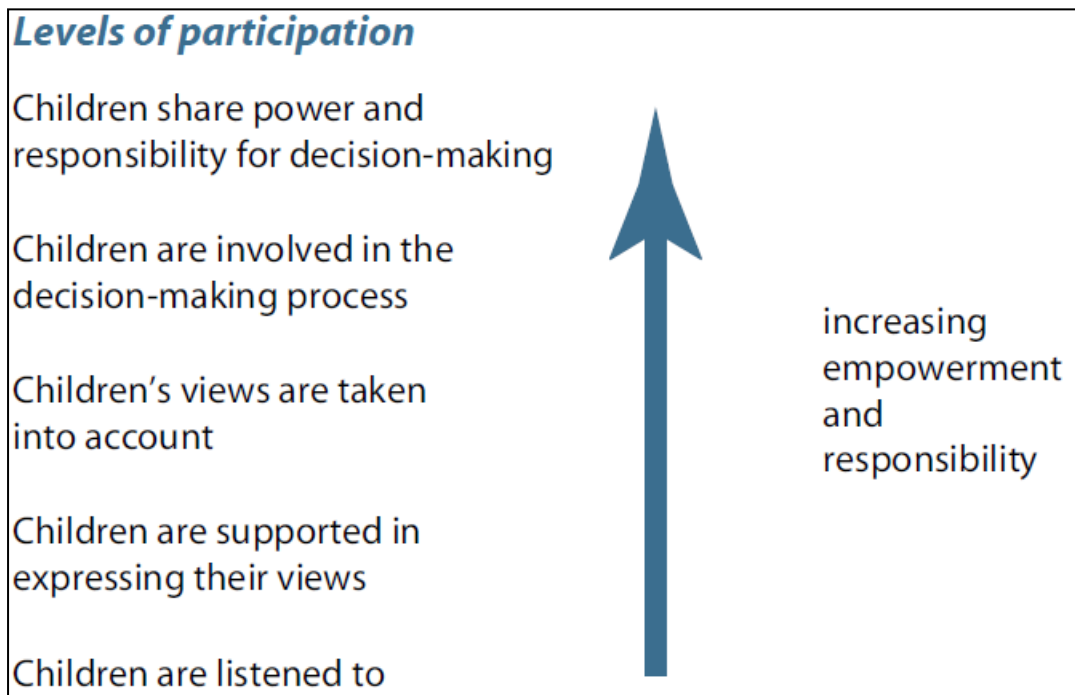
However, schools often use formal consultation methods, such as school councils, which are often skewed to favour only gaining the views of the most articulate and confident pupils. Disengaged and lower achieving pupils with less articulate skills seem to have limited opportunities to participate often exacerbating their sense of marginalisation within their school (Hartas, 2011). Many non-attenders fall into this category due to their low academic self-concept and SEN difficulties particularly with literacy and numeracy and often struggle to access the curriculum (Corville-Smith et al., 1998; Reid, 2014a). Hartas (2011) found that lower achieving pupils described a preference for more informal avenues to provide their views which help them to feel that they are genuinely being listened to. They also desire consultation methods tailored to their individual needs to elicit their views with the most success (Woolfson, Harker, Lowe, Shields, Banks, Campbell, and Ferguson, 2006).

It is not only exclusionary, but disadvantageous to simply gain the views of some articulate pupils since it produces only partial insights into pupil perspectives and therefore can only provide partial solutions (Flutter, 2007). Moreover, research suggests that schools possibly benefit most from gaining the views of the most concerning pupils to understand their difficulties within the school system (Arnot et al., 2003). Thus to maximise the chances of devising the best solutions for all pupils,

schools need to adopt more inclusive practices by consulting an extensive and varied range of pupils (Flutter, 2007). This illustrates the importance of seeking the views of non-attenders.

## 2.6 The importance of the interactionist perspective

### *2.6.1 The limiting perspectives of the dominant discourses*

Researchers have demonstrated the complex nature of non-attendance and with new issues emerging, such as cyber bullying and gang culture, the complexity of this phenomenon is evolving (Reid, 2014a). However dominant discourses regarding non-attendance tend to be the legal and clinical discourses which focus on the issues originating from the child and family without considering school and other systemic factors. For example, the legal discourse of education legislation, such as the Education Act 2002, infers that parents are the cause of attendance issues as they impose fines and legal orders on parents to ensure their child's full time attendance. Furthermore, and perhaps more importantly, the child's voice is diminished as they are viewed as passive subjects rather than active participants in their attendance difficulties (Pellegrini, 2007).

Similarly, the clinical discourses of the medical model tend to construct non-attendance as a clinical behaviour and imply that causal factors are within the child or family. For example, they use labels such as 'school phobia' and phrases such as 'treatment'. Currently, the medical model approach is used amongst some professionals as an assessment process to help inform appropriate interventions. For example some EPSs use scales and checklists, such as the School Refusal Assessment Scale (Kearney and Silverman, 1993) when working with school non-attenders (Gregory and Purcell, 2014). However, researchers caution that some aspects of the social context can still be overlooked and pupils' views ignored when only using this scale (Pellegrini, 2007; Gregory and Purcell, 2014). Thus, although the medical model provides some insight into understanding non-attendance, complex social and environmental factors are given less significance. This results in

explanations and therefore interventions to be focused on the pupil rather than adapting their environment (Gregory and Purcell, 2014).

### 2.6.2  The Interactionist perspective

Whilst some pupils may have a genuine clinical diagnosis influencing their non-attendance, this within child perspective is a limiting view. For example, the role of the school environment in promoting and sustaining good attendance has long been evidenced in research. Reid (1985) emphasised that issues within the school system were the trigger and maintaining factor leading to persistent absence. Parents and pupils attribute school factors such as problems with lessons, teachers and peers (bullying) as the main causes for non-attendance (Malcom et al., 2003; Gregory and Purcell, 2014). Similarly, most professionals acknowledge that some school factors play a role such as a rigid academic curriculum, pedagogy, bullying and teacher attitudes (Malcom et al., 2003, Reid, 2006a). However whilst some staff acknowledge that school issues may trigger non-attendance, many view the problem as originating from the home (Archer, Filmer-Sankey, and Fletcher-Campbell, 2003).

Therefore, an interactionist approach has been proposed to devise more effective support interventions; it advocates that there is a reciprocal link between non-attenders and their environment (Place et al., 2000). Consistent with this view, Thambirajah et al. (2008) recommend professionals to view non-attendance in terms of circular causality (reciprocal interaction between systems) rather than linear causality (one system causing the reaction of another system). Professionals then begin to understand that non-attendance is occurring due to interactions *between* people rather than *within* one person. Taking this view, the importance of gaining the perspectives of the parents, school staff, and the child is emphasised.

Thus rather than using the limited view of the medical model, Gregory and Purcell (2014) propose adopting the social model alongside systems theory to provide non-attenders with effective interventions and support. The social model views non-attenders as part of other systems within their social context which influence each other. It is underpinned by the principles of systems theory which considers the reciprocal rather than linear influences between subsystems within any context.

Therefore in relation to effectively supporting non-attenders, this will help professionals not to focus on only one potential cause of non-attendance thereby limiting potential effective interventions. It will facilitate professionals in engaging with and resolving contributing factors within the pupils' different subsystems (Miller, 2003).

### 2.6.3  Developing good practice to support non-attenders

For several years researchers have sought successful approaches and interventions to manage non-attendance (Reid, 2014b). However no single intervention has been proven to be unequivocally effective or appropriate for all non-attenders (Elliott & Place, 2012). Nevertheless some research and guidance highlight key recommendations for schools and professionals to effectively support non-attenders. School based interventions providing individualised support for non-attenders is highly recommended (e.g. Thambirajah et al., 2008; Reid, 2014a). These include peer mentoring and buddy systems where non-attenders can have access to a supportive peer and reduce their level of isolation and anxiety about attending school. Similarly adult and learning mentors have been recommended to help non-attenders have regular opportunities to discuss and resolve issues affecting their attendance. Ideally, a key member of school staff, such as pastoral assistants, fits this role as it allows non-attenders to be able to build a supportive relationship with an adult within their school who knows their school systems and can help to affect change.  Where non-attenders present anxieties or concerns around particular subjects or teachers, providing them with a reduced timetable or modifying the lesson to be more suited to the pupil has also been suggested as a helpful strategy to encourage their attendance. However, due to their anxiety, when supporting non-attenders they may need support to engage and express their feelings, for example through non-verbal means such as drawing (Thambirajah et al., 2008). For students who are disengaged or have missed school work through absence, providing a designated room to do work or providing individualised catch up lessons have also been shown to be supportive in encouraging school attendance (Reid, 2014a).

However, Pellegrini (2007) highlighted that often interventions are insufficiently planned and are structured on anecdotal evidence. This is important considering

research suggests poorly planned interventions which predominantly consist of sanctions with little pupil support are unsuccessful (National Centre for School Engagement (NCSE), 2007). Lauchlan (2003) advocated that the best interventions are individualised and tailored to meet not only the pupils' needs but addresses the multi-facets within their different systems. Thus, researchers advise schools to conduct an in depth assessment involving parents, the child and school staff to identify contributing factors to attendance difficulties (Nuttall and Wood, 2013). However, schools have been found to evade this step and advance directly into intervention strategies (Thambirajah et al., 2008).This causes the likelihood of not devising the most effective intervention (King, Ollendick, and Tonge, 1995).

EPs can support schools with this process as a core element of their role is to consider the interaction of systemic and holistic elements impacting on the pupils' context (Gregory and Purcell, 2014). Indeed EPs have been identified as well placed to conduct preventative and collaborative work to promote attendance at the systemic, group and individual level (Pellegrini, 2007). For example, at a systemic level they can conduct training for school staff and parents, at a group level EPs can liaise with school staff to plan, conduct and evaluate group sessions in social skills and Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT) and at an individual level, EPs can support school staff in conducting a comprehensive assessment of the pupil's needs. This can help make informed decisions with other agencies regarding the most appropriate interventions and EPs can support with the implementation of such strategies (Pellegrini, 2007).

## 2.7    School staff's management of non-attendance

### 2.7.1  The importance of seeking staff views

Local authorities have a responsibility to ensure schools are improving attendance in line with their set targets. Therefore schools work with key staff and external agencies to help combat the problem such as deputy heads, heads of year, form tutors, learning mentors, classroom assistants, home-school liaison officers and EWOs (Reid, 2006a). However many schools are still struggling to improve their

attendance and despite some research, there is a lack of information exploring the views of professionals and school staff regarding managing school attendance (Reid, 2006a; Reid, 2014a).

However, having established the importance of gaining pupil views, gaining the perspectives of school staff is of equal importance. Rather than pupil views dictating the leadership and structure of their school and disregarding any staff views, pupil perspectives should contribute towards those of the staff (Flutter and Ruddock, 2004). Often there are similarities with pupil and teacher views which help to form common objectives (Flutter, 2007). Together, pupils and teachers can provide the first-hand evidence to fully understand any systemic changes needed; they allow us to understand their perceptions and hence the aspects they consider to be important to make a difference to their experiences (Flutter and Ruddock, 2004). Thus, the combined perceptions of the pupils and staff will help to create a more holistic overview of possible contributing factors to non-attendance.

### 2.7.2  Research seeking school staff views in relation to managing non-attendance

Most research into the views of school staff in the UK regarding managing non-attendance is limited or has been conducted several years ago. Two large scale studies which sought staff views were that by Malcom et al., (2003) and Reid (2006a). A key explanation for this paucity of research may be due to the lack of emphasis the government has placed on exploring staff views and those of other professionals in relation to managing non-attendance (Reid, 2014b). The research that has taken place, do provide some insight into the perspectives and challenges of school staff. However currently new government initiatives and pressures exist and as most of these studies were conducted several years ago, current staff views may present different experiences and therefore should be explored.

Staff views illustrated that the absence definitions used interchangeably meant that they and other educational professionals tended to struggle with a clear understanding of the underlying reasons for non-attendance. This impacted on their ability to manage and support pupils effectively (Archer et al., 2003). Additionally,

school staff perceived that support agencies such as the Education Welfare Service (EWS) allocated insufficient time to support them. This was mainly due to the EWS being short staffed (Reid, 2006a). Another issue was the government pressures on schools to minimise unauthorised absence. Staff felt concerned that due to these pressures, pupil absence could be recorded inadvertently as authorised based on reasons given by parents (e.g. illness) when in fact they were truanting (Malcom, 2003; Reid, 2006a). Taking these issues into account, it illustrates some possible challenges staff may face when attempting to intervene earlier to support non-attenders.

However perhaps the most crucial challenge reported by staff was their lack of training in managing attendance issues. The majority of school staff and educational professionals, including EWOs, had not undertaken any training in this capacity which was a concern particularly for head teachers (Reid, 2006a; 2006b). Most school staff who had undertaken some training considered it to be insufficient (Reid, 2006a).  Archer et al. (2003) also found that educational professionals had limited knowledge and skills in working with school refusers and had limited training on these issues. Considering the government priorities to improve attendance levels and that teachers and EWOs are the main professionals tasked with achieving this, professional development training in managing attendance may be key to facilitating this process. Indeed Reid (2005) conducted a large training event for staff from all schools within a local authority which resulted in attendance improvements in several schools across the area. This was due to increased confidence amongst staff in managing attendance related issues, their increased awareness of factors affecting non-attendance and the implementation of new school procedures to effectively manage attendance.

Researchers have argued that managing attendance should be a core part of teachers' initial and professional development training (Reid, 2004, 2005). Past research has indicated that head teachers were concerned that most staff had to gain this knowledge and experience on the job. Thus, many staff felt that they were using every avenue to improve attendance but were still uncertain whether they were using the most effective strategies (Reid, 2006a). This highlights that a lack of training may not only be counterproductive to ensuring good practice but is also

perhaps professionally demeaning for professionals not to consider themselves efficiently trained (Reid, 2008a).

## 2.8    <u>Summary and Research Questions</u>

Improving and maintaining high attendance levels across schools nationally remains a priority for the UK government as school absence currently remains at concerning levels. Government guidance and legislation have advocated for schools and professionals within children's services to implement early intervention practices to support non-attenders prior to their attendance issues becoming more entrenched. This approach provides an effective way of minimising poor outcomes for non-attenders. However in order for early intervention to be successful, non-attenders need to be involved in the process.

Research regarding non-attendance has mainly focused on pupils who are severe non-attenders and have rarely sought non-attenders views. Therefore there is a paucity of information regarding the in-depth perspectives of non-attenders at the early stages of their attendance difficulties. Considering the objective of professional practice is to intervene during the earlier stages of non-attendance it seems crucial to understand the views of these non-attenders to ensure successful intervention. Gaining their subjective perspective will help to understand important systemic factors maintaining their non-attendance.

Non-attendance is a complex phenomenon with the issues arising from interactions between the pupil and the systems within their social context. Thus, successful interventions require an individualised yet systemic and multi-layered approach. However school staff face several challenges in attempting to intervene early and provide supportive and successful interventions to promote attendance. Although they implement approaches to effectively manage non-attendance, challenges such as inadequate support from EWOs and lack of training may cause them difficulties in providing more successful strategies. Staff therefore are a key component to effective management of non-attendance and as such an understanding of their perspectives and experiences will help to determine strategies to support them with this task. Managing non-attendance is complex; therefore the perspectives of the

pupils and staff will be key to understanding how to support non-attenders early and effectively.

This study explored the perspectives of early stage non-attenders and school staff. Due to the paucity of research seeking the views of mainstream pupils during the early stages of their non-attendance, this study focused on a sample of Year 8 and 9 pupils with attendance levels between 77-87%. The study took place within one school since pupil and staff perceptions may vary in different schools due to the different contextual factors and different school procedures when managing attendance. It was also intended to determine any common issues and discrepancies within staff and pupil perceptions. Additionally, focusing on one school context adds relevance to the EP role as the focus of EP work predominantly entails exploring ways to create systemic, group or individual change within one school context. The overall objective of this study was to provide additional and updated information to inform educational professional practice in effectively supporting non-attenders particularly at the earlier stages.

The research questions for this study were:

1- What are the perceptions and perceived experiences of pupils during the early stages of their school non-attendance?

2- What are the perceived experiences of the type of support pupils have been offered or used since experiencing attendance difficulties?

3: What are the perceived experiences and perceptions of school staff working with pupils who are experiencing attendance difficulties?

4: What are school staff perceptions and experiences of the systems available in their school to prevent and support pupils with attendance difficulties?

# CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

## 3.0    Introduction

This chapter presents the methodology used in this research. It initially discusses the philosophical underpinnings and rationale for the research design followed by information on the recruitment of participants, research procedure and ethical considerations. Finally an overview of the rationale and approach of the data analysis will be provided.

## 3.1    Philosophical Stance

Ontological positions in research are the philosophical beliefs of how much reality actually exists, independent of human interactions and social constructions. The variations in beliefs rest on a spectrum ranging from the concept that reality is entirely independent from, and therefore is not reflective of, human interactions, perceptions and social constructions (realism) to the concept that reality is entirely dependent of these (relativism). This study was underpinned by the critical realist ontological position which rests between these two views in the middle of the spectrum. It posits that there is not one single reality since reality is socially influenced by human interactions. However it assumes that some true authentic reality does exist which helps to produce knowledge, particularly in research, that can be used to inform and create change in our world (Braun and Clarke, 2013). Therefore this study assumes that the perceptions of the pupils and staff are not the only truth or reality. However their perceptions reveal some truth and reality regarding attendance difficulties which help us draw conclusions and an understanding of individuals' experiences of non-attendance.

Another philosophical stance of this research is the epistemological assumption, that is, the view of what constitutes meaningful knowledge and how it is produced. Epistemological assumptions range from the notion that knowledge is wholly objective to the view that knowledge is subjective. This research holds the assumption that each participant, and indeed the researcher, have their own version of reality and are therefore co-constructing or creating 'the reality' together (Robson, 2011). Therefore the research is based on the epistemological assumptions of the

social constructionist paradigm. It posits that knowledge is constructed through our social interactions with others and therefore different versions of knowledge exist rather than an objective reality (Burr, 2003). In this research, the understanding of non-attendance is therefore constructed through the participants' subjective perceptions of their experiences.

Social construction views that language is the main component which forms and constructs our perceptions of the world; it provides us with a framework of meaning for our thoughts and concepts (Burr, 2003). Therefore this study obtained the perceptions of pupils and staff through their language to gain insight into their understanding of their experiences.

Social construction also views that our understanding of the world is specific to and influenced by our culture and periods of history. Therefore this research views that the knowledge produced from the pupil and staff perceptions is influenced by the current social and economic period and also their cultural environment including the school environment (Burr, 2003).

### 3.2    Rationale for Research Design and Method

A qualitative research design was selected since it matched the aims of the research in several ways. Quantitative research methods are more suited to testing hypothesised and causal relationships and measuring the generalisability of phenomena (Elliott Fischer, and Rennie, 1999; Yardley, 2000). Whereas, qualitative research methods are most appropriate for exploratory studies allowing an in-depth understanding of the 'interwoven aspects of the topics or processes studied' (Yardley, 2000, p. 215). Although quantitative methods can be used to conduct exploratory research, qualitative methods are most suited to research concerned with understanding a particular research topic through the participants' perspectives (Elliott et al., 1999). It generates in-depth, rich and detailed data for interpretation (Braun and Clark, 2013).

The principles of qualitative research acknowledge that our knowledge and experiences are not based on an objective reality but rather our subjective perceptions which are shaped by our language, social interactions and cultural

perspectives (Yardley, 2000). Thus, unlike quantitative methods, qualitative methods recognise there are various ways of interpreting data rather than only one truth. It acknowledges the subjectivity within both the data and the interpretation of data and allows it to be incorporated into the analysis (Braun and Clark, 2013). Therefore it incorporates, rather than denies, the researcher's perceptions which helps to facilitate a more adequate understanding of participants' experiences (Elliott et al., 1999).

Qualitative research has been critiqued for not including a representative sample to allow findings to be objective, replicated and generalised to a larger population. However qualitative researchers highlight that obtaining large sample sizes which are statistically representative would produce an immense amount of data that would inhibit the ability to conduct an in-depth analysis. Thus qualitative research often requires recruiting a small sample with particular attributes of interest for the research topic (Yardley, 2000).

This research therefore consisted of recruiting a small sample of participants with attendance difficulties. More specifically, pupil participants were recruited from Years 8 and 9 as the study was concerned with pupils at the earlier stages of non-attendance whereas research shows that non-attenders in higher year groups have more entrenched attendance difficulties.

One school was selected for this study as it had high absence levels. This purposive recruitment process is consistent with the aims of qualitative research as it allowed opportunities for participants to provide relevant and rich information regarding the research topic (Patton, 2002). Researching within one school context was also considered appropriate since participants would share some experiences within their school environment to help shape and construct their versions of knowledge.

Qualitative methods have also been recognised as a valuable approach to obtaining the subjective views of individuals who are marginalised or underrepresented in psychological research (Braun and Clarke, 2013). Research into non-attenders views is particularly lacking and therefore qualitative methods fits with the aims of this research to explore the views of these underrepresented pupils.

The qualitative method selected for data collection was individual semi-structured interviews; it permits the flexibility necessary to acquire the depth and variation of participants' responses using their own words and frame of reference. It also recognises the researcher's role in jointly constructing knowledge with participants by helping to explore and develop an understanding of their experiences through their interaction during the interview (Braun and Clark, 2013). Thus, it acknowledges the researcher's influence in generating meaning from participants' views. Therefore, this was deemed appropriate to fulfil the research objective which was to gain an in-depth understanding of the various perceptions and meanings that participants attached to their experiences.

Other research methods such as questionnaires and focus groups were not considered appropriate as they would not have facilitated obtaining the in-depth individual voice of each participant. Unlike interviews, questionnaires tend to omit the complexity in participants' perspectives (Yardley, 2008). In addition, pupil participants in this study were considered to be vulnerable due to their circumstances such as being a young carer to parents with mental health difficulties and terminal illness, having emotional and behavioural special educational needs, being a victim of bullying, having a transient and chaotic home life, and experiencing family financial hardship. Thus, it was considered important to build a rapport with each of them individually and ensure their confidentiality which was aided through conducting individual interviews rather than focus groups or questionnaires.


### 3.2.1 Myself as a Participant

As this research adopted a qualitative design based on a social constructionist paradigm, I have remained conscious of the subjectivity of my research. It is acknowledged that the qualitative researcher brings their own perspectives and beliefs to the research and these will be reflected in any interpretations and knowledge produced (Braun and Clarke, 2013).

I have reflected on how my background, values and previous experiences may impact on my approach to this research and my interaction with participants. I value education for all children and having previous EWO experience I am conscious of

the difficulties for pupils and staff in improving non-attendance. In addition, as a current TEP, I recognise how the current political and financial climate impacts on resources to support non-attenders. Therefore whilst conducting this research and interpreting the data, I have attempted to be transparent in critically reflecting on my influence in producing the knowledge derived from this research.

Prior to conducting the pupil interviews I met with them individually to build a rapport. This also helped to redress the inevitable adult-child power dynamic which is frequently noted in research with children where, due to their minority and incompetent status, adult views supersede those of the child (Kellett, 2010).

Finally, I remained reflective by keeping a record of my thoughts around the data collection process, reasons for any modifications to the design or procedure and the process of analysis and interpretation. My objective was to reflect on any personal assumptions and have as accurate an account as possible of the research process.

### 3.2.2  Participatory methods

Within the social constructionist paradigm, the assumption is that language is the main component which forms and constructs individuals' perceptions of the world (Burr, 2003). Therefore gaining pupil and staff views through interviews was considered appropriate to understand their individual perceptions. However, qualitative research recognises that the interpretation of data is the researcher's interpretation of the participants' story (Braun and Clarke, 2013). It was therefore important to ensure that the research methods used would elicit pupil and staff perceptions as accurately as possible.

The semi-structured interview method alone was deemed appropriate to obtain staff perceptions. However, in agreement with researchers such as Lewis (2004), I acknowledged the need to consider the authenticity, credibility and reliability of the research methods used to elicit the views of the pupils, particularly since some pupils had identified SEN difficulties.  Although interviews have been recognised as suitable for secondary aged children (Mauthner, 1997), using multiple or participatory methods in qualitative research with pupils have been recognised as a valuable tool in gaining an understanding of their perceptions (Darbyshire, MacDougall and

Schiller, 2005). It involves using creative and visual approaches to facilitate a more interesting method for pupils to discuss their views within their capacities such as drawing, role-play and visuals (Kirby, 2001)

Thus, this study used some participatory methods during the interviews with pupils to elicit their views and gain a more accurate interpretation of their perceptions. Personal Construct Psychology (PCP) and Solution Focused Brief Therapy (SFBT) methods have been recognised as useful in obtaining pupil views (Hobbs, Todd and Taylor, 2000; Roller, 1998). Therefore this study incorporated multi-methods from these approaches. 'The Drawing the Ideal School technique' is based on the principles of PCP and was selected as it has been shown to enable 'pupils to express their views using a mixture of drawing, talking and writing' regarding the type of school they would like (Williams and Hanke, 2007, p. 134). Additionally, scaling questions were used which are based on the principles of SFBT. This allowed pupils to inform the researcher about observations, impressions and predictions about their attendance difficulties by rating their thoughts on a scale of one to five. This enabled the researcher to identify what was working well and help pupils describe how aspects of their school experience could be improved (Redpath and Harker, 1999). Each of the scaling questions was presented in an A4 sized coloured visual format (see Appendix 1 for example). Pupils were then able to use a pencil to illustrate the number where they rated their thoughts on the scale. For example pupils circled, ticked or crossed the number or they shaded in the rectangular area surrounding the number.

