School attendance difficulties: An exploration of perceived barriers to attendance and the support offered for non-attendance from the perspectives of parents and school staff
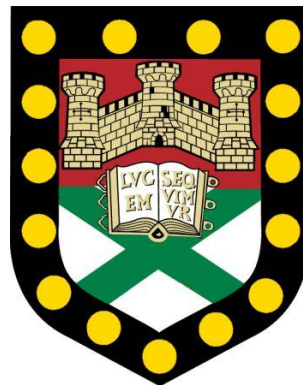

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to the University of Exeter

as a thesis for the degree of

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I certify that all material in this thesis which is not my own work has been identified and that no material has previously been submitted and approved for the award of a degree by this or any other University.

Signature: ………………K Lissack………………………………

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Abstract

School attendance is crucial for academic progress as well as the holistic development of children (Pellegrini, 2007). Research has consistently demonstrated poor short-term and long-term outcomes for children who experience school attendance difficulties and there is growing concern in the UK, and across the world, for children who miss education (Askeland et al., 2020; Baker & Bishop, 2015). School non-attendance (SNA) is a challenging and longstanding phenomenon for schools, professionals, and families alike (Fornander & Kearney, 2020; Gulliford & Miller, 2015). It is well documented that attending and engaging in school is not only critical for children's cognitive development but also for their social-emotional development and mental wellbeing (DfE, 2019; Maynard et al., 2018). This research was conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic. Worldwide, it is estimated that 1.6 billion students have been affected by school closures in response to the pandemic (Donohue & Miller, 2020). These school closures have continued to raise awareness and concern for the detrimental impacts of non-attendance at school on children's development and wellbeing.

In this research, I employ a pragmatic methodological approach within a two-study research design. In study one, an online questionnaire was used to gather views from parents (n=289) who have experience of their child's school attendance difficulties. I aimed to elicit parental perspectives on the barriers to attendance and their views on the support offered to them and their child for non-attendance. I also elicited parental views on how this support could be improved. In study two, online semi-structured interviews with conceptual mapping and a card-sort activity were used with a sample of pastoral school staff (n=10) who have experience in supporting non-attendance. In this study, I explored how pastoral staff conceptualise attendance difficulties and elicited their views on what school-based factors might act as barriers to attendance. I also explored staff's perspectives on how support for non-attendance can be facilitated in schools. This research was conducted under strict ethical and methodological considerations in response to the pandemic. The findings provide insight into attendance difficulties during this unique and unprecedented

time. The data were analysed using reflexive thematic analysis as outlined by Braun and Clarke (2013; 2020).

The findings demonstrate that SNA represents a challenging, complex, and at times, desperate situation for many parents in this study. A variety of factors were highlighted to act as barriers to children's school attendance. In line with existing literature, parents emphasised the role of school factors over other factors (Melvin et al., 2019). Anxiety and other mental health difficulties were perceived by both parents and staff as having significant impacts on a child's ability to attend school. Parents' views on the support received varied, reflecting the complex and individualised nature of non-attendance. Parents valued home-school partnerships that encompassed kindness and removed parental blame for their child's non-attendance. Both parents and school staff identified similar factors that might improve support for children and families experiencing non-attendance (and at different levels: school, family, professional, and wider systems). The congruences in views across the two studies indicate a key role for pastoral staff in supporting families in cases of non-attendance. The findings contribute to an understanding of school non-attendance from the view of parents and pastoral staff. Implications for the practice of Educational Psychologists (EPs) and school staff are discussed with an exploration of possible future actions for addressing the complex and challenging nature of school non-attendance.

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List of Abbreviations

Abbreviation	Terminology
ASD	Autism Spectrum Disorder
BPS	British Psychological Society
CAMHS	Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services
CBT	Cognitive Behavioural Therapy
COVID-19	Coronavirus Disease 2019
DfE	Department for Education
EP	Educational psychologist
EWO	Education Welfare Officer
GDPR	General Data Protection Regulation
KS3	Key Stage 3
KS4	Key Stage 4
KiTeS	Kids and Teens at School (Melvin et al., 2019)
P1	Participant 1 (example)
PPCT	Process-Person-Context-Time
RTA	Reflexive Thematic Analysis
RQ	Research Question
SENCO	Special Educational Needs Co-Ordinator
SEN	Special Educational Needs
SES	Socio-economic status
SNA	School Non-Attendance
SRAS	School Refusal Assessment Scale
TA	Thematic Analysis

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Chapter One: Introduction

1.1. Chapter Overview

In this chapter, I will introduce the topic of school non-attendance (SNA) and briefly explore the significance of non-attendance on children's development. I will present an overview of my positionality as a researcher. I will introduce an overview of the current research and explore the relevance of the topic to educational psychology practice. I end this chapter by considering the impact of the COVID-19 (Coronavirus disease 2019) pandemic on my research.

1.2. Topic Overview

School prepares children for life and plays a critical role in all areas of a child's development (Finning et al., 2018). All children have a right to access full-time education, regardless of their abilities or disabilities (Melvin et al., 2019; Warnock Report; Department for Education and Science, 1978). When a child is not attending school, for whatever reason, there can be severe negative impacts on their overall development and life outcomes (Askeland et al., 2020; Carroll, 2010). For example, social exclusion and lower socio-economic status have been linked to poor school attendance (Pellegrini, 2007; Reid, 2014a). Evidence also suggests that poor emotional regulation, social isolation, and a higher risk of mental health difficulties and offending behaviours are associated with school absenteeism (Baker & Bishop, 2015; Fornander & Kearney, 2020).

In 2019, the DfE (2019a, p.1) reported that 'both authorised and unauthorised absence rates have increased since last year, the rate of the latter now being the highest since records began' (updated figures currently not available owing to impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic). Every school day lost from absence can have negative impacts on the individual child (Hancock, et al., 2013). As Moore et al. (2019) states, schools are not able to function well if pupils are frequently not attending and thus, school staff have a central role to play in addressing attendance difficulties.

Prosecuting parents for their child's non-attendance has also been raised as a contentious issue as there is limited evidence to suggest that it is effective in

improving attendance (Sheppard, 2011). Research also indicates that prosecuting parents for non-attendance can be a factor in their decision to deregister their child from school (Baynton, 2020; Kendall & Atkinson, 2006). The tensions associated with these experiences can be viewed within the so-called concept of 'off-rolling' (where schools informally encourage families to take their child out of school and off their roll due to difficulties with behaviour or attendance). Off-rolling has been recognised by Ofsted as an increasing problem in schools and further highlights the need to understand the first-hand experiences of school attendance difficulties from those involved (Dannow et al., 2020).

With the continued spread of COVID-19, the UK Government closed schools for a significant period from March 2020 and again in January 2021. Concern has been raised for children who are not consistently attending school due to national lockdowns and for those children who are missing school days due to the spread of the virus. The school closures have also prompted widespread acknowledgment of the importance of school attendance and the detrimental impact that non-attendance can have on children. Early research has highlighted the mental health implications for children and how school closures are likely to exacerbate social inequalities (Van Lancker, 2020). I conducted the initial planning stages of my research prior to the start of the pandemic and so, I could not envisage the increased significance the topic of non-attendance would have in light of the school closures. By the middle of April 2020, 192 countries reported school closures in response to the pandemic representing almost 1.6 billion students (Donohue & Miller, 2020). With this in mind, I believe this research is timely and pertinent. In this research, I seek to explore parental and school staff perspectives on school non-attendance, the support that is provided to families to address such difficulties, and how this support might be improved.

1.3. My Positionality

In the following paragraphs, I provide the context within which this research is situated. I acknowledge the role of my positionality and subjectivity and its effects on the decisions made at every stage of the research process (Bourke, 2014). As a trainee educational psychologist (EP) undertaking a Professional

Doctorate, I recognise that I am situated within a privileged position in academia and my personal and professional experiences will influence the assumptions I have, the interpretations I make, and the way I design this project. Research cannot be separated from the researcher's own beliefs, value systems, and assumptions (Bourke, 2014). In my career so far, I have worked in various schools and colleges in a variety of roles to support children and young people achieve their full potential. My past experiences have raised questions for me as to why some pupils experience difficulties in attending school. For instance:

- What makes some pupils not want to attend school?
- What factors are involved when children experience attendance difficulties?
- How might the school/college environment impact children's ability to attend?
- How can school attendance difficulties be prevented?

As a researcher, I must be aware of the influence of my past experiences and my own values and beliefs on the decisions made and the interpretation of my data (Braun & Clarke, 2013). Thus, throughout my research journey, I have continually reflected upon my thoughts and feelings to show how I am positioned within the context of the research (Savin-Baden & Major, 2013). Throughout the thesis, I provide signposts to 'reflexive accounts' which provide insight into these reflections. I discuss my positionality further in Chapter Three (section 3.4).

1.4. Professional Relevance and Contribution to Educational Psychology

My initial interest in attendance difficulties was ignited further by my experiences in practice as a trainee EP. A piece of complex casework initially triggered my thinking around the difficulties some children experience in attending school. On reflection, this led me to question how EPs might support children who are experiencing attendance difficulties. From this piece of casework, the following reflective questions arose for me:

- What is the role of EPs when working with children with attendance difficulties?
- What support from school staff might be needed to prevent such difficulties? What support could EPs provide?
- What causes a child to experience attendance difficulties?
- What preventative measures can schools put in place to prevent attendance difficulties?

In addition to this initial complex case, I have come across several cases where children are unable to consistently attend school and I am aware of several colleagues who have been involved in similar complex and multi-faceted cases of non-attendance. When carrying out assessment for such cases, the heterogeneous nature of SNA necessitates careful consideration of multiple causal factors and complexities involved (Elliot, 1999). EPs are well-positioned to challenge practices and support families and children who experience SNA at an individual and systemic level (Carroll, 2015). Given the complexity of SNA, it is suggested that EPs have "much to offer in this important and demanding area" as they have appropriate training and skills to meet the heterogeneous needs of children and carry out thorough assessment of possible causes (Carroll, 2015, p. 47). EPs work at a multi-agency level as well as directly with families and children, thus they are well placed to meet the demanding and changing needs and complexities of children's non-attendance (Cameron, 2006; Lauchlan, 2003). SNA is thus an important area of research for the EP profession. As Pellegrini (2007) points out, EPs can act as mediators between school staff and families to promote partnership and a shared approach to intervention.

In this research, I seek to explore attendance difficulties from the perspective of two primary stakeholders: parents and pastoral school staff. Qualitative research with these key stakeholders is limited within the existing literature (Heyne et al., 2020). My aims of the present research also coincide with current and continued national interest in the promotion school attendance (DfE, 2020).

1.5. Rationale for the Research

The topic of SNA has been extensively studied over the years across different disciplines. This, in part, has led to a discrepancy in the way the problem of school absenteeism has been conceptualised and there is limited universal agreement about terminology (Heyne et al., 2020; Ingul & Nordahl, 2013). The existing research has tended to adopt a quantitative approach and is often contextualised within a medicalised, within-child perspective (Dannow et al., 2020). SNA can be an emotive topic for both families and educational practitioners (Pellegrini, 2007), and while school attendance is an extensively researched field, there is limited research investigating their first-hand experiences and views (Heyne et al., 2020). This paucity of research adopting a qualitative approach is significant because, to improve early intervention and support for families, a better understanding of the problem is needed (Lyon & Cotler, 2007). Thus, qualitative research that raises the voice of those experiencing the complex problem of SNA to better understand their first-hand experiences is warranted (Dannow et al., 2020). I sought to address this gap in the research by exploring the experiences and views of parents and school staff.

1.6. Originality and Value of the Research

Within a pragmatist philosophical approach (Norwich, 2020), this research seeks to add insight to the current research landscape in a way that promotes solutions to the complex and long-standing problem of SNA. Previous research has tended to focus on causal factors of non-attendance (e.g. Havik et al., 2015) without a broader consideration of intervention or support strategies (Finning et al., 2018). While the current research aims to elicit views on the barriers to attendance, it also seeks to fill a gap in the literature in relation to support experiences and perspectives on how this support could be improved. This broader perspective will thus provide insight into the inherently complex nature of attendance difficulties from the view of key stakeholders. In addition, this research applies a bioecological systems framework to understand the complex nature of school absence (Melvin et al., 2019). Previous research on SNA has been dominated by a medicalised perspective and there have been

recent calls to adopt a bioecological systems approach to research (Melvin et al., 2020). Totsika et al. (2020, p.1640) points out that "from an ecological systems perspective, school absence or non-attendance is a phenomenon that is poorly described". The current research therefore provides a unique contribution to the research landscape by situating the approach within a bio-ecological systems perspective (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006).

1.7. Overall Research Aims

The overarching aim of this research is to investigate how SNA is understood from the perspectives of parents and pastoral school staff. Specifically, in study one, I seek to explore how parents make sense of their child's non-attendance with regards to what they view to be barriers to attendance. I also aim to investigate parents' views on the support they receive and how they think this support could be improved. Study two seeks to explore how school staff conceptualise SNA, how they view school-based factors act as barriers to attendance, and how they perceive support could be facilitated more effectively to meet the needs of children. The aims and research questions are explored further in Chapter Three.

1.7.1. Thesis Overview

This thesis is divided into two linked studies (Figure 1.1). In both studies, I employ a pragmatic methodological stance. Due to the COVID-19 crisis, I adapted my research so that data collection methods were solely online. In study one, an online survey was used to gather insight from parents who have a child (or children) experiencing school attendance difficulties (n=289). This study adopts a wide-angle lens by recruiting parents with experience of any type of non-attendance and recruitment was not restricted to a particular local authority area. In study two, I employ a more focused approach by conducting semi-structured online interviews with pastoral school staff (n=10).

Figure 1.1

Overview of Thesis Structure

STUDY 1
- Parents of children experiencing attendance difficulties (n=289)
- Online survey

Linkng Study 1 and Study 2
- Study one informs elements of study two including participant sample and research questions.

STUDY 2
- School staff (n=10)
- Online interviews, concept mapping, and card sort activity.
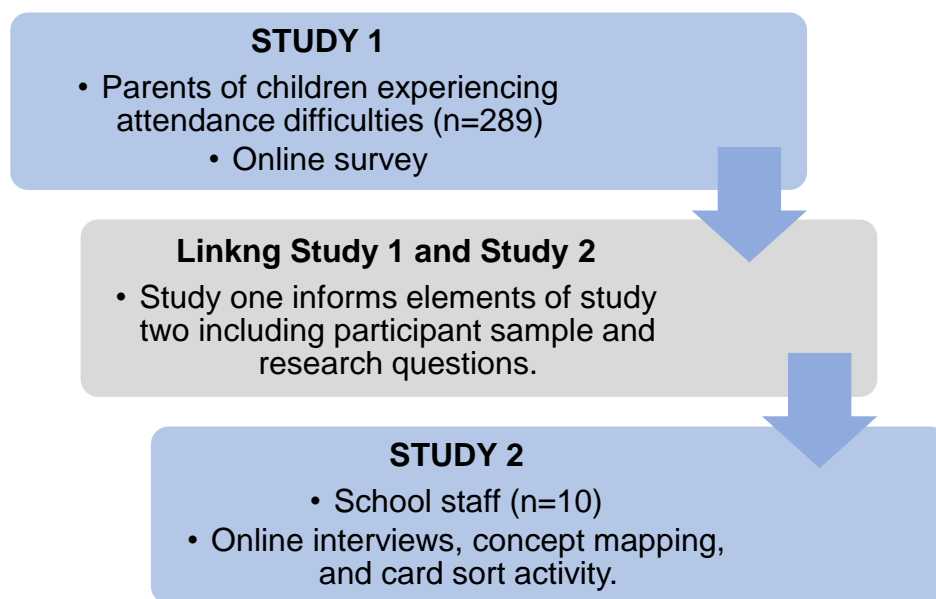
1.8. Contextual Information: Doing Research during a Pandemic

At this point, I would like to acknowledge the context within which this research was undertaken (see Appendix A for research timeline). My research was heavily impacted by the circumstances caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. The research was conducted during the first UK national lockdown; an unprecedented time in response to the spread of the virus. During this time, no face-to-face data collection was permitted. My original research plan included eliciting views from children who were experiencing attendance difficulties. In March 2020, prior to the announcement of the national lockdown, I had planned to conduct face-to-face interviews with four children. However, due to the restrictions, I was unable to carry out these interviews. In response, I initially considered adapting the interviews to take place online. However, following a pilot interview with one of my participants this approach to data collection was deemed unsuitable (see Appendix B for reflections). After much reflection and discussion with colleagues and supervisors, I decided to refocus my research towards parents and school staff. I will reflect on these changes throughout this thesis. I acknowledge the challenges and ethical considerations posed by undertaking research during a pandemic in Chapter Four.

1.9. Chapter Summary

In this chapter I have introduced the topic of SNA and the reasons for conducting this research. I have briefly highlighted my positionality and explored how the research is relevant to educational psychology. Finally, I provided insight into the context of this research and how the pandemic has influenced the design process.

In the next chapter, I will provide an in-depth exploration of the current literature on SNA and detail how my research aims to fill the gap in the existing research.

Chapter Two: Literature Review

2.1. Overview of Literature Review

In this literature review, I begin by highlighting the challenges posed by the issue of school non-attendance and the difficulties in conceptualising and defining it. I also draw upon research eliciting views of teachers and parents. I will end this literature review by commenting on how the gaps in the current literature have framed and guided the present study (see Appendix C for literature search terms).

2.2. Introduction

SNA is a universal problem across countries and a key focus for UK Government seeking to address the problem (Heyne, 2019; Kearney, 2008a). Absence from school can have significant impacts on a child's cognitive, social, emotional, and personal development (Dannow et al., 2020). Gentle-Genitty et al. (2020) have recently highlighted some of the tensions and difficulties associated with SNA. For instance, the pressures of government targets for attendance, the difficulties in supporting children who experience non-attendance, and the identification of children who might be at risk of longer-term persistent school absence (Heyne et al., 2019). Furthermore, Kearney (2001) notes that SNA is one of the longest standing research areas amongst children and young people; it has been studied across many disciplines, including education, social work, psychology, medicine, psychiatry, and public policy, with little intersection between them (Birioukov, 2016). This has led to a "splintering across disciplines and thus a lack of consensus with respect to defining, conceptualizing, classifying, assessing, and addressing" SNA (Kearney et al., 2019, p. 2). Elliot and Place (2019) use the term 'conceptual confusion' to reflect these challenges. These discrepancies have caused a lack of a shared research agenda and have arguably created a barrier to successful implementation of evidenced-based strategies and a disjointed approach to supporting children (Heyne et al., 2019; Kearney et al., 2019; Kljakovic & Kelly, 2019).

Despite this 'conceptual confusion', research has consistently shown students with low attendance can experience poor short-term and long-term outcomes (Reid, 2014a; Walker & Donaldson, 2010). For example, poor attendance has been linked to social exclusion and longer-term life implications such as lower socio-economic status in adulthood (Pellegrini, 2007). Consequently, SNA not only has individual and immediate impacts for the child themselves, but also has implications at a societal level (Malcolm et al., 2003). There is growing concern amongst educators for children who experience low school attendance (Reid, 2014a; Baker & Bishop, 2015) and recently, there has been a call for research to adopt a pragmatic approach to "drive change, and to justify the implementation of service delivery" (Tonge & Silverman, 2019, p. 119). At the same time, Heyne (2019) has called for more research into what schools can do to improve early identification, assessment, and intervention.

2.3. Conceptualisation of School Non-attendance

There is a continuing debate regarding the terminology for SNA (Finning et al., 2020; Heyne et al., 2019). Terminology used in research studies will often reflect the individual researcher's identity and professional perspective (Kearney & Graczyk, 2014). As highlighted by Kearney (2008a), the different disciplines taking an interest in SNA impacts the perspective and approach taken in research. For example, some studies specifically recruit participants experiencing SNA who have been diagnosed with an anxiety disorder, or their exclusion criterion might state that the child does not display any antisocial behaviours (Kearney, 2008b). Consequently, many children who experience attendance difficulties can be excluded from research, which impacts the comparability of research findings (Chu et al., 2019).

2.3.1. A 'Labelling Dilemma'?

The way practitioners perceive and give meaning to the labels ascribed to children's difficulties has implications for the type of provisions and interventions employed (Norwich, 1999). Thus, it is necessary to recognise the tensions and complexities associated with the labelling of SNA. Historically, SNA has been viewed within an 'illegal truancy' perspective (Berg et al., 1993; Heyne et al.,

2019). The term 'truancy' is often associated with externalising problems and refers to students who do not attend school due to disinterest, with their parents not necessarily being aware of their absence (Gase et al., 2019; Tonge & Silverman, 2019). Earlier research on SNA has also used the term 'school phobia' to describe children who appeared to have a specific fear of school which reflected a clinical perspective. This term has been criticised by some researchers as being misleading because it implies the child has a fear of the school itself, which is often not the case (Thambirajah et al., 2008). The focus on a clinical labelling approach that takes a pathological perspective has been viewed as deterministic and too simplistic for understanding the inherent complexities of SNA (Billington, 2018; Kearney, 2008b).

As noted by Lauchlan (2003), there has been a move towards establishing a distinction between SNA classified as 'truancy' and 'school refusal'. The term 'school refusal' is associated with internalising symptoms, such as anxiety. It refers to students who experience difficulties in attending school for emotional reasons, while their parents are aware of their non-attendance (Fornander & Kearney, 2020; Gonzálvez, et al., 2019). Nuttall and Woods (2013) justify their use of the term 'school refusal' in their paper by arguing that, as a behavioural descriptor, it encompasses the full range of needs of a child experiencing attendance difficulties due to anxiety (Nuttall & Woods, 2013). However, I would argue that there are negative connotations associated with the term 'refusal' and 'refuser'. Baker and Bishop (2015, p.365) found that the term was problematic for all participants in their study, noting that "the language of refusal and the label 'school refuser' in particular appear problematic, attributing, as they do, a form of within-child responsibility to the individual". As pointed out by Pellegrini (2007, p. 65) not all cases of school non-attendance are characterised by anxiety or conduct disorders, which Pellegrini argues turns this label into an "unhelpful tool". Further, I consider the term 'school refusal' to reflect a negative view of the child's situation. Gregory and Purcell (2014) also found that the use of the term 'school refuser' did not accurately describe the experiences of their participants (children and their families). They posit that the use of the term 'school refuser' fails to take account of school factors and other environmental barriers in understanding and addressing children's attendance difficulties.

Moreover, in their large-scale study on professionals' understandings of 'school refusal', Archer et al. (2003) found that there was no clear distinction between different groups of children experiencing attendance problems.

2.3.2. Implications of Labelling for Research and Practice

The tensions associated with labelling SNA can be a barrier to developing a shared understanding of the problem (Elliot, 1999). Categorising attendance difficulties into 'school refusal' or 'truancy' can influence how professionals and practitioners view the problem (Finning et al., 2020). For instance, Armstrong et al. (2011) found that when SNA is conceptualised as 'truancy', school staff tended to view it less sympathetically when compared to 'school refusal' behaviours. Yet, research has shown that 'truancy' has underlying internalising problems like that seen in 'school refusal' behaviours (Finning et al., 2019a, Mandalia et al., 2018). Egger et al. (2003) highlight that these 'subtypes' of SNA are not mutually exclusive as both are associated with internalising difficulties alongside wider systemic problems at school and home.

In support of this, Tonge and Silverman (2019, p. 119) argue that there is a need to "understand and respond to the complex range of bio-psycho-socio-cultural determinants of absenteeism". More recently, research has begun to move away from terminology such as 'school refusal' and 'school phobia' (Tonge & Silverman, 2019). Alternative terms within the literature include: 'emotionally based school avoidance' (Morgan et al., 2018); 'chronic non-attendance' (Lauchlan, 2003); and 'extended school non-attendance' (Pellegrini, 2007). With these changes in terminology, research has begun to take a broader perspective, viewing SNA as a rational response to environmental barriers and feelings of unsafety, rather than as a medical or within-child problem (Thambirajah et al., 2008; Tobias, 2019).

Despite this move away from within-child perspectives, the lack of consensus regarding the conceptualisation of SNA is an ongoing issue in existing literature (Elliot & Place, 2019; Heyne, 2019). Specific terms are often used interchangeably without recognition of the distinctions between them (Thambirajah et al., 2008). Kearney (2008a) argues it is useful to explore these

discrepancies and unravel them by distinguishing between problematic and non-problematic attendance. Hence, very short-term absences and pre-arranged authorised absence, for example due to illness, would not be viewed as problematic non-attendance (Kearney, 2008a). However, as Kearney (2008a) further highlights, problematic non-attendance can develop rapidly, while Miller (2008) discusses how extended non-attendance can often occur after an illness-related absence. So, despite this form of absence not being an issue initially, it may quickly become problematic, highlighting the importance of understanding the context of the reasons for non-attendance (Hickman et al., 2008).

Evidently, there continues to be a lack of agreed criteria for problematic absenteeism (Skedgell & Kearney, 2018). Pellegrini (2007, p. 75) highlights that "researchers and practitioners could increase understanding of school non-attendance by working towards a shared definition of this behaviour". Heyne et al. (2019) further posit that this lack of consensus concerning the operationalisation of SNA is a fundamental issue which has implications for the support and interventions employed. It is this difference in understanding that Baker and Bishop (2015) argue warrants further exploration to prevent negative implications for children who experience non-attendance. This indicates that a shared understanding will allow for improvements in the way children are assessed and supported (Kearney, 2003; Pellegrini, 2007).

2.3.3. Terminology Used in the Present Research

For the purposes of the present research, I have chosen to use the umbrella term 'school non-attendance'. I posit that this term reflects a neutral stance in describing the experiences of children not attending school without placing any judgment on them or their experiences. The current research seeks to adopt a broad approach to non-attendance without pre-defining what it might encompass. This view is partly in line with Pellegrini's (2007) use of a similar phrase: 'extended school non-attendance'. The use of the word 'school' draws attention to the school environment, while avoiding any pre-judgement on what might be causing a child's attendance difficulties (Pellegrini, 2007). Pellegrini (2007) uses the word 'extended' to denote the persistent nature of school

attendance difficulties. I have chosen not to use the word 'extended' because I aim to explore a broader perspective of non-attendance at any stage. By including the word 'extended', I believe I would be excluding an exploration of the earlier stages of non-attendance. I aim to extend the reach of my study to gather views about non-attendance, regardless of how long the issue has been experienced.

2.4. Prevalence of School Non-Attendance

Given the discrepancies in defining and conceptualising the construct of SNA outlined above, accurate prevalence figures are difficult to obtain (Clissold, 2018). Dannow et al. (2020) note that prevalence figures for school absenteeism have ranged from 6% to 23%. According to Kearney (2019) school attendance difficulties are amongst one of the most common behavioural difficulties in children and young people. Kearney (2019) describes SNA as being experienced across a spectrum, from relatively minor occurrences of absence to persistent and chronic non-attendance. Prevalence figures often do not discriminate between these different types of SNA (Kearney et al., 2019). However, research that does discriminate between types has quoted that 'school refusal' behaviours, where anxiety is seen to be the main cause of non-attendance, affects around 1–2% of school-aged children (Kearney, 2008b; Nuttall & Woods, 2013). In the UK, the Department for Education (DfE, 2019) operationalises persistent absenteeism as missing 10% or more of the school term. Conversely, other research has defined persistent absenteeism as being absent for 25% of total school time for at least 2 weeks (Tonge & Silverman, 2019), whilst others define it as missing 10 days of school in a 15-week period (Kearney, 2008b). Consequently, it is not always possible to make valid comparisons between studies and data sets (Chu et al., 2019).

Furthermore, as highlighted by Baker and Bishop (2015), local variations in reporting arrangements mean that accurate national statistics for the prevalence of non-attendance are hard to obtain. Gubbels et al. (2019) highlight that absenteeism rates differ depending on the definition and measurement period. Definitions of SNA also vary between countries and prevalence will depend upon what methods are used to capture data (Tonge & Silverman, 2019). These

figures rely on local authorities monitoring and reporting non-attendance, and often the underlying difficulties causing non-attendance are not reported (Clissold, 2018). Hence, statistics are not necessarily accurate, and caution is warranted when highlighting prevalence figures in research.

2.5. Theoretical perspectives of School Non-Attendance

2.5.1. Individual Factors

There is evidence to suggest that various individual factors can increase the risk of SNA (Finning et al., 2019c). Historically, the literature has adopted a clinical focus to explain children's non-attendance (Baker & Bishop, 2015). Much of the existing literature across various disciplines has attempted to link school attendance difficulties to specific psychopathological conditions (Tonge & Silverman, 2019). Lawrence et al. (2019), for example, used a survey to examine the relationship between mental disorder and school attendance in Australian schools. They found a positive correlation between students with a diagnosed mental disorder and increased absences from school when compared to children without a diagnosed mental disorder.

There is further evidence to suggest that children experiencing SNA are likely to display symptoms related to depression and anxiety (Kearney, 2008b). For instance, Kearney and Albano (2004) used the School Refusal Assessment Scale (SRAS) and diagnostic interviews with 143 children and their parents to examine the diagnoses associated with 'school refusal'. They found that anxiety disorders were associated with school refusal behaviours. A flaw in Kearney and Albano's (2004) study, however, was their lack of consideration for any contextual factors, such as family history of non-attendance or peer relationship difficulties, which has been shown to influence school non-attendance (Dalziel & Henthorne, 2005).

More recent research has emphasised the influence of depressive symptoms and found this may be a greater risk factor than anxiety for problematic absenteeism (Fornander & Kearney, 2020). Finning et al. (2019b) used data from a community survey of 5-to-16-year-olds (n=7977) and questionnaires to

assess the impact of emotional disorders on absence rates. They found that anxiety, depression, and emotional difficulties were all associated with higher rates of both authorised and unauthorised non-attendance. Depression was found to be the strongest association in secondary-aged children, specifically for unauthorised absences. Finning et al. (2019b) conclude by suggesting that school absenteeism can be a useful tool to identify children who are experiencing mental health difficulties, further supporting the importance of focusing on children's attendance patterns in schools. Indeed, Finning et al. (2019b) claim that school staff should be aware of the impact of emotional disorders on a child's attendance, and that non-attendance can be a sign of an emotional difficulty, indicating the need for appropriate individualised support to access education.

2.5.2. Functional Model of Non-Attendance

In a move away from the psychopathological approach, Kearney and Silverman (1993) adopted a behavioural approach that considers the functions that maintain a child's SNA over time (Kearny, 2019). Kearney (2001) aimed to improve the cohesiveness of defining SNA by categorising the functions it serves the child. This approach is argued to be more specific and applicable to intervention and assessment when compared to focusing only on the symptoms a child is experiencing (Gregory & Purcell, 2014; Kearney, 2019). Rather than separating the different forms of SNA, Kearney (2001) posits that a functional model of taxonomy is warranted. The four-function taxonomy categories of school refusal behaviour, as proposed by Kearney (2019), are as follows:

1. To avoid school situations and objects (such as busy hallways) that cause negative emotions (i.e. fear, anxiety, depression).
2. To escape from aversive social situations (e.g. negative interactions with teachers or bullying) or evaluative situations (e.g. exams or speaking in front of the class).
3. To gain or pursue attention from others outside of school (e.g. staying at home to be near parents or engaging in out-of-school activities during school hours).
4. To obtain or pursue tangible rewards outside of school (e.g. autonomy or comfort).

From this, the School Refusal Assessment Scale (SRAS) was developed which measures the relative strengths of each of the functions in individual cases, which are either negatively reinforcing the behaviour (1 and 2) or positively reinforcing (3 and 4) (Kearney & Albano, 2004). This approach supports the development of a personalised cognitive-behavioural approach based on the child's functional profile (Heyne et al., 2019; Kearney, 2019). The reliability of this measurement scale has been acknowledged by leading authors and evidenced as a robust and psychometrically sound assessment tool for practitioners, allowing for the exploration of factors that might influence a child's attendance difficulties (Thambirajah et al., 2008).