Timelines and images have also been suggested as useful participatory methods (Kirby, 2001). This research used an A3 sized timeline (see Appendix 2 for A4 version) which represented the period of time since pupils started secondary school. It helped pupils identify different periods of time when situations may have positively or negatively affected their attendance. Pupils were able to draw or write on the timeline to illustrate their thoughts and feelings. An A3 sized chart with images and labels of different emotions (see Appendix 3 for A4 version) was also used to facilitate pupils in explaining their thoughts and feelings regarding their experiences.

## 3.3    <u>Sample</u>

### *3.3.1  The Context of Sunny Dale School*

The research took place in one mainstream secondary school within in a large local authority.  Following discussions with the EWS manager and link EP to the school, Sunny Dale School was considered the secondary school in the area with the highest absence levels requiring much input from the EWS. The EWS manager and link EP also considered them to be the secondary school in the area most in need of reviewing their systems to improve their attendance. Their latest Ofsted report (March 2013) data also illustrated that their whole school attendance level was very low (90.9%) placing them amongst the lowest percentage of all schools nationally. Additionally their attendance level had decreased within the last two academic years.

At the time of this research 883 pupils were enrolled at Sunny Dale School with 49% girls and 51% boys. The majority of the students attending this school are White British. Amongst enrolled pupils 39.9% were eligible for free school meals which was 11.7% higher than the national average indicating the likelihood of a low socio-economic (SES) demographic. In relation to the *Special Educational Needs Code of Practice* (2002), the proportion of pupils supported through School Action Plus and Statements was 8.2% which was only 0.5% higher than the national average. Available records indicated that students tend to start at Sunny Dale School with attainment levels often well below the national averages. Additionally, in 2013, GCSE results indicated that 29% of pupils achieved at least five A\*-C grades including English and Mathematics which remains substantially below the national average (60%). Their latest Ofsted report (March 2013) highlighted that as well as pupil achievement, the leadership and management and the quality of teaching required improvement.

The demographics of children at this school, and therefore my sample, are unlikely to be representative of all schools, particularly with regards to ethnicity. However the incidence of non-attenders has been found to be equal across ethnicity (Pellegrini 2007). Nevertheless, aspects such the higher levels of low SES, and the need for

improved quality of teaching, leadership and management are consistent with studies demonstrating these as factors related to higher non-attendance (e.g. Attwood and Croll, 2006; Reid, 2008a).

### 3.3.2  Participant Recruitment

<u>Staff Participants</u>

The researcher emailed a consent form and details of the study to the school SENCo and asked her to forward the email to all school staff. The email requested all staff interested in taking part in the study to contact the researcher via email to arrange a mutually convenient time to conduct the interview. Six staff participants contacted the researcher with an expression of interest and were subsequently recruited for the study. Due to the fact that this research was conducted with a small sample of staff participants within one school, their participant information, such as their job title and years working at the school, will not be disclosed in order to protect their anonymity.

<u>Pupil Participants</u>

Selection criteria for pupil participants were developed based on the research objectives. Firstly, it aimed to gain the views of pupils during the earlier stages of non-attendance. Government guidance indicates that schools should intervene earlier, at 85% attendance, to combat attendance difficulties (DfE, 2011). Therefore it was considered that pupils with attendance levels during the previous academic year approaching 85% and those just below should be selected; they would be able to provide perceptions of the experiences affecting their attendance and their experiences of how the school has supported them in managing their attendance difficulties. The research used a 10% threshold whereby pupils with attendance between 87% and 77% were included.

Secondly, it aimed to obtain the views of vulnerable non-attenders who were not engaging in anti-social activities or truanting. Research (e.g. Malcom et al., 2003; Reid, 2006a) shows that pupils sometimes mask their attendance difficulties through illness. Therefore it was considered important to include pupils who had reported illness which had not been proven as genuine (e.g. via information from a medical

professional). Pupils with authorised absences such as holidays and exclusions were omitted unless their unauthorised absence alone reached between 87-77%.

Thirdly, the research aimed to gain the views of a non-clinical sample therefore any pupils with known clinical or psychological difficulties (e.g. anxiety and depression) were excluded from the study.

Therefore the selection criteria were as follows:
- Pupils with attendance between 87% and 77% predominantly due to unauthorised absence
- Pupils who primarily remain at home with parental knowledge when absent during school hours
- Pupils with no known anti-social behaviours (e.g. delinquency)
- Pupils with no known clinical or psychological difficulties
- Main reasons for absence due to reports of illness or pupil refusing to attend

14 pupil participants were initially recruited from Years 8 and 9. Year 7 pupils were excluded since their attendance data for their secondary schooling did not exist at the time of commencing the research. Parental consent and pupil consent was subsequently sought (see procedure and ethical considerations). Following this process, two participants were subsequently excluded due to consent not being obtained from one parent and one pupil. Therefore 12 pupils participated in the research. Table 3.0 below illustrates the pupil participant information.

**Table 3.0- <u>Pupil participant information</u>**

| Pseudonym | Time spent in Sunny Dale School (to nearest year) | Identified SEN? | Year Group |
|---|---|---|---|
| Ben | 1 year | No | 8 |
| Jess | 1 year | No | 8 |
| Joe | 1 year | Yes | 8 |
| Leah | 1 year | No | 8 |
| Paul | 1 year | Yes | 8 |
| Sophie | 1 year | Yes | 8 |
| Luke | 1 year | Yes | 8 |
| Ann | 2 years | Yes | 9 |
| Jake | 2 years | No | 9 |
| Kim | 2 years | Yes | 9 |
| Lynn | 2 years | No | 9 |
| Mark | 2 years | No | 9 |

## 3.4    <u>Planning and Developing the Interview</u>

### 3.4.1  *Initial development of interview questions*

Questions for the interview schedules were developed following consideration of previous research and areas that I thought would help to inform educational professional practice. Pupil interview questions mainly centred on their experiences which may have led to their non-attendance, and their perceptions of supportive interventions. Staff interview questions concerned their experiences working with non-attenders, and perceptions of their current support systems.

Interview schedules were developed using open-ended questions and avoided any leading questions. Questions were sequenced so that the topics were clustered and flowed in a logical format starting with more general and rapport building questions leading into more specific questions (Breakwell, 2006). However since these were semi-structured interviews there was flexibility during the interview in terms of the order and wording of questions depending on how participants responded. Prompts

or probes were added for some questions where it was considered that I may wish participants to expand on some responses (Braun and Clarke, 2013).

### 3.4.2 Pilot and modifications

Prior to data collection a pilot interview was conducted for the pupil and staff interview schedules. Reflections are described below.

_Pilot with pupil participant_

This was conducted with one Year 8 participant who matched the selection criteria. Feedback from the pupil indicated that the participatory methods helped her to understand the question and explain ideas. However she would have preferred an explanation of the participatory methods prior to starting the interview because sometimes it took a while to understand how to use it. I therefore ensured that I explained all participatory methods prior to starting subsequent interviews. The pupil indicated that the questions were not too difficult to understand or answer.

Upon reviewing the interview data, the research tools, interview questions and prompts facilitated relevant information to answer the research questions. However, I noticed that the wording of some questions was too long causing the pupil to ask for repetition. I therefore shortened some of these questions by separating the question into two or three parts rather than one long question (e.g. Can you think of some of the times when you have not attended school for some time? What were your thoughts or feelings at the time? Was there anything or anyone that helped to encourage you to go to school? Who or what?)

Secondly, I thought the session lasted too long (just over 1 hour) due to the amount of different activities and questions. This did not allow much time for debriefing the pupil and I felt that it would impact on the pupils' concentration and therefore their ability to provide accurate responses. Thus, I omitted two aspects of the interview; the 'Ideal School' technique and two questions regarding specific information about the lessons they liked and disliked. These were chosen as I noticed that the views of these areas had been answered through other interview questions and participatory

methods (see Appendix 4 for the pilot interview schedule and Appendix 5 for the revised schedule).

*Pilot with staff participant*

This was conducted with a secondary school teacher within the same local authority. Her feedback indicated that the questions flowed in a logical manner and the scaling questions were useful, both of which aided her understanding and answering of the questions. However she found difficulty recalling the systems in place at her school to manage non-attendance and thought prompts would help for this question. I therefore added prompts to help staff discuss these systems.

Reflecting on interview data, the interview questions provided relevant and in-depth information to answer the research questions. However there were some questions which could have potentially elicited more in-depth information if there were scaling questions added or more questioning around the reasons for their responses. I therefore added these to some questions. For example, I added a scaling question to expand on the usefulness of any training and why they scaled it as useful or not (See Appendix 6 for the pilot interview schedule and Appendix 7 for the revised schedule).

## 3.5    **Data Collection Procedure**

Collecting the data for the pupils consisted of all four steps below. Data collection for staff participants consisted of steps one, three and four.

1. During the first step I spent four days in the school in a teaching assistant role observing lessons and having informal discussions with pupils and staff. This allowed me to immerse myself in the school environment. It helped to build my knowledge and experiences of the school, from the pupil and staff perspective, and facilitated the co-construction of the knowledge within the school context. This also helped prospective participants to observe me in their environment which served as a useful first step in building a rapport.

2. The purpose of the second step was two-fold; (a) to build a rapport with the pupils and (b) to explain the research to pupils in order to obtain their consent. I met with each pupil individually in a separate room to introduce myself and use a PowerPoint presentation (Appendix 8) to inform them of the purpose and process of the research. Subsequently, pupils were given the opportunity to decide whether they wanted to take part and give their written consent or not. Building a rapport with the pupils was considered important in order to gain their trust and develop a research relationship to help participants to feel comfortable during the interview session. Considering that these participants were vulnerable, it was hoped that building a rapport would help to reduce any potential anxieties.

3. I then returned on a subsequent day to conduct the interview. Each participant was interviewed separately in a quiet room in the school using a semi-structured interview. A Digital Voice Recorder (DVR) was used to record the interviews to accurately capture all of the information discussed.

4. Following the interview, I allowed opportunities for debriefing. Pupils and staff were able to ask any questions or discuss any aspects of the interview and research. I also thanked them for their participation and provided my contact details should they wish to discuss anything further. I also explained the next time I would be in contact with them (i.e. to provide them with the findings of my research). I provided pupils with a debrief letter (Appendix 9) to thank them and explain these aspects so that they had a written record.

## 3.6    Ethical Considerations

As well as receiving ethical approval through the university ethics committee, throughout conducting this research, I ensured that ethical principles in the British Psychological Society (BPS) Code of Human Research Ethics (2010) guidelines were followed including those regarding researching with vulnerable children.

### 3.6.1  Valid Consent

Verbal consent was initially sought from the school head teacher prior to starting the participant recruitment process. Subsequently staff consent forms (Appendix 10) were signed by all staff participants and parental consent for all pupil participants was obtained via an opt-out consent form (Appendix 11). The consent forms contained full details of the research and ethical considerations to ensure parents and staff had the required information to make an informed decision. Additionally, as this was a vulnerable group of children (BPS, 2010), prior to starting data collection, all parents who had given consent (by not returning the opt-out slip) were telephoned to confirm verbally that they were in agreement for their child's participation and to answer any potential questions.

I also ensured that pupils were able to make informed decisions about participating in the research and documented their written consent. A visual PowerPoint presentation and child friendly language was used to engage the pupils and aid their understanding about the research. Pupils' understanding of the research was checked using specific questions on the pupil consent form (Appendix 12).

During the PowerPoint presentation and prior to interview, pupils were advised that they had the right to decline taking part and also the right to withdraw from the study at anytime without any consequences. Methods of withdrawing were clearly explained to them. During the interview pupils were provided with a red card (see Appendix 13 for paper copy) which they could hold up to indicate that they wished to withdraw (Harker, 2002). Staff participants were also explained their right to withdraw at any time and confirmed that they could inform me verbally at any point during the interview or via my work contact details.

### 3.6.2  Confidentiality

All information shared by participants was anonymised (using pseudonyms or letters) and kept confidential. Also, due to the small sample size and single school context, feedback of findings to the school and participants will not include any quotes or detailed information to protect participants' anonymity. The safety and security of interview data was ensured by saving all information in a secure electronic file which

could only be opened using a password. All electronic data was deleted from the DVR and any computer device following transcribing.

### 3.6.3  Risk and Minimising harm

Since vulnerable pupils were involved, a criminal records disclosure was obtained prior to commencing the research. Additionally, prior to each interview with pupils they were informed that the child protection officer of the school would be informed if they revealed any information which was deemed to be placing them at risk of harm (Kellett, 2010).

During the interview with pupils I maintained 'a high level of sensitivity' to their 'mood and behaviours' (Sargeant and Harcourt, 2012 p. 53) in case they showed any signs of distress and required support. Pupils were informed that if they felt uncomfortable or did not wish to answer any questions they could hold up the aforementioned red card to inform me. Staff participants were also explained that they could inform me of this verbally.

To avoid any emotional impact on pupil participants, in advance of data collection, I informed them that my involvement was temporary and that following the interview they would not hear from me again until I had completed and analysed the data (Sargeant and Harcourt, 2012). Following the interview, pupils were provided with a debrief letter which also informed them of this.

## 3.7  Rationale for Data Analysis Approach

There are many different forms of qualitative analysis covering a spectrum from descriptive to more interpretative analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2013). I considered using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) however this form of analysis is prescriptive as it is underpinned by particular epistemological assumptions, phenomenology and hermeneutic inquiry, and therefore requires a specific form of methodology (Smith and Eatough, 2006). It is also idiographic and is concerned with

forming an in-depth analysis of individual case studies to understand the experiences of each participant in detail (Smith, 2004). These assumptions and underpinnings did not fit with the aims of my research of exploring themes across the entire data set rather than focusing intently on individualistic experiences. Thematic analysis was considered a more suitable form of analysis for this study. It identifies, analyses and reports patterns within qualitative data. It is useful in qualitative psychological research particularly due to its flexibility; it is not linked to any particular theoretical or methodological framework (Braun and Clarke, 2013). This allowed the data collection and analysis to be suited to the exploratory nature of my research. Thematic analysis was also considered appropriate due to its ability to not only describe the data in rich detail but also interpret different aspects of the research (Braun and Clarke, 2006).

There are two variations of thematic analysis which can be used to identify themes and patterns in data: inductive and deductive. Inductive coding entails the themes deriving directly from the data rather than trying to fit them into a pre-existing coding frame. Deductive coding consists of themes deriving from existing theory (Braun and Clarke, 2006). Having considered the benefits of each, my analysis undertook the inductive approach as I was interested in gaining the views of participants directly from the data and therefore had broad rather than specific research questions and analysed all data. However as recognised by Braun and Clarke (2006), I acknowledge that my theoretical knowledge and epistemological stance would also influence the coding.

### 3.7.1 Thematic Analysis Process

The process I used for thematic analysis was guided by Braun and Clarke's (2006) six step process of analysis. It was considered to be an appropriate process in ensuring that I could engage with the data well enough for it to be analysed and interpreted to reflect the patterns and themes of the participants' perspectives. I conducted two separate thematic analyses: one for pupil data and another for staff data. The NVIVO programme was used during this analysis to facilitate managing and organising the data. The analysis process used is summarised below:

*Phase 1: Familiarisation with the data*

The electronic data was transcribed verbatim but omitting subtle utterances (e.g. uhhh, ummm) since the nature of my analysis was to analyse the content of participant views rather than 'how' participants spoke (Robson, 2011) (see Appendix 14 for sample of transcript). This stage facilitated my familiarisation with the content and ability to make initial notes on meanings or patterns which may be interesting and relevant in answering my research questions. I also immersed myself in the data following transcribing by reading and re-reading it to gain an overall insight into what my data had revealed (Braun and Clarke, 2013).

*Phase 2: Generating initial codes*

I undertook this phase separately for each transcript. Coding entailed systematically working through my data line by line in order to describe what the participant was discussing and thus organise the data into meaningful groups (Robson, 2011). As the aim for my research was to derive the codes from the data, I coded the entire data set. However, I omitted coding minimal aspects in the pupil data where pupils digressed from the questions and engaged in descriptive dialogue about specific features of a game they enjoyed (e.g. an Xbox game) which were irrelevant to the research questions. Throughout this process I continued to make notes on potential interesting patterns or themes which could be used in the next analytical stage. Below is a transcript extract from a staff interview with initial codes.

**Table 3.1- <u>Staff interview transcript extract with initial codes</u>**

| Interview transcript | Initial codes |
|---|---|
| **Amy:** *A lot of students who are school refusers or lesson refusers are Aspergers students. I think it's quite common with them when they are out of routine or that kind of thing. We do have a lot of EBD students with particularly difficult backgrounds.* | *Many school refusers have aspergers*<br><br>*Difficult home circumstances influencing school refusal* |
| **I: Could you elaborate on that a bit, when you say particularly difficult backgrounds?** | |
| **Amy:** *They don't have a very nice home life basically. So they have lots of issues and problems, possibly with peers, possibly with parents, possibly with the relatives, all kinds of different things. We have a brother and sister at the moment, there's no clear boundaries outside, and I don't think therefore that they feel they need to adhere to boundaries inside school either. So there is a lot of school refusal and lesson refusal there is well. I could give you 20 different reasons for 20 different students here and now. Do you know what I mean, they all seem to be different. I wish you could find a link because it would make it easier. It's hard to know where to start with them.* | *Difficult home circumstances influencing school refusal*<br><br>*No boundaries at home influencing school refusal*<br><br><br>*There appears to be individual and different reasons for each pupil*<br><br>*Difficulty knowing how to support pupils* |

***Phase 3: Searching for themes***

NVIVO was used to merge all codes from the transcripts together into one document so as to create a list of all participant codes (pupil and staff transcripts were separated into two documents). Then, using some of my initial notes, different codes were combined to form themes based on similarity in meaning. Presented below is an example of some initial codes which were merged into a theme.

**Table 3.2- <u>Initial codes merged into themes</u>**

| Initial Codes | Theme |
|---|---|
| *Deliberately misbehaving to be removed from class* <br><br> *Pleased to be removed from boring lessons* | *Classroom behaviour* |
| *Not feeling listened to by teachers* <br><br> *Childish treatment by teachers* | *Communication between staff and students* |

I developed a 'miscellaneous' theme where codes which did not seem to fit with other codes were placed temporarily (Braun and Clarke, 2006). Organising my codes in this way enabled me to observe the relationships between different themes and consider whether to further merge or split these to form possible over-arching or sub-themes. For example, the theme shown above *'Classroom behaviour'* was later considered better placed as a sub-theme within the over-arching theme *'Learning Environment and Pedagogy'*.

*Phase 4: Reviewing themes*

Initial themes were refined which consisted of merging, splitting, discarding and creating new themes and sub-themes. I re-engaged with the transcripts and data extracts to consider which candidate themes would best represent the raw data collected. This process was aided by peer consultation with two TEP colleagues and supervisor discussions with three supervisors (two EP and one academic). I did not consider inter-rater reliability during this process since my research is underpinned by a social constructionist stance and therefore my interpretations are unlikely to be the same as another person. In agreement with Yardley (2000, p.218), using inter-rater reliability would be meaningless as it would not exclude subjectivity but rather it would represent 'an interpretation agreed by two people'. Instead I shared my themes and some data extracts with the aforementioned persons, to have meaningful and critical discussions about how my themes were derived and other possible interpretations that could be considered.

There were instances when there were not enough coded data to support one theme, when separate themes were recognised as having the same content or when aspects of the data appeared to be understated. This led to themes being split to form a sub-theme, some coded data being merged with other existing themes or

sub-themes and new themes being formed. I continued to read over the data extracts within each theme and continued this process until satisfied that there were coherent patterns within each theme. Presented below is an example of some changes to themes which took place during this phase.

**Table 3.3- <u>Examples of some changes to themes during Phase 4</u>**

| Original sub-themes | Change which took place | Reason for change taking place |
|---|---|---|
| *Negative thoughts*<br><br>*Negative emotions*<br><br>*Conflicting thoughts or emotions* | Merged into sub-theme:<br><br>*Negative and conflicting thoughts and emotions* | Similar content existed across the original sub-themes |
|  | New theme formed:<br><br>*Acknowledging pupil views* | The pupils' views regarding their feelings of not feeling heard was considered to be understated |
| *Effectiveness of involvement*<br><br>*EP role and involvement*<br><br>*(Staff sub-themes)* | Merged to create two new sub-themes:<br><br>*Building relationships with pupils and families*<br><br>*Earlier intervention and collaborative liaison* | Staff views regarding the effectiveness of support from external agencies were not emphasised enough. Also both original sub-themes had similar content. |

**Phase 5: Defining and naming themes**

I returned to refining the themes to ensure they were clear in representing the aspect of the data they set out to capture. The aim was to ensure that each theme was coherent and internally consistent (Braun and Clarke, 2006). This involved me renaming some themes to be more concise and finalising which codes should be discarded. For example the overarching theme '*Acknowledging pupil views'* was

renamed *'Gaining and acknowledging pupil views'* to reflect the pupil views of wanting staff to obtain their views as well as acknowledge them.

## 3.5   <u>Quality of Research</u>

Demonstrating the trustworthiness and usefulness of qualitative research has been criticised by quantitative researchers due to the differences in their conceptualisation of reliability and validity (Shenton, 2004). However qualitative researchers argue that due to the underpinning principles of qualitative research, the traditional criteria of reliability and validity cannot be applied (Yardley, 2000). Qualitative research is based on the notion that there are different versions of reality shaped by context, culture and situations rather than absolute truths; a belief held by quantitative research (Yardley, 2008). Researchers (e.g. Guba, 1981; Yardley, 2000) have therefore provided alternative criteria to assess the quality of qualitative research which will be used to demonstrate the quality of this research in this chapter.

Qualitative researchers (e.g. Guba, 1981; Robson, 2002) have acknowledged the value of prior prolonged engagement within the setting, to enhance credibility. However placing too many demands on staff during this time may deter them from cooperating in the research. Additionally, researchers may become too immersed in the setting influencing their judgements (Shenton, 2004). Prior to data collection I spent four days in the setting which helped me to develop an understanding of the school systems, and establish a rapport with potential participants. However I ensured avoiding placing too many demands on staff or pupils. For example, I organised my own timetable of activities within the school to avoid staff having to use their time. I spent four days in the school as I felt this would be sufficient time to gain insight into school systems and build rapport without becoming too immersed. I also spent time in a variety of classrooms to avoid becoming too absorbed in specific aspects of the school.

Member checking has been considered helpful to add accuracy and credibility to qualitative research through participant verification of information (Guba, 1981). However this method was not considered appropriate for participants to recall experiences which at times were negative experiences. In particular, non-attenders

have been recognised as a vulnerable group where researchers should remain sensitive to the difficulties and associated negative emotions they experience when recalling their experiences (Gregory and Purcell, 2014). Therefore there was concern that this procedure may trigger negative emotions resulting in more harm than being beneficial.

However, triangulation was used which has been recognised as a useful tool in enhancing the rigor of qualitative research as it involves using more than one source to collect data (Robson, 2002). This research used data triangulation whereby participatory methods and interview methods were used to gather pupil views to help verify the authenticity of their perspectives. Also, pupil views and staff views were obtained rather than only obtaining one perspective. However, this latter triangulation method was not used to corroborate participants' views in order to focus on a single perspective. Rather it was to gain differing perspectives of participant experiences regarding attendance difficulties to enrich the understanding of this topic (Yardley, 2008).


## Chapter Summary

This chapter provided a rationale for the critical realist and social constructionist qualitative research methodology adopted in this study which reflects the exploratory nature of the research. Semi-structured interviews and participatory methods were used as the data collection method following piloting. Purposive sampling was used to enhance the opportunity of gathering relevant information. The procedure and ethical considerations were discussed. Thematic analysis was selected to identify and interpret themes to reflect information across the data. Chapter 4 and 5 will provide the findings from the pupil and staff interviews respectively.