Despite this, the functional model has also been criticised. Research has indicated that some children score very low on all four functions despite experiencing attendance difficulties, thus indicating the model does not reliably cover all factors involved (Heyne et al., 2019). In line with this, Kearney (2019) has acknowledged the model does not consider any contextual variables that may exist in cases of school absenteeism. For instance, family dynamics, school environment, and parental factors are not into taken account as part of the assessment (Thambirajah et al., 2008).

Gregory and Purcell (2014) criticise the use of measures and scales more generally because they can take emphasis away from the complex social and environmental factors impacting a child's attendance difficulties. This medical-model approach, they argue, can be useful in cases where the child is being treated for anxiety and depression, but it should not be a stand-alone approach (Gregory & Purcell, 2014). Indeed, there has been a call for increased emphasis on the importance of conducting a broad assessment that moves beyond functional analysis, particularly one that also captures contextual factors such as the family, the school, and socio-cultural considerations (Carroll, 2015; Heyne, et al., 2019; Tonge and Silverman, 2019).

With these points in mind, I would posit that questionnaires and scales are useful when used as a starting point in the assessment of SNA cases. They can also raise awareness in schools of the many factors that can be associated with SNA (Gregory & Purcell, 2014). The functional model of SNA has provided a robust and theoretically sound assessment tool for practitioners and allows for

exploration of factors that might influence a child's attendance difficulties (Thambirajah et al., 2008).

2.5.3. Moving towards an ecological systems perspective

Recent research has begun to consider the interplay of various contextual factors involved in school absence (e.g., Melvin et al., 2019). However, due to the discrepancies in how SNA is defined, there is limited research situating the phenomenon within an ecological systems perspective (Totsika et al., 2020). Melvin et al. (2019) propose the need for consideration of multiple factors and multisystemic contexts around the child at different systems to understand and respond to the issue. These contexts can include the home-school relationship, peer interactions, neighbourhood factors, and wider social cultures (Thambirajah et al., 2008). Thus, a systemic approach to SNA looks beyond the individual and views the system as a whole (Gregory & Purcell, 2014). The child is seen to develop within the multi-systemic contexts of their environment (Melvin et al., 2019). By adopting a perspective that considers the multitude of contributary factors across different systems, a clearer understanding of the problem, and the influencing factors that are maintaining the child's difficulties in attending school, is likely to be gained (Thambirajah, et al., 2008). While it is widely recognised that multi-systemic factors are involved in SNA, I have found few studies that draw on the theory directly, nor do many studies explore understandings and perceptions of systemic factors.

2.5.4. Bioecological Model of Human Development (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006)

Within an interactional ecosystemic model, parents, family, and school factors at different levels are recognised to influence a child's development (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006). In relation to SNA, school and parents are seen to play an equal part in establishing support and intervention for change to the problem (Thambirajah et al., 2008). This shift in perspective is significant because the way schools, educators, and professionals view and label school absenteeism will inherently have an impact on the way they support and intervene with the issue (Elliot & Place, 2019; Norwich, 1999). Gentle-Genitty et

al. (2020) argue that more research that engages teachers and school staff is warranted to develop understanding of SNA within an ecosystemic perspective that takes account of home environments, relationships between students and staff, and promotes consideration of the need behind the behaviours (Gentle-Genitty et al., 2020). Bronfenbrenner's (1977) earlier theory of human development posited that an individual's development and behaviour is influenced by the interactions between different systems within nested contexts. These include the immediate environment (Microsystem), family and peer interactions (Mesosystem), indirect relationships and environment (Exosystem), social and cultural norms and values (Macrosystem), and the changes over time (Chronosystem) (Bronfenbrenner, 1977) (Figure 2.1).

Figure 2.1

Bronfenbrenner's Bioecological Theory of Human Development
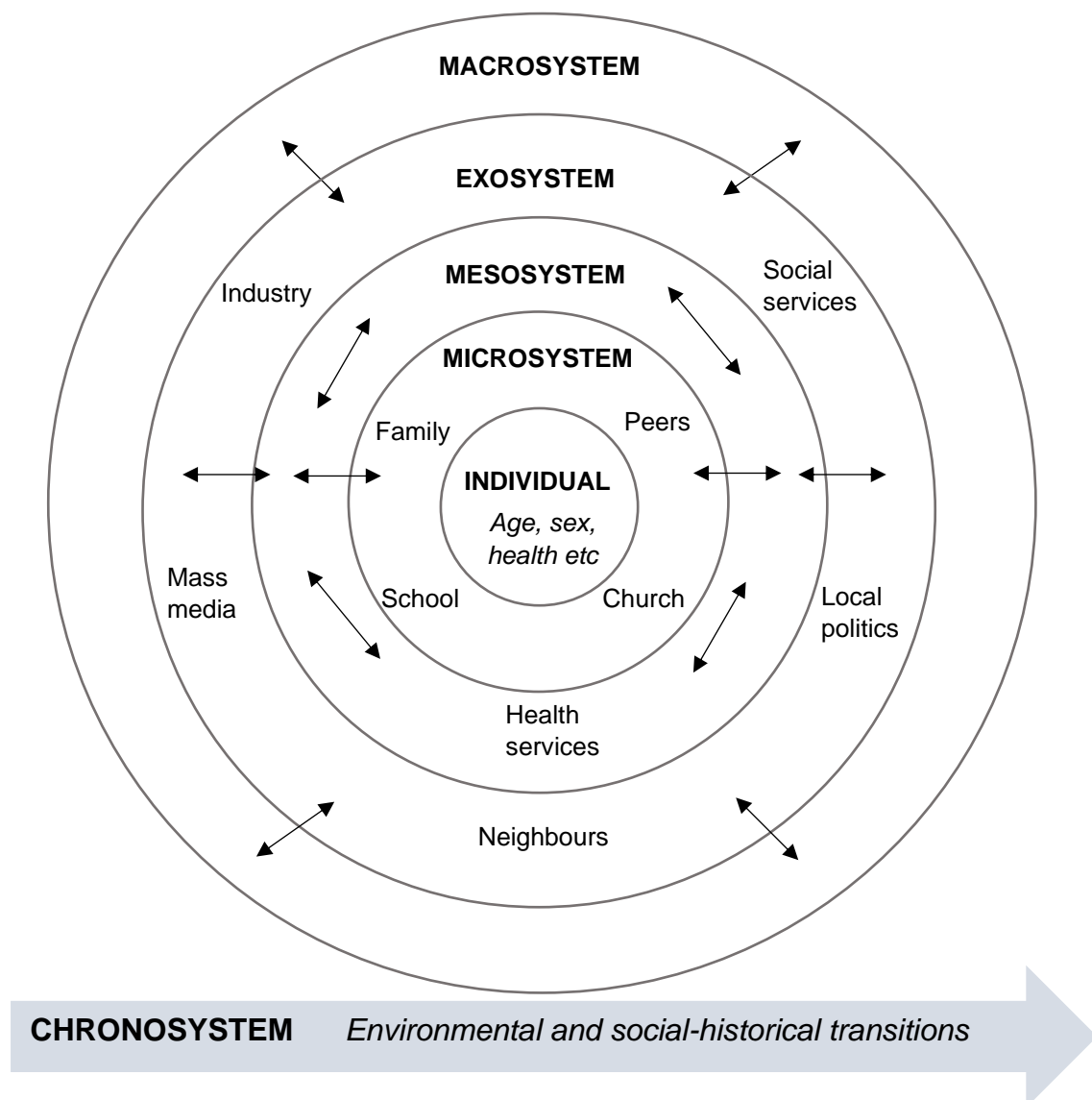
Within the microsystems and mesosystems, the school climate can be a factor in a child's attendance difficulties (Melvin et al., 2019). As described by Melvin et al. (2019), school climate is a multi-dimensional construct which includes factors such as peer support, teacher-student relationships, feelings of safety, the school's physical environment, and the home-school community connections. Melvin et al. (2019) argue for the importance of a positive school climate in promoting attendance and a sense of belonging for children, and this has been backed by previous research (e.g. Hendron & Kearney, 2016; Van Eck et al., 2017). In addition, family context has been evidenced to be a risk factor for SNA (Gren-Landell et al., 2015). For instance, Kearney (2008a) identified high conflict family environments as a risk factor, while Lyon and Colter (2007) found interactions between family and school (the mesosystem) play a key role in school attendance. This highlights the importance of considering how communication between home and school can support a child experiencing attendance difficulties (Dalziel & Henthorne, 2005).

Tobias (2019) found that family coaches (practitioners supporting families experiencing attendance problems) had strong views regarding the influence of a child's home circumstances on their attendance difficulties. Moreover, Hendron and Kearney (2016) found a lack of parental involvement in school life was a factor in SNA. However, as argued by Finning et al. (2019a), these family factors are complex and, in practice, these risk factors are not experienced in isolation; they are inherently part of a complex system of interactions.

In a later developed model, Bronfenbrenner and Morris (2006) highlight "proximal processes" as key to children's development. This revised model encompasses four key components in addition to the nested environmental contexts, termed the Process-Person-Context-Time (PPCT) model of development (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006). Each of these environments and the complex interactions between them can influence a child's ability to attend and engage in school. This theoretical framework provides a way of understanding a child's learning experiences within a wider, systemic framework (Stivaros, 2007). The PPCT model takes a broad perspective and emphasises individual attributes of the child and their proximal interactions, distal environmental factors, and the temporal broader context (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006). I will now describe each element of the PPCT model.

Process. Process represents the key influence on development; the inner foundation of the model (the microsystem) and the immediate environment in which the child interacts with objects and people. These interactions are known as proximal processes (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006). Reciprocal interactions become increasingly more complex over time. For a child's development to be effective, these interactions need to be regular and predictable (Bronfenbrenner, 2001). Thus, relationships are a core factor in a child's development. Within the school environment, the reciprocal relationship between teacher and pupil would be an example of an interaction at this level. If this relationship breaks down, there will likely be a decline in the quality of the microsystem for the child, which may subsequently impact their behaviour in the classroom (Stivaros, 2007).

Person. Person characteristics represent the role of the developing individual and are divided into three types: force, resource, and demand (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006). These individual characteristics either promote or interfere with the core proximal processes. Force characteristics represent a child's disposition and temperament, such as curiosity and impulsivity (Stivaros, 2007; Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998). Resource characteristics include ability, skills, and the experience of a child which will influence the development proximal processes (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006). Finally, demand characteristics include gender, race, and age, and can influence other people's expectations of a child and the child's interactions with others. All these characteristics combine to influence proximal processes and thus shape the future development of a child (Stivaros, 2007).

Context. The context element of the PPCT model represents the multi-tiered environment within which the child is developing and includes the microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, macrosystem, and finally the chronosystem. The microsystem is where the child has direct involvement, playing an active part in interactions where proximal processes occur. The mesosystem is where interactions between different microsystems take place and is where the child can transition into new ecological contexts (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006). For example, a child's transition to secondary school would represent a change in their microsystems, their proximal interactions, and the interactions with their mesosytem (Stivaros, 2007). The exosystem includes environmental contexts

where the child does not have a direct involvement but there is direct impact on their development (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006). Factors in the exosystem are separate from the mesosystem but have an influence on the nature of interactions in the exosystem, for example parental employment may influence their ability to engage in the school community (Stivaros, 2007). Finally, the macrosystem comprises the outermost ring of the child's environment and represents cultural norms, the political landscape, and societal values (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006).

Time. The final element of the PPCT model is time. Bronfenbrenner and Morris (2006) posited that proximal processes and the factors described above vary over time. Time is conceptualised to influence development at the microsystem level, the mesosystem level, and the macrosystem level (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006).

2.5.5. Applying Bronfenbrenner's Theory to School Non-Attendance

Within the existing literature, proximal and distal factors as set out in the bioecological model of development have been associated with SNA (Melvin et al., 2019). The bioecological theory raises the prominence on the school environment as a significant context within the child's microsystem. Melvin et al. (2019) argue that research needs to take account of the bioecological systems approach to understand the complex interactions between individual, parental, and environmental factors involved in SNA. To support researchers in this endeavor, they have developed a framework called 'The Kids and Teens at School' (KiTeS) (Figure 2.2) with the aim of improving "understanding of the factors influencing absenteeism among all school-aged students, including those from minority or vulnerable populations" (Melvin et al., 2019, p.1). Melvin et al. directly apply Bronfenbrenner's model to inform and facilitate research into SNA to better understand the causes and develop preventative measures.

Figure 2.2

The KiTeS Bioecological Systems Framework for School Attendance and Absence (Melvin et al., 2019, p.5)
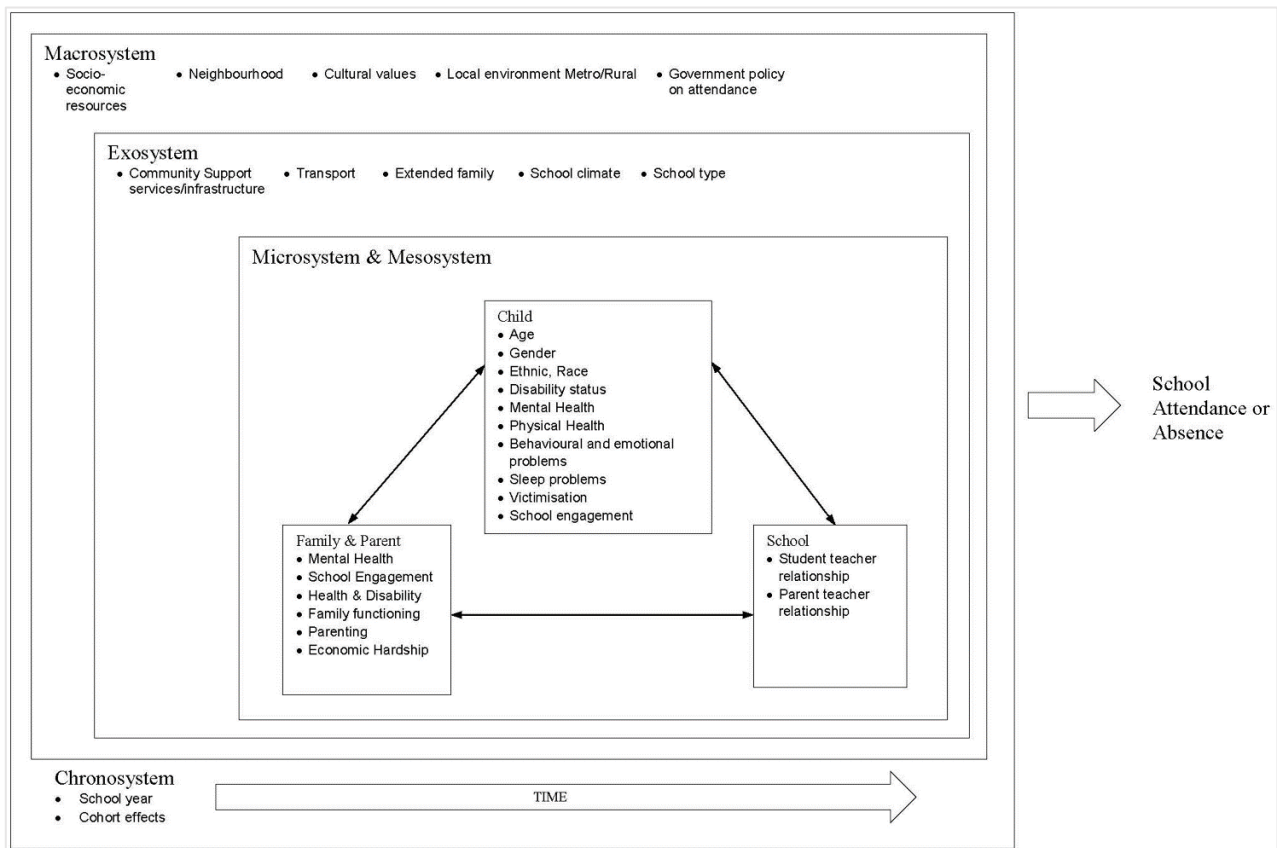
Proximal process, distal process, parental factors, and environmental factors have been shown to influence SNA (Melvin et al., 2019). Looking beyond the mesosystem, research has also indicated that the socio-economic status (SES) of a family can also influence attendance, with children from low SES families more likely to experience SNA (Dalziel & Henthorne, 2005). Evidently, the heterogeneous nature of SNA warrants careful consideration of the factors that might be impacting upon a child's attendance. A multi-systemic approach to research using Bronfenbrenner's theory to account for the complexities of SNA represents a shift away from the individual focus to a broader consideration of wider systems of influence (Melvin et al., 2019). With this in mind, the present study will utilise Bronfenbrenner's theory and Melvin et al.'s (2019) model to inform the research design and as a conceptual framework to make sense of the findings.