# CHAPTER 4: PUPIL FINDINGS

## 4.0     Introduction

In this chapter, the findings from the interview responses of 12 secondary school pupils in Years 8 and 9 are presented. Following a thematic analysis of the interview responses, six main themes were generated. These themes and their associated sub-themes are presented in Table 4.0 below.

**Table 4.0: Themes and sub-themes following analysis of pupil responses**

| Themes | Sub-themes |
|---|---|
| 1. **Lesson Enjoyment and Understanding of Work** | Motivation to attend lessons<br>Teacher mood and characteristics<br>Teacher explanations and teaching approaches<br>Influences on classroom behaviour<br>Necessity for support with understanding Work |
| 2. **Thoughts and Emotions about School and Attendance** | Negative and conflicting thoughts or emotions<br>Pupil concern about attendance<br>Positive thoughts about school |
| 3. **Effects of Absence** | Enjoyment<br>Academic difficulties<br>Unsupportive responses of others |
| 4. **Impact of Family and Friends** | Positive influences of friendship<br>Positive influences of family involvement<br>Unhelpful family influences |
| 5. **Communication and Relationships within the School Context** | Congruence of pupil and staff views<br>Teacher-pupil relationship<br>Challenges with disclosing difficulties |
| 6. **Gaining and Acknowledging Pupil Views** | Opportunities to feel heard<br>Management of bullying and peer conflict<br>Management of attendance difficulties |

To help illustrate the richness of pupils' perceptions and experiences, some words, phrases and vignettes of their responses have been included in italics within the themes presented. In some instances, pupils' responses may include words or phrases which are colloquial terms or not Standard English and also terminology specific to the school context. Explanations of this terminology are illustrated in table 4.1 below.

**Table 4.1:    Terminology specific to school context**

| Terminology | Meaning |
|---|---|
| On-call | Classroom teacher informs another teacher on behaviour monitoring duty to remove a pupil from the lesson |
| Reflection room | Designated room for pupils who have been removed from lessons via the 'on-call' procedure |
| Faculty removed | Following the 'on-call' procedure pupil is taken to another lesson within a higher year group |
| Isolation | Internal exclusion |
| Learning support | Designated room to support pupils with academic and emotional needs. |
| Named person | Staff member responsible for supporting individual pupils with any difficulties |
| RAG (Red, Amber, Green) | A system where pupils inform staff of lessons in which they have difficulty by coding them with Red, Amber and Green. They attend learning support during lessons coded red, are permitted to leave amber lessons to go to learning support if there are any issues, and always attend green lessons. |

## 4.1    Theme 1: Lesson Enjoyment and Understanding of Work

### 4.1.1  Motivation to attend school and lessons

Most pupils emphasised that the main reason for their non-attendance was their lack of motivation to attend lessons which they did not enjoy or understand.

**Jess:** Sometimes as soon as I go to school I'm like I wanna be home….Just like when I don't like it [lessons] or understand what the teacher is saying.

Conversely, when they had a lesson which they deemed enjoyable, they looked forward to attending school and missed doing enjoyable subjects when absent.

**Lynn:** I find it [school] so boring but if it's good lessons then I'll come in... if there were more fun lessons.

Some pupils further informed that the more often they had "*bad subjects*" within the day and week, the more likely they were to lack the motivation to attend.

**Mark:** I'd be able to survive it [bad subject] for like one day like but when you have it 2 days or when you know you have it again after one day you just don't wanna do it again.

Pupils described telling their parent that they were ill to mask their lack of motivation to attend particular lessons. This also included pretending to be ill following a genuine illness to avoid returning to school on a day where they disliked a lesson. Some pupils explained they did not tell their parents the truth because they would "*force*" them to attend school and would not allow them to stay at home despite parents being aware of their aversion or difficulties with school.

**Ben:** well the only way to stay at home is to pretend I'm sick…. [or] I have to pretend to come into school and then really don't come into school.

**Leah:** I just tell my parents I'm still sick… because they would actually force me to come in...Say if I'm sick the Wednesday and Thursday and it's just Friday I have to go in then I'll just say I'm still ill.

### 4.1.2   Teacher Mood and Characteristics

Several pupils described how their teachers' negative mood in the classroom impacted on their lesson enjoyment more than the subject or topic itself. For example, they felt that some teachers would be in a "*bad mood*" from a previous lesson and then "*take it out*" on them. They also thought some teachers would often be '*grumpy*' and '*shout*' which "*kills the whole lesson*" and made it less appealing to attend.

**Ann:** *[I would prefer] if she [teacher] spoke to me, not in a rude way. If someone else has p'ed her off she shouldn't speak to another student in a rude way.*

**Leah:** *I like fun happy teachers, like if you walk into a lesson and the teacher is grumpy it kinda just kills the whole lesson.*

Others mentioned teachers' being too "*bossy*", "*strict*" and sending them out of the lesson for minor incidents such as "*standing up*". Luke stated that some teachers "*get angry*" and "*have a go*" at the pupils all the time.

**Ben:** *The teachers are really bossy. Mrs X, if you haven't got a pen she gives you half an hour detention…My History teacher is really strict. He will call 'on-call' just for standing up.*

**Jess:** *She calls 'on call' for nothing. Someone got up to get some glue and she got 'on called'. She will 'on call' like 3 people every lesson and it's really stupid.*

### 4.1.3  Teacher Explanations and Teaching Approaches

Some students discussed how the rapid pace of some teacher explanations and the short timeframe given to complete their work often left them unable to understand and complete the task in time. Pupils suggested that teachers tended to underestimate how long it may take some pupils to understand and complete work and would often move on to the next task prior to students grasping an understanding of the initial task.

**Jake:** *If you lose concentration for a split second when someone is explaining something you won't understand it. Because you might miss a step and then the teacher rubs it off and then you won't be able to find out.*

**Joe:** *Some of the work [is difficult], like the teachers wouldn't tell us how to do it they would just tell us to do it….they would just give us a sheet*

Students also commented that when they did ask teachers for help they still often could not completely understand the work or they had to wait a long time prior to being helped. This sometimes resulted in the teacher being annoyed with the limited work the pupil had accomplished. Students therefore frequently opted to ask peers for help instead. However some students acknowledged that due to "*so many people who wanted help*" in the class it was difficult for teachers to spend the required amount of time giving them more thorough explanations.

**Jess:**    *I do get a little bit angry when I have my hand up and he [teacher] doesn't come for ages…i'll say 'I don't understand can you please like help me' and he'll go 'you haven't done nothing in this time?'*

**Mark:**    *Like they'll [teachers] explain it to me, I'll understand a little bit of it but there will still be other parts that I will just not get at all.*

All pupils mentioned how the teaching approaches in the classroom influenced their enjoyment and willingness to attend the lesson. They described a preference for interactive, kinaesthetic and visual learning as this aided their understanding, facilitated interest and enabled them to concentrate more. Whereas they considered *"boring"* lessons as those where they only read from a book and write.

**Lynn:**    *I don't concentrate a lot in a few of my lessons…in Drama and PE I concentrate because they are like actual activities.*

**Kim:**    *The lessons [make school boring] because they are always like not fun… we just sit there and have to write.*

Pupils also discussed enjoyment in lessons with variation in the teaching approaches, opportunities for paired learning, and an element of choice with who they could work.

**Mark:**    *Instead of being told 'right you have to do this, this and that' you [should] get the opportunity to do something else… Also I think they should add more things to do with other people even if just in pairs.*

### 4.1.4  Influences on Classroom Behaviour

Several pupils reported that when they did not understand their work or found the lesson uninteresting, they tended to "*mess around", "chat" or "daydream*" although one student mentioned that they would "*try*" to do the work as best they could.

Many pupils mentioned that their behaviour was worse in lessons without interactive activities or if they disliked the teacher.

**Lynn:**    *in French and German I get on-called because I'm that bored.*

Some students described this behaviour as being more unconscious and accidental sometimes entering a lesson with the best intentions but after a short period their behaviour would go "*downhill*". Other students described deliberately misbehaving in order to be removed from a "*boring lesson*". Irrespective of if they deemed their behaviour to be deliberate or not, some students reported positive feelings such as "*proud*", "*glad*" and "*happy*" if their misbehaviour caused them to be removed from "*boring*" lessons.

**Leah:** *If it's a boring lesson then I'm actually quite glad to be out of there. It's not my aim, I don't plan it …it [good behaviour] lasts for like 5 minutes and then it goes downhill*

**Kim:** *I couldn't be bothered about it [the lesson] so I thought I may as well mess around to let the time go by.*

When removed from their lessons pupils discussed their preference to go to the '*reflection room*' rather than being '*faculty removed*' as there was more opportunity for enjoyment in the 'reflection room'. For example students mentioned being able to '*mess about*' in the 'reflection room' whereas they had to '*proper concentrate*' if they were 'faculty removed' since they were placed into another lesson. They also discussed preferring to be excluded rather than being in isolation.

Some students recognised a link between their behaviour in lessons and their academic attainment stating that perhaps if they listened more and did not "*misbehave*" they may understand the work better. However they were uncertain whether their behaviour was the cause of not understanding the work or the effect.

**Ben:** *I dunno, it might be easier [the work] but because I'm messing around I don't get what's going on sometimes.*

**Leah:** *I don't understand German but that's probably because I don't listen.*

Despite some pupils recognising their own distracting behaviour, most pupils described negative feelings such as "*anger*" and "*unhappy*" when their peers' misbehaviour distracted them in lessons. Several pupils expressed a desire for quieter classrooms to be able to concentrate better.

**Joe:**        *I would usually get a headache every day from going into a class from people screaming, shouting and throwing paper across the room…[I was] pretty annoyed really because you couldn't get anything done.*

**Lynn:**      *I'm learning more in the lessons and I'm concentrating more in the lessons... because I haven't got many distracting people in the lessons.*

Some pupils' indicated that the teacher's approach in managing pupil behaviour also influenced the way pupils behaved in lessons. For example, some teachers told pupils to *"ignore"* the distracting behaviour rather than sending "*those people who are distracting out of the classroom and let the other ones learn".*

**Jess:**      *When she [teacher] is trying to make sure that everyone is doing what they are supposed to do and she goes to one person the whole class will mess about during that time.*

Additionally, some pupils highlighted their desire for teachers to recognise them more for good behaviour. Lynn explained that achievement points "*doesn't really help"* because sometimes, once earned *"if you're bad they say you're not having an achievement point anymore".*

### 4.1.5 Necessity for Support with Understanding Work

Some students valued having a teaching assistant in some classes and frequently relied on them to support with understanding work. However Jess highlighted that in one lesson even with three teaching assistants "*it still isn't helping"* her to understand the work.

**Sophie:**     *In Mr. X's class, there is this teaching assistant…she will help you if you ask for help.*

Some pupils discussed the usefulness of the learning support facility within the school to help them understand the work. Ben explained that it would encourage him to attend school if he had access to learning support.

**Ben:**      *If I went to learning support I'd have no reason to skive…because you'd be getting help.*

However Jake and Sophie described their experience of using or being offered learning support where they felt it was not helpful. Sophie felt eventually teachers would tell her that she could no longer use learning support so thought "*it's better to just go to the lesson than go in there*".

**Jake:**   *You know they call it student support but there wasn't a lot of support there. They just told you to get on with it.*

Jake also emphasised that he did not think that the homework club was useful to support him with understanding his homework.

**Jake:**   *I think it's a waste of time…. I didn't know how to do my homework and all the teachers in there didn't know how to do it either.*

Some pupils described intervention sessions that they would prefer to be offered or which they have already found helpful to understand their work such as, pre-teaching topics or revising difficult work.

**Sophie:**   *It's better like if you're out [of the lesson] so you can get the help that you need without getting distracted….*

**Luke:**   *I think people who really need help… they should take out into another lesson. Basically have your own lessons for people who have problems.*

## 4.2   Theme 2: Thoughts and Emotions about School and Attendance

### 4.2.1  Negative and Conflicting Thoughts or Emotions

Some pupils mentioned that their negative thoughts and emotions about school impacted on their non-attendance. This was mainly due to their negative anticipations of what may happen at school if they attended. Ann described worrying thoughts about being bullied such as *"are they gonna stop?"*

**Lynn:**   *[I worry] because there could be fights, arguments or anything happen that day.*

Some pupils also stated negative thoughts and emotions about school due to staff reprimands. They sometimes stayed at home to avoid receiving any staff reprimands in school. Kim stated that staying home helped to avoid her '*getting into trouble*' or '*causing trouble'.* Paul also stated that because the consequence for being late was an after school detention he frequently opted to stay at home to avoid this detention but that if it was during lunchtime he would be more likely to attend school.

**Luke:** *it's like 'what's gonna happen today? Am I gonna be put in isolation...am I gonna get in trouble?*

Students also mentioned they sometimes felt conflicting thoughts and emotions when they were absent from school. For example, wanting to attend school but feeling unable to face difficult or "*boring*" lessons and feeling *"happy"* while "*skiving*" lessons but being concerned about subsequent parental reactions and reprimands. Other pupils were concerned about their low attendance but felt too worried to leave their parent without their care. Responses from two pupils also indicated feeling emotions such as *"anger" and "depression"* whilst being absent from school.

**Jake:** *I've got depression because as soon as I go back to school I won't remember anything that they've [teachers] said because I haven't been there.*

### 4.2.2 Pupil Concern about Attendance

Ten pupils' illustrated mixed thoughts and feelings regarding their attendance. Using scaling questions with a 5 point scale, pupils' responses ranged from being not at all concerned (scale point 1) to being extremely concerned (scale point 5) about their attendance.

Two pupils who scaled their responses between 4 and 5 stated different reasons for their high concern. Ann mentioned that it was because more recently she was "*skiving lessons and not wanting to come in*" compared to previous years where she had good attendance whereas Luke mentioned that his parents receiving a fine was a contributing factor.

Pupils who scaled their response at 3 tended to be satisfied that their attendance was improving compared to previous levels or that they were maintaining a level where they would not get a detention or their parent would not get a fine.

**Ben:** *I am [concerned] sometimes…I make sure that I don't go over the attendance [level] and my dad doesn't get a fine.*

Explanations for responses scaled at 1 or 2 consisted of pupils stating that their low attendance did not bother them because they were not interested in school and because they perceived their attendance level to be good enough although "*not perfect*".

Some pupils also mentioned that they thought it would be quite easy to improve their attendance stating they should "*make sure you go in every day if you are not very ill*" and *"just get outta bed".* This suggests that some students are conscious of what they should do to improve their attendance yet they still find difficulty in actually implementing these strategies.

**Leah:** *It's really easy [to improve] but I just don't… [I need to] just get outta bed.*


### 4.2.3   Positive Thoughts about School

Despite some negative thoughts and emotions about school, eight pupils expressed some positive views and experiences regarding their school. Some explained that they enjoyed aspects of their transition from primary school such as "*moving around to different lessons and having different teachers*".

**Ben**: *It felt cool because it was a new school and it felt good to be in it…It's good, helpful and good social life.*


Some pupils described their enjoyment in using modern facilities comparing them to previous old equipment the school used to have.

**Joe:** *People like the facilities because in the old school the facilities were not as good as the ones here…*

**Jake:** *the equipment, like its proper trampolines and gymnastic equipment. Not shabby and horrible.*

Whilst other pupils compared their school to others in the area indicating they had positive experiences and reviews.

**Ann:**   *People think School A [this school] is a rubbish school but it isn't…it is a good school like we came 3rd in the borough with GCSE exam levels.*

**Paul:**   *I think it's a good school because I have heard it's the second best school in the area.*

## 4.3   Theme 3: Effects of Absence

### 4.3.1  Enjoyment

Many pupils expressed that while absent they enjoyed their time away from school. This was mainly due to engaging in more fun activities. This included activities such as watching television, playing Xbox, walking the dog, socialising with friends who were excluded and exploring the woods.

**Paul:**   *I am always playing on the Xbox… The Xbox takes over everything.*

**Kim:**   *I wake up, watch TV, take my dog for a walk and then I tidy up.*

Mark discussed feeling a sense of freedom when away from school:

**Mark:**   *Having my own choices. Being able to do what I want and not being told what I can and can't do all the time constantly.*

Lynn described enjoying quality time with her parents whilst absent:

**Lynn:**   *Some days my mum and I watch films and have a snuggle day… Or I even go with my mum and dad to town.*

However Sophie explained that she did not enjoy her time at home stating that *"it's really boring"*. Similarly, Joe described a typical day at home when absent as one where he had to look after himself.

**Joe:**   *I usually have to cook for myself, feed myself, I have to do everything on my own.*

### 4.3.2  Academic Difficulties

Several pupils perceived that their absence, particularly long periods, negatively impacted on their academic ability and their ability to catch up with their work. Sophie mentioned starting to feel that staying home was *"pointless"* because it made things more difficult for her when trying to catch up with work.

**Sophie:**  *[it is difficult] catching up on work…people might have started new topics and I might have missed loads of homework.*

**Ben:**  *I think probably the reason why I am bad at lessons is because I'm barely at them because of my attendance.*

Jake discussed how he would prefer to catch up with work outside of the classroom rather than returning straight to class following a period of absence:

**Jake:**  *instead of going straight to my lesson…I'd rather get taken out maybe with some work to catch up on.*

Due to his low attendance, Luke described being concerned about the decline of his education and that it may jeopardise his career aspirations.

**Luke:**  *[I was worried] that I was gonna grow up with no education. Basically that I will be dumb…that I wasn't gonna get a job when I'm older*

However a few pupils stated that they did not feel behind with their learning or did not feel concerned about being behind.

**Lynn:**  *I don't need to catch up on lessons. They [teachers] just give me the normal day's sheet and I finish it*

**Jess**:  *Sometimes I don't catch up…it doesn't make me feel any way just that I've missed out on some work.*

### 4.3.3  Unsupportive Responses of Others

Some pupils expressed challenges with managing unhelpful responses of their peers and teachers when they returned to school following absence. They felt a sense of

being interrogated by peers and staff regarding reasons for their absence. Mark stated "*as soon as I walked through the doors it would be 'where have you gone? What have you done?'*"

**Jake:**  *People would like always say 'why were you off?' and I didn't want to explain myself. I'd just lie and say I was ill.*

**Sophie:**  *They [teachers] could just say to students that you shouldn't ask people why they haven't been in because it's none of their business.*

Some pupils also felt concern about staff reactions when returning to school such as being told off for being absent or not having the correct work or equipment.

**Jess:**  *Like when I haven't been in they were like 'where's your homework?' and I'm like I haven't got it and then they give me a detention*

**Joe:**  *[I would be] thinking that the teachers are gonna tell me off [about] the fact that I hadn't been in*

## 4.4    Theme 4: Impact of Family and Friends

### 4.4.1  Positive Influences of Friendship

Most pupils' indicated they valued having friends at school mentioning that they would find school *"boring"* and "*dull"* if they did not have friends and that being with their friends was part of what made school an "*OK"* experience for them. Pupils discussed how friends provided them with support such as empathising and giving positive advice when going through a day of challenging lessons, and sticking by each other through tough social disagreements to avoid "*getting all the stress put onto them"*.

**Sophie:**  *I say to my friends like how bad my day is and they'd be like "don't worry I'm sure it's not that bad as you may think".*

**Lynn:**  *we've stuck by each other with all our arguments. So if I'm not in then it all goes onto her but if she's not in it goes onto me but if we're both in together we sort it out.*

Most pupils mentioned that friends gave them more support in school than staff. In reference to his home life difficulties, Joe stated that he tended to *"just bottle it up"* before he made friends in school. However Mark highlighted that although he preferred to talk to his friends about difficulties he was conscious not to "*burden them too much"* for fear of losing them as a friend.

**Joe:**    *My friends supported me through all the bad days I had…I just bottled it up [when I did not have friends].*

**Mark:**    *My friends are pretty much the main thing with me at the moment. Not really staff... but I don't burden them too much… burden your friends, you won't have any.*

Pupils also discussed missing their friends when absent and feeling the need to attend school to socialise with them. Sophie explained that her friends encouraged her to attend school more than her mother.

**Ben**:    *I wanted to see them [friends] so I just came in to see them.*

**Leah:**    *I can't go more than two days without them [friends]… '* *they text me and stuff asking when I am coming back'.*

**Sophie:**    *Well my mum said don't come in if you're ill but my friends… they said that we missed you and saying like encouraging me not to have any days off*

Leah further emphasised the importance of friendship commenting that she would often keep in contact with her friends during the school day even whilst absent stating '*I normally text them'.*

However some pupils said that although they had friends, if they did not see them due to absence they would be fine because they would be in contact with them outside of school. Ann discussed that her mother encouraged her to attend school rather than her friends.

**Paul:**    *I don't really care [if I do not see them when absent]…I know where he lives so I can always knock for him.*

**Jake**:    *I don't mind too much [if I do not see them when absent] because I speak to them on the phone.*

*Ann:*            *My mum tried to [encourage attendance] but not really my friends.*

### 4.4.2   Positive Influences of Family Involvement

Most pupils indicated how their family were a positive influence in helping them to attend school and indicated that their relatives encouraged them to attend more than school staff.

*Luke:*           *My sister says it's a bad experience [being bullied] but 'don't change who you are'…and I was like 'OK. So I went to school … and she said 'well done and keep going to school'.*

*Lynn*:           *I tell my mum I can't be bothered to come to school because of all of the arguments. She said you're just gonna have to go to school and ignore them.*

Other pupils described how their family supported them through difficult times such as having to look after an ill parent or adjusting to secondary school transition.

*Jake:*           *When my mum can't cope when she's ill I need my dad…sometimes on the weekends I go over to my dad's.*

*Mark:*           *My cousin…he feels like my dad…everything that I know from school, like making friends and life just in general, he is the one for it.*

*Sophie:*         *My sister, she showed me [around new school], if I forgot I would go to her and ask her.*

Some pupils mentioned parents encouraging them to attend sometimes through their concern about receiving a fine.

*Ben*:            *Well he [dad] shouts at me saying you have to stop skiving because if you skive more I'm gonna get a fine. Sometimes he forces me.*

**Paul:**          *I would say I'm not [going to school] and they [parents] would say 'you bloody are'.*

Other pupils mentioned their parents encouraging them to attend school due to feeling concerned about the risk of their child not receiving a "*good education*".

*Mark:*           *My mum was worried about my attendance. She wanted me to get a decent grade… a decent education.*

**Luke:**          *My mum says if you don't [go to school] your learning is going down… she would say "you need to go back to school".*

However Kim explained her discontent with her mother's encouragement to attend school stating that it "*annoyed*" her when her mother told her that she could not stay at home and that *"I don't really listen [to her mother] because I don't really care".*

### 4.4.3  Unhelpful Family Influences

Some pupils highlighted how difficulties in their home life caused a negative effect on their school experience. Two pupils indicated that they felt they had to stay home to care for an ill parent:

**Jake:**          M*y mum had really bad depression and sometimes I'd stay home because she needed to always have someone there otherwise she'd have gone out of control.*

**Joe:**          *Sometimes I have to look after my mum if she's extremely ill because she used to have cancer and now she has to have radiation*

However both Jake and Joe identified how having external support from the Young Carers service, and school counsellor were beneficial helping them to feel better about attending school.

**Jake:**          *The counsel worker [is the most helpful support] …'cause it takes my mind off things, and my mum 'cause I don't have to worry about her when I'm at school.*

**Joe:**          *I have a mentor [school counsellor] once a week…I find it helpful because I can talk to her about my problems and its confidential*

Some pupils described how home circumstances adversely impacted on their ability to do their homework.

**Mark:**          *I can't always do mine [homework]…when you've got your mum in hospital… and your step dad is running up and down…it's kind of hard.*

**Jake:**          *Homework [is difficult]. Especially when my mum's ill 'cause I always have to look after her…*

Mark also discussed how helpful counselling was for him to manage his difficult home circumstances. However his sessions had since ceased causing him to feel a desire for more sessions within school.

*Mark:*　　　*I did say to them [teachers] that I've got counselling outside of school…But it's finished now….and now I'm just dropping again in my attitude.*

Ben mentioned having to abruptly move from his housing accommodation to an area far away from school due to financial difficulties.

 *Ben:*　　　 *I wasn't attending much because my dad and I had to move house because something happened to his benefits so we had to move further away*

Paul described home circumstances where his parents did not enforce boundaries at bed time and therefore he engaged in activities such as "*watching a film, reading, or watching videos on my phone".* This caused him to go to bed about 3am and struggle to get up for school on time in the morning.

Kim stated that she had conversations with her mother about difficulties at school and that her mother agreed with her negative views that school and some rules were "*silly"* and that teachers "*don't really wanna teach us they just want to get a good reputation for their school".*

*Kim:*　　　*I talk to her about how I don't like it [school] and that I think it's silly… She thinks it as well…*


## 4.5　　Theme 5: Communication and Relationships within the School Context


### 4.5.1　Congruence of Pupil and Staff Views

Some pupils indicated that they have an incongruence of views with teachers with regards to rules and reprimands which appeared to deteriorate their relationship with teachers.