2.6. The Influence of School Factors

Past research has tended to neglect school and community factors that can influence school attendance (Kearney, 2008b; Lyon & Cotler, 2007). Yet, school factors have been linked to SNA and warrant further exploration (Brouwer-Borguis et al., 2019). A key school factor evidenced to influence SNA is transition points from primary to secondary school. Baker and Bishop (2015) found that all four secondary pupils in their study reported difficulties with transition to secondary school. Factors recognised as risks for SNA at secondary school include: a larger more complex school setting, negative pupil-teacher relationships, moving between different teachers all day, and unpredictability of the new school environment (Ingul et al., 2019).

Havik et al. (2015) point out that research on SNA has often limited participant samples to recruiting from child mental health clinics when studying school refusal. This represents a clinical approach and might provide some explanation as to why school factors might have been neglected. Havik et al. (2015, p. 222) further explain that "research focusing on the role of school factors and conducted in large normal samples allowing the control of family and individual factors is sparse or lacking". School-related factors that have been found to influence SNA include bullying (Ingul et al., 2019), classroom management practices (Brouwer-Borguis et al., 2019), social isolation (Havik et al., 2015), peer conflict (McShane et al., 2001), and pressure from peers to skip school (Malcolm et al., 2003). In a study by Van Eck et al. (2017), it was found that feelings of connectedness and perceptions of school safety influenced attendance, while Egger et al. (2003) noted that poor pupil-teacher relationships was a major factor in children's non-attendance.

Nevertheless, the research is not straightforward and there are conflicting views amongst teachers, parents, and children. A large-scale study by Malcolm et al. (2003) found that parents and pupils identified school-related factors as the causes of truancy, while teachers believed that parental attitudes and the home environment were the most important influences. Similarly, Finning et al. (2019c) found discrepancies between parents and pupils' beliefs about causes of SNA, when compared to practitioners and school staff's beliefs. There is a

call for more research into school factors that might impact upon a child's ability to attend school, particularly at the adolescent age because this is when school factors play a more important role and cases of SNA are more complex (Brouwer-Borguis et al., 2019).

2.7. Views and Experiences of School Non-attendance

It is argued that more qualitative research is needed to better understand school attendance difficulties (Dannow et al., 2020; Heyne et al., 2019). This area of research is slowly growing, and increasingly, researchers are eliciting the views of different stakeholder groups such as educational practitioners, parents, and the children themselves. As discussed, research has indicated that these groups often hold differing and conflicting views about the reasons for SNA (Finning et al., 2020). As Heyne et al. (2019) emphasise, gaining the voices and perceptions of all stakeholders using qualitative methodology is important in developing effective interventions and a shared research agenda.

2.7.1. Parental Views and Experiences

Parents are viewed as being legally responsible for their child's school attendance. Yet, there is limited research exploring their views and first-hand experiences (Dannow et al., 2020). Research that does explore parental views has tended to use semi-structured interviews and questionnaires. Dalziel and Henthorne (2005), for example, found that parents were empowered by the support they received from Educational Welfare Officers (EWOs) as it allowed them to communicate with the school about their difficulties. In contrast, Gregory and Purcell (2014) interviewed five mothers of children who were absent from school and found that they often felt blamed and patronised by professionals for their child's SNA. Further to this, in an unpublished thesis by Browne (2018), it was revealed that parents often felt powerless and unheard during their experiences of SNA. Havik et al. (2014) interviewed 17 parents to explore their views on the role of school factors in 'school refusal'. Parents viewed school staff as playing a vital role in re-engaging children with school. Parents also recognised the need for more support for their child during times of transition and the importance of the pupil-teacher relationship (Havik et al.,

2014). Other research has evidenced the importance of positive pupil-teacher relationships for children's development and sense of school belonging (Myers & Pianta, 2008). As such, it is suggested that these factors can protect children against developing 'school refusal behaviours' and act as a motivator for children to attend school (Havik et al., 2014; Wilkins, 2008).

Similarly, Malcolm et al. (2003) found that parents perceived the main cause of their child's attendance problems to be school factors such as bullying, peer pressure to skip school, and problematic relationships with teachers. While Dannow et al. (2020) recently carried out a qualitative phenomenological study with parents and children and found individual, relational, and school factors were attributed to children's non-attendance. However, this study was based in Danish schools and cultural and political factors will likely differ from those in the UK regarding school attendance. Nonetheless, the study demonstrates the universal complexity of the phenomenon across countries and further emphasises the significance that parents place on school factors.

2.7.2. School Staff Views and Experiences

As previously highlighted, much of the research eliciting school staff views conflicts with parental perspectives. School staff are likely be the first to identify and recognise changing patterns in attendance (Finning et al., 2020; Havik et al., 2015). Thus, Gregory and Purcell (2014) highlight the importance of exploring their views and recommend more exploration into how practitioners conceptualise SNA. In the following section, I provide an overview of the existing research on school staff's perspectives and discuss the implications for the present study.

In a qualitative study, Gren-Landell et al. (2015) explored teachers' views on non-attendance in Sweden and found that teachers emphasised the role of family factors and individual child factors, such as mental health problems, yet did not recognise the role of school factors. Malcolm et al. (2003) also conducted interviews with teachers and found they perceived home factors, such as parental attitudes to education, as the main causes of students' attendance difficulties. However, in this study, the term 'truancy' was used to

describe SNA. As previous research has shown that truancy is viewed less sympathetically than other terminology, it could be argued that a bias amongst participants may have impacted findings because of the negative connotations associated with truancy (Armstrong et al., 2011). Finning et al. (2020) found that staff across three different schools with varying roles had similar beliefs about risk factors for SNA. School practitioners recognised individual, family, and peer factors as key influencers on attendance. However, school factors were discussed less frequently than other factors, while one of the groups did not discuss school factors at all as being influential in SNA (apart from the restricted nature of the curriculum) (Finning et al., 2020).

Much of the research with school staff tends to focus on views of teachers and neglects to consider other staff with non-teaching or pastoral roles (Finning et al., 2020). Finning et al. (2020) attempted to fill this gap in the literature by utilising focus group methods with secondary school practitioners (with any role) who support children with attendance difficulties to explore their beliefs about risk factors. Practitioners (n=16) recognised the importance of academic pressures and transition periods as risk factors for SNA. According to Finning et al. (2020) the findings suggest that staff may feel a lack of agency with regards to being able to mitigate barriers to school attendance as participants did not recognise how they might positively influence or mitigate these risk factors. This view supports earlier research by Archer et al. (2003) who found educational professionals were ill-equipped at recognising and supporting children with attendance difficulties. Yet, it is acknowledged that frontline educational practitioners, namely teachers and other school staff, are best placed to lead on planning interventions to support children (Cook et al., 2017). Thambirajah et al. (2008, p. 58) argues that practitioners "need to include themselves in the system that they are working with and be prepared to examine their own attitude, motivation and feelings evoked by the case [of non-attendance]". Similarly, Finning et al. (2020) suggest that staff need to consider the interactions within and between factors to create positive change:

> "Small, positive shifts in some of the things that school practitioners can control could be the difference between attendance and non-attendance, particularly for pupils who are experiencing other life stressors." (p.10)

Given these arguments, I suggest that further exploration in relation to school staff's understanding and beliefs about SNA is warranted.

At this point, I planned to include a review of literature that explores the child's views in relation to attendance difficulties. However, owing to the unprecedented and ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, I had to heavily adapt my original research plan (which included interviewing children experiencing SNA). Therefore, a section of my original literature review entitled 'The child's voice' is found in Appendix D.

2.8. Intervention and Support for School Non-Attendance

The difficulties in conceptualising SNA have led to confusion and a lack of consensus regarding assessment and intervention approaches (Kearney & Graczyk, 2014). The individualised nature of SNA indicates that no single recommended intervention will be successful for all children (Elliot & Place, 2019; Lauchlan, 2003). Research suggests that the most effective school-based interventions will be those that take an individualised approach to meet the needs of children (Lauchlan, 2003; Thambirajah et al., 2008). Nevertheless, Nuttall and Woods (2013) argue that there is a lack of research into interventions that attempt to address attendance difficulties. In their case-study research, they found that successful reintegration was established when children felt safe, experienced positive relationships between home and school, and wider contextual factors such as the needs of the family were addressed. Despite these findings, most research exploring interventions has a clinical basis with a focus on therapeutic interventions that attempt to minimise the internalising disorders of anxiety and depression (e.g. Egger et al., 2003; Hannan et al., 2019). However, as discussed previously, Finning et al. (2019a; 2019c) highlight that the association between SNA and anxiety and depression is not straightforward and a medicalised approach does not necessarily consider all factors that might be impacting upon a child's ability to attend school.

2.8.1. Systemic Approaches

Existing research indicates that identification, assessment, and intervention for SNA will be a complex process that necessitates a multi-systemic approach (Archer et al., 2003; Myhill, 2017; Nuttall & Woods, 2013). Systemic approaches consider not only the child's internalising disorder such as anxiety, but also the contextual factors that impact upon school attendance. Practitioners would need to work in collaboration to support the child, family, and the school to address the complex multi-systemic needs of individual children (Gregory & Purcell, 2014; McKay-Brown et al., 2019). Archer et al. (2003) suggest that a complex collaboration between schools, external agencies, and families is necessary to ensure appropriate support is put in place. Malcolm et al. (2003) found that most schools included EWOs, pastoral support, and parental discussions to support children back to full-time attendance. However, Tobias (2019) argues that due to the range of different professionals involved, there can be disjointed approaches to assessment and intervention because of the differing viewpoints held regarding approaches to support.

2.8.2. Early Identification and Support

As Pellegrini (2007) reiterates, the different conceptualisations of non-attendance can cause misleading hypotheses about a child's attendance difficulties, which can prevent early signs being recognised. Research has shown that the longer a child is not attending school, the more difficult it is to re-engage them in full time attendance and the poorer the outcomes for that child (Clissold, 2018). Early non-attendance has been shown to lead to deterioration of school performance, which in turn may lead to further non-attendance (Havik et al., 2015). This negative cycle can become difficult to break (Credé et al., 2010). Once non-attendance has become persistent and severe, schools will likely face major challenges in supporting the child back to full attendance (Heyne, 2019). Thus, early identification and intervention are critical to successful support.

The key to early intervention is the recognition of difficulties by school staff, which Heyne (2019) argues is not currently done well and schools are failing to

intervene early enough. Despite this, Ingul et al. (2019) argue that certain characteristics in the early stages of school attendance difficulties may be readily identified, including emotional distress such as anxiety or depression, and somatic complaints. Thambirajah et al. (2008) argue that once identified, the first stage in understanding a child's problematic absenteeism is to first gain the view of the young person themselves. Furthermore, Tonge and Silverman (2019, p. 119) argue that "there is a need to understand and respond to the complex range of bio-psycho-socio-cultural determinants of absenteeism". They argue for future research to consider early support and pragmatic approaches to address the complexities of school attendance difficulties.

2.9. Chapter Summary

As this literature review has demonstrated, school absenteeism is a complex phenomenon at the forefront of educational policy and practice and has been extensively studied (Dannow et al., 2020). Current studies have demonstrated conflicting perspectives between the child and the parent on the one hand, and school staff on the other (e.g., Finning et al., 2020). This review has highlighted several key avenues for future research regarding children's SNA. Firstly, there is an absence of research in the UK that explores parental views on the reasons for their child's non-attendance and there is currently a lack of research on parental views on the support offered to them. Secondly, whilst research exists that examines teachers' views of SNA, existing research has neglected to explore the views of non-teaching staff (e.g., pastoral staff), despite them playing a key role in recognising early attendance difficulties and supporting children and their families (Finning, et al., 2020).

The next chapter will provide a deeper exploration of the aims of the present research and the methodological assumptions underpinning the decisions and approaches taken to address the aims.

Chapter Three: Aims, Research Questions, and Methodological Position

In this chapter I will set out and justify the aims of this research and the research questions that I seek to address. I will explore the philosophical stance of pragmatism that underpins my approach. Finally, I will explain the design I have chosen to address the aims of the thesis.

3.1. Overall Aims

In this research, I seek to gain insight into how parents and school staff understand and view school non-attendance. The research is split into two linked studies. Study one has two main aims. Firstly, I aim to elicit parents' views on the barriers to their child's attendance at school and, secondly, to explore parents' perspectives on the support they receive for non-attendance and how, if at all, this could be improved. In study two, I aim to explore how pastoral staff conceptualise SNA and how they perceive support could be facilitated to meet the needs of children experiencing SNA. The intended outcome of this research is to integrate the findings from each study to improve understanding of how parents and school staff perceive the problem of SNA and ultimately, to inform support practices that meet the needs of children who experience attendance difficulties. A focus is placed upon informing the practice of EPs and school staff. I will now explore the specific research aims and questions for each study comprising this research.

3.1.1. Study One Aims

In study one, I aim to explore the views of parents with a child (or children) experiencing school attendance difficulties. I use the term 'parent(s)' throughout this thesis as reference to the main caregiver(s) of a child (the term is not restricted or limited to any specific caregiver status). As the literature review has demonstrated, there is limited research exploring parents' first-hand perspectives about their experiences of non-attendance and the support they receive (Baker & Bishop, 2015; Dannow et al., 2020). Therefore, this study seeks to begin to fill this gap and elaborate on parental views on SNA.

Study one seeks to address the following specific aims:

◊ To explore parents' views on what acts as barriers to their child's school attendance.

◊ To gain insight into parents' perspectives on the support they receive for school non-attendance.

◊ To explore parents' views on how support to address attendance difficulties could be improved.

3.1.2. Study Two Aims

In study two, I aim to explore how school staff understand attendance difficulties and gain insight into their views on supporting children experiencing SNA. The existing literature has demonstrated that school staff in non-teaching roles are often overlooked in research on SNA (Finning et al., 2020). Non-teaching staff, such as those in pastoral and senior leadership positions, play an important role in identifying and responding to pupils' attendance problems (Finning et al., 2020; Reid, 2007).

Study two seeks to address the following specific aims:

◊ To explore how school staff understand school non-attendance.

◊ To investigate school staff's perspectives on how school-based factors might act as barriers to children's attendance.

◊ To explore school staff's views on how support could be facilitated to meet the needs of children who experience non-attendance more effectively.

3.2. The Research Questions

3.2.1. Development of Research Questions

Agee (2009, p.431) argues that a "reflective and interrogative" process to prevent poorly constructed questions is necessary when developing research questions (RQs). In this research, I continually reflected upon and refined my

RQs in an iterative, ongoing process to address the initial aims as set out above (Thomas, 2017). I followed Agee's (2009) suggestions by focusing on refinement and development throughout the inquiry process and viewed this process as a journey to help map the direction of my research. The iterative nature of my research was also strongly influenced by the COVID-19 pandemic and subsequent safety restrictions. My data collection period was due to take place during the first UK lockdown, and so I had to adjust my research to reflect these measures. Therefore, the iterative and evolving process became an even greater part of the research development (Agee, 2009; Creswell, 2007).

In the early stages, I developed initial broad prima facie questions (Thomas, 2017). These questions were tentative and exploratory (based on my experiences in practice and my initial reading), helping me to begin the research design process and focus my thinking on the topic of SNA (Agee, 2009). The questions also helped me focus my search of current literature on SNA. My practical experiences as a trainee EP heavily guided my initial thoughts and ideas at this stage of my research journey (I explore the practitioner-researcher role in more detail under section 3.4).

My initial broad research questions were as follows:

◊ What support do parents and children receive for school attendance difficulties?

◊ How do parents engage with schools if their child is not attending?

◊ Do parents feel supported by school staff and other involved professionals?

◊ Are parents able to build good relationships with school staff when their child is not attending?

◊ How do school staff understand the difficulties in attending school?

◊ In what ways do school staff address the problem of non-attendance?

◊ Do parents think support or interventions for their child are effective?

◊ What could be done differently to support parents and children?

3.2.2. Finalising the Research Questions

These prima facie questions were continually refined and made more specific throughout the research process. School absenteeism has been studied extensively over many years, particularly from a quantitative perspective (Dannow et al., 2020), and so it was important to focus on developing specific research questions that addressed the aims and added a unique contribution to the current research landscape (Thomas, 2017).

Due to the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, I adjusted my research questions to address the unique situation created by social distancing restrictions. During the process of refinement in response to COVID-19, I further considered the scope of my research, engaged in discussions with colleagues and peers, and reflected personally on the continuing impact of the pandemic in the UK. The final research questions thus emerged based upon the literature review, the response to the pandemic, and from my own experiences and insight into SNA while working with parents and practitioners as part of my trainee EP role. Appendix E provides reflexive accounts that I will refer to throughout this thesis. I reflect further on the adaptations made because of the pandemic in [reflexive account 1](#).

3.2.3. Study One Research Questions

Study one has three research questions as follows:

RQ1	What do parents view to be the barriers impacting their child's ability to attend school?

RQ2.1	What are parents' views on the support that is offered to them and their child for school non-attendance?

RQ2.2	How do parents think support could be improved to help their child attend school more consistently?

The specific rationale for each research question is provided in Appendix F. The findings from study one helped to refine the research questions for study two (more detail about the link between study one and study two is provided in section 5.8).

3.2.4. Study Two Research Questions

RQ1.1	How do school staff conceptualise and make sense of school non-attendance?

RQ1.2	What school-based factors do school staff view to be barriers to attendance, and why?

RQ2	What do school staff view to be the facilitators of effective support for families who experience school non-attendance?

In light of the pandemic and subsequent school closures between March and July 2020, and the timing of my research, the data collected from both studies will inevitably reflect the unique context and experiences of the participants during this time. While the above RQs do not specifically refer to the pandemic, the findings will inevitably reflect participants' experiences of school closures and lockdown.

3.3. Methodological Position

It is important to acknowledge the underlying principles and assumptions of the researcher about the nature of knowledge and reality because these assumptions will impact the way inquiry is conducted (Kuhn, 1962; Thomas, 2017). The philosophical assumptions of a researcher will determine the questions asked and the research design (Robson & McCartan, 2011). Thus, the approach to knowledge taken, the underlying assumptions and values of the researcher, and the principles that have underpinned the research design need to be explicitly stated and addressed (Haynes, 2013; Willis et al., 2007). In this research, I adopted the position of pragmatism because I am interested in exploring possible solutions to the complex problem of non-attendance (Briggs, 2019).

A research study that takes a 'pragmatist philosophical approach' (Norwich, 2020) focuses on identifying a problem in the 'real world' and is based upon understanding human experience, with a focus on generating solutions to the problem (Briggs, 2019; Duram, 2012; Hassanli & Metcalfe, 2014). Pragmatism stems from Dewey's (1938) seminal work on enquiry and action. It offers flexibility in methodological approach so that the process of selecting the most appropriate method to answer the research question is prioritised over debates about seeking truths and metaphysical considerations (Mertens, 2020; Norwich, 2020). As a researcher, I acknowledge the complexities of reality and the debates about what constitutes truth and reality, yet I posit that research does not need to be limited by these philosophical concerns, nor does a focus need to be placed upon them (Duram, 2012; Taskakkori & Teddlie, 1998). I believe that our reality cannot be separated from human practices, and so, knowledge is always going to reflect our perspective and our experiences in practice (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Adopting a pragmatist philosophical approach to this research allows me to focus on the complex problem of non-attendance, possible practical outcomes of the findings, and how support might be improved for families experiencing it in the 'real world'. (Creswell & Clark, 2017).

3.4. Researcher-Practitioner Role

In this research, I seek to investigate the complex problem of school attendance difficulties from the perspective of parents and school staff and to explore their views on the support for children. Briggs (2019) acknowledges how pragmatism recognises the interconnection between research and practice. As an EP in training, I believe I cannot separate my professional practice experiences from my academic researcher role; they are entwined and will therefore be difficult to separate (McGinn & Bosaki, 2004). I acknowledge that as a researcher-practitioner, I will be bringing my own experiences and assumptions to the interpretation of the data collected in this research (Crotty, 1998). My beliefs, values, assumptions, and biases need to be acknowledged in this research because they will inevitably impact the choices I make and the interpretation of the data (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). This necessitates a commitment to reflexivity (Morgan, 2014) (Appendix E provides a selection of my reflections). I aim to reflect upon and share my findings from this research as a practitioner with the hope that positive change can occur both within my own practice and within other educational practitioners' practice.

3.5. The Current Research

To address the aims and RQs in this study, I used an online survey and online semi-structured interviews to collect data. The study is exploratory and seeks to address the problem of SNA and improve support in the real world (Briggs, 2019). At this point, it is important to note that although both qualitative and quantitative methods were used, this study does not employ a mixed-methods approach as such. The different methods of data collection sit alongside each other but are not integrated in a way that would be expected in a mixed-methods study design (Mertens, 2020).

Having established the philosophical approach that underpins my research, I will now briefly introduce the overall design of my research, including the method of data collection and data analysis. In line with my pragmatic approach, I have designed the research across two linked studies that use different methods of data collection, both of which met the restrictions imposed

by the UK government in response to COVID-19 pandemic at the time of data collection (Figure 3.1). For study one, an online questionnaire with open and closed questions was used. Study two used online semi-structured interviews with school staff. Questions were developed using hierarchical-focussing, and a card sort activity and a concept mapping task were also used to address the RQs in study two.

3.6. Chapter Summary

In this chapter I have explored the aims guiding this research. I have presented the research questions which seek to address the specific aims within each study. I have explored the philosophical stance of pragmatism that guides my research and its implications for the research design. The structure and overall design of the research was briefly introduced.

In the next chapter, I will more thoroughly explore the methods, rationale, and ethical considerations for study one.

Figure 3.1

Overall Research Design

PRAGMATIST PHILOSOPHICAL APPROACH

STUDY ONE

RESEARCH QUESTIONS 1-2.2

Online Questionnaire Design (parents, n=289)

Closed questions	Open-ended questions
Descriptive statistical analysis (RQ1-2.2)	Reflexive thematic analysis (RQ1-2.2)

Findings and Discussion

Findings from study one to inform study two

STUDY TWO

RESEARCH QUESTIONS 1.1-2

Conceptual mapping	Basic visual content analysis (RQ1.1,2.2)

Semi-structured interviews (school staff, n=10)

Hierarchical focussing	Diamond ranking card sort (RQ1.2)

Reflexive thematic analysis (RQ1.1-2)

Findings and Discussion

OVERALL DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Chapter Four: Study One Methodology

In this chapter, I will discuss and justify the research design chosen to address the aims of study one. I will explore the method chosen for data analysis and examine the ethical issues and strategies employed to address them.

4.1. Research Design

Having set out my overarching methodological position in chapter three, I will now set out the design process. As my research is underpinned by pragmatism, the methods were chosen on the basis that they were the most suited to addressing the RQs (Briggs, 2019). Figure 4.1 shows the overall research design for study one. I sought to recruit a diverse range of participants and gain a 'wide-angle lens' of SNA from the view of parents via an online questionnaire (Braun et al., 2020; Toerien & Wilkinson, 2004). The questionnaire was predominately qualitative in nature with some additional supporting quantitative closed questions. Surveys of this nature allow for large sample sizes, respondent anonymity, standardisation of questions, and open-ended questioning (Braun et al., 2020). Thus, a breadth and depth of knowledge on the topic of SNA from parents' perspectives could be sought, allowing participants to share their thinking and experiences (Braun et al., 2020).

Figure 4.1

Research Design for Study One

STUDY ONE

RESEARCH QUESTIONS 1-2.2

Online questionnaire design (parents, n=289)

Closed questions

Open-ended questions

Descriptive statistical analysis (RQ1-2.2)

Reflexive thematic analysis (RQ1-2.2)

Findings and Discussion

Findings from study one to inform study two
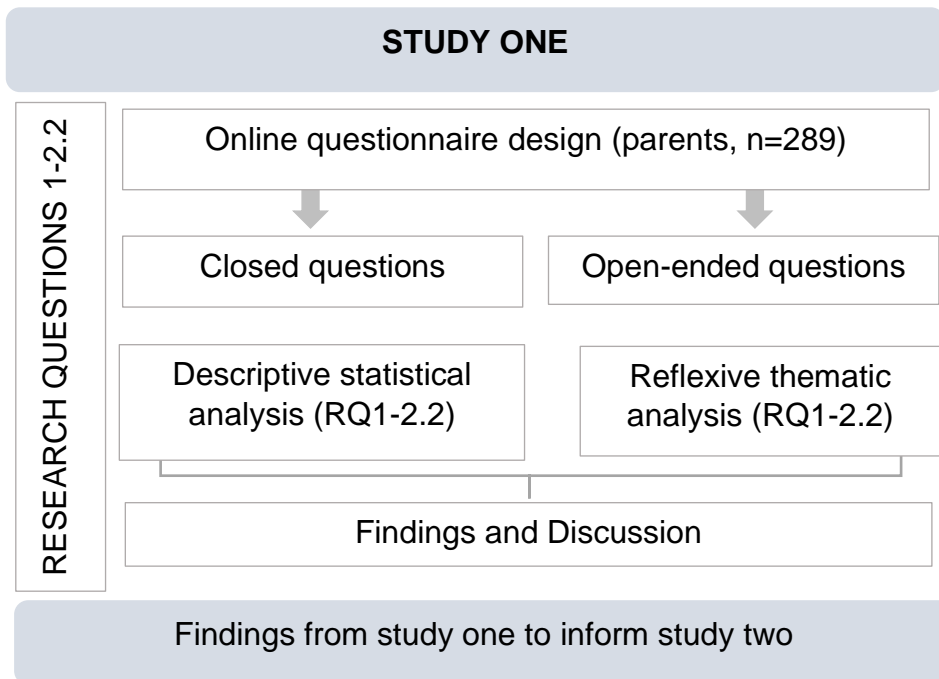
4.2. Participants

4.2.1. Participant Sample

The literature review highlighted the paucity of research that examines parental views on SNA (Dannow et al., 2020). For study one, I defined the target population as parents of school-aged children who experience school attendance difficulties in any educational setting. I decided to accept any participant who was experiencing attendance difficulties as, in line with the research aims, I wanted to reach a wide group of parents to gain a broad sense of the nature of SNA and gather insight into parents' views on the support offered to them and their child. As legislated in law, parents are responsible for their child's attendance at school (DfE, 2020). Thus, parents tend to be the first initial point of call for a school when a child is absent and they will likely have direct contact with school staff who provide support to address attendance difficulties (Gregory & Purcell, 2014; Kearney, 2008a).

4.2.2. Recruiting Parents

This study used a purposive sampling technique. Once I had produced the questionnaire, the webpage link was circulated via an online Facebook page of an organisation called 'Not Fine in School'. This is a group that aims to support parents and raise awareness of school attendance difficulties. The group had just over 10,000 members at the time of this research. Therefore, the group provided access to parents across the country who have current or past experiences of school attendance difficulties. [Signpost to reflexive account 2].

When designing the online survey, I considered how participants' access and familiarity with using online methods might impact recruitment and accessibility to the study (Braun et al., 2020). As I had chosen to recruit participants from an online social media platform, potential participants were likely to be experienced in using and engaging in online media and therefore more comfortable in sharing their views in an online survey (Braun et al., 2020). I am aware that recruiting via social media only taps into a small proportion of parents across the country which causes a potential sampling bias (Arigo et al., 2018). I do not seek to generalise the findings of this study and I acknowledge that the findings represent only the views of the parents in this study. There are also important ethical issues attached to this method of recruitment which are further considered in section 4.3. and 4.11.2.

4.2.3. Recruitment Process

I initially contacted the founder of the 'Not Fine in School' organisation via their website. After discussions with the founder and agreement that I could use the Facebook group to recruit participants, I wrote an invitation for participants to take part in a pilot study which was posted on the Facebook page. The call for participants included information about the aims of my research and a link to the online questionnaire where participants were provided with more detailed information. Following the pilot study, a further post for participants was posted on April 24th (See Appendix G). All participants (n=289) were required to agree

to give their consent prior to participating (Appendix H). The full recruitment procedure is outlined in Figure 4.2.

Figure 4.2

Recruitment Procedure for the Final Questionnaire (post-pilot study)

```
              ┌─────────────────────────┐
              │   Ethical approval      │
              │ granted on April 20th   │
              └─────────────────────────┘
                          │
              ┌─────────────────────────┐
              │   Email contact with    │
              │  founder of 'Not Fine in│
              │   School' organisation  │
              └─────────────────────────┘
             ↙                          ↘
┌──────────────────────────┐    ┌──────────────────────────┐
│ Produce a 'call for      │    │ Questionnaire goes 'live'│
│ participants' information│    │ on Facebook group on     │
│ to post on Facebook group│    │ April 24th.              │
└──────────────────────────┘    └──────────────────────────┘
              ┌────────────────────────────────────┐
              │ View open ended responses to ensure│
              │ suitability of qualitative response│
              │ (Braun et al., 2020).              │
              └────────────────────────────────────┘
                          │
              ┌─────────────────────────┐
              │   Re-posted to boost    │
              │   recruitment on        │
              │   April 29th.           │
              └─────────────────────────┘
                          │
              ┌─────────────────────────┐
              │  Re-post recruitment    │
              │ information for last call│
              │ for participants on May 8th.│
              └─────────────────────────┘
                          │
              ┌─────────────────────────┐
              │ Close online questionnaire on│
              │ May 15th with 289 responses.│
              └─────────────────────────┘
```

4.2.4. Sample Size

Making the decision about sample size for online surveys is not a straightforward process (Braun et al., 2020). In the design phase, I initially planned to recruit approximately 100 respondents using the purposive sampling

method described above. I considered this to be an appropriate number of responses based on the scope of the study, RQs, characteristics of the population, and the chosen method of analysis (reflexive thematic analysis) (Braun et al., 2020; Malterud et al., 2016). Braun and Clarke (2006) recommend 50-100 survey responses for thematic analysis to be a suitable method for analysis. However, online surveys with a qualitative focus have also been used with over 100 and even greater than 500 respondents (e.g. Jowett & Peel, 2009) (Braun et al., 2020).

When the questionnaire went 'live' on April 24th, I started to read a selection of responses to gain an idea of the nature and richness of written responses to the qualitative questions. This is a technique recommended by Braun et al. (2020) who argue that richness of the dataset is more important than reaching an exact number of specified responses. From this process, I decided to gain a richer dataset and a higher response rate by re-posting the call for participants on April 29th and again on May 8th. After a 3-week period, there were 289 responses and I decided this provided sufficient data given the timescale and scope of my study. The questionnaire was closed to further responses on May 15th.

4.3. Using Social Media to Recruit Participants

Using social media to recruit for research can help the researcher connect with people who might have otherwise been hard-to-reach (Khatri et al., 2015; Thomas, 2017). Gelinas et al. (2017) recognise that social media is increasingly used as a recruitment tool in research and argue it is a promising method for reaching a wide population. During data collection, the social distancing restrictions caused by the COVID-19 pandemic also meant that using social media allowed for a safe and convenient data collection method. However, there are other issues to consider when recruiting participants via social media. For instance, Thomas (2017) suggests the need for a regular commitment to checking the post for inappropriate comments. I decided to remain distant from the group post and did not engage in comments on the post from potential participants. The organiser of the group acted as a gatekeeper in this respect

and monitored any comments or queries, which were directed to me via my email address provided.