*Kim:*　　　*They send us mixed messages… sometimes they're like "you shouldn't care what you look like…you just come here to learn" and then when we come to school with different colour hair…they're like "go home, you need to take it out".*

A few pupils discussed feeling that teachers treated them as *"children"* or *"babies"*

when in fact they were *"teenagers"*. For example the way teachers spoke to them, the extensive rules and restrictions within school and receiving work they perceived to be below their ability levels.

**Ann:** *Some teachers treat you like a child but you're not a child anymore…you're a teenager. … with the phone rule [not permitted to use mobiles] that's like treating us like little children.*

**Jess:** *She [teacher] sort of treats us like little kids….She tries to make us do kiddies stuff [classwork].*

Pupils further spoke specifically of understanding having the mobile phone restrictions during class time but was in disagreement with staff views that they could not use it during break or lunch times either.

**Lynn:** *You're not allowed to go on your phones or DSs [games console] or anything...Like it's our time they shouldn't have taken it away from us*

Some pupils also expressed unhappiness at being restricted to use certain areas of the school or to play certain games during break and lunch times. They highlighted that staff tell them that lunches and breaks are their time to socialise but they felt restricted to do so. Luke felt that if there were more fun lunchtime clubs available this would make lunchtimes more enjoyable as there was *"nothing to do"* during these times.

**Mark:** *Break and lunch you should be able to go to more places…it would be brilliant.*

**Luke:** *We used to play this bulldog game but it got taken off because apparently too many people got hurt, but they really didn't get hurt. So we just stand there now and there is nothing to do. It would be fun yea to have more clubs on… but they said money issues.*

### 4.5.2  Teacher-Pupil Relationship

Some pupils described not really knowing their teachers apart from their names and not feeling enough of a connection or bond with them to seek their help or support. Mark also spoke of not really knowing of any teachers who could help him and feeling apprehensive to talk to those not working within his year group.

**Leah:** *I don't really talk to teachers… I've never really like bonded with a teacher…because I don't really feel like I connect with them*

> *Mark:*      *I don't really know some of the teachers here...I know some of their names but…..like there's one teacher I talk to but I don't talk to her much because she is not my person for my year group.*

Kim expressed feeling as if teachers were dishonest and tended to collude with each other in instances when there were any pupil-teacher disagreements.

> *Kim:*      *Say like I went and told Mrs X about the teacher grabbing me the other day, that teacher might lie and say that he didn't…when like two other people [students] said that he did. But because they [teachers] are all friends they'll think we are lying and then they won't do anything about it.*

Luke admitted that sometimes his relationship with teachers is not positive because he does not show manners to teachers but he perceived he was reciprocating the lack of manners teachers gave to him. He also perceived teachers would continuously change their opinion of him stating that he was making progress and then that he was being *"bad"*.

> *Luke:*      *It's like you're a dog and they are training you…[teachers will say] "you're doing stuff really good" and then like the next day I'll get on-called and they'll say "oh your being really bad"… I don't listen to them…'cause there's no point if they don't help me out I don't help them out.*

To gain a better teacher-pupil relationship and to ensure pupils give "*less trouble",* pupils perceived that teachers should show more of a genuine interest in helping them when they notice they are in need. Some pupils gave instances where they experienced positive teacher-pupil relationships in their school which was characterised by teachers having a caring nature, being easy to talk to and valuing pupil's opinions.

> *Kim:*      *In isolation those two teachers were the only ones who would actually sit down and listen to us. The others would just say they haven't got time or anything.*

> *Mark:*      *If they [staff] knew something was up they should do their best to come over and talk to me rather than sitting back just staring and thinking "oh well he's surrounded by his mates so I'll just leave him". That's why I don't really talk to any staff.*

### 4.5.3 Challenges with Disclosing Difficulties

Many students described not revealing their true thoughts or emotions to peers or staff which often served to maintain or exacerbate their attendance difficulties. A few pupils stated that they *"forget"* to disclose their difficulties or that they were not sure why they did not. However following further interview questions they revealed that they had various concerns. This suggests that some pupils may not always be conscious of why they do not disclose their difficulties to teachers or peers.

Some pupils mentioned concealing their difficulties from teachers with regards to understanding their work. They felt a fear of teachers perceiving or judging them negatively and therefore often preferred to ask their peers for help as there was less risk of a negative consequence.

**Luke:**     *Well I would ask the teacher but it's just…if I get a question wrong then I'm just like…I bet she's…thinking bad of you basically.*

**Sophie:**     *[I feel] a bit afraid because say if they told you and you still did not get it they will probably moan at you…because when they explain it they are like I am not explaining it again because you should have been listening.*

Sophie also said that she assumed nothing would be done so asking a teacher for help would not be helpful:

**Sophie:**     *I just didn't want to tell anyone [about Maths difficulties]…I thought it might not have been helpful …and there was no point.*

Ben highlighted his fear that if he asked staff for academic support it would not result in his desired outcome. He believed there was a risk in him telling staff as he may get into trouble for "*skiving*" and be placed in a lower academic set rather than receiving his desired outcome of getting help from learning support.

**Ben:**     *If I tell the teachers [about difficulties in lessons] they will be like 'so you skive'…and then they will keep putting me in isolation… he [head of year] may just say you can't go in learning support, sorry you'll have to just move down a set...*

Ben, also explained that although he would like to ask for help he did not perceive he had the ability to articulate his difficulties to his head of year.

**Ben:** I dunno how to say to them [teachers] *"I struggle in this lesson…like can I have help or something". I dunno how to explain it to him [Head of Year].*

Pupils also spoke of not revealing their home difficulties or school concerns to anyone. Students cited reasons for this as sometimes being *"too upset"* to talk or fear that friends and staff would *"spread it"* to others.

**Jake:** *I didn't really speak to school because I was too upset about it [home difficulties].*

**Lynn**: *If I tell one teacher, that teacher will tell another teacher who will bring it up in front of other students and tell everyone.*

## 4.6    Theme 6: Gaining and Acknowledging Pupil Views

### 4.6.1 Opportunities to Feel heard

Some pupils perceived that teachers did not listen to them which caused them to feel "*shoved aside*" and choose not to listen to their teachers

**Kim:** *The teachers will shout at us and then we'll try say our point and they say they're not interested… And that's what makes us more angry because we know that they're not gonna listen to us so we think why should we listen to them.*

**Ann:** *Some teachers don't even give you a chance like to explain what's happened.*

Kim further highlighted the importance of feeling listened to stating that she feels better when she is listened to because *"it doesn't boil up inside me all day and everything will just get on top of me and I will just explode".*

Many pupils discussed having a "named *person*" however some pupils did not find this experience helpful due to not knowing who their named person was, not having opportunities to meet with them or feeling a lack of support when they did met with them.

**Mark:**        *I was told about that [named person] getting sorted out and it never happened. So I was let down in that sense.*

**Luke:**        *I've always asked for help with her [named person] and she's like "nah you don't need help"…it seems like she don't wanna help basically.  I don't know who my named person is no more.*

**Sophie:**        *If they give you a teacher [named person] that you don't like then you don't really want to speak to them about anything*

However, although Paul also did not have regular opportunities to meet with his named person he did not describe feeling unsupported.

**Paul:**        *I haven't spoken to her yet… I see her around the school…when she sees me in the corridor she may ask me if I want to talk to her.*

### 4.6.2  Management of Bullying and Peer Conflict

Some pupils discussed avoiding school or "*skipping lessons"* due to a fear of being bullied or due to social discord amongst their peers.

**Ann:**        *Last year I didn't wanna come in because of bullies…I'd be worried about like the people in school like if they were gonna bully me or if they were gonna say something about me.*

**Luke:**        *I was getting bullied... I thought it was a good idea to stay at home because when you're at home it's safe. No one like picks on you when you're at home. I'm like at home and on my own basically and I'm like this is how I want to live my life.*

These pupils mentioned that staff did not provide many opportunities to consult with them about their concerns or to discuss possible supportive interventions. Ann stated that this approach *"would have helped so much".* Rather, pupils perceived that often staff did not acknowledge their views but were blaming or not believing them when they informed staff of their concerns. For example Ann stated "*school knew very well [about the bullying], but they just said 'oh you're putting yourself in the matter of being bullied, you're putting yourself in the shoes of someone who gets bullied'"*

These students therefore described feeling that school staff were not *"sorting out"* the bullying and conflict issues.

**Ann:** *I would report it to my head of year but nothing would happen. She would say do a statement…we'll sort it out but it never really did get sorted out… [it would be more helpful] if like they actually read through your statements like ask me how I felt about it happening rather than me just writing the statement.*

**Luke:** *They [teachers] don't help you… you would write it down in a statement and then they would put it to the side…  If they [pupils who are bullied] don't bring their mum in, it's not getting sorted.*

Ann and Lynn also discussed how having little opportunity be consulted and have their views heard resulted in them feeling that most of the support strategies implemented were unhelpful.

**Lynn:** *They [teachers] are not really helping…because they split us all up but the girl keeps coming into the classroom, like sneaking in and just sitting and shouting things out…it happens all the time.*

Ann mentioned that the 'exit' card system "*didn't really help"* because some *"teachers didn't know I had it"* and also she was not allowed to leave the lesson unless she had informed the teacher of who was bullying her. This meant that the bullies became aware of her telling the teacher. *She stated "I'd prefer to have that type of exit card where I could just show it to the teacher and go".* In addition, Ann was permitted to 'RAG' her timetable but stated:

**Ann:** *It was helpful but then they said that…I had to go to my lessons and that really really annoyed me… they said I was in there [learning support] too much. But they didn't take into account that it was because bullies were going into my lessons.*

Similarly Lynn described how staff gave her a *"log book"* to record bullying incidents but it was unhelpful so far because "*we ain't got it yet and everything they [bullies] are saying now can't be in the log book".* Consequently the bullying continued and Lynn felt that *"when we get the log book they'll [bullies] stop and pretend they are all innocent".* Lynn indicated that this sometimes resulted in dealing with the matter herself which often escalated the problem.

**Lynn:** *we just got on top of her and started fighting her. That stopped most of the bickering between us all. Even when the teachers said "what you did was really bad" and I said "well it stopped it like you don't do anything about it so we helped ourselves".*

Ann and Lynn also highlighted some unhelpful aspects of using learning support as a system to support them with peer conflict or bullying issues. Sometimes while they

were in learning support one of the bullies would be 'on-called' and "*also end up in learning support…then I would be in the room with them and they would say things to me"*. Lynn explained that the staff in learning support were unhelpful because they "ignore it".

**Lynn:** *The teachers [should] get involved and stop the arguments more. And actually help the student through things …like what's actually caused this argument and what could help to stop it and keep her away from us.*

However, when Ann was asked what the most helpful support was for her with bullying issues, she stated *'I dunno, maybe coming into learning support'* indicating that, although it may be minimal, there was some benefit to this support.

### 4.6.3  Management of Attendance Difficulties

Most pupils stated that once attendance difficulties had been identified, neither they nor their parents were given the opportunity to be consulted through a meeting to discuss potential reasons for their low attendance. Instead staff tended to telephone, email or send letters home asking parents for reasons for absence and warning them of the likelihood of being fined if their child's attendance did not improve.

**Leah:** *Like a meeting or something like that [would be more helpful than a fine]… we just got letters, I think about 3 letters.*

**Kim:** *My mum was supposed to have a meeting because my mum told the teacher and when she turned up they said there was no meeting booked.*

**Mark:** *School was sending emails asking why wasn't I in which I understand but when it gets to the point when you have 3 letters through your door asking the same thing…that is a bit over the top.  It was probably lack of communication through the school.*

Many pupils stated that they initially found out that their attendance was a concern either when their parent received a letter from school or a fine. Other pupils stated finding out through methods such as being told through an unfamiliar member of staff, through their form tutor or through receiving their termly report. Several pupils therefore appeared unsure of what their current attendance level was or what the acceptable level of attendance is prior to it being a concern for staff. Their responses varied stating that the acceptable level was between 80%-99%.

**Jess:** *They [staff] just phoned my mum. That's how I know, they say you're fined because your daughter had a day off....like last year I got fined. My mum was like 'she is Ill' and they said well you have to send her to the doctors to get proof.*

**Paul:** *I'm not sure [of current attendance level] because we haven't got the report cards with the attendance… It [acceptable attendance level] is supposed to be at 91%.*

**Joe:** *It was around the middle of Year 7 when I found out…the teacher told me that the attendance was unsatisfactory. I dunno [who she was] but I've seen her before.*

However, three pupils indicated that they were invited to discuss their attendance difficulties with a member of staff. Nevertheless Lynn deliberately avoided the meeting due to fears of the meeting being uncomfortable whilst Sophie was called in at the end of the meeting therefore her views were not considered when forming strategies.

**Lynn:** *I even had to have a meeting with her [attendance officer] and she said she was disappointed because I didn't turn up. [She wanted to talk about] my attendance, like why I'm not coming in and if there are things happening at home…like the school always wants to know your business…they ask you lots of questions about "what's happening at home and do you get abused" and all that.*

**Sophie:** *Well at first my mum was in there [meeting]…and then they came to get me and then said "we're just making sure that everything is OK"….they could have asked what lessons I don't really like and if I wanted to come into learning support for those lessons if it's really bad.*

However, Jake described how initially he was concerned about speaking to staff about his difficulties but once he did, he found the experience useful.

**Jake:** *I didn't speak to anyone here [at school] because I was too shy... But then they asked me what was going on at home and I told them everything so then they got the counsel workers to help my mum.*

Some students commented that since becoming aware of their attendance difficulties, their form tutor had mentioned the need for their attendance to improve however this tended to be the tutor just stating that they need to improve their attendance rather than consulting with them to discuss difficulties and form strategies.

**Ben:** *Well if I come back [from absence] my form tutor says I need to improve my attendance… That's it…not really helpful because all he says is "you need to come in that's another week off you need to come in". That's it really.*

**Jess:** *[The form tutor] just says "you're attendance is really bad". I'm like how? And he really bugs me. It's just like they just wanna fine me.*

## Chapter Summary

Following a thematic analysis, this chapter presented an overview of the perceptions from the interviews of 12 non-attenders. The key findings suggest that pupils perceive themselves to have a lack of opportunities to be heard by staff, dislike many aspects of the teaching and learning environment and are dissatisfied with many aspects of the support interventions available. This chapter included both negative and positive perceptions with the intention of providing a balanced overview of participant responses. Chapter 7 will provide a discussion of the interpretations of these findings.

# CHAPTER 5: STAFF FINDINGS

## 5.0 Introduction

In this chapter the findings from the interview responses of six secondary school staff members are presented regarding their experiences of working with non-attenders. Following a thematic analysis of the interview responses, four main themes were generated. These main themes and their associated sub-themes are presented in Table 5.0 below.

**Table 5.0: Themes and sub-themes following analysis of staff responses**

| Themes | Sub-themes |
|---|---|
| 1. Influencing Factors on Attendance | Parental Support and Family Culture |
| | School Environment and Curriculum |
| 2. Pupil Support within School | Emotional and Academic Support |
| | Pastoral care as Support |
| | Unhelpful Short and Long term Effects of Support |
| | Difficulties with Implementing Support |
| 3. Factors Affecting the Effectiveness of External Agency Involvement | Building Relationships with Pupils and Families |
| | Earlier Intervention and Collaborative Liaison |
| | Resources Constraints |
| 4. Colleague Support and Attendance Management | Importance of Collaborative Working and Shared Expertise |
| | Effectiveness of School Procedures |
| | Promoting Attendance Improvement |

## 5.1 Theme 1: Influencing Factors on Attendance

### 5.1.1 Parental Support and Family Culture

Five staff discussed family factors which they perceived impacted on pupils' attendance. Some staff perceived the lack of parental support or involvement to

improve their children's attendance was a major challenge for them in facilitating higher attendance levels.  Staff mentioned examples such as parents not attending parents' evenings despite them being the parents that the evening would benefit most.

**Emily:**	*The parents that don't come to parents evenings are the ones that need to…so you know, it's hard work.*

Some staff indicated that at times parents appeared to condone their children's absence and create '*barriers*' to their children attending school, such as providing the school with '*ridiculous'* excuses, rather than working collaboratively with school staff to improve their child's attendance.

**Cheryl:**	*It [excuse] would be as daft as "it's raining"… there always seems to be little blockages which don't appear to be the student, it does appear to come from the parent.*

Staff also acknowledged that pupils' non-attendance can be attributed to the family culture and also family dynamics where some parents appear apathetic to the importance of school attendance and do not value education, in turn passing on their views and values to their children. Staff indicated that often, the culture within the family is one of '*low aspirations*' which '*passes along'* to pupils influencing them to also have low aspirations for themselves. Amy explained that this appeared to be due to parents having a "*lack of education"* about the importance of school attendance. The majority of staff mentioned that it was common to see effects of this through siblings having a history of poor attendance.

**Olivia:**	*We have quite a lot of families here who have a history of being persistently absent and there is that lack of motivation within the family and it kind of passes along… the patterns of behaviour are projected onto the young person.*

To address this, Cheryl and Olivia described their intention of aiming to educate and raise awareness with parents and pupils about the link between attendance and attainment. For example, through sending newsletters home, having visual displays of the link between attendance and attainment at parents evenings and having the

*"attendance improvement officer meet with parents of children who have got poor attendance"* at parents evening. Olivia indicated that often parents perceive attendance such as 93% to be good because if *"you get that in an exam it's fantastic".* She recognised that the school needed to educate parents on how this and lower levels of attendance can negatively impact their child's attainment.

It was also highlighted that *"dysfunctional"* or chaotic home environments can negatively impact on attendance even in cases where parents are supportive. Participants commented on instances such as parent separation, single parent working patterns, lack of boundaries and parental emotional difficulties as factors impacting on pupils' willingness and ability to attend school. Staff noticed that these factors frequently caused attendance difficulties amongst siblings.

**Amy:**       *[Child X] has got a very supportive family but I think what triggered his school refusal was the split of the mum and dad.*

**Olivia**     *We also have some families that try to get their children in but there's maybe some issues with boundaries at home, so they're not the parent, they are being parented by the child who is making the decisions.*

Positive examples of parental involvement were mentioned, specifically in instances when pupils masked their unwillingness to attend school or lessons by pretending to be ill. Kate indicated that these examples tended to be those parents who worked and consequently their child's absence was often perceived as an *"inconvenience"* therefore they wanted to *"sort out"* the root of the problem. Kate also illustrated that involving parents in meetings with the child proved helpful in resolving attendance issues as *"everyone is singing from the same song sheet".*

### 5.1.2   School Environment and Curriculum

All staff discussed how aspects of the school environment affected pupils' non-attendance. For example, pupils may experience bullying or peer conflict which often impacts on their willingness to attend school and also on their parents' willingness to send them to school before *"the situation has been completely been looked into and resolved".* Kate explained that bullying issues tended to affect pupils' attendance

because "*when you are very young, that [friendship issues] is very important and very upsetting"*.

However Carmen explained how children with emotional needs may sometimes instigate bullying for reasons such as *"getting attention"*. She gave an example of one pupil she considered a "*provocative [bully] victim*" stating "*I think she has emotional needs and gets attention through things blowing up".* Carmen emphasised that it may be more difficult to identify and support such pupils with emotional needs affecting attendance because they are not always automatically placed on the SEN register unlike those pupils with other forms of special educational needs such as autism.

Additionally, Kate and Amy highlighted how the school environment is sometimes not conducive to helping pupils on the Autistic Spectrum attend school and therefore they often struggled to attend.

**Kate:** *They just genuinely are not happy in this kind of environment. Especially a very busy environment if they find it difficult in crowds or around lots of people because it is a very busy school.*

Staff acknowledged that peers questioning pupils about reasons for their absence can also negatively impact on non-attendance because *"they don't want to be confronted"*. However Amy highlighted the difficulty staff have with preventing peers from doing this because even though staff may warn the class peers not to, pupils may be asked outside of the classroom which is harder to control.

**Amy:** *When they go back into lesson the first thing that everyone says is, "where have you been?" They don't want to be asked that question, and so off they go you don't see them again for goodness knows how long.*

In addition Emily discussed how sometimes staff reprimands such as detentions cause pupils to avoid attending school.

**Emily:** *Yesterday he didn't come into school…he got his detention and he wasn't going to do it.*

Kate mentioned that frequently new Year 7 pupils had difficulty settling into their new school environment during the first term due to *"a lot of changes"* such as their social groups. Carmen informed that at times transition difficulties in Year 7 may also occur because this was the time that an *"undiagnosed condition"* or *"difficulties manifest themselves"*.

Olivia stated that although there may be other issues which cause low attendance, the key problem was pupils' *"lack of motivation"* to engage with the academic curriculum. Olivia highlighted that there is a *"pressure on young people"* to *"conform"* to a curriculum which they may find difficulty accessing for reasons such as low academic abilities or lack of interest in certain subjects. Her view was that it is difficult to motivate such pupils to attend subjects. Consistent with this view, Carmen highlighted that often, pupils may not attend school because of *"underlying SEN difficulties… speech and language difficulties and not comprehending what's going on in the classroom"*.

**Olivia:** *I think one of the biggest challenges is trying to find a niche and find a tool to motivate the students.*

Olivia also explained that even *"high achieving"* students may not have an interest in certain subjects and therefore attendance difficulties become apparent when teachers assign these pupils to subjects in which they may be capable of achieving but have no interest.

**Olivia:** *I think the stumbling block has been sometimes when we have put them on a pathway [subject choices] because we have got high aspirations for them and they feel like they have been railroaded into it, and they haven't got the passion for the subject.*

Olivia therefore emphasised a need to have a more *"creative"* curriculum to make it more accessible to those pupils who are more *"vocationally"* oriented or have interests in more creative subjects. However due to the more *"selective approach"* of subject criteria stipulated by universities and colleges to gain a place, Olivia explained that schools felt obliged to lead pupils down the more academic route if they showed the ability to give them the best chances for future education.

**5.2    Theme 2: Pupil Support within School**


*5.2.1 Emotional and Academic Support*

Most participants described how the school supported some pupils with emotional or academic support using school-based resources. Participants commented on various intervention groups such as "*emotional literacy", "problem-solving"* and *"protective behaviours*" aimed at helping pupils with attendance difficulties to build "*positive friendships*" and "*make them feel more confident".* However it was highlighted that *"time constraints"* prevented more children from receiving access to these intervention groups. Staff also mentioned social clubs which were helpful to encourage pupils to develop "*other social groups".* Although mentoring schemes had been discontinued, staff felt that it should be *"reinstated"* because with mentoring the "*school community becomes smaller, and the smaller it becomes the more inclusive people feel".*


However the support considered to be the "*most powerful tool"* was that of the learning support base which was described as somewhere quiet that children could work with some additional adult support. Most participants considered it "*crucial"* as it allowed students to at least enter the school building and access some learning with the potential of gradually reintegrating them into lessons. Staff preferred this option rather than making students attend every lesson which was considered an "*impossible task"* for these pupils.

*Carmen:*     *That's the ideal environment for them because at least we do get them into school accessing some learning… the member of staff on duty will actually go round and offer help to students …It doesn't always work though, even some of them [pupils] won't even do that [go to learning support]*

With regards to pupils' attendance and attainment, participants discussed that there were "*some successes*" for some students using learning support. For example, some students attended some of their lessons and a few achieved some good exam results following differentiation of work and additional tuition within learning support. However staff reported that sometimes there were fluctuations in pupils' willingness to attend lessons despite this intervention.

**Amy:** *She [student] did end up achieving, as far as her exam results went, her full potential…so I would say that that was successful, albeit in a different way. We had to differentiate to offer her what was best for her.*

Many staff members also considered the school-based counselling service as a useful mode of support for non-attenders with emotional needs.

**Cheryl:** *We've got a fantastic counselling service which we would always make available if we felt that that would benefit whether it is for the child or as a family.*

Cheryl also mentioned that the school counselling service is aiming to help improve persistent absence such as via home visits "*which might be more comfortable for a child to speak about an issue rather than come into the school environment to have to do it*".

However Amy said that this counselling service was in quite high demand and therefore may not always be immediately accessible to non-attenders. In addition students had to rely on staff referring them as there was not an option to self-refer.

**Amy:** *There are waiting lists, and it really depends on the circumstances for each individual child… the capacity isn't enough for everybody who we think needs it.*

### 5.2.2 Pastoral Care as Support

The role of the "*named person*" was discussed as being pivotal in gaining a secure and close relationship with pupils and their family in order to understand their issues and devise appropriate support strategies. Amy perceived it "*was the most valuable tool*" to use with non-attenders. She discussed the main aims of this role stating "t*he named person does all the students IEPs, tracks their progress, and will liaise with the form tutors, head of years and our attendance officers*". Cheryl also highlighted the value of input from a named person when having home-school meetings "*because they probably have a more close dealing with the student, possibly more contact with parents on a different level*". A few participants also explained how

opportunities were made for the named person to introduce themselves to the child such as through letters and a contract.