4.4. Rationale for Online Survey Design

I aimed to gain a 'wide angle lens' on the topic of SNA from parental perspectives. I decided to use an online survey because it can "generate great data, can be less daunting than doing interviews or focus groups, and be very quick and cheap way to collect data" (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p.136). It also allowed participants the anonymity to express their views and to use the national reach of the Facebook group for a larger, more diverse sample (Braun et al., 2020). Online surveys can also be used to gain a broad range of views on the research topic that other methods cannot (Braun et al., 2020). Surveys are also ideally suited to sensitive topics because they offer participants privacy and anonymity (Braun et al., 2017). I used closed questions to gather introductory data that led on to more open-ended, discursive questions for further exploration. This allowed participants space to express their views more freely.

The data gathered can be focused on the chosen topic, with less influence from the researcher with standardised questions being asked in the same way (Creswell & Clark, 2017). Questionnaires are thus useful for pattern-based analysis across the sample (Braun et al., 2020). Braun et al. (2020) also found that survey data provide more relevant information and can be more focused than interview data. They therefore discredit concerns that survey data is not rich enough:

> "while an individual response may lack the meandering detail of an interview transcript, if surveys are a good 'fit' for the research question, topic and population, then the dataset as a whole will likely be rich and complex" (Braun et al., 2020a, p.4).

4.5. Designing the Online Questionnaire

The questionnaire was designed solely for use in this study (Appendix K) (Figure 4.3). It was constructed using Microsoft Forms, an online survey creator

which fulfils General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) requirements. An introductory information section was provided which included information about the study, how the data would be used, and reiterated to participants that participation was voluntary (Appendix H). Participants were required to check a box to confirm that they had understood and agreed to the information about their participation before proceeding to the first page of questions.

Figure 4.3

The Questionnaire Design Process (based on Cohen et al., 2018)

QUESTIONNAIRE DESIGN

Consider study RQs and purpose

Define target population Parents of children with attendance difficulties.	**Decide Sampling method** Purposive (using social media).

Generate topics to be addressed based on RQs and data required.

Decide types of questions/scales required • Likert scales, open-ended, multiple choice.	**Draft and write the questionnaire** (using Microsoft Forms)

Pilot and test the questionnaire • Pilot initial questionnaire draft with colleagues and supervisors. Then seek and address feedback. • Pilot questionnaire with sample target population (parents, n=23). • Make amendments based on feedback (see Appendix J)

Administer final questionnaire online • Send prompts where needed.

The questionnaire was constructed based on existing literature and the aims of the research. It was divided into four sections. Section one consisted of the participant information and consent form. Section two included predominately quantitative questions about the nature of the school non-attendance such as the age of the participants' child and their current stage of education (rationale for inclusion of all questions is provided in Appendix I). These questions were designed to gain insight into the participants' current situation and gain initial objective data about the nature of their situation. I gave participants the opportunity to choose 'other' in multiple choice questions to ensure the questionnaire was inclusive by allowing participants to answer in their own words if desired (Jowett & Peel, 2009).

Section three sought to address research question one. This section included Likert scale questions (Likert, 1952) about what factors parents perceived had influenced their child's non-attendance. Research shows that Likert scales are reliable, valid, and accessible for participants to understand (Hasson & Arnetz, 2005; Krosnick & Presser, 2010). These questions were constructed based on Melvin et al.'s (2019) bioecological model of school absenteeism and on factors that are shown in existing literature to be related to SNA. The follow-up open-ended questions allowed respondents to expand on their multiple-choice answers and explain their responses in their own words, which is something that closed Likert scale questions alone will not have achieved (Allen, 2018).

To address the final research question, section four focused on gaining insight into parents' views on support for SNA using three types of questions: Likert scales, multiple-choice questions, and open-ended questions. In this section, most items were qualitative, allowing respondents space to write as much or as little they wished (Braun et al, 2020). I also decided to include direct questions about COVID-19 and the impact of lockdown on families. I did not want to overlook the unique situation that families were experiencing at the time, and because of the school closures, I wanted to gain insight into how this might have impacted their situation.

4.6. Piloting the Questionnaire

4.6.1. Initial Pilot

Piloting the questionnaire was a key part of the design process and is considered a necessity prior to disseminating to the target population (Gray, 2014). Gray (2014) recognises that online questionnaires offer facilities not available in paper-based questionnaires, such as skip patterns and drop-down options, which increases accessibility. However, this means there are greater opportunities for design errors which can affect response rates (Gray, 2014). Therefore, I wanted to test these aspects during the pilot stages to ensure usability and convenience for participants.

Additionally, piloting improves the suitability and effectiveness of the questionnaire for the intended audience (Mertens, 2020; Oliver, 2014). Respondents need to be able to give information that accurately reflects their views, including options to select 'don't know' and 'other' (Gray, 2014). Gillham (2007) suggests that piloting should first be with people who are not part of the target group. With this in mind, I provided an initial draft copy to a colleague to examine and offer feedback. From this, some amendments were made to the formatting and wording of some questions. I also provided a Microsoft Word copy to my research supervisors to check for suitability, layout, and errors. Once feedback from this stage of piloting was gathered and addressed, I piloted the online version with the same colleague. Gray (2014) suggests that online questionnaires should be piloted on different internet browsers and devices to ensure compatibility and accessibility. This was completed prior to disseminating to the target population on the Facebook group. One of the key amendments at this stage of piloting was the addition of the following question at the end: *"Are there any other comments you would like to make relating to your child's school non-attendance?"* providing participants with an opportunity to add any more thoughts or final comments.

4.6.2. Questionnaire Pilot

I posted the pilot questionnaire on the Facebook group for two days on April 20th and April 21st, asking for respondents to complete the pilot version which included pilot feedback questions (Table 4.1). It was made clear at the start of the questionnaire that this was a pilot, and I was interested in respondents' feedback (Mertens, 2020). The aim of this stage of piloting was to seek feedback about the logistics of completing the questionnaire, whether the instructions and items were clear and unambiguous, and if the length of the questionnaire was appropriate, with the aim of reducing the likelihood of non-response in the final version (Gray, 2014).

Table 4.1

Pilot feedback questions (adapted from Oliver, 2014)

Q1	How long did it take you to complete? Did you feel the questionnaire was too long, or there were too many questions?
Q2	Did you feel you had a good understanding of the instructions presented at the start of the questionnaire?
Q3	Did you manage to answer all questions? If not, were there any particular reasons for this that you think the researcher should know about?
Q4	Were there any questions that did not make sense? Which ones?
Q5	Was the language used clear and easily understandable?
Q6	Was the layout of the questionnaire clear?
Q7	Is there anything you would improve?

I received 23 responses. Pilot feedback is provided in Appendix J showing the revisions made in response to feedback. The feedback from the pilot was generally positive. The average time taken to complete the questionnaire was 38 minutes. I was concerned that this was too long but the feedback from respondents was encouraging. Although this is longer than I anticipated the questionnaire would take, I believe it reflects the commitment and engagement of participants in wanting to share their views, and so I consider this to be a strength rather than a limitation.

In parallel with other research that uses predominantly qualitative questions (e.g. Jowett & Peel, 2009), responses were anticipated to be brief, owing to the inability to ask respondents to expand on their answers. In response to a pilot respondents' feedback that one of the answer boxes restricted the length of their answer, I ensured there were no character limits on the final questionnaire and added an explanation in the introductory information that respondents were able to write as much as they wanted (Jowett & Peel, 2009). As suggested by Mertens (2020), I checked for blank responses and any groupings of responses that might suggest a misinterpretation of the question. I also spent some time reading the responses to the pilot questionnaire. This allowed me to check if they addressed the research aims and provided the data I was looking for to answer the RQs. At this stage, I was satisfied that the questionnaire was an appropriate method of data collection to address my aims.

4.7. Richness of the data

Braun et al. (2020, p. 4) argue that surveys can produce "rich, deep and complex data" and can facilitate participant disclosure, though they also acknowledge that not all responses will be rich and detailed. Indeed, the data from the questionnaire provided a range of responses both in length and in detail, ranging from one-word and one-sentence answers to long and detailed paragraphs. Some of the accounts were rich with a high level of emotional content (Davey et al., 2019), with comments such as "I felt very let down…" and "It has been a massive stressful battle…". This parallels with what Braun et al. (2020) discuss in relation to the anonymous nature of an online survey which can address some of the social desirability bias associated with face-to-face data collection methods.

4.8. Method of Analysis

4.8.1. Quantitative Data Analysis

The quantitative data obtained from the online questionnaire were analysed using descriptive and frequency statistics in Microsoft Excel. I chose to analyse

the data descriptively to summarise and present the closed-ended responses in a way that is accessible and supplementary to the qualitative findings. These quantitative data were presented either as a bar chart or pie chart for clarity and visual representation of the data.

4.8.2. Qualitative Data Analysis

There is a wide scope for analysing qualitative survey data, and so researchers need to carefully consider their approach (Braun et al., 2020). I chose to analyse the data for both studies using thematic analysis (TA). Thematic analysis is not a homogeneous method of qualitative analysis and Braun et al. (2019) recognise the different and distinct forms of TA: coder reliability, codebook, and reflexive. In line with my pragmatic approach and recognition of the importance of researcher influence, I chose to analyse the data using Braun and Clarke's (2013; 2020) reflexive thematic analysis which acknowledges the active role of the researcher. I chose reflexive TA as opposed to coder-reliability and codebook TA because, as argued by Braun and Clarke (2020a, p.7), reflexive TA recognises that researcher subjectivity is "conceptualised as a resource for knowledge production" which influences and shapes the knowledge that is produced. TA is a method for analysing data rather than a methodology in its entirety and it is not tied to any particular methodological paradigm (Smith et al., 2009; Trainor & Bundon, 2020). There are arguments that this flexibility can cause a lack of consistency and limit descriptive power (Trainor & Bundon, 2020). To address these concerns, I prioritised reflexivity where the researcher immerses in the data through reflective engagement (Braun & Clarke, 2019). This is a key element that distinguishes the approach from other forms of TA (Braun & Clarke, 2013). (Samples of my reflexive accounts and analysis are provided in Appendix E and Appendices L-Q, respectively).

4.8.3. Approach to Reflexive Thematic Analysis

In reflexive TA themes are conceptualised as "shared meaning based-patterns" and can be analysed either semantically or latently (Braun et al. 2019, p. 845). Semantic coding remains at the surface level of the data and captures explicit

meaning of what has been said by the participants, while at the latent level, the researcher looks at the underlying meanings within the data at a deeper conceptual level (Braun & Clarke, 2020a). In this research, I identified themes at the latent level as I generated codes from my underlying assumptions. I adopted an inductive approach to analysis as the coding is led by the data with themes being generated as the output of that coding as opposed to approaching the data with set ideas or a pre-defined framework (Braun et al., 2019). My experiences as a practitioner and pre-conceived ideas about the topic of non-attendance have inevitably influenced the coding process and I cannot separate my own social world experiences from the data gathered (Braun et al., 2019). Researcher subjectivity is acknowledged and encouraged in reflexive TA as a key part of the interpretation and analytic process.

Reflexive TA is a recursive process where codes can be adapted and developed, renamed, combined, or split throughout the process. I approached coding in this way by revisiting the initial codes, grouping them, and continually re-checking the dataset, which reflected my developing conceptualisation of the data (Braun et al., 2019). I then used thematic maps to visually represent the initial themes developed from the coding process. This allowed me to visually view how the codes fitted together, how they crossed over, and how the initial themes were developing (Braun et al., 2019). These thematic maps were adapted and developed throughout the analytical process. They were developed from an 'initial' map, a 'developed' map, and then the 'final' map (see Appendix M for example maps for RQ1). This process also allowed me to move beyond the surface of the analytic process and engage with the coding process to "identify implicitly or unexpected unifying patterns of meaning" by revisiting the data and my initial coding (Braun et al., 2019, p. 848). Table 4.2 provides examples of coded data and data extracts.

Table 4.2

Example of Coded Data for RQ1

Participant	Data extract (taken directly from participants' written responses)	Codes
P90	"The school environment is key to reducing anxiety so my son can attend. The judgement, refusal to recognise or understand disability or allow reasonable adjustments from staff and bullying from other children has raised anxiety so much it resulted in school avoidance".	The role of environment. Misunderstanding needs. Bullying led to anxiety.
P97	"Lack of understanding, support and ability to manage his illness in the initial stages. We eventually got a few measures in place once we had a diagnosis. But sometimes they let us down - teachers promising to meet him from the school bus and not turning up".	Misunderstanding needs. The power of diagnosis. Broken promises.
P143	"My daughter does not cope well with peer interaction and as a result cannot form friendships although this is something she feels very confused about and desperately wants to have friends".	Peer interaction difficulties. The need for friendships.

4.9.1. Survey Data

Braun et al. (2020a, p.10) warn that due to survey data being more structured compared to interview data, it can be easy to simply summarise responses and dilute themes, which can result in an "impoverished and underdeveloped qualitative analysis". With this in mind, I decided to approach the analysis as a cohesive whole, coding and developing patterns across the whole dataset (Braun et al., 2020). I analysed the dataset RQ-by-RQ as it became apparent during the familiarisation phase that relevant information for specific RQs ran throughout the responses to different questions (Terry & Braun, 2016). The responses were read carefully and re-read so that I gained a good overview of the data.

Owing to the volume of data and the scope of this small-scale study, I decided to use the software NVivo for the initial coding stage (see Appendix N for sample responses and NVivo coding). During the analysis of such high volumes of data (over 180 pages in total), I was aware of the potential for 'analysis

fatigue'. To address this, I alternated the starting points during each stage of coding and re-checked the coding several times. This was an important stage of the analysis and a lengthy one since, unlike data from qualitative interviews, I was not part of the data collection process and was unfamiliar with the data. Of the 289 respondents, all questions were answered. Appendix O-Q provides a step-by-step approach to analysis taken.

4.9.2. Commitment to Rigour and Quality

It is important to acknowledge the concepts of dependability, credibility, and confirmability during the research process (Mertens, 2020). I acknowledge that my own prior knowledge, experiences, and assumptions have influenced the way in which I interpreted the data. However, as Mertens (2020), argues credibility of a study can be enhanced through prolonged and substantial engagement and peer debriefing. Throughout the research, I kept a researcher journal to reflect on my decisions and thoughts and have used reflexivity throughout to ensure transparency of the processes undertaken.

To improve credibility and transferability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) of the study, I followed clear procedures when collecting and analysing data to reduce bias, including discussions with supervisors and keeping a detailed record of the analysis process. I did not engage in coder checking because this goes against reflexive TA's underpinning assumptions and the focus on researcher subjectivity (Braun & Clarke, 2019). Indeed, coding is a flexible and active process that "inevitably and inescapably bears the mark of the researcher(s)" (Clarke & Braun, 2014, p.78). In addition to this, I followed Yardley's (2017) four key principles for improving the quality of qualitative research:

- *Sensitivity to context*: I carefully considered the meanings across the dataset and followed the steps by Braun and Clarke (2013; 2020) in a creative and recursive process.
- *Commitment and rigor*: I took time to ensure an in-depth engagement and detailed exploration of the data, time was taken to engage in the data, and reflexivity was prioritised.

- *Transparency and coherence*: I have been explicit in the process of analysis taken.

- *Impact and importance:* I aimed to generate useful knowledge of practical utility.

4.10. Ethical Considerations

The research was designed and conducted strictly in accordance with the University of Exeter Code of Good Practice in the Conduct of Research (2017), BERA (British Educational Research Ethics Framework, 2018), British Psychological Society's (BPS) code of human research ethics (2014), BPS (2018) Code of Ethics and Conduct and the Health Care Professions Council Standards of Conduct Performance and Ethics (2016). Final ethical approval was given on April 20th, 2020 (Appendix R). It is worth noting that ethical approval was re-granted having reapplied in response to the restrictions caused by the pandemic. My previous plan to carry out face-to-face research was heavily altered to take place via online methods. I will now discuss the ethical considerations in this research.

4.10.1. Informed Consent

Potential participants (those using the link to access the online questionnaire) were provided with a detailed brief in the introduction to the questionnaire. Consent was obtained through an 'opt-in' process whereby participants were asked to read the information and accept the terms of participation prior to accessing the questionnaire (Appendix H). I was mindful when producing the questionnaire that not all participants may have taken the time to engage and read the participant information. According to the BPS (2017) the completion of a questionnaire may be viewed as a proxy for valid consent. I included a check box at the end of the consent brief to encourage engagement and allow participants to indicate they had read and understood the information (BPS, 2017).