*Carmen:*      *There's formal letters and there's a contract about the relationship between the named person and the student which they [student and named person] discuss and sign…at School Action Plus they would have a meeting…at School Action not necessarily*

Participants also discussed the importance of knowing what difficulties were causing the non-attendance. This enabled them to make any necessary changes within the school environment, offer rewards or make referrals to external agencies to encourage school attendance. For example Carmen commented on how staff use Individual Education Plans "*to identify and give short-term targets*" such as reducing pupils' time table of lessons and then "*building them*" up to full time. Other examples described were "*RAGing their timetable*", issuing "*exit cards*", changing their form groups or subject teachers, and escorting them to class following the busy crowd period in the mornings.

Staff mentioned having discussions with pupils individually to support pupils through any difficulties. Involving pupils in these discussions were conducted formally and informally.

*Carmen:*      *We try to have all our students at our meetings, unless they are very delicate things to be discussed.*

*Emily:*      *It's generally informally type of thing. I will say if you want to come and see me you can do, you know where I am.*

Cheryl and Olivia discussed how more recently they had started meeting with PA pupils once a term for five minutes to identify any necessary support. However Cheryl explained although some non-attenders had revealed some issues affecting their attendance, so far most pupils were not very forthcoming with information.

Emily emphasised that it was difficult to identify any specific type of support which was helpful because "*each child is different*" but mentioned that the most important thing was that "*they need to know the support is consistent and it's available*". She stated that non-attenders "*know there is support, they are not silly*".

### 5.2.3 Unhelpful Short and Long term Effects of Support

Staff described their concern about some of the short and long term effects of some support systems for non-attenders. Participants were concerned that through pupils accessing their education in learning support, they struggled to reach their full academic potential.

*Cheryl:* *He's a very bright boy and it's really sad because obviously we can see that his grades are tumbling…as good as it is that the work is being supplied [in learning support] you still don't get the full benefit of actually being there in the classroom with the teacher.*

Amy explained that it was often more difficult to reintegrate pupils into lessons once they had worked in learning support particularly if they did not like the subject. Participants were therefore concerned that these pupils were being *"isolated"* and *"ostracised"* from their peer group and lacked the ability to access the curriculum through social interaction with classroom peers.

*Olivia:* *You have got to be really careful that they don't become too comfortable in there and too isolated within school.*

*Emily:* *They then don't socialise with their peer group and then they sort of become ostracised.*

These concerns led some participants to perceive they were not adequately preparing these pupils for their future and discussed the possibility of these pupils facing long term effects of social isolation.

*Amy:* *[what] worries me most is that they may be able to work independently and get very good grades but if they can't interact socially within a community… I'm not quite sure what good we are doing them in the long run.*

*Emily:* *I can just see the longer term future for them. Education, commitment, health issues, mental issues…because they are not socialising.*

However both Amy and Emily explained that when pupils in learning support were able to work with a friend or saw their peers successfully reintegrating into lessons, this seemed to inspire them to attend some lessons.

### 5.2.4 Difficulties with Implementing Support

Most participants explained that although they were able to offer support strategies for non-attenders, they faced various challenges with implementing these.

Often they were unable to recognise pupils' attendance difficulties prior to attendance levels already being very low by which time it seemed more difficult to reengage pupils into the school system.

**Amy:**     *It's [attendance] one of those things that you don't often notice it until it's too late, and by that time the children have gotten into that mindset and can be extremely stubborn where it is very difficult to get through to them.*

Staff also emphasised the challenges they faced with implementing support due to them not "*understanding*" exactly what factors were affecting non-attendance.  This tended to be more difficult for reasons such as pupils' susceptibility to fluctuate with their willingness to attend, academically able students also being unwilling to attend, and pupils not revealing the reasons to staff. This led staff to maintain that frequently "*there's no rhyme or reason*" for pupils' non-attendance therefore making it difficult to know how best to support them.

**Cheryl:**     *We had numerous meetings with myself, his named person, his parent, him in as well and also the [Local Authority] attendance officer. But he just doesn't really give you a reason.*

When pupils would not disclose reasons for their absence, staff commented that they did not want to incessantly question pupils in case they jeopardised their positive relationship or pupils become more recluse prompting further non-attendance. For example some pupils tended to develop a '*negative attitude'* with staff feeling that '*everybody is against them'*.

**Emily:**     *I don't push it too far because I don't want to be the reason why they don't want to come back into school.*

Emily also explained that some pupils struggled to understand for themselves why they were not attending school and why staff were "*forcing' their beliefs"* [of having to attend school or support groups] onto them.

Similarly, Kate explained that certain pupils frequently masked their unwillingness to attend school by pretending to be ill thereby making it difficult for staff to be aware of any difficulties and support them appropriately.

*Kate:* *Certain children often will become frequent flyers to the medical bay... It will be a lot of headaches, bellyaches. We sort of say "is there something else wrong?" and suddenly they burst into tears and tell you immediately. Some...will gradually reveal to you.*

Other difficulties staff indicated were time, staff and financial constraints. For example, school not having sufficient staff or time to meet with pupils, and the pastoral team not having an extra budget to finance attendance rewards. In addition, staff reported that they are "*having a reduction in staff*" and that *"[named] people were moving on and not being replaced"* therefore making it less likely that staff will have time to monitor and meet with pupils to gain their views. Moreover, staff perceived that the number of non-attenders is increasing thus making further demands on resources and causing more challenges for staff with implementing support.

*Amy* *it's really difficult to give the level of support [needed]…Possibly that's why we're not getting them [non-attenders] back into lessons, and school*

Some staff members also mentioned the difficulty of pupils being able to access available in-school support due to the fact that these pupils were frequently absent.

*Amy:* *If they're not in school how do you get to give them support*

## 5.3    Theme 3:  Factors Affecting the Effectiveness of External Agency Involvement

### 5.3.1  Building Relationships with Pupils and Families

Participants mentioned liaising with a range of different agencies such as Connexions, Family Support workers (FSWs), School Nurses, EWOs, EPs and Youth Support workers. Most participants commented that the agencies were most

effective and helpful when they had longer term input allowing them to build a relationship with pupils and families. For example, FSWs were able to "*build a relationship with the parents*".

**Amy:**    *Connexions at the moment is working quite well for that particular young man because he is developing a good relationship with our Connexions member.*

Cheryl explained that the ongoing work of a targeted youth worker helped to improve one pupil's attendance significantly and consequently the pupil requested to continue seeing the worker "*as she has found it really beneficial*".

### 5.3.2  Earlier Intervention and Collaborative Liaison

Staff suggested that earlier intervention and a collaborative approach from external agencies would be welcomed at the initial stages of non-attendance to make the biggest impact on attendance improvement and support school staff. Most participants discussed how agencies became involved when non-attendance was entrenched therefore becoming more difficult to reengage non-attenders. Responses discussed the importance of agencies "*getting in there early*" and "*nipping it in the bud*" to improve the chances of successfully reintegrating non-attenders. Staff desired agencies to work collaboratively by attending meetings and being "*part of the agreement*" in supporting these pupils.

**Kate:**    *You [EPs] probably need to be brought in early on… sometimes people are brought in almost too late…I think if the stakeholders are in much earlier it would just be much easier.*

However most participants commented on lengthy processes and short term input from external agencies which appeared counterproductive in supporting staff and pupils. Cheryl explained "*the least effective professionals*" were the EWS because of their long process prior to prosecuting parents.

Similarly, staff perceived the waiting time to access an EP was very long especially considering the vulnerability of non-attenders not receiving a full time education. Emily mentioned that although she attended a meeting with an EP she was not

asked for her input. Additionally, Amy indicated that although she received helpful CBT training from an EP and used it with a non-attender, it "*didn't have a long term impact*". She perceived longer EP involvement with the pupil would have been more beneficial and longer term training for her to gain confidence in using CBT independently.

**Amy:**    *I haven't seen a huge amount of success with outside agencies. I think because it's all so very short-term and I think a lot of the students do suffer from low self esteem, low confidence…there's too much that is too deep and I think an extended time is needed.*

However most participants explained that they had no previous liaison with an EP regarding supporting non-attenders as they did not "*really make the link*" with the EP role and non-attendance and did not "*have a good knowledge of what the role would be*". A few participants acknowledged that this may be due to a need to raise awareness with staff about the varied role of EPs in relation to working with non-attenders. Staff considered "*it would be really good*" if EPs provided advice on strategies to support non-attenders.

**Olivia:**    *We look for an EP where there are challenges within the classroom, but [not] when there is a student that's a non-attender…I think it may be sort of raising awareness about the role of the EP.*

Nevertheless, Carmen stated that "*EPs would be a main person*" and her "*first port of call*" that she would liaise with regarding non-attenders.

### 5.3.3  Resource Constraints

Staff perceived that financial and time constraints adversely affected the service delivery of some external agencies. Amy stated "*money [with external agencies] is tight and it's got a little bit harder to get outside agencies involved… because the people that we usually use don't exist anymore". S*ome agencies which staff considered effective have since changed their service delivery approach or disbanded without any other replacement service. Staff perceived these resource

constraints affected their ability to provide appropriate support to improve some pupils' attendance.

Olivia discussed having a support agency which was "*key*" to getting students to attend school as "*they would support the family as well as getting the student into school... But unfortunately they lost their funding, and there's nothing like that that's replaced*". Carmen also commented that "a*s soon as that [support] service folded we reverted back to how things were before*".

Staff shortages or changes to the service delivery of the Police Community Support Officers, the EWS and Health professionals such as paediatricians were also mentioned as negatively impacting staff's ability to support non-attenders. For example, Carmen indicated that often external professionals were unable to attend Common Assessment Framework (CAF) meetings which is aimed at working collaboratively. She stated *"I don't think other external agencies build in the time needed for CAFs to be fully operational"*.

## 5.4    Theme 4: Colleague Support and Attendance Management

### *5.4.1  Importance of Collaborative Working and Shared Expertise*

The importance of collaborative working and shared expertise was highlighted through staff's responses regarding their confidence to support non-attenders.  On a scale of one to five (where one denotes not at all confident and five denotes extremely confident), responses ranged from three to five mainly based on staff perceptions of their experience and knowledge in managing and supporting non-attenders.

Subordinate staff who supported non-attenders based on directives from more senior staff explained that their confidence was between three and three and a half. Although they had some experience of working with non-attenders, they perceived that they did not have *"all the knowledge"* they needed to support them. Others rated their confidence at a 4 explaining that they felt confident to support non-attenders

within their remit, however acknowledged that they relied on senior staff to deal with "*some of the [more complex] levels*" of supporting non-attenders.

**Emily:** *I can deal with some of it, but I need to take it further [to more senior staff] when I can't.*

However, senior staff stated feeling confidence levels at four or five due to their knowledge and experience such as liaising with external agencies and "*having the ability to make quite big decisions*" about pupil support.

**Carmen:** *I know who's out there, I know what procedures need to be done, I have experience of writing CAFs, I can set things up from scratch.*

Staff also indicated that they gained most of their knowledge and skills through learning strategies and procedures on the job and had not received any specific training. However, most staff mentioned that they had received training in similar areas which they applied when supporting non-attenders such as "*child protection*", "*behaviour training*" and "*working with hard to reach students*".

**Carmen:** *It's experience, learning what has worked and what hasn't worked. Working with other people like my manager.*

Therefore most staff mentioned they tended to work collaboratively, particularly with pastoral staff, as they knew students well and were able to help with any necessary decision making regarding supporting non-attenders. For example, Carmen explained that she and the appropriate head of year (HOY) would "*have a discussion maybe before we recommend an open case to the EWO*". Olivia explained that as well as tutors and HOYs, "*the SEN department are pivotal*" in helping staff negotiate alternative arrangements for children who are "*reluctant to go to lessons*".

Most staff felt that colleagues were willing to share their knowledge and expertise and felt supported in their role working with non-attenders. Staff considered their colleagues to be "*a tight team*" and "*supportive*".

**Cheryl:** *Everyone is very supportive and people who are more knowledgeable are always willing to give you the benefit of their knowledge.*

Olivia also valued staff working together using a "*collective approach*" to facilitate supporting the wide range of pupils' needs.

**Olivia:**    *It's always best to have a collective approach, because people bring different experiences and different skills to the table.*

However, some staff described not always being informed of some matters involving non-attenders, specifically when it was a child protection issue. Kate explained that they were *"not entitled to know"* this information which sometimes left her feeling "*undermined*" as it made it more difficult for her to support pupils. Whereas, Emily stated *"[if] I have passed it onto the relevant person and the relevant person has been dealing with it, that's fine".*

Additionally, some staff highlighted that, for reasons such as "*time constraints*", monitoring and managing attendance was perceived amongst staff as being the sole responsibility of the in-school attendance improvement officer rather than as a collaborative whole school venture. This left the attendance improvement officer feeling overwhelmed with this responsibility stating "*one person trying to monitor all that attendance is quite hard…...other members of staff could perhaps be helping more… it's very much, well your attendance improvement that is your role".*

Olivia emphasised the need for all staff to be more open minded about evolving in their role to incorporate a whole school approach to improve attendance. She had recently delivered training to staff regarding this and supportive approaches to use.

**Olivia:**    *I think that you always get a cohort of staff who are quite set in their ways, and it is about the evolvement of the profession…but you do get the majority of staff in school that are open to trying new ideas.*

Most staff stated they would welcome further training about appropriate ways to support non-attenders both in school and through external agency liaison.

**Kate:**    *known ways of dealing with these children, policies that tend to work with certain types of children… and why are we not able to communicate, you know, that would be useful. Strategies that other people have found successful.*

### 5.4.2  Effectiveness of School Procedures

Staff highlighted some procedures used to manage non-attendance. For example, Emily mentioned the school enforcing late detentions to deter pupils attending school late (as lateness also affects attendance levels if they arrive beyond a certain time).

Some staff mainly discussed using a "*systematic approach*" to managing school attendance via the "*fixed penalty notice procedure".* This consisted of the school sending letters to parents to inform them of their child's low attendance when it "*dropped below*" 96% and again when it was below 90%. Cheryl explained that subsequently "*further letters [would be sent] that refer to the fixed penalty notice fines that would be issued if attendance carried on being really bad".* This ultimately led to parents being fined for their children's low attendance if it did not improve.

However this procedure only helped to improve some students' attendance such as those who "*take time off if they have got a slight headache, or a bit of a cold, or a bit tired"*. But Olivia explained that there are "*hard hitting students"* with difficult family circumstances "*that it hasn't really impacted".*

Cheryl emphasised that sometimes this was due to parents often becoming "*negative"* and "*defensive*" (when they received a letter) and did not seem to understand that the school had the best intentions for their child's education. She stated that often these families required additional support and intervention from the EWS rather than "*constantly fining parents"*.


### 5.4.3  Promoting Attendance Improvement

Olivia and Cheryl described their evolving role in promoting and improving school attendance. This included Cheryl screening new Year 6 pupils for those who may be at risk of having attendance difficulties via parent questionnaires. She did not receive many responses but information received helped because "*we were aware of that [reason] and if we could work around it in some way then we would".*

Additionally, Cheryl and Olivia commented that the crucial factor they believed would promote and improve attendance was a new tracker system as it would enable the attendance issue to be recognised as a whole staff responsibility rather than solely

one person's role. Moreover, it would facilitate earlier intervention for those pupils at risk of becoming PA because form tutors would be encouraged to have a *"brief conversation"* with pupils whose attendance had dropped within a week rather than only focusing on PA pupils. More often PA pupils were already receiving interventions and support whereas "*it is the students that kind of just drift off and then end up in that situation, we are sort of trying to do the early intervention and capture that"*. Cheryl highlighted that this system would also facilitate more open communication between pupils and staff as they "*are more likely to feel comfortable to approach their form tutor"* regarding attendance rather than the attendance officer.

Although the new tracker system had only been implemented for half a term so far, Olivia stated that she had seen some improvement with attendance:

**Olivia:**     "*I think we have fewer students that have the random days off and better communication from parents because they know that we are going to chase them".*


## Chapter Summary

Following a thematic analysis, this chapter presented an overview of the perceptions of six staff working with non-attenders. The main findings highlighted that staff experience many challenges in working with non-attenders particularly due to resource constraints and lack of parental engagement. However a whole school approach to improving non-attendance, multi-agency collaboration and further training was perceived as a positive step forward. This chapter included both negative and positive perceptions with the intention of providing a balanced overview of participant responses. Chapter 7 will provide a discussion of the interpretations of these findings.

## CHAPTER 6: DISCUSSION

This study gained an understanding of the perceptions and experiences of secondary school non-attenders during their early stages of attendance difficulties particularly regarding support they had been offered or used. The study also explored the views of secondary school staff regarding their experiences working with non-attenders and their perceptions of the support available to help these pupils attend school regularly.

This chapter presents a discussion of the findings to address the research questions. It will initially provide a discussion of pupil findings followed by that of staff findings. Subsequently, a summary of the contrasting pupil and staff perceptions will be discussed. The research limitations are considered followed by suggestions for future research and recommendations for educational professionals and EP practice. Finally a conclusion of the research is presented.

## **Pupil perceptions**

This section will discuss research questions one and two by discussing pupils' perceptions within the following themes*: Gaining and acknowledging pupil views, Communication and relationships within the school context, Lesson enjoyment and understanding of work, Impact of family and friends, Thoughts and emotions about school and attendance and Effects of absence.*

### 6.1     Research Question 1

What are the perceptions and perceived experiences of pupils during the early stages of their school non-attendance?

### *Thoughts and Emotions about School and Attendance*

The research findings indicated that pupils often avoided school due to negative anticipatory thoughts about what may occur if they attended. In particular bullying,

peer conflicts, staff reprimands and difficult and boring lessons were mentioned, all of which are well documented in research as causes of non-attendance (e.g. Reid et al., 2010; Gregory and Purcell, 2014). However pupils appeared to have an underlying desire to attend school but perceived the benefits of remaining at home to outweigh the disadvantages of being absent from school. Since early studies with non-attenders (e.g. Reid, 1985) it has been identified that they do not typically enjoy being absent from school suggesting the complexity of their difficulties.

However despite the complexity of many pupils' non-attendance, some perceived attending school as an easy task stating simplified ways they could improve such as '*attend every day unless very ill'.* This indicates that non-attenders with complex needs may not always perceive it as such and therefore may not seek additional adult support. Perhaps they may lack some meta-cognitive awareness (awareness of their thoughts) of the underlying thoughts and reasons why they find it difficult to attend school; they may require support to understand their thoughts and bring it to their consciousness. Nuttall and Woods (2013) found that providing this support helped non-attenders to become conscious of their thoughts and reframe negative thinking to be more positive. Some therapeutic interventions such as CBT and Motivational Interviewing have been identified as being supportive in this process with non-attenders and disaffected pupils (Elliott, 1999; Atkinson and Woods, 2003).

Despite many negative views, some non-attenders were able to identify positive thoughts about their school environment which is rarely mentioned in current literature. This emphasises the importance of gaining non-attenders views to determine any positive perceptions as it helps to form successful interventions and adapt the school environment to motivate them to attend (Nuttall and Woods, 2013).

### *Gaining and Acknowledging Pupil views*

Research and government guidance has highlighted the benefits and importance of all pupils, particularly vulnerable pupils such as non-attenders, to have their views heard and to contribute towards decision making processes which affect them (e.g. DCSF, 2008; DCSF, 2010; Flutter and Ruddock, 2004). However, in line with Gregory and Purcell (2014), a main issue for pupils was their perception that staff

rarely gave them opportunities to be heard or to discuss their feelings regarding issues within school. Most pupils stated that staff tended to consult their parents about their attendance difficulties during the earlier stages and therefore pupils were usually unaware of their low attendance until it reached more concerning levels. This is contrary to recommendations for successful early intervention and reintegration with non-attenders (DCSF, 2010; Nuttal and Woods, 2013); these non-attenders appeared to be viewed as passive participants within their attendance difficulties and adults as the experts (Woolfson et al., 2006, Bragg, 2007; Pellegrini, 2007).

However, pupils' perceptions illustrated that more than just offering them an opportunity to be heard, staff need to consider whether the approaches used are conducive to non-attenders engaging and revealing their honest views. Most pupils who were offered or desired the opportunity to speak with staff did not perceive it to be a useful experience, were apprehensive to attend, and sometimes deliberately avoided meetings due to various reasons such as having negative preconceived ideas of the meeting or their ability to articulate their difficulties. Also, pupils' perceptions seemed to be one of staff touching base with them rather than consulting and involving pupils in decision making processes. Woolfson et al., (2006) and Hartas (2011) acknowledged these difficulties when consulting with pupils and emphasised the need for staff to facilitate and support pupils to engage and successfully communicate their views particularly through informal methods. Considering the vulnerability of non-attenders, they are likely to benefit from such systems to help them feel safe to discuss their attendance difficulties willingly and honestly in order to have the best chances of addressing their needs.

Similarly, researchers have emphasised the importance of schools not using tokenistic approaches for pupil participation where ultimately pupils' views are not considered or acknowledged (Shier, 2001; Flutter and Ruddock, 2004). However pupil perceptions indicated a school system where tokenistic approaches are possibly used with non-attenders since they did not feel listened to or involved in decision-making processes. As suggested by Arnot et al. (2003) and Flutter (2007), this highlights a gap where the views of the pupils that staff are concerned about are not fully considered and therefore effective strategies to support them may be overlooked.

The effects of power imbalance between teachers and pupils are extensive due to the hierarchical structure of staff holding the positions of authority (Robinson and Taylor, 2013). Most pupils in this study seemed to view their school experience as a power struggle; they perceived that staff had the power to oblige pupils to listen to them, but that pupils lacked this power as staff were rarely willing to listen to pupils. Thus, this seemed to cause them to feel a sense of helplessness and a lack of control to change their negative school experiences without more support from staff. It is likely that these non-attenders sought alternative options to resolve their negative school situations which manifests as behaviour and attendance difficulties. Place et al. (2000) argued that non-attenders seemed to lack the coping skills necessary to resolve negative school issues. However in this study it appears that non-attenders did not perceive they had the necessary coping skills due to their view of a power imbalance. Similar findings have been found in studies with disaffected pupils where they seem perceive a lack of control over their school experiences and become disaffected as a behavioural response to their awareness of the mismatch between their needs and what their school experience is offering them (Solomon and Rogers, 2001; Hartas, 2011).

These issues highlight the importance of non-attenders having opportunities for their views to be heard; key benefits of gaining pupils views regarding their school experiences consist of redressing the school power imbalance to develop mutual respect, empowerment and citizenship (DCSF, 2008; Busher, 2012).


***Communication and relationships within the school context***

Many studies on non-attendance emphasise the association with poor pupil-teacher relationships (e.g. Attwood et al., 2003, Gregory and Purcell, 2014). Most pupils highlighted their perception of a lack of trust and a fractured and disconnected relationship with their teachers which influenced their unwillingness to confide in staff or seek their help.

One issue affecting the pupil-teacher relationship included pupils perceiving that staff treat them as *children'* or *'babies'* particularly with the way they speak to them, the low level work and the restrictive school rules. This is consistent with the views of

long term non-attenders and disaffected pupils (Attwood et al., 2003; Riley and Docking, 2004). These perceptions appeared to cause pupils to feel a lack of autonomy and freedom within school which prompted some of them to stay at home where they felt they had more freedom of choice and were able to engage in more enjoyable activities. Indeed, promoting autonomy through providing non-attenders with an element of choice and control has been identified as a positive facilitator in effective reintegration (Nuttall and Woods, 2013).

However, a wider issue within this appears to be that these pupils are experiencing a low sense of sense of school belonging and therefore seek for this unmet need elsewhere which appears to be at home. Feeling a sense of belonging is a basic human need (Maslow, 1943). Many researchers have identified that a low sense of school belonging contributes to lack of school engagement and poor school attendance (e.g. Osterman, 2000; Tillery et al., 2013). Researchers have advocated positive pupil-teacher relationships are the key to pupils feeling a strong sense of school belonging (Hamm and Fairclough, 2005; Myers and Pianta, 2008; Tillery et al., 2013). Thus, in agreement with Raufelder, Sahabandu, Martínez, and Escobar (2013), I propose that a productive starting point for these non-attenders would be for teachers to invest in repairing their pupil-teacher relationships. This is particularly important since pupils perceived themselves to be reciprocating or mirroring the teachers' attitudes towards them.

Some teacher characteristics which pupils perceived as facilitators for positive teacher-pupil relationships were valuing their opinions, having a caring nature, and being easy to talk to. Pupils also desired more positive and consistent recognition particularly for good behaviour which has been found to be positive facilitators in supporting non-attenders (Nuttall and Woods; 2013). Similarly, disaffected pupils desire a sense of school belonging and recognition when they try their best (Hartas, 2011). This highlights a potential need for these vulnerable non-attenders to have a more tailored approach where there is recognition for small step progress rather than only when they occasionally meet all teacher expectations.

### Lesson enjoyment and understanding of work

Pupils indicated that they felt unmotivated to attend school when they anticipated having a subject which was boring, difficult or irrelevant to their career aspirations and interests whereas enjoyable subjects motivated them to attend. This is consistent with previous research into pupil views on non-attendance (Malcom et al., 2003; Reid et al., 2010).

However, pupils' perceptions of mundane teaching approaches and negative teacher characteristics seemed to influence their perceptions of lesson enjoyment more than the curriculum content. Other studies with truants, disaffected pupils and severe non-attenders also found that negative teacher-pupil relationships and the quality of teaching was a more pertinent factor of their disengagement with school than the curriculum (O'Keeffe, 1994; Solomon and Rogers, 2001; Attwood et al., 2003; Reid et al., 2010).Teaching approaches also seemed to be an underpinning cause of pupils' behavioural difficulties; pupils perceived that some approaches such as the rapid pace of lessons and minimal teacher explanations caused them difficulty in understanding their class work which led to reduced classroom engagement and being sent out from lessons. Therefore although they were in school they were not benefitting from taught lessons. However, pupils described feeling positive emotions when they were sent out from lessons illustrating their perceptions of these lessons not meeting their academic needs or interests. Pupils did acknowledge that teachers seemed unable to dedicate the necessary time to help them understand the work due other pupils needing help. This highlights that some non-attenders require more bespoke teacher support to enable their success with independent learning.

Despite recognising their own distracting behaviour, some pupils emphasised their desire for more vigilance and punitive behavioural management approaches to facilitate quieter classroom environments which is consistent with research with long term non-attenders (Gregory and Purcell, 2014). This illustrates that some non-attenders desire classroom environments which are conducive to successful learning. Perhaps teaching approaches need to be more balanced between overly punitive and those which are too lenient when managing behaviour.

***Impact of family and friends***

Research regarding the causes of non-attendance often highlights home circumstances as a contributing factor (NAO, 2005, Reid, 2014b). Some pupils in this study perceived some negative family influences on their attendance. However, others mentioned some adverse home influences but did not seem to perceive them as negative such as their parent's negative views about their school, having a lack of enforced boundaries at home, and being able to engage in enjoyable activities when absent. In agreement with previous research (e.g. Lauchlan, 2003; Thambirajah et al., 2008; Gregory and Purcell, 2014), this emphasises the need for an interactionist and systemic approach to managing non-attendance especially since there may be home factors influencing pupils non-attendance that they may not be conscious of.

However, consistent with the findings of Dalziel and Henthorne (2005), the majority of pupils indicated that their family encouraged them to attend school, often more than school staff, and supported them through difficult school experiences. Most pupils admitted often pretending to be unwell to avoid school otherwise their parents would not allow them to stay at home even if they were aware of their aversions or difficulties with school. Their perceptions are contrary to the dominant views that non-attendance is often negatively influenced by parents condoning pupils' absence (Reid, 2007). Rather, they tend to agree with research indicating that parents have difficulty improving their children's attendance and desire more support from professionals (Dalziel and Henthorne, 2005; Nuttall and Woods, 2013).

The potential for friends to be a protective factor for non-attenders was illustrated in the value pupils placed on having friends at school in order for them to feel able to cope throughout a school day. Social isolation has been associated with long term non-attendance (Place et al., 2000; Gregory and Purcell, 2014) and friendship has been shown to improve non-attenders' confidence and socialisation (Nuttall and Woods, 2013). This highlights the importance of schools ensuring opportunities for non-attenders to develop and maintain friendships. However pupils sometimes felt concern to share their difficulties with friends in case information was not kept confidential or losing friends as a result of *'burdening'* them. This suggests that although friendship may be a protective factor for some non-attenders, they may still

need support from adults. Thus, regular monitoring of the emotional well-being of non-attenders is vital to ensure they are receiving necessary adult support.

### *Effects of Absence*

When pupils are absent from school, secondary complications can occur which further exacerbates their reluctance to attend school (Thambirajah et al., 2008). Many pupils perceived negative experiences following a period of non-attendance which led to negative perceptions of their teachers and about returning to school. Pupils with home and bullying difficulties were the most concerned about their peers querying reasons for their absence. This suggests that they may be more vulnerable when attempting to return to school as they may perceive their issues to be more sensitive and personal than others not attending to avoid a lesson. This highlights a need for school staff to implement tailored supportive reintegration strategies for non-attenders to avoid further complications particularly for those who are most vulnerable (Reid, 2006a; Nuttall and Woods, 2013). However vulnerable pupils are not always easily identifiable during the earlier stages (Walker and Donaldson, 2010) therefore collaborative working with parents and non-attenders is vital to facilitate early identification and appropriate support.

### Summary

The points discussed above highlight that several aspects of the school environment discourage pupils from attending school, particularly mundane teaching approaches, lessons they perceive as difficult, negative teacher characteristics and few opportunities for their views to be heard. The school system seems to be using more tokenistic approaches causing pupils to view their school experiences as a power struggle and feel a sense of helplessness and a lack of control to change their negative school experiences. Pupils also express feeling a lack of autonomy and freedom within their school system prompting them to avoid school. Returning to school after a period of absence was also perceived to be difficult and exacerbated their unwillingness to attend school. Generally, pupils illustrated a low sense of school belonging causing them to avoid school and seek this unmet need elsewhere. Pupils showed a desire for more positive teacher characteristics, positive recognition

from teachers, and classroom environments which are more conducive to successful learning. Negative home factors were also shown to adversely impact on pupils' school attendance although some pupils showed a lack of awareness of this. Most pupils emphasised the supportive role of their family and friends regarding their school attendance. These points illustrate the need to use an interactionist and systemic approach to managing non-attendance with the full involvement of non-attenders.

## 6.2     Research Question 2

What are the perceived experiences of the type of support pupils have been offered or used since experiencing attendance difficulties?

### *Lesson enjoyment and understanding of work*

Non-attenders have been associated with significantly lower levels of academic self-concept and self-esteem (Corville-Smith et al., 1998; Reid, 2014a). However, this has received little attention in literature on non-attendance (Lyon and Cotler, 2007). There was evidence of pupils' low academic self-concept in this study through pupils' perceptions of the necessity for individual academic support for them to be successful in difficult subjects. These pupils perceived their academic needs would not be met with the available support within the classroom and often avoided lessons they considered to be too difficult to understand. Pupils with a low academic self-concept are less likely to be emotionally and behaviourally engaged in school, and tend to have a sense of helplessness (Raufelder et al., 2013). Thus, it is important to implement strategies to raise their academic self-concept such as developing positive teacher- pupil relationships, and providing them with additional support to achieve success through individual and group sessions (Woolfolk, 2007; Reid, 2014a).

In agreement with Lyon and Cotler (2007), the findings here advocate the importance of acknowledging the adverse effects of low academic self-concept on attendance in order to provide appropriate support for non-attenders with these

needs. Indeed, pupils emphasised the usefulness of group intervention sessions with core subjects and desired more of these for other difficult subjects and to catch up with work following absence. Nuttall and Woods (2013) also found that providing opportunities for non-attenders to catch up was a positive facilitator in successful reintegration. Some pupils valued teaching assistants and desired the opportunity to have more access to learning support to gain more individual and bespoke academic support. However some pupils who had opportunities to use learning support and the homework club perceived their experiences to be unhelpful; they considered there to be a lack of individual support from teachers and therefore some pupils declined the opportunity to use learning support. Similarly teaching assistants were not always helpful unless teacher explanations were clear. This illustrates the importance of regularly monitoring academic support with pupils to ensure effective interventions and successful outcomes.

### *Gaining and acknowledging pupil views*

Many pupils discussed being assigned a key staff member who was responsible for supporting them through any difficulties which is consistent with recommendations in research (Thambirajah et al., 2008) However, the majority did not perceive this support useful for various reasons. Consistent with Nuttall and Woods (2013), pupils emphasised the need for them to have established a positive relationship with their key staff member and more access to opportunities to obtain their support. This indicates that although pastoral care interventions are in place, there are elements of tokenistic participation (DCSF, 2008) rather than distinct opportunities for pupils to discuss their difficulties. This further emphasises a need for closer monitoring of interventions with pupils to evaluate the effectiveness.

Similarly, pupils experiencing bullying and peer conflict highlighted that the interventions in place to support them and keep them safe, seemed ineffective prompting them to avoid school. Pupils perceived there to be a lack of vigilance, monitoring, and consequences from staff to ensure their safety during class sessions and when in learning support which sometimes led to non-attenders getting into altercations and being reprimanded by staff. This is in line with research illustrating that bully victims are frequently absent and reprimanded for behavioural difficulties

(Gastic, 2008) and highlights a need for better monitoring of strategies. Pupils perceived that effective strategies were abruptly withdrawn or not provided and that they were not part of a monitoring or decision making process. This further highlights the need for more effective systems to facilitate gaining pupil views.

### *Impact of family and friends*

Pupils with difficult home circumstances perceived the support from external agencies, such as the counselling service, to be helpful in facilitating a positive emotional well-being and their willingness to attend school. They particularly valued when support was offered to them and their parent and the opportunity to discuss concerns with the assurance of confidentiality. This illustrates the benefit of considering both school and home factors when supporting non-attenders. The importance of regularly monitoring the emotional well-being of non-attenders was also illustrated as some pupils felt vulnerable following the cessation of supportive interventions. There is much research on the value of external agency involvement (Elliott and Place, 2012; Gregory and Purcell, 2014) however this suggests that schools should effectively liaise with colleagues, external agencies and parents to ensure continued monitoring and necessary support following the end of supportive interventions.

### **Summary**

These points demonstrate that overall pupils seem to perceive the school support systems to be ineffective and therefore unhelpful in encouraging them to attend school. In particular, pupils appeared to have a low academic self-concept and perceived that the available academic support was unhelpful to access some areas of the curriculum. In addition pupils perceived that having a key person as pastoral care support was unhelpful particularly since they had limited access to their support. Pupils who experienced bullying or peer conflict also perceived their support to be ineffective in helping them to feel safe and attend school. Moreover pupils perceived the most effective strategies were abruptly withdrawn or not offered to them and they felt excluded from the decision making and monitoring of strategies. Support from some external agencies were considered to be effective although some pupils felt vulnerable when this ceased without any alternative support. These points highlight

the need for regular monitoring of the effectiveness of support and including non-attenders in this process.

## Staff perceptions

This section will address research questions three and four by discussing the staff perceptions within the following themes: *Influencing factors on attendance, Colleague support and attendance management, Pupil support within school and Factors affecting the effectiveness of external agency involvement.*

## 6.3    Research Question 3

What are the perceived experiences and perceptions of school staff working with pupils who are experiencing attendance difficulties?

### *Influencing factors on attendance*

Staff perceived that the lack of parental involvement and support in their children's education was a major challenge to effectively support non-attenders. However, even when parents were supportive, "d*ysfunctional"* or chaotic home environments were perceived as negatively affecting pupils' attendance. This illustrates that more than just encouraging parental involvement, the effects of the home environment needs to be considered when supporting non-attenders. These views are in agreement with government guidance and existing research, which document the negative impact of poor parental involvement, attitudes and poor home environment on attendance (e.g. Malcom, 2003, Reid, 2008, Taylor, 2012). However research suggests that parents can often face challenges in ensuring their child's regular attendance, can feel blamed by schools and desire more support (Dalziel and Henthorne, 2005; Gregory and Purcell, 2014). Thus this suggests the importance of a supportive and tailored approach when collaborating with parents.

In line with existing research with school staff and professionals (Reid, 2006a; Reid, 2014a), bullying and peer conflict were also perceived as dominant school factors

affecting pupils' attendance. Staff perceived this to be due to the importance pupils placed on friendships and also pupils' and parents' unwillingness to resume school until issues had been completely resolved. These views indicate a difference in pupil and staff perceptions of 'resolving' their issues since pupils seem willing to attend if support, monitoring and vigilance is in place to ensure their safety.

Research widely suggests that the rigid and academic nature of the curriculum is a major negative influence on pupils' non-attendance (NAO, 2005; Reid, 2012). Although only one staff member explicitly stated this as a key problem, others highlighted that pupils with SEN difficulties or undiagnosed SEN difficulties often found it challenging to access the curriculum; it negatively impacted on pupils' motivation to engage in lessons particularly those with low academic abilities or disinterest in certain subjects. However, staff perceived that the lack of creative or vocational curriculum left them with few alternatives to engage pupils with academic difficulties. Staff in other studies have also expressed the need for a more vocational curriculum (Reid, 2006a; Reid, 2012b). Government guidelines and legislation such as the SEN code of Practice and the Education Act (2011) emphasise the need for schools to work inclusively but the rigid curriculum appears to be an exclusionary approach leaving some pupils such as non-attenders more marginalised. This highlights a complex situation in need of a review to support schools in being more inclusive. Pupils' views should be considered in any review consultations to facilitate their active participation in matters concerning them (Shevlin and Rose, 2008).

### Colleague Support and Attendance Management

Existing literature emphasises the limited training staff have on non-attendance and highlights this as an issue (e.g. Reid, 2005; Reid, 2006a). Findings from this study illustrate that some staff may still lack an awareness or understanding of the complexity of non-attendance and effective management since they have few training opportunities to develop their knowledge and skills.

This appeared to affect the school's ability to adopt the recommendation of a whole school approach to managing attendance (Reid, 2014b). It was perceived as the responsibility of one staff member which caused challenges in early identification

and implementing appropriate support for non-attenders. However researchers suggest that the staff member with responsibility should disseminate information rather than assume the full responsibility (Thambirajah et al., 2008). It was acknowledged that some long standing staff members were sometimes resistant to evolving their role to adopt a whole school management approach. Agencies such as the EPS can support with training staff so that they can feel more skilled in supporting non-attenders and observe the benefits of their individual contributions. (Pellegrini, 2007; Thambirajah et al., 2008).

Working collaboratively was considered helpful, however some subordinate staff perceived that they were not always informed about relevant matters to support non-attenders. This indicates a need for senior staff to regularly review their information sharing systems in consultation with subordinate staff to ensure they feel able to support non-attenders effectively. Indeed, Nuttall and Woods (2013) identified that supervision with senior and subordinate staff helped them to reflect on their involvement and better facilitate early intervention of non-attendance.

### *Pupil support within school*

Consistent with research regarding the difficulties identifying vulnerable pupils and non-attenders at an early stage (Thambirajah et al., 2008; Walker and Donaldson, 2010), staff expressed their challenge of identifying and understanding the reasons for non-attendance, particularly those who masked their difficulties and those with emotional needs. This negatively affected their ability to support and reengage non-attenders early. Similar to findings by Nuttall and Woods (2013), non-attenders were also perceived to sometimes be unsure of the reasons for their non-attendance or why they had to attend school or supportive interventions. Staff also acknowledged their difficulty in preventing peers from questioning non-attenders but showed awareness of the negative effects on reintegration.

These difficulties emphasise the complex nature of managing non-attendance and supports the view of researchers (e.g. Lauchlan, 2003; Gregory and Purcell, 2014) regarding the importance of using an interactionist and systemic approach to involve pupils, parents and professional views to support non-attenders. Perhaps sharing

more information amongst school staff will also facilitate earlier identification of non-attenders.

## Summary

This information highlights that staff perceive there to be several school and home factors impacting on pupils' non-attendance. In particular staff discussed a lack of parental involvement in their children's education, dysfunctional or chaotic home environments, bullying and peer conflict, the rigid and very academic curriculum, and the lack of opportunities for staff training. The lack of a whole school approach to managing non-attendance was also considered to impair early identification and thus early intervention strategies. Similarly staff found difficulty identifying and understanding reasons for non-attendance particularly when pupils masked their difficulties. These views emphasise the complexity of managing non-attendance and the need for an interactionist and systemic approach to include both school and home factors.

## 6.4    Research Question 4

What are school staff perceptions and experiences of the systems available in their school to prevent and support pupils with attendance difficulties?

### *Colleague support and attendance management*

The "*systematic approach*" used to manage school attendance via the "*fixed penalty notice procedure*" was not perceived as significantly effective for non-attenders with entrenched issues; staff viewed that the parents of these non-attenders often became defensive. This is consistent with evaluative research suggesting this approach is most effective at the emerging stages of non-attendance rather than complex cases and that it creates challenges to maintain positive relationships with families (Halsey, Bedford, Atkinson, White, and Kinder, 2004). This emphasises the need for early intervention and building relationships with parents and non-attenders through including them in the decision making process at early stages.

Staff acknowledged the need for new systems to promote earlier intervention and gain pupil views and had started developing systems to address this. However there was limited success. It appears then that although strategies are in place, they are producing limited successful outcomes. Pellegrini (2007) highlighted that often interventions are insufficiently planned and are structured on anecdotal evidence. Schools may benefit from using evidence based research particularly regarding effective approaches to gain pupil views (e.g. Shier, 2001; Woolfson et al., 2006), involve parents (e.g. Dalziel and Henthorne, 2005) and implement early intervention strategies (DCSF, 2010; Reid, 2014b).

### *Influencing factors on attendance*

Staff views indicated that they are aiming to promote more parental involvement which is important to improve attendance (Reid, 2014b). They had recently started to introduce systems to educate pupils and parents about the impact of poor attendance on academic attainment. However the adverse influences of national policy was highlighted when staff explained that parents tended to perceive attendance percentages as an exam grade and therefore considered their child's attendance to be good even when it was severely low. This suggests a need for more transparency by providing a more unambiguous format of attendance data such as illustrating the number of days missed and relating it to the effect on attainment.

### *Factors affecting the effectiveness of external agency involvement*

Staff perceived that the late and limited involvement of external agencies, particularly the EWS and EPS was counterproductive to successful early intervention and was therefore often ineffective. These concerns from staff regarding the EWS is documented in literature (Reid, 2006a; Reid, 2008b) and illustrates that this is still a pervasive issue impeding more effective attendance management. Little has been researched on the efficacy of the EP role with non-attendance however researchers have acknowledged that due to the pressures within their service delivery, availability to conduct ongoing individual casework is rare (Elliott and Place, 2012).

Nevertheless, if EPs are expected to promote inclusive practice (DfEE, 2000), their involvement with non-attenders is paramount not least because of their vulnerability and lack of full time education. Some staff members were unaware of the EP role and how they could support with non-attenders. This highlights the need for EPs to raise awareness of their role especially with preventative work and early intervention with non-attenders. Considering EPs demand and lack of availability, more creative approaches will be necessary to develop a service delivery to address these needs.

### Pupil support within school

The role of the "*named person*" was considered valuable as it helped to develop a secure and close relationship between a staff member, pupils and parents. However contrary to effective practice (Nuttall and Woods, 2013), there were limited opportunities for the "*named person*" to meet and build a rapport with non-attenders and only met to introduce themselves with the non-attenders most in need which contradicts the aim of early intervention. Staff also mentioned that formal documents to introduce the named person was sent to pupils' parents which highlights further exclusionary practice and the need for staff to include pupils to foster successful engagement.

The cost of early intervention and the demand on school resources to manage non-attendance is well documented (Reid, 2006a; DCSF, 2010) and staff responses indicated that the challenges appear to be even more pervasive due to the current austerity measures across all areas of the education and social care sector. Time, staff and financial constraints prevented earlier intervention and more pupils from accessing interventions to address their emotional and academic needs. Often, pupils with the most complex needs were prioritised for interventions due to these constraints. Furthermore, pupils were unable to self-refer and therefore were reliant on staff being aware of their need and want for this service. Staff perceived that these constraints negatively influenced their ability to reengage non-attenders and that the increasing number of non-attenders was placing further demands on already restricted resources. The service delivery of some key external agencies was also compromised resulting in scenarios such as the relapse of attendance difficulties following improvement. This illustrates how the political and financial climate has

wider implications for schools and external agencies in managing and improving attendance (Reid, 2014). Thus a systemic and interactionist approach is required to effectively manage non-attendance (Lauchlan, 2003; Nuttall and Woods, 2013; Gregory and Purcell, 2014).

Research emphasises the emotional and academic needs of non-attenders and the benefit of them receiving additional support (Woolfolk, 2007; Raufelder et al. 2013; Reid, 2014a).  Additional support was mainly provided through the learning support base which staff considered the *"most powerful tool"* to support non-attenders. Staff felt that it at least allowed non-attenders to access some education in school because often, their frequent non-attendance impeded their access to available support. However staff mentioned concerns about the negative effects of non-attenders using learning support; it was often difficult to reintegrate them back into lessons causing them not to achieve their full academic potential and becoming socially isolated from their peers. Social isolation and poor educational attainment has been associated with long term non-attendance (e.g. Place et al., 2000; Taylor, 2012; Gregory and Purcell, 2014) and therefore, if not reintegrated, learning support could potentially cause long term social and emotional consequences. Staff discussed their caution to avoid non-attenders being educated in learning support long term although this was a challenge.  Staff recognised that when some non-attenders were able to work with a friend or saw their peers successfully reintegrating into lessons, this seemed to inspire them to attend some lessons. This demonstrates the positive influences of friendship and peer relationships for non-attenders and highlights the importance of appropriate reintegration plans with close monitoring with non-attenders to meet their expectations and encourage successful engagement.

## Summary

The points discussed illustrate that staff perceive there to be considerable challenges in supporting non-attenders. Staff felt that the systematic procedure used to manage non-attendance was ineffective for pupils with more entrenched issues and acknowledged the need for earlier interventions and involvement of non-attenders. Current systems had limited success possibly due to tokenistic

approaches being used. Staff also expressed how time, staff and financial constraints affected their ability, and that of key external agencies, to effectively support and reengage non-attenders. Staff also perceived there to be insufficient and delayed involvement from key external agencies which further prevented effective early intervention. Having a key named person for non-attenders and providing access to learning support were considered to be valuable tools in supporting and reengaging non-attenders. However it was acknowledged that there were some challenges in implementing these approaches. Thus, although it is clear that staff are providing some supportive interventions for non-attenders, the accompanying challenges highlight the need for collaborative working amongst staff and professionals, regular monitoring of effectiveness and the involvement of non-attenders in decision-making processes.

## 6.5    Summary of pupil and staff perspectives and experiences

Following the discussion of pupil and staff perceptions and experiences, it becomes apparent that there are several underlying causes of non-attendance within the school and home environment. Key commonalities and discrepancies in pupil and staff views were also highlighted which helps to give some insight into areas where educational professionals can support schools and pupils to improve their attendance.

### *Gaining and acknowledging pupil views*

Pupils considered that staff do not acknowledge or value their views which caused them to feel a sense of helplessness and a lack of control to change their negative school experiences. Some staff acknowledged that they needed to have more opportunities to gain pupil views, however most staff considered that even when they provided them with opportunities, pupils do not always engage and rarely discussed their views. Staff therefore discussed their difficulty identifying and understanding the reasons for pupils' non-attendance as a result.

What staff did not seem to recognise is the difficulty that some non-attenders experience in articulating and expressing their feelings. Staff also did not recognise

that pupils held negative preconceived ideas of meetings and that pupils were reluctant to reveal their honest views due to their perception of a disconnected pupil-teacher relationship. Furthermore, some non-attenders also appeared to lack an awareness of their underlying thoughts and reasons for their attendance difficulties which seemed to also impact on their inabilities to express their difficulties. This was recognised by some staff members who noticed that some non-attenders were unsure of the reasons for their absence.

These points highlight that the approaches that staff use to engage non-attenders and elicit their perceptions largely appear not to be conducive to effectively engage non-attenders.


*Academic and emotional support*

Pupils discussed avoiding school due to negative school experiences and negative feelings about school and staff. Although staff seemed to acknowledge that some aspects of the school environment does negatively impact on non-attendance, they perceived that they were implementing all available academic and emotional support for non-attenders particularly through learning support. What staff appear to be unaware of is the fact that pupils perceive many of these support systems to be ineffective with little monitoring and pupil involvement in decisions. Similarly pupils perceived that support systems that were helpful were abruptly withdrawn or not offered.

Pupils therefore seem to feel unsupported causing them to develop a low sense of school belonging and therefore seek belonging elsewhere which tends to be at home. There also appeared to be a vicious negative cycle where pupils' difficult lesson experiences caused them to have a low academic self-concept which led to their unwillingness to attend school and in turn caused them to fall further behind in their learning. It appears then that pupils' negative self-perceptions were largely influenced by their interactions within their school environment and their perceptions of not having suitable support.

However whilst staff acknowledged that there were areas for improvement in their support systems, they also highlighted that their main challenge was that they were

limited in the time, staff and financial resources to effectively manage the demand for emotional and academic support. Staff were also reluctant to implement support which they thought would ultimately cause pupils to be more socially isolated and not achieve their full academic potential.