4.10.2. Using Social Media to Recruit Participants

According to Bender et al. (2017), using social media as a recruitment tool raises unique ethical dilemmas, while Gelinas et al. (2017) notes there is a growing gap between the use of social media and a lack of regulatory guidance. The recruitment procedure was passive in that potential participants could view the study information online via the post on the Facebook group and choose whether they wanted to take part (McInroy, 2016). Fox et al. (2007) argues that this approach can improve participants' sense of control over the process.

4.10.3. Privacy and Anonymity

McInroy (2016) notes that the issues associated with privacy and anonymity in online research are complex. Participants were not asked for any identifying information such as names or locations, to improve anonymity. As the researcher, I did not engage in any comments on the Facebook post so that I had limited interaction with potential participants. My email address was provided on the post and on the information page of the questionnaire. No identifiable information was obtained from the questionnaire. Further considerations on the ethical procedures for this research are provided in Appendix S.

4.10.4. Doing Research during a Pandemic

The COVID-19 pandemic impacted heavily upon my original research design. Social distancing measures meant that I was unable to carry out any face-to-face research activity. As a result, both studies of this research were carried out via internet-mediated methods. I was also mindful of conducting any kind of research during the lockdown which was naturally an uncertain and disrupted time for most people in the UK. As schools were closed to most children during this time, parents' normal routine and life at home were likely to be disrupted. On the other hand, I recognised that parents might have more time available and welcome engagement in research. To address these points, I prioritised discussions with my supervisors and colleagues. Participants were in no way

coerced into participating, and if they did take part, it was made clear in the information brief that they could withdraw at any stage.

4.11. Chapter Summary

In this chapter, I have explored the research questions and data collection methods for study one and provided justifications for these methods. I have explored ethical considerations and initial thoughts about the impact of carrying out research during a pandemic.

In the next chapter I will present the findings for study one which are discussed in relation to the current literature and theory relevant to school non-attendance.

Chapter Five: Study One Findings and Discussion

5.1. Introduction

In this chapter, I will discuss findings for study one in line with existing research. I have provided thematic maps as a visual representation of the themes. Alongside qualitative findings, I will include relevant descriptive statistics.

5.2. Background Questions

Contextual information was gathered from participants to provide insight into the nature of their current circumstances in relation to school non-attendance. With regards to age, Figure 5.1 shows 81% of participants' children were aged between 11 and 16 years old. Research has shown that attendance difficulties are more prevalent at this age (in secondary school aged children) (Attwood & Croll, 2006; Goodman & Scott, 2012) and this is reflected in this study's sample of participants.

Figure 5.1

Age of Child Experiencing Attendance Difficulties
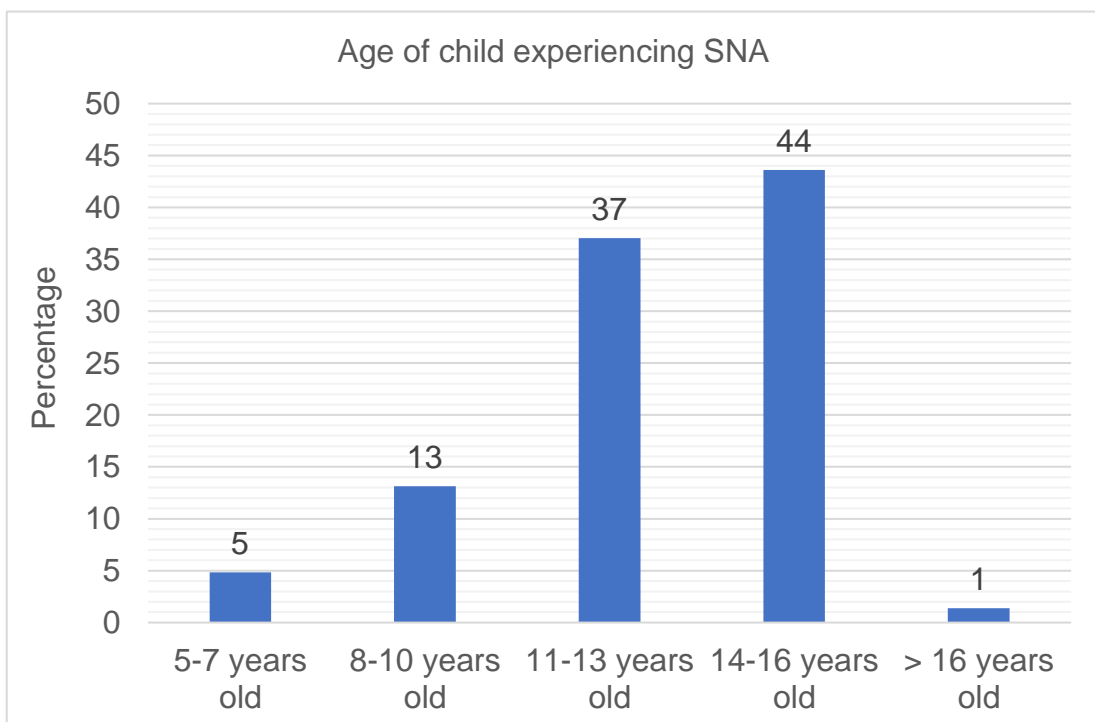
Figure 5.2 shows when participants first started noticing attendance difficulties in their child. Of note here, 56% (n=162) of participants reported that their child's difficulties began during key stage three at secondary school, while 33% (n=95) of parents reported it started during primary school. Perhaps surprisingly, 23 parents (8%) reported that their child began to show signs of difficulties attending nursery.

Figure 5.2

Stage of Education when Attendance Difficulties Started
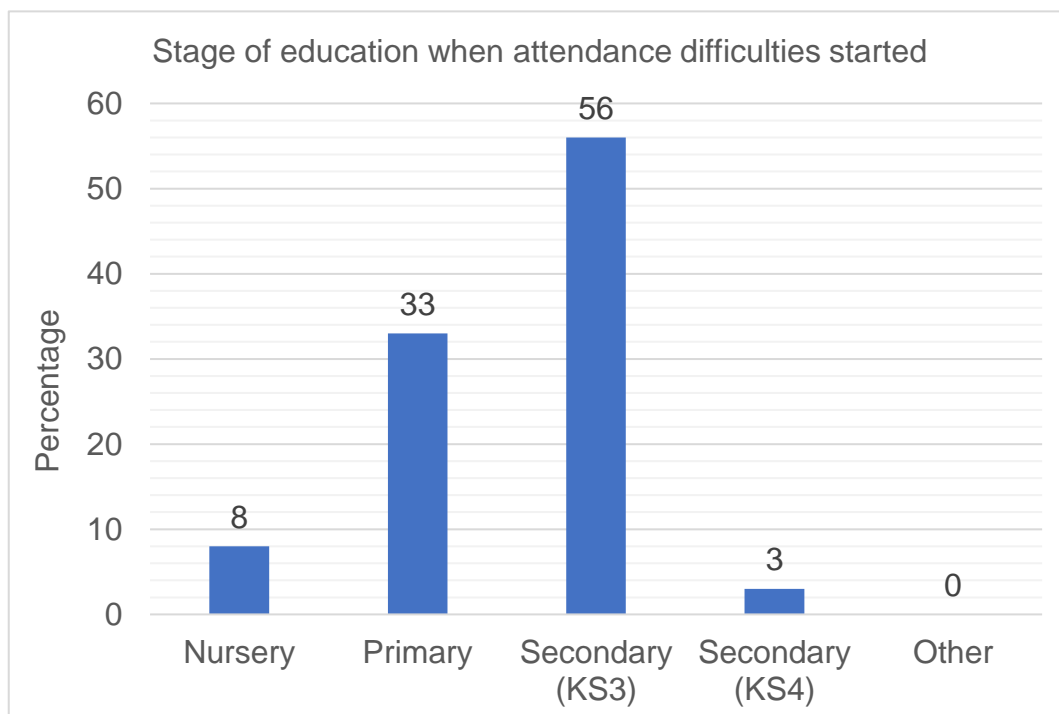
I also wanted to gain insight into how long children had been experiencing attendance difficulties (Figure 5.3). Of note, 58% (n=167) of participants in the sample reported that their child had been experiencing SNA for over two years.

Figure 5.3

Length of Time Child has Experienced Attendance Difficulties

Length of time child has experienced attendance difficulties
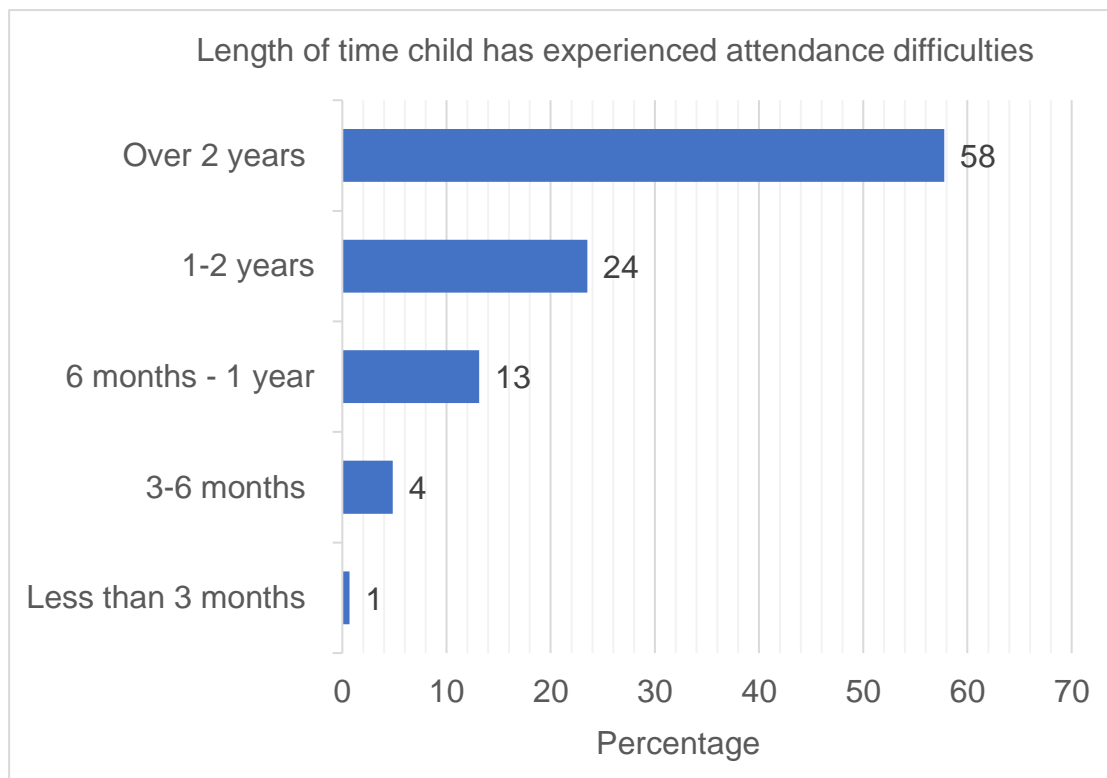
Finally, I wanted to explore whether the children experiencing SNA had an additional need. 64% (n=186) of participants reported that their child had been diagnosed with an additional need. To explore this further, I asked participants to select a category that best described their child's additional need (Figure 5.4). I also gave an option for participants to choose 'other' and to describe the specific additional need. Responses to this option included the following:

- Selective mutism (1.3% of participants)
- Tourette syndrome (1.3%)
- Trauma (1.3%)
- PTSD (post-traumatic stress disorder) (2%)
- OCD (obsession compulsive disorder) (2.4%)

Of note, 51% (n=148) of participants reported their child as having autism. The qualitative findings from the survey are therefore likely to reflect and expand on participants' views about how their child experiences school and will provide

insight into barriers to attendance for children with autism. Existing research has evidenced an association between autism and school attendance difficulties. Munkhaugen et al. (2017, p.31), for instance, concluded that "school refusal behaviour is pervasive in students with ASD (autism spectrum disorder).

Further to this, 53% (n=153) of participants reported their child as having anxiety. While I did not aim to specifically recruit parents with a child experiencing anxiety, the profile of participants highlights how children's mental health can impact on their ability to attend school, and vice versa. Further analysis of the qualitative data revealed parents' views about the significant impact anxiety has in relation to attending school (this is explored further in section 5.3).

Figure 5.4

Category of Additional Need of the Child
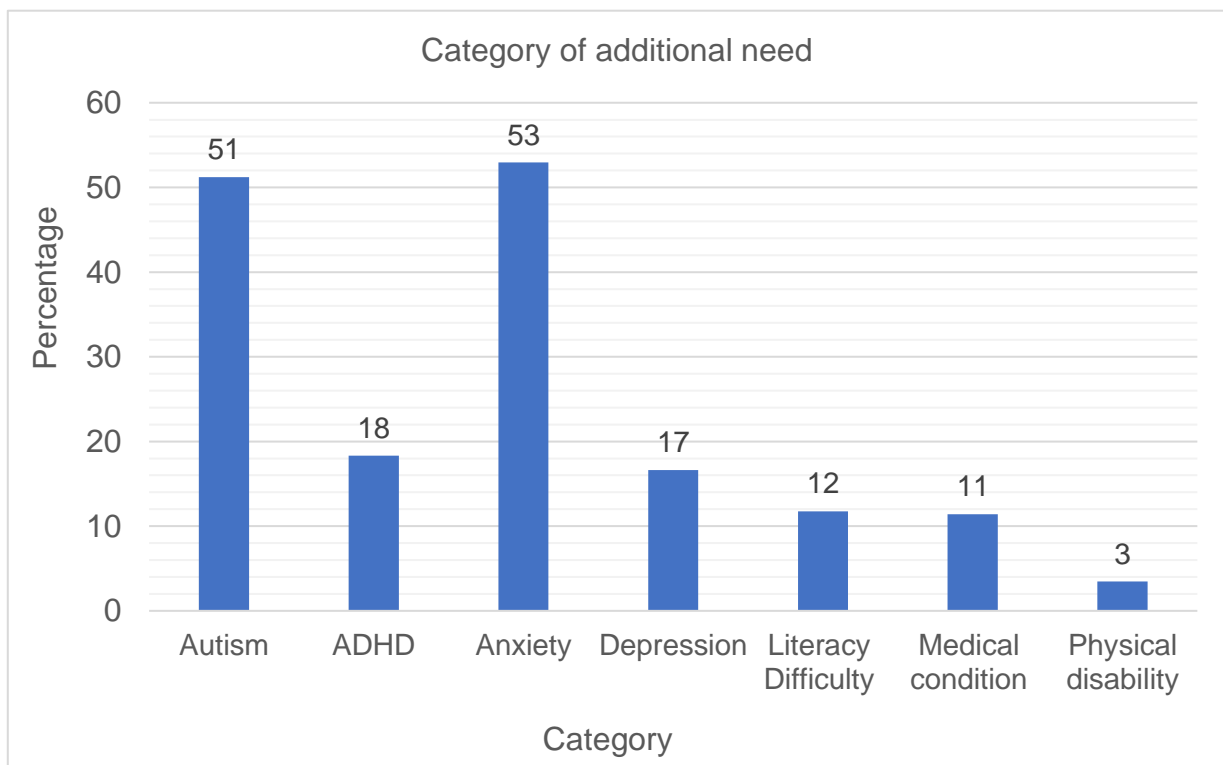
Having briefly explored the contextual information, I will now present the qualitative findings. Data extracts from parents' responses are labelled using the letter 'P' for participant and their participant number (i.e. P1 for participant one). When presenting data extracts, I have maintained participants' original verbatim written responses to preserve their ownership over their own accounts.

I have not addressed any spelling or grammar errors, nor adapted participants' shorthand responses. For clarity, I have provided the meaning of any acronyms directly adjacent within square brackets.

5.3. Research Question One: Findings and Discussion

RQ1	What do parents view to be the barriers impacting their child's ability to attend school?