Discrepancies in pupil and staff views regarding support appeared to be mainly due to staff and parents having discussions without non-attenders' involvement. For example, pupils who were being bullied seemed willing to attend school if appropriate support was in place whereas staff perceived that pupils wanted the bullying issues to be completely resolved before attending school. Thus what appears to be of most importance to support non-attenders, is understanding their subjective perceptions as this will help to understand how they perceive things to be and how this influences their actions.

*Perceptions of home factors*

Staff perceived parental and home factors as a main cause of non-attendance. Whilst some pupils acknowledged the negative effects of their home environments on their attendance, others appeared to be unaware of these effects. This further demonstrates that some non-attenders are not always fully conscious of the underlying causes of their non-attendance and may therefore require support with this.

Many pupils perceived that their parents were encouraging and supportive of their school attendance and they admitted to usually deceiving their parents by masking their attendance difficulties with illness. However, school staff perceived that parents often condoned their child's absence when what often appears to be the case is that parents are unaware that their child is masking their unwillingness to attend school. This highlights how non-attenders' feelings of helplessness, lack of freedom, lack of control, and low sense of school belonging can impact on their behaviour and manifest as pupils avoiding school through pretending to be ill.

_Whole school approach to attendance management_

Staff acknowledged the need for earlier intervention approaches to manage non-attendance.  However resource constraints and the lack of whole school approach caused challenges for staff to implement this. Staff mentioned that some of their colleagues were resistant to evolving their roles to be part of a whole school approach whilst some subordinate staff felt they were not always informed about relevant matters which would help to support non-attenders. These points highlight how wider systemic school issues can impact on individual staff's abilities to support non-attenders. Furthermore it illustrates the importance of understanding staff perceptions regarding difficulties in implementing a whole school approach.  What the perceptions of these staff indicate is that some staff members may lack an understanding of the complexity of managing non-attendance and may not recognise how they all individually can impact on pupils' willingness to attend school.

These commonalities and differences in staff and pupil views emphasise how our perceptions are socially constructed through our environmental experiences and how they influence our behaviour. It therefore highlights the importance of obtaining the views of both non-attenders and staff using a systemic and interactionist approach in managing non-attendance. This will help to facilitate early intervention, gain insight into contributing factors and develop more effective strategies in supporting non-attenders.

## 6.6    Recommendations

**_Educational professionals_**

The following recommendations are intended for educational professionals, particularly school staff. They are presented in relation to areas in need for consideration which were identified through findings in this research.

_Pupil participation_

Non-attenders should be involved in decision making processes including the planning and regular reviewing of interventions. Involving non-attenders in planning

any meetings they will be involved in will enable them to be aware of what to expect and facilitate their engagement. The consultation methods used to elicit pupil views, particularly those of non-attenders, should be discussed with pupils to identify their preferred approach and provide necessary support with communicating their perceptions.

*Positive pupil-teacher relationships*

A named person should be provided for each non-attender with regular opportunities to build a rapport. Where possible, non-attenders should have an opportunity to choose this staff member so that they feel ownership and an element of choice in decisions affecting them. It will also enable them to feel more comfortable within the pupil-teacher relationship which will help to facilitate engagement. Staff should aim to use consistent personalised recognition of any small steps which non-attenders make with their academic and behavioural progress rather than only when they meet all teacher expectations.

Staff should promote positive pupil-teacher relationships as a whole school approach such as through pupil voice activities, and focusing on characteristics that pupils have identified as facilitating positive relationships (e.g. valuing their opinions).

*Learning environment*

Schools should employ teaching approaches which non-attenders have identified as being more conducive to their engagement such as a better balance with punitive and lenient behaviour management, varied and interactive tasks, opportunities for paired and group work, and slower pace of task completion. Schools should also provide more tailored academic support for non-attenders to catch up and understand the curriculum such as group interventions.

*Devising appropriate interventions*

Interventions should be developed using evidence-based practice and an interactionist approach to identify contributory factors from different interacting

systems. Parents should be involved in the initial assessment of pupil needs to provide a holistic view of issues.

Interventions should be regularly monitored with non-attenders and parents to ensure efficacy and for non-attenders to feel joint ownership of plans. Recording agreed actions using non-attenders' preferred method (e.g. visual map of actions) will be vital to clarify all expectations. Reintegration strategies which are individually tailored to pupils' needs or concerns should be used to encourage pupil attendance. This will help to avoid further complications which often occur through prolonged absence such as pupils' avoiding school due to fear of feeling left behind with class work.

Staff should ensure close liaison with colleagues, parents and external agencies to ensure a smooth transition and regular monitoring following supportive interventions such as counselling and academic interventions.

### *School management of attendance*

Schools should adopt a whole school approach to managing attendance with one staff member responsible for the training and dissemination of information. They could develop good practice by sharing successful practice with other schools such as visiting other schools with good attendance or those which have improved their attendance.

Staff should ensure effective information sharing procedures with relevant colleagues regarding non-attenders to ensure earlier identification particularly for those with emotional needs. Undertaking specific training to reflect on practice, develop knowledge and help staff to recognise the benefits their individual contributions will support with this process. Senior staff should aim to regularly review school systems with subordinate staff to ensure they feel equipped to manage attendance issues.

To facilitate more understanding of the importance of attendance, attendance data should be presented to parents and pupils using a more transparent and

unambiguous format to illustrate the number of days missed and how this affects attainment.

***Educational Psychologists***

The following recommendations for EPs are mainly based on systemic and organisational support. This is aimed to facilitate more preventative and early intervention work and is tailored to the limited availability that EPs have with schools. They are presented in relation to the three main levels of EP work: organisational/systemic, group and individual.

<u>Organisational/systemic</u>

EPs and staff should aim to discuss attendance concerns at the beginning of school year to plan and prioritise EP involvement such as relevant staff training on supportive reintegration strategies and strategies to understand non-attenders' perceptions. This training can also be conducted jointly with the EWS to further identify more creative and collaborative working practices.

EPs are well placed to facilitate drop-in sessions, work discussion groups and solution circles for staff to discuss systemic or individual attendance issues and collaboratively problem solve. They can also support schools in reflecting on the impact that their school systems and pupil-teacher relationships have on attendance. This can include supporting staff in developing an inclusive school ethos which promotes pupils' sense of school belonging, pupil voice and participation, motivation to attend lessons, positive behaviour and academic self-concept. In supporting staff to embed pupil voice within their school practice, EPs can help schools to use information from pupil views to adapt the school environment to one which is more conducive to promoting attendance.

EPs can support schools in promoting parental engagement and building positive parent-school relationships. For example they can facilitate parent training regarding the importance of attendance and parental involvement. They can also facilitate

parent coffee mornings with the school staff member responsible for attendance to informally discuss attendance difficulties.

*Group*

EPs can collaborate with schools to plan and facilitate relevant group sessions with the involvement non-attenders and staff (e.g. social skills, coping skills groups). Additionally, EPs can support staff to determine the efficacy of group interventions by regularly reviewing non-attenders' progress through a pre and post measure of their attendance.

*Individual*

EPs should prioritise gaining non-attenders perceptions and using an interactionist perspective involving parents and staff to devise appropriate interventions.

EPs should aim to use supportive methods to help non-attenders develop their metacognitive awareness of their attendance difficulties. Using personal construct psychology and therapeutic interventions such as CBT or motivational interviewing will be useful approaches to support this process.

## 6.7    Research limitations

In evaluating the process of conducting this research, some limitations of the study have been identified. It is acknowledged that the views of non-attenders' parents were not included in this study. Thus further knowledge, particularly regarding issues such as home circumstances and home-school relationships, is limited to the perceptions of pupils and staff. However, the objective of the study was to explore the views of non-attenders and staff since they are the key people involved in the school experiences and supportive interventions yet their views are particularly lacking in non-attendance research.

The study took place in one secondary school with known characteristics of schools with higher non-attendance (e.g. area with low SES). Therefore the experiences and

perceptions of staff and pupils may be more extreme compared to schools with higher attendance or in more affluent areas. Additionally, staff and pupils were a small self-selected sample therefore the views of other non-attenders and staff may have generated differing perspectives. In particular, only female staff volunteered to take part which creates a gap in the knowledge of male staff views. This may be representative of more female staff being involved in supporting non-attenders or feeling that they would like to discuss their experiences and challenges. Another possibility may be that staff who wanted to take part did not want to use their spare time to be interviewed. Perhaps more staff may have volunteered if they were offered a cover teacher to teach their lesson whilst being interviewed.

However, this does suggest that those staff who participated were those who may have faced many challenges, those who are most involved with managing attendance, and those who wanted to provide their honest perceptions and experiences; all of which are likely to have provided richer data for this study. Similarly, the pupils who consented are likely to be those who were willing to provide their honest perceptions and experiences regarding their attendance difficulties. Alternative methods such as using questionnaires, focus groups or researching in more schools may have provided more participants and thus information however this would have jeopardised having an in-depth individual perspective from a shared school context.

This does imply that the research findings are limited to this particular school context and the participants involved. However in agreement with Yardley (2000) conducting this qualitative research design was not aimed to generalise findings to the larger population but rather to contribute to the current research knowledge available on non-attendance and provide examples of the types of issues affecting non-attenders and staff.

Finally, as a social constructionist researcher I am conscious of how my personal background and experiences may influence the interpretation of data. Tufford and Newman (2012) explain that throughout qualitative research it is important to be conscious and monitor any preconceptions influenced by personal experiences; it can serve positively as potential insight or negatively as potential bias. I therefore

took a reflexive stance by keeping memos of observations and procedures throughout my data collection and analysis to critically discuss research decisions with research supervisors and TEP colleagues (Cutcliffe, 2003; Tufford and Newman, 2012).

## 6.8 Future research directions

The findings from this study have provided insight into other areas of non-attendance which would benefit from further research. Most of the research on non-attendance has concentrated on developing strategies and interventions without including the views of pupils particularly those at the earlier stages of non-attendance. This study has provided evidence that obtaining non-attenders' views contributes to understanding why they are unwilling to attend school and how strategies can be adapted to better support them. Therefore future research which replicates this study within similar and different school contexts will help to expand and develop an understanding into how to support non-attenders at the early stages. Conducting this research in primary schools will be particularly useful in developing early intervention strategies.

Exploring non-attenders' views regarding how to improve specific areas identified in this study as contributing to their non-attendance will also be useful. For example, how school systems can be adapted to promote their sense of school belonging, academic self-concept, approaches to gain and acknowledge their views, and develop positive pupil-teacher relationships. Furthermore, longitudinal studies would prove beneficial in determining the efficacy of any adaptations to school systems to improve attendance, particularly those which illustrate any challenges to adapting school systems and ways to overcome them. Similarly, studies which explore the views of previous non-attenders who improved following early intervention and their school staff will contribute to knowledge on good practice in early intervention systems. Also, seeking staff views in schools which previously had low attendance and have since improved will also help to determine good evidence based systemic practice.

Finally, in aiming to develop more collaborative working amongst school staff and EPs, research exploring the perspectives and experiences of EPs working with non-attenders will be useful. These studies should aim to generate ideas for new ways of effective collaborative working to prevent non-attendance and support non-attenders.

## **Conclusion**

This research aimed to provide educational professionals with further knowledge and understanding of the perceptions and experiences of non-attenders, during the earlier stages of non-attendance, and school staff that support them. Although studies have explored non-attendance, few have considered these perspectives. Thus, this research has provided a unique contribution to educational professional practice, particularly for EPs; a profession identified as being well placed to promote attendance but has limited research with direct relevance to conducting this in their role.

School staff are clearly implementing strategies and interventions to manage non-attendance. However what this research illustrates is that early intervention requires a whole school approach where staff at every level are involved in facilitating an inclusive ethos for all pupils to feel valued, respected and heard. Non-attenders appear to feel marginalised and have a low sense of school belonging and academic self-concept which leaves them feeling vulnerable and in need of individualised and tailored approaches to redress these perceptions. However staff face various challenges in effectively implementing the necessary approaches to address non-attenders' needs not least their limited resources and opportunities for specific training.

This research presents a case for educational professionals to evolve their roles and begin collaborating more creatively to combat these challenges and manage non-attendance during the current financial austerity climate. Non-attendance is a complex phenomenon with wide ranging contributing factors which may differ for each pupil. Therefore this research emphasises the importance of using an interactionist perspective in supporting non-attenders. EPs are equipped with the knowledge to use this perspective to work systemically in supporting schools, parents and non-attenders. However this study advocates that the key to supporting non-attenders is to gain their views and involve them in decision making processes.

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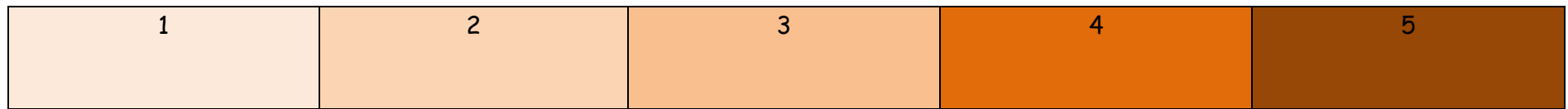
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## **Appendices**

# How helpful has each of these forms of support been?

| 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
|---|---|---|---|---|

Not helpful at all                                                      Extremely helpful

**<u>Appendix 2- Visual Timeline</u>**

**<u>Timeline of school years</u>**

⟶

**Start of secondary school**                                                                                                    **Now**
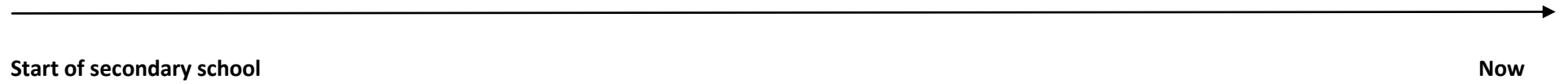
# FEELINGS CHART

| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| Afraid | Confused | Surprised | Sad |
| Excited | Disgusted | Proud | Angry |
| Sick | Happy | Very Happy | Hungry |
| Lost | Shy | Sleepy | Embarrassed |
| Unhappy | Very Sad | Tired | Worried |

## Appendix 4- Pilot pupil interview schedule

### Building a rapport and gaining profile

1. Can you tell me a bit about yourself? What's going well for you at the moment? What words would you use to describe (a) yourself and your school? Have you always thought of yourself/ school this way?

2. On a scale of 1-5 how concerned are you with your level of school attendance? (1=not at all concerned, 5=extremely concerned). Would you like your level of attendance to improve? If yes, how easy do you think it will be to improve your attendance? (1=very difficult, 5=extremely easy). [Visual scales will be shown]

### Starting Secondary School

3. Can you think about when you first started Secondary school? Can you remember what your first year was like?

   Prompts:
   - Did you make friends easily?
   - How did you learn your way around the school and the different rules?
   - Did you get to know your teachers quickly? How?
   - Did you find anything particularly enjoyable?
   - Did you find anything particularly difficult/challenging? How did you cope/manage these? Did anyone/anything help you?
   - What helped you to settle into this school? (E.g. teachers, systems).

4. If at all, when did you begin to notice that you were having some difficulties with attending school? [Provide timeline of school years].

5. Can you think of any things in particular that may have caused these difficulties?

   Prompts:
   - How were you doing in your lessons? Were there any lessons of particular difficulty?
   - How were you getting along with your teachers?
   - Was anything going on at home?
   - How were you getting along with your friends?

### Current situation

6. On a scale of 1-5 (where 1= never and 5= always) how often do you have good days at school? [Provide visual scale].
   a) Imagine it is the morning for school. What are some of the thoughts and feelings you are experiencing? What do you think may be causing these feelings? [Visual feelings chart can be used]

   Prompts:
   - Do you ever worry about something happening to you at school?
   - Do you ever have problems sleeping because you are worried about going to school?

7. Do you ever tell anyone these thoughts or feelings? If no, why not?
   a) Who do you tell?
   b) Has anything or anyone helped you when you have felt this way?
   c) If no, what do you think may help you when you are feeling this way?

8. Do you have any friends in school? How do you feel when you are away from your friends and not at school and how do you keep in contact with them?
9. What do you like most about school? Why? How often do you get to do this? [use scale 1=never 5=always].
10. What do you like least about school? Why? How often do you do this? [use scale 1=never 5=always].
11. When you are absent from school (Monday-Friday) what do you do at home? Do you enjoy your time away from school [scale 1=a lot 5=not at all]? Why/why not?

## Support

12. Can you think of one of the days you had the most difficulty at school/ in coming to school and what made this day so difficult?
    - If anything, what helped you to get through this day?
    - Did anyone at school do anything to help
    - If you could go back in time what would you have liked at that time to help you? (E.g. from your teachers? Parents? Friends? Other agencies?)

13. Since you have been experiencing difficulties attending school can you think of some of the things your school has done (or is doing now) to help you and how helpful each of these things been on a scale 1-5 (1=not helpful at all 5=extremely helpful)? Why? Can you suggest how the support could be even better/ improved?

    Prompts:  Part-time table, re-integration plan, meetings with parents, emotional literacy sessions, staff member to talk to, peer buddy.

14. Thinking of some of the times when you have not attended school for some time (e.g. a few days or weeks) what were your thoughts/feelings at the time? If, anything, who or what helped to encourage you to go to school? What was the most difficult thing about coming back to school?

15. Since you have been experiencing difficulties attending school has anyone spoken to you about your feelings about school? Who? Did you find speaking to them helpful/unhelpful? Why/why not?

16. Imagine you have the power to make anyone do anything to help you attend school. What would you make them do?
    Prompts: (a) teachers (b) your parents (c) other professionals (d) your friends (e) other students in school.

# Appendix 5- Revised pupil interview schedule

## Building a rapport and gaining profile

1. Can you tell me a bit about yourself? What's going well for you at the moment? What words would you use to describe (a) yourself? (b) School? Have you always thought of yourself/ school this way?

2. On a scale of 1-5 how concerned are you with your level of school attendance? (1=not at all concerned, 5=extremely concerned). Would you like your level of attendance to improve? If yes, how easy do you think it will be to improve your attendance? (1=very difficult, 5=extremely easy). [Visual scales will be shown]

## Starting Secondary School

3. Can you think about when you first started Secondary school? Can you remember what your first year was like?

   Prompts:
   - Did you make friends easily?
   - How did you learn your way around the school and the different rules?
   - Did you get to know your teachers quickly? How?
   - Did you find anything particularly enjoyable?
   - Did you find anything particularly difficult/challenging? How did you cope/manage these? Did anyone/anything help you?
   - What helped you to settle into this school? (E.g. teachers, systems).

4. If at all, when did you begin to notice that you were having some difficulties with attending school? [Provide timeline of school years].

5. Can you think of any things in particular that may have caused these difficulties?

   Prompts:
   - How were you doing in your lessons? Were there any lessons of particular difficulty?
   - How were you getting along with your teachers?
   - Was anything going on at home?
   - How were you getting along with your friends?

## Current situation

6. On a scale of 1-5 (where 1= never and 5= always) how often do you have good days at school? [Provide visual scale].
   b) Imagine it is the morning for school. What are some of the thoughts and feelings you are experiencing? What do you think may be causing these feelings? [Visual feelings chart can be used]

   Prompts:
   - Do you ever worry about something happening to you at school?

- Do you ever have problems sleeping because you are worried about going to school?

7. Do you ever tell anyone these thoughts or feelings? If no, why not?
   - d) Who do you tell?
   - e) Has anything or anyone helped you when you have felt this way?
   - f) If no, what do you think may help you when you are feeling this way?

8. Do you have any friends in school? How do you feel when you are away from your friends and not at school? Do you keep in contact with them? How?
9. When you are absent from school (Monday-Friday) what do you do at home? Do you enjoy your time away from school [scale 1=a lot 5=not at all]? Why/why not?

## Support

10. Can you think of one of the days you had the most difficulty at school/ in coming to school. What made this day so difficult?
    - If anything, what helped you to get through this day?
    - Did anyone at school do anything to help
    - If you could go back in time what would you have liked at that time to help you? (E.g. from your teachers? Parents? Friends? Other agencies?)

11. Since you have been experiencing difficulties attending school can you think of some of the things your school has done (or is doing now) to help you? How helpful has each of these things been on a scale 1-5 (1=not helpful at all 5=extremely helpful)? Why? Can you suggest how the support could be even better/ improved?

    Prompts:  Part-time table, re-integration plan, meetings with parents, emotional literacy sessions, staff member to talk to, peer buddy.

12. Thinking of some of the times when you have not attended school for some time (e.g. a few days or weeks). What were your thoughts/feelings at the time? Was there anything or anyone that helped to encourage you to go to school? Who/what? What was the most difficult thing about coming back to school?

13. Since you have been experiencing difficulties attending school has anyone spoken to you about your feelings about school? Who? Did you find speaking to them helpful/unhelpful? Why/why not?

14. Imagine you have the power to make anyone do anything to help you attend school. What would you make them do?
    Prompts:  (a) teachers (b) your parents (c) other professionals (d) your friends (e) other students in school.

## Appendix 6- Pilot Staff Interview Schedule

1. Have you had experience working with pupils who are having difficulty attending this school?
   (a) If yes, what are your experiences of working with these pupils? E.g. some experience, a lot of experience, difficult experiences, successful experiences?
   (b) If no, why do you think you may not have had this experience?

2. What do you consider to be the main reasons for these pupils having difficulties attending school? **Prompts**: learning difficulties, family issues, behaviour, bullying.

3. What systems are you aware of in your school to:
   (a) Support pupils with these difficulties?
   (b) Prevent pupils having difficulty attending school?
   (c) If any, what do you think have been the difficulties/benefits of these systems?

4. What do you think are the main challenges you face when working with pupils who have difficulty attending school?

5. How confident would you say you are about your knowledge and ability to meet the needs of pupils who have difficulty with attending school? Why?

6. Have you received any training (initial teacher training or subsequent training) or undertaken independent reading about supporting pupils who have been identified as having difficulties attending school?

7. When supporting these pupils do you seek support from other colleagues or professionals? If yes, who?
   (a) How effective is this liaison?
   (b) What, if anything, is helpful?
   (c) What, if anything, could improve this process?

8. In your opinion is there anything else the school could consider offering:
   (a) as a preventative measure?
   (b) to support pupils with difficulties attending school?

9. Can you think of a pupil who was having difficulty attending school and subsequently was successfully reintegrated? What, if anything, do you think made the most difference to create this success?

10. Can you think of a pupil who is currently having difficulty attending school? What do you think would help this pupil to successfully reintegrate?

11. If anything, what do you think Educational Psychologists could do to support (a) the school (b) pupils to successfully reintegrate pupils/prevent pupils having difficulty attending school?

## Appendix 7- Staff Interview Schedule

1. Have you had experience working with pupils who are having difficulty attending this school?
   (c) If yes, what are your experiences of working with these pupils? E.g. some experience, a lot of experience, difficult experiences, successful experiences?
   (d) If no, why do you think you may not have had this experience?

2. What do you consider to be the main reasons for these pupils having difficulties attending school? **Prompts**: learning difficulties, family issues, behaviour, bullying.

3. What systems are you aware of in your school to:
   (a) Support pupils with these difficulties? (**e.g**. main person, interventions, learning support, updating assessment of their needs, opportunities to obtain students' views)
   (b) Prevent pupils having difficulty attending school? (**e.g**. screening for those at risk, promoting protective factors, rewards, raising awareness).
   (c) If any, what do you think have been the difficulties/benefits of these systems?

4. What do you think are the main challenges you face when working with pupils who have difficulty attending school?

5. On a scale of 1-5 (where 1=not confident at all, 5=extremely confident), how confident are you about your knowledge and ability to meet the needs of pupils who have difficulty with attending school? Why?

6. Have you received any training (initial teacher training or subsequent training) or undertaken independent reading about supporting pupils who have been identified as having difficulties attending school?
   (a) If yes, on a scale of 1-5 (where 1=not at all useful and 5=extremely useful), how useful has it been in enabling you to support these pupils? Why?

7. When supporting these pupils do you seek support from other colleagues or professionals? If yes, who?
   (d) How effective is this liaison on a scale of 1-5 (where 1=not effective at all, 5=extremely effective)?
   (e) What, if anything, is helpful?
   (f) What, if anything, could improve this process?

8. In your opinion is there anything else the school could consider offering:
   (a) as a preventative measure?
   (b) to support pupils with difficulties attending school?

9. Can you think of a pupil who was having difficulty attending school and subsequently was successfully reintegrated? What, if anything, do you think made the most difference to create this success?

10. Can you think of a pupil who is currently having difficulty attending school? What do you think would help this pupil to successfully reintegrate?

11. If anything, what do you think Educational Psychologists could do to support (a) the school (b) pupils to successfully reintegrate pupils/prevent pupils having difficulty attending school?

## WHAT WILL HAPPEN TO MY INFORMATION?

⊙ Record our conversation using a voice recorder.

⊙ Type up the information and delete the recording.

---

## WHAT WILL HAPPEN TO MY INFORMATION?

⊙ Change names

⊙ Confidential

⊙ Share findings with the school in a short report

---

## WHY SHOULD I TAKE PART?

Opportunity

HELPING HANDS

Student Voice

## YOUR CHOICE

- Even if you do decide to take part you can choose to stop **at any time**.

## WHAT HAPPENS AFTER TODAY?

- consent form.

- arrange a time with you for the interview

## FINALLY...

- Thank you very much for listening.

- You can always contact me even after today to ask me anything about the project.

Dear_____

Thank you very much for talking to me about your experiences of coming to school. I really enjoyed meeting you and listening to all the things you had to say. I hope that you also enjoyed talking about your experiences.

All the things you told me will be very useful for my research and will help me to think about how schools can support pupils who may find it difficult to attend school.

As I explained when we met, you will not hear from me again until I have typed up and analysed all the interviews. After this, I will give you a letter explaining some of the things that my research found out.

In the mean time if you have any questions or worries about anything we talked about, then it is important that you talk to (teacher's name) in school as she knows all about my research. Of course, you can also contact me and I will be happy to hear from you. My contact details are below.

Thanks again for taking part in my research!


Regards,

Chenelle Beckles (researcher)


Email:

Mobile:

## Appendix 10- Staff consent form

**Re: Research with Trainee Educational Psychologist**

I am a Trainee Educational Psychologist undertaking my training at the Institute of Education, University of London. As part of my studies I am conducting research into children who have difficulty attending school.

Research suggests that regular school attendance supports children's academic and social success but that school children can find attending school challenging. As part of my research I am interested in finding out school staff's experiences and perceptions of working with these children and the support systems available for them.

I will speak to staff involved in the study individually for around 30 minutes to discuss their views. My discussions will be voice recorded in order to ensure I capture all the information shared; this will be kept in a secure place and will be deleted immediately once analysed.

Please be assured that all information you share (including your name) will remain anonymous and confidential and that you can withdraw from the study at any time. Key findings from the study will be shared with the school in a short report but your name will never be mentioned in any reports or publications from this study. I will also contact you following the research, to offer you a copy of the report with the key findings.

I hope you agree that this study will be beneficial for children, parents and teachers. It will be a useful resource to help inform educational professionals about any additional support strategies which could be used to support children so that they can engage successfully in school.

I am seeking your permission to meet and talk with you. Please complete the below information to indicate whether you are in agreement to participate in this research.

If you have any questions or would like to discuss any aspect of this study please do not hesitate to contact me using the contact details below.

_____

Please tick one:

I AGREE to take part in this research

I DO NOT AGREE to take part in this research

Signature: _____

Position within school:_____

Length of time working in school:_____

Date: _____

## Appendix 11- Parent consent form

Dear Parent

**Re: Research with Trainee Educational Psychologist**

I am a Trainee Educational Psychologist undertaking my training at the Institute of Education, University of London. As part of my studies I am conducting research into the best ways to support children's school attendance.

Research suggests that regular school attendance supports children's academic and social success but that school children can find attending school challenging. I am interested in finding out children's views about their school attendance. I want to find out what support is available for them.

Your child has been identified as a pupil whose views could be helpful to this study. I will speak to children involved in the study individually for around 45 minutes to discuss their views on attending school and the support provided for them. My discussions with pupils will be voice recorded in order to ensure I capture all the information they share; this will be kept in a secure place and will be deleted immediately once analysed.

Please be assured that all information shared by your child (including their name) will remain anonymous and confidential and they can withdraw from the study at any time. Key findings from the study will be shared with the school in a short report but your child's name will never be mentioned in any reports or publications from this study. I will also contact you following the research, to offer you a copy of the report with the key findings.

I hope you agree that this study will be beneficial for children, parents and teachers. It will be a useful resource to help inform educational professionals about any additional support strategies which could be used to support children so that they can engage successfully in school.

I am seeking your permission to meet and talk with your child. If you **DO NOT agree** to me talking with your child can you please sign the slip attached and return it to (teacher's name) by (date) **otherwise I will assume you are in agreement.**

If you have any questions or would like to discuss any aspect of this study please do not hesitate to contact me using the contact details below.

Yours sincerely


Chenelle Beckles
Trainee Educational Psychologist
_____

I **DO NOT agree** for my son/daughter……………………………….. (insert child's name) to take part in the research study into children's school attendance carried out by Chenelle Beckles (Trainee Educational Psychologist).


                              …………………….…………………………
                              (Signature of parent/guardian)

## Appendix 12- Pupil Consent form

Pupil name: _____

Please circle your answer for each of the questions below:

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| Have you seen the pupil information presentation that explains what this research project is about? | Yes | No |
| Do you understand what this research project is about? | Yes | No |
| Do you understand what you will be asked to do? | Yes | No |
| Have you asked all the questions you want to ask and know who to contact with further questions? | Yes | No |
| Do you understand that it is OK for you to stop taking part in the research project **at any time**? | Yes | No |
| Do you know how to let the researcher know that you do not want to take part anymore? | Yes | No |
| Do you understand that nothing will happen if you decide you do not want to take part anymore? | Yes | No |
| Do you understand that this information will be kept safe and no one will know who you are? | Yes | No |

**If you have answered 'NO' to any of the questions above please DO NOT continue.**

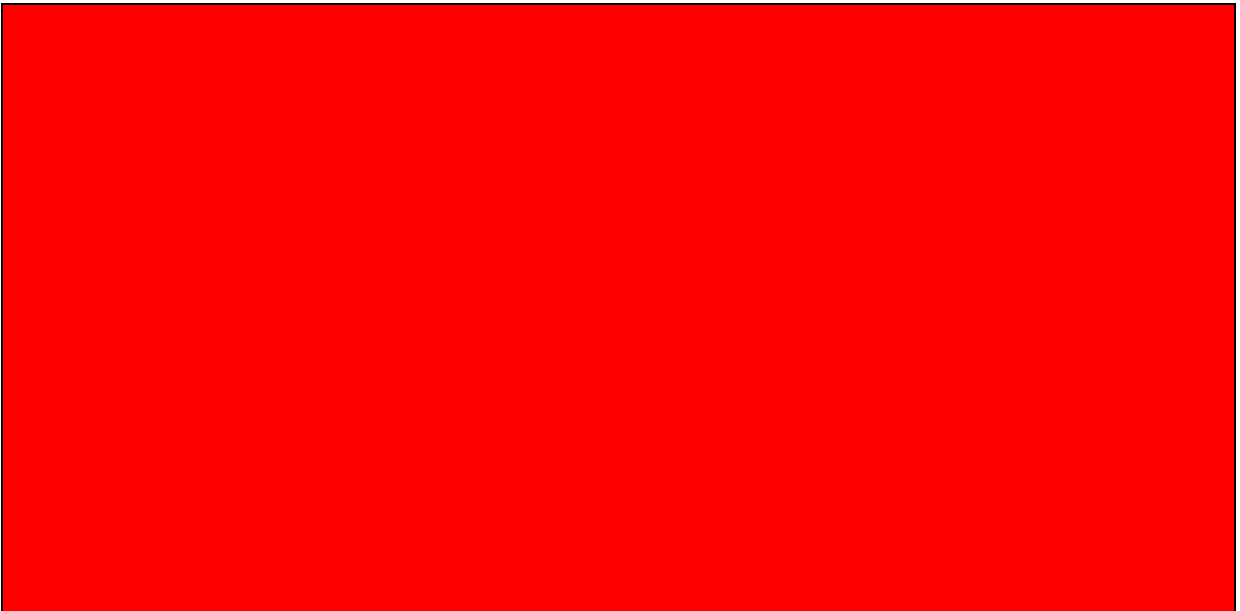Please tick one:



I would LIKE to take part in this project

I would NOT LIKE to take part in this project

Signature: _____

Date: _____

# Appendix 13- Red card

# Appendix 14- Example of pupil transcript

**R**: What would you say are some of the things that's going quite well for you at the moment?

**Ann**: My lessons, they're better than they were last year. I think it's because I got moved out of most of my lessons and put in different lessons now.

**R**: Ok and how does that make you feel?

**Ann**: It feels much better because my lessons before when I was in Year 8, the teacher's weren't engaging with us properly like giving us proper warnings. They were just putting our names on the board and then 'on-call' us and they wouldn't give us a chance. Now the teachers are giving us more of a chance before they 'on-call' us.

**R**: Ok can you think of 1 or 2 words that you would use to describe your school?

**Ann**: Chaotic, the students can be chaotic. The school itself is alright but it depends what lessons you're in and what teachers you've got. Some teachers don't even give you a chance like to explain what's happened, some of them don't even listen.

**R**: Ok so can you give me an example maybe of when that's happened?

**Ann**: So when someone has called me names and I take myself out of the equation and took myself out of the class and the teacher wouldn't listen to me. This happened this year in Year 9. When I tried to tell her what happened she said "oh I didn't hear that so come back in class". So I said "No" 'cause I wasn't gonna go back in class and have something like that happen again. So it was the end of the lesson so I just went to lunch. And she gave me half an hour detention for it but there's no point in me doing it because she wouldn't listen to me.

**R**: Ok so what do you think would have been more helpful for you at that time?

**Ann**: If I asked "can you actually listen" and me be able to tell her and explain it.

**R**: What do you think would be the outcome or what would you like the outcome to be?

**Ann**: I think she would have actually listened but sometimes she doesn't. I would have liked the person who did it to be taken out of the class, let them be 'on-called' because she was the person who was shouting it.

**R**: Ok so how would you say things were in Year 7 and 8 compared to now?

**Ann**: It is so much different because some teachers treat you differently, some teachers treat you like a child but you're not a child anymore, you're an adult, or you're a teenager. And some teachers don't take that into account, that you should treat them like adults not treat them like children because we want to be treated the way they want to be treated.

**R**: Right ok, so can you give me one example where you feel that teachers treated you like a child?

**Ann**: Like when I was in German last year she gives us Year 7 work and it's like we're not Year 7s we're Year 8s and she'd speak to us like we were children and that just wound me up. I was trying to explain it to her and then I just got angry so I came up to learning support.

**R**: Ok so what is it exactly that the teachers do to make you feel like they speak to you as a child?

**Ann**: It's the way they speak to me. Like the way they talk. And with the work it's like it was work we had done in Year 7.

**R**: So do you find the same problem with the work now that you're in Year 9?

**Ann**: No because I don't do Languages or Humanities anymore. 'Cause last year we were supposed to pick our options as well but then they changed that to this year which annoyed me because they've done it with everyone else but then they changed it when it was our turn.

**R**: Oh Ok so all the way through Year 8 you thought at the end of the year you would change your options but then they said to you actually you've got to change your options at the end of Year 9 now?

**Ann**: Yea because this year we were supposed to start doing our option lessons and now we're not.

**R**: And how did that make you feel? You can use this feelings chart to help you.

**Ann**: I was surprised and confused because we were told we would be doing it and then we had our options evening, then that got cancelled because it wasn't enough notice. So then that got changed and we didn't find out if there was gonna be another one. Then we had a meeting with Ms A, my named person and my mum and my mum asked "why haven't they picked their options yet" and Ms A said "we've been told they're not doing it until Year 9". My mum said "can you find out why" 'cause I wanted to pick mine then because I knew what I wanted to do. It was really annoying.

**R**: So you found out that you would not be choosing your options in that meeting with Ms A?

**Ann**: Yeah. No one knew.

**R**: Ok. So how would you say your attendance is both last year and this year?

**Ann**: Last year I didn't wanna come in because of bullies. And then my attendance totally dropped. Last year was a difficult year for me.

**R**: Ok, so if you were to think about how concerned you were with your attendance last year where would you rate it on this scale where 1=not at all concerned and 5=very concerned?

**Ann**: I was at a 5 because I was very concerned but when I was in Year 7 my attendance was alright. It was just year 8 when I was skiving lessons and didn't wanna come in.

**R**: Ok and would you say it was mainly because of the bullies why you didn't want to come in?

**Ann**: Yeah but the school didn't wanna take that into account but they knew why I wasn't coming in because my mum had spoken to them plenty of times.

**R**: Ok so if we use this timeline here where would you say it was when you first started getting bullied?

**Ann**: It was about the end of Year 7 and beginning of Year 8.

**R**: And when did you stop wanting to come into school?

**Ann**: Well I started skipping lessons first around the same time, end of Year 7.

**R**: Ok and did you tell anyone?

**Ann**: I would report it to my head of year but nothing would happen. She would say do a statement and then we will get the girls or the boys in and we'll sort it out but it never really did get sorted out.

**R**: So did the problem continue throughout Year 8?

**Ann**: Yes, then I stopped going to my lessons in Year 8 and I was just in learning support.

**R**: Did you get permission from teachers to go to learning support?

**Ann**: No I RAGed (Red, Amber, Green) my timetable to say which lessons I didn't go to and what lessons I did.

**R**: Ok did you have a meeting about it?

**Ann**: No, I asked Ms A if I could RAG my timetable and she said yeah and then she went off.

**R**: Ok so is it all the red ones that you would come in here for?

**Ann**: Yea

**R**: And the amber ones?

**Ann**: I'd go into lessons and if anything happened I'd come up here.

**R**: Oh ok, and the green ones?

**Ann**: I'd stay in those lessons.

**R**: Ok and how did you find RAGing your timetable worked for you?

**Ann**: It was helpful but then they said that I couldn't come in learning support, I had to go to my lessons and that really really annoyed me.

**R**: Yea. Were you still coming into school at this time?

**Ann**: Sometimes I didn't come into school.

**R**: Ok can I ask you about how helpful some of these support systems were. So using this scale where 1 is not helpful at all and 5 is extremely helpful where would you rate the helpfulness of writing your statement and the teachers saying they would talk to the bullies?

**Ann**: 1 because it was not helpful at all.

**R**: Ok so what would have been more helpful for you?

**Ann**: If like they actually read through your statements like ask me how I felt about it happening rather than me just writing the statement.

**R**: right ok. And how helpful would you say it was RAGing your timetable on the scale from 1 to 5?

**Ann**: It was 5 at first and then it just went to 2 because they didn't want me to come into learning support.

**R**: Right, did they give you a reason why?

**Ann**: Because they said I was in there too much. But they didn't take it into account that it was because bullies were going into my lessons. They didn't really ask me.

**R**: So no one asked you about the bullies or anything like that?

**Ann**: No not in learning support at all.

**R**; Right ok, so what did you use to do in learning support?

**Ann**: The class teachers would send my work up and I would do work. I found that helpful and didn't mind doing that because then I didn't hear anyone in my class say anything to me. But then it didn't help when a teacher would 'on-call' someone and they would also end up in learning support because then I would be in the room with them and they would say things to me.

**R**: Ok so what would have been more helpful for you at that time?

**Ann**: Being able to work in here (room adjacent to learning support) and they work in learning support.

**R**: Ok so you said you told the teachers about the bullying and they told you that you had to go back to your class instead of staying in learning support, what was the reason they gave you?

**Ann**: Because I was in learning support too much.

**R**: Ok did they give you another option that you could do instead of coming to learning support?

**Ann**: No they gave me an exit card but that didn't really help.

**R**: Ok how helpful would you rate the exit card on the scale from 1 to 5?

**Ann**: A 3  because it was helpful but then some of the teachers didn't know I had it and then all the students would know about it because then I'd have to go up to the teachers and tell her who was bullying me, like write their names down for her and then show her my exit card. She was supposed to speak to them and then if they carried on I'd have to show her the names again and then tell her I was going to learning support.

**R**: Ok so what is it that you did not like about that, why did you find it unhelpful?

**Ann**: Because people don't actually have that one, I'm the only person who has that one. People just have an exit card to go straight to learning support. I'd prefer to have that type of exit card where I could just show it to the teacher and go.

**R**: Ok did you explain that to them?

**Ann**: No, I didn't. They didn't really give me a chance to.

**R**: Ok, have you ever sat down with someone at school and talk about how things are going and what they could do to help you?

**Ann**: No.

**R**: Ok but you spoke to your Head of Year and Mrs A. At those times did any of them ask you what they could do, or what would you like from them to help you?

**Ann**: No

**R**: Would you have liked something like that?

**Ann**: Yes it would have helped so much.

**R**: Ok and apart from the three things you mentioned earlier that the teachers did to help you, did they do anything else?

**Ann**: No.

**R**: Ok so when would you say was the turning point when things started to get better?

**Ann**: This year when I came into Year 9 because I've got different teachers, I don't know I just think they are better teachers than I've had. Children didn't used to listen to my other teachers, they'd just muck around but they listen to these teachers.

**R**: Ok and what about the bullies? Have they stopped?

**Ann**: They don't bully me as much as they did before but I think it's a bit stupid that they've put me into a lesson with people who used to bully me last year and they still bully me. I've told them who they are but they've still put me into their lessons.

**R**: Ok, and so far how has it worked in those lessons with those children?

**Ann**: They still bully me. I just don't take a lot of notice of it. If they're right in my face and they say it to me and it gets me wound up….yea it's really annoying.

**R**: Ok, so how easy would you say it would have been for you to improve your attendance during the time you were experiencing the difficulties at school? Using this scale where 1= very difficult and 5=extremely easy where would you rate it at that time?

**Ann**: If they took me out my lessons, I would come in for half a day, do my work and go home, 'cause they knew they did it ….and it would have helped so much. I'd rather go to college because at least in college they treat you like an adult.

**R:** So if everyone treated you as an adult you think that would have been more helpful for you to come to school?

**Ann**: Yea because last year I was listening to music in class because we were doing a test and I didn't wanna hear everything that everyone else was saying to me so it was distracting me from them while I was doing my work and the teacher 'on-called' me and she asked me if I wanna go in Mrs B's classroom. So I went in Mrs B's classroom doing my work and then another teacher Mrs C came to me and said really rudely take your headphones out and give me your phone. I said no and put it in my bag. She went "come on then" you're going to isolation. So she took me to the isolation room and another teacher Mrs D asked me to give her the phone and I said no, then Mrs E asked me and I said no because it's my phone and my responsibility. If I wanna listen to music, I'll listen to music, if it distracts me from everyone else I'll do it. Then because I refused to go to the isolation room because there was someone in there who bullied me, they excluded me and put me in twilight.

**R**: Can you explain what twilight is?

**Ann:** I got sent home and excluded for the rest of the day. And then the next day I had to come in at 1 o'clock until 5 o'clock and do work.

**R**: Ok, so in that situation what do you think would have been better for you?

**Ann**: If she spoke to me, not in a rude way. If someone else is p'ed off she shouldn't speak to another student in a rude way. Because when she called my mum and said "we've excluded Ann can she come home" she spoke to my mum rudely…she said "Ann is coming home, she's being excluded" and my mum wasn't very happy. When I got home I explained to my mum why and then she came in the next day with me and we spoke to Mrs E and she told Mrs B " you have a very unhappy mother" because of the way she spoke to her. My mum didn't like the way she spoke to her because that was rude. She shouldn't have spoken to anyone like that especially a student at a school.

**R**: So do you think that maybe if she'd approached you and asked you nicely to remove your headphones that would have been better?

**Ann**: Yes and I would have.

**R**: Ok so when you first started at this secondary school can you remember what your first year was like? How did you make friends?

**Ann**: I came up with one person from my primary school and 2 people from the primary school next to me because our primary school was a federation.

**R**: And how did you learn your way around the school?

**Ann**: I think it was a few months before I came to School A (this school) I got shown around. I didn't go to the open evening to look around because I had already been around with my sister being here. So I already knew my way around.

**R**: Oh ok, and how did you get to know your teachers and everything?

**Ann**: I don't really know, I just got to know them after a while.

**R**: Ok and did you find anything particularly enjoyable when you first started school?

**Ann**: ummm I liked Art because I like drawing. But I liked textiles because you can just make things and you can do your own creations, it's just a big burst of creations.

**R**: Ok and did you find anything particularly difficult or challenging during that 1st year at secondary school?

**Ann**: No

**R**: Ok that's good. So at the times when you found it difficult to attend lessons and attend school during Year 8 how did you cope during those times?

**Ann**: If anything happened I took myself out of the equation in the class. I'd text my mum and get her to call me and explain what happened and if it was something that my mum didn't like she'd come down to the school and give them an ear full because my mum doesn't t like it when I get bullied because I got bullied in primary school. She doesn't like bullying full stop anyway.

**R**: Yea, when you were being bullied in primary school did you stop going in as well?

**Ann**: No this is the 1st time I've had difficulties coming in because I had difficulties at primary school but it was about something else. People think School A (this school) is a rubbish school but it isn't. When you actually get in there and know what it's like it is a good school like we came 3rd in the borough with GCSE exam levels. It is a good school when you get to know it. Some of the teachers are nice when you get to know them.

**R**: So at the times last year when you were having difficulties coming to school how often would you say you had good days at school on a scale from 1 to 5 where 1=never and 5=always?

**Ann**: 2

**R**: Ok so at that time during the mornings before school what were some of the thoughts and feelings you had about coming into school?

**Ann**: I'd be worried about like the people in school like if they were gonna bully me or if they were gonna say something about me. I'd be worried.

**R**: And did you talk to anyone about your worries?

**Ann**: School knew very well, but they just said "oh you're putting yourself in the matter of being bullied, you're putting yourself in the shoes of someone who gets bullied"

**R**: Right ok, so did the worries ever stop you from coming into school?

**Ann**: Yes

**R**: And what helped you when you were feeling worried?

**Ann**: I'd go to my lessons and if something happened I'd go to learning support, I'd walk out of my lessons. Then when they said I can only go there for History, German and French that really annoyed me because they knew what lessons were bad for me.

**R**: Right ok, so did you ever have like a meeting about the issue?

**Ann**: No they didn't give me a chance to.

**R**: Ok, well did your mum ever come in for a meeting, besides the time you told me about with Mrs A, did she ever come in to meet with your head of year or anything like that?

**Ann**: No, I would have found that helpful.

**R**: Yea. Ok so when you were at home when you were supposed to be at school did you enjoy your time away from school?

**Ann**: Yea because then I'd be able to like do things with my mum, like if she needed help I'd help her. I'd rather be at home like if my mum hurts herself and she can't get to the phone, she won't call the school, she'd call me or my sister because every time she calls the school, it never gets to us and its annoying.

**R**: Ok, so if you think about those times when you were finding it hard to attend school and you were at home, you were enjoying the time away from school. How did that make you feel about coming back into school?

**Ann**: I knew I had to come into school because my mum kept like saying to me "you've got to go to school Ann, I don't want to get a fine"

**R**: Ok so if you think about the day when you had the most difficulty coming into school can you think of what made that day so difficult for you?

**Ann**: I just didn't wanna wake up in the mornings. I'd be like scared. I'd pretend to be sick sometimes so that I didn't have to come into school.

**R**: Ok and on the days when you did make it into school even when you didn't feel like it, what helped you get through the day?

**Ann**: I just used to think to myself I'll be at home in a few hours.

**R**: Ok so if you could go back in time to Year 8 and you could re-do things and make anyone do anything to help you, what would you have liked from your teachers to help you at that time?

**Ann**: If I wasn't in lessons with the bullies.

**R**: Was it just in the lessons that they bullied you then?

**Ann**: And at break and lunch

**R**: So was there anything that you think would have helped you at break and lunch times?

**Ann**: I used to come up to Sanctuary during break and lunch times then this year they tried to stop it.

**R**: Ok so you would have liked that to continue?

**Ann**: Yea

**R**: Ok is there anything that you think your friends or parents could have done to help you during that time?

**Ann**: Like try and persuade me to go to school, things like that.

**R**: Were they persuading you at the time?

**Ann**: Not really, my mum tried to though but not really my friends.

**R**: Ok so when you were off for a number of days, say 2 or 3 days at a time, what were some of the things you were thinking about?

**Ann**: "has my Head of Year had a word with them", "have they stopped", "are they gonna stop"… but they didn't.

**R**: ok, and what was the most difficult thing about coming into school after all that time away?

**Ann**: thinking if I'm gonna be bullied that day.

**R**: Ok so of all the people you've spoken to about the issue, who or what was most helpful for you?

**Ann**: I dunno, maybe coming into learning support.

**R**: ok and if you can think of 3 things you'd like your school to be like, the ideal school or the perfect school, what would you say?

**Ann**: being able to do what you want like with the phone rule, it's stupid because if my mum messages me and it's something important and I can't read it and then when I get home she's not there and I don't know why, it would be the school's fault.

**R**: What's the phone rule?

**Ann**: That we are not allowed our phones out at all when we are in school. It's stupid though. I'd like to be able to use my phone at some point during the day.

**R**: Ok anything else you'd like to see in your school?

**Ann**: Treating us all more like adults, because with the phone rule that's like treating us like little children.