Participants were asked to rate the importance of wider systemic factors using a Likert scale (Appendix K). The findings are presented in Figure 5.5. 74% of participants (n=215) rated school factors as having "a great deal" of influence on their child's non-attendance. Less emphasis was placed on the impact of home factors, community factors, and wider social-cultural factors. This initial descriptive finding is in line with existing research, such as Malcolm et al.'s (2003) study that found parents rated school-based factors as the main cause of non-attendance. Participants were asked to expand on their responses through further open-ended questions and I will now present these findings. Throughout the discussion, I use different terms to describe SNA, for example 'school refusal'. These terms are in accordance with the terminology used in the specific literature that I am citing.

Figure 5.5

Parents' initial views on the factors that have influenced their child's attendance difficulties

Factors influencing school non-attendance

Factor	A great deal	A lot	To some extent	A little	Not at all
Wider social/cultural factors	10	17	35	18	20
Community factors	11	19	33	15	22
Home factors	10	20	26	17	27
Peer factors	55	21	17	4	3
School factors	74	19	6	1	0
Transition	42	26	20	4	8
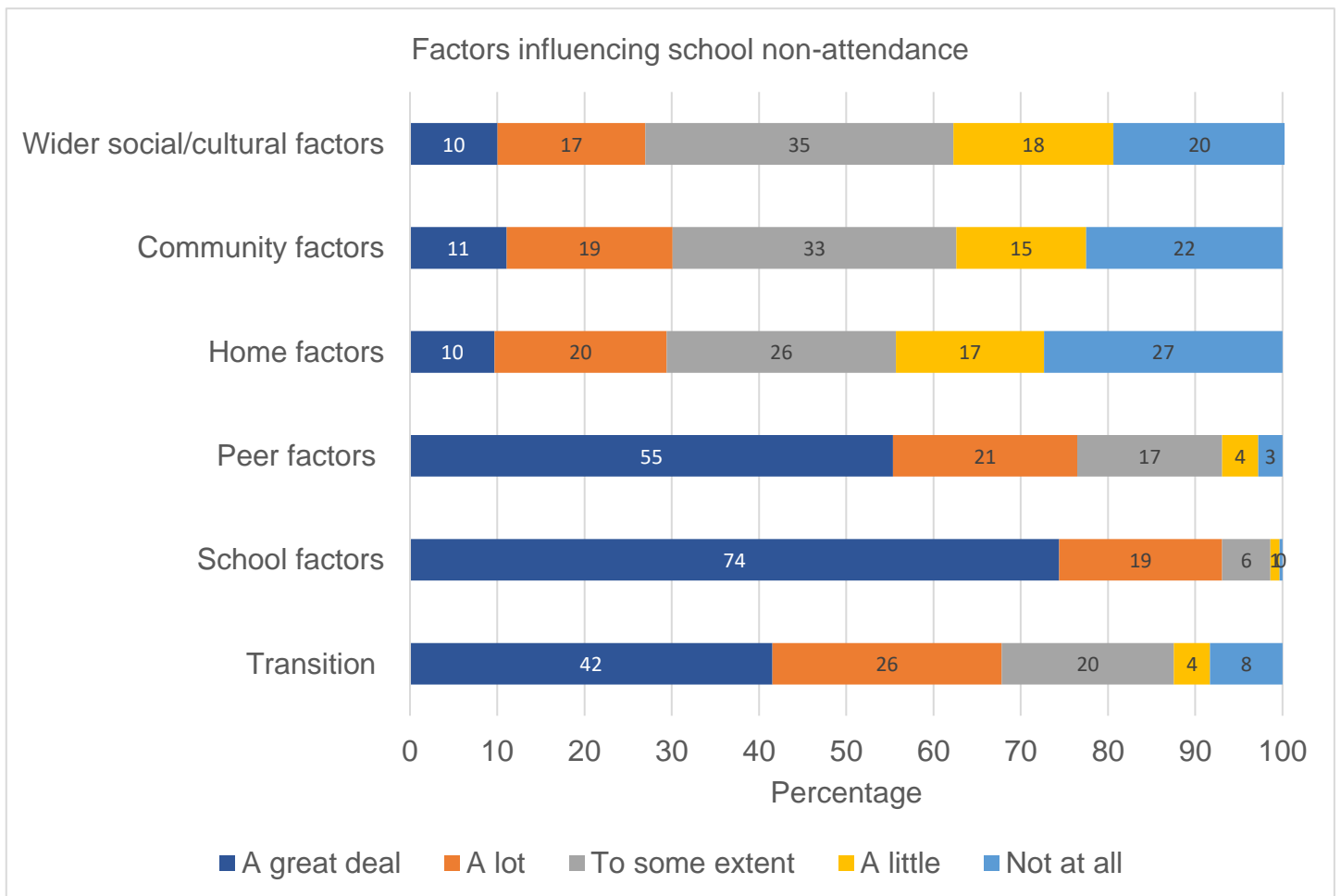
Qualitative findings

Qualitative findings for RQ1 were varied and demonstrate the individual and complex nature of SNA. Parents' views on the barriers to their child's attendance varied across five main themes (Figure 5.6).

Figure 5.6

Overall Thematic Map of Themes and Subthemes for RQ1: Parents' Views on The Barriers to their Child's Attendance.

Unacknowledged needs, misunderstood differences	Lost sense of belongingness and safety	Individual child experiences	My child's mental health	The damaging culture of the system
Limited understanding and acceptance of need	The power of negative peer interactions	Family circumstances	Anxiety overwhelms my child	School ethos and the data-driven school world
Hidden difficulties and the art of masking	Difficult school transitions	Medical needs and physical difficulties	Impact of the pandemic	The education system is flawed
	Overwhelming sensory environment			
	Broken feelings of trust			

5.3.1. Theme One: Unacknowledged needs, misunderstood differences

This theme was developed based upon parents' reported concerns about the apparent lack of acknowledgement and understanding amongst school staff of their child's needs. This theme consists of two subthemes (Figure 5.7).

Figure 5.7

Thematic Map for Theme One, RQ1
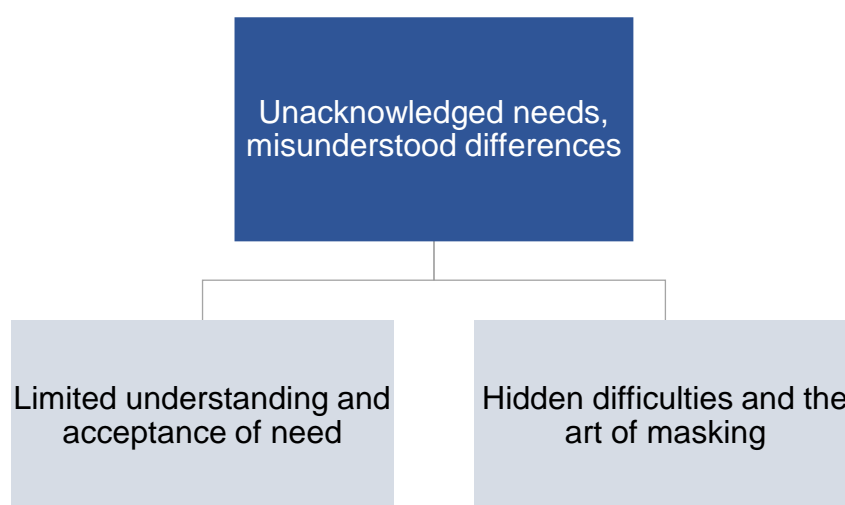
Subtheme: Limited understanding and acceptance of need

Several parents reported that staff lacked awareness and understanding of their child's difficulties or additional needs. Often parents wrote about how staff had not accepted that there was a problem. From the parental viewpoint, this lack of understanding impacts the way teachers respond in the classroom:

> Teachers had no understanding of difficulties or how bad the anxiety was, asd [Autism Spectrum Disorder] not recognised so constantly punished for the same things over and over (P71).

Several parents emphasised that this limited understanding ultimately impacted their child's ability to cope in school and created "huge anxiety" (P232) about attending. Some parents reported that school staff did not recognise there to be a problem because their child was viewed as being "academically able" (P87) or "bright" (P136). This suggests that children who are viewed as being 'able' can be

overlooked in terms of their social and emotional needs. This echoes findings from Havik et al. (2014) who found parents attributed a lack of teachers' support as a key risk factor in their child's school refusal. Similar findings by Clissold (2018) showed parents' discourses centred around a lack of understanding which led to inadequate support and subsequent non-attendance. These findings suggest that there is a need for wider understanding of children's additional needs and attendance difficulties within schools (Havik et al., 2014).

Further to this, I noted one parent's report that school staff had limited cultural competence in relation to their child's race:

> Lack of cultural competence to understand BME [Black and Minority Ethnic] families, unconscious bias, lack of professional expertise in the area (P61)

This finding can be understood within Bronfenbrenner and Morris' (2006) model as a child's demand characteristics (in this case, race and ethnicity) can impact interactions within their social environment. The child's proximal processes may be negatively or positively influenced. This parent's account is consistent with literature which has indicated that race and ethnicity are demand characteristics associated with school absenteeism (Gee, 2018; Skedgell & Kearney, 2018).

Subtheme: Hidden difficulties and the art of masking

This subtheme relates to parents' reports about the hidden nature of their child's difficulties which can then remain unacknowledged. This appeared particularly true for parents of children diagnosed with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD). Of note, 51% (n=148) of participants reported their child as having a diagnosis of ASD. Through the 'art of masking', parents believed their child's needs were misunderstood by staff as they did not recognise these 'hidden difficulties'. Consistent with existing research, it is suggested that incorrect attributions about behaviour tend to be made towards children with hidden difficulties, such ASD (Riddick, 2012).

Interestingly, when parents wrote about their experiences of masking, it was predominantly in relation to girls:

Girls on spectrum present differently and although diagnosed at 3 masked well and difficulties not recognised or ignored in school until masking was no longer effective (P157).

These experiences resonate with existing literature on autism. For instance, Cook et al. (2018) found that parents recognised their daughters' ability to mask their autistic characteristics. Attwood (2006) found that girls with ASD can appear to cope well, while boys receive earlier diagnoses as they are more likely to exhibit external behaviours associated with ASD. This is an interesting finding as parents appear to view their child's masking and resultant staff misunderstanding of needs to be a direct barrier to their ability to attend school. Indeed, Thambirajah et al. (2008, p.34) report that "developmental problems such as ASD are sometimes a contributory factor [to non-attendance], especially when the problems are subtle and remain unidentified".

Such accounts also echo research by Munkhaugen et al. (2019) and Totsika et al. (2020). Both studies highlight the pervasive nature of SNA in children with ASD. Munkhaugen et al. (2019) concluded that ASD is a major risk factor for 'school refusal behaviour' and suggest social, emotional, and executive functioning difficulties for this population need to be addressed through individually tailored interventions. Further, in line with suggestions by Archer et al. (2003), these findings indicate a need for greater awareness of ASD at a systemic school level and, more specifically, of children's ability to mask their difficulties (Preece & Howley, 2018; Totsika et al., 2020).

5.3.2. Theme Two: Lost sense of belongingness and safety

Parents perceived both the physical and social environment of school to be a barrier to their child's attendance. One parent described school as "inhospitable" (P7) for some children. These environmental influences can be viewed as 'push factors' as they serve to push children away from school as they seek to avoid such negative experiences (Kearney, 2008). This theme consists of four subthemes (Figure 5.8). Each subtheme can be represented as school factors at a child's micro- and meso-system level (Melvin et al., 2019).

Figure 5.8

Thematic Map for Theme Two, RQ1
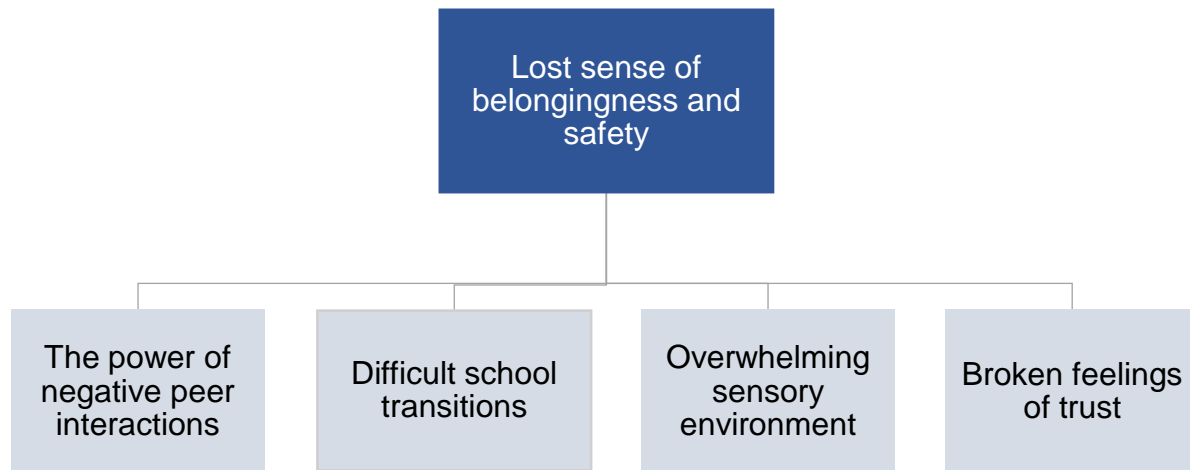
Subtheme: The power of negative peer interactions

Across the dataset, there was a strong sense that parents viewed bullying as a significant barrier to attendance. P12 noted that "bullying has a significant affect and prevents your child from wanting to go to school". Another parent believed that their child "feels at odds with the other kids, is terrified of the popular kids" and "has suffered some low-level bullying" (P7). Research has reported that young people with ASD are at greater risk of bullying (Tippett et al., 2010). As such, these findings may be representative of the high proportion of participants who reported their child as having a diagnosis of ASD. Friendship and socialisation difficulties were also described by several parents. For example, one parent noted that their child "finds it difficult to make friends" (P70). This is supported by literature that suggests social isolation in school can have negative impacts on a child's attendance (Gregory & Purcell, 2014; Ingul et al., 2019). Research has also shown that children who experience SNA are more likely to have difficulty making and maintaining friendships (Carroll, 2011).

These findings support the position that attendance difficulties should be viewed as an interactionist phenomenon that considers environmental factors rather than simply viewing it as a within-child problem (Thambirajah et al., 2008). Moreover,

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existing research suggests a positive interpersonal school environment can promote a sense of belonging and children's attendance (Nuttall & Woods, 2013; Wilkins, 2008). A sense of belonging is viewed as a psychological human need for development (Maslow, 1943). If children lack feelings of belongingness caused by limited positive peer interactions, there is a greater risk of them experiencing negative emotions associated with attending school (Tillery et al., 2013).

Subtheme: Difficult school transitions

Parents wrote about transitions being a major influence on children's feelings of safety. 68% of parents (n=196) reported transition had either 'a great deal' or 'a lot' of influence on their child's SNA. Parents wrote about two types of transitions: the move to secondary school and the everyday transitions between classes. P242 described transitions as being "extremely challenging" for their child. Changes in staff, the school day, and the environment were raised as issues contributing to non-attendance, which resonates with existing literature (e.g. Egger et al., 2003; Matthew, 2020). Several parents wrote about the loss that their child experienced when they moved to a new school. For example:

> The loss of the nurturing environment of a primary school and the lack of information sharing between staff at the secondary school (P67).

The impact of transitioning from primary to secondary school on attendance has been evidenced widely within existing research (e.g. Fremont, 2003; Pellegrini, 2007). While the current study did not aim to limit the participants with regards to age group, most parents (81%, n=233) had children between 11 and 16-years of age. Therefore, it can be assumed that the focus on transition to secondary school as a key factor in SNA reflects this demographic. This age group has been shown to be at greater risk of SNA due to these key corresponding transition points (Thambirajah et al., 2008). Factors such as the young person's increased autonomy and reduced parental control at this age may partly explain these experiences (Goodman & Scott, 2012).

Subtheme: Overwhelming sensory environment

Parents wrote about the sensory environment being overwhelming and their child being "unable to cope" (P5) with such sensory challenges. Parents reported their child became fearful of school because of the noise and crowds. P122 acknowledged that: "…high numbers of children…sensory issues: noise, smells, litter" became too much for their child. These findings are in line with existing literature (e.g. Archer et al., 2003; Goodman & Scott, 2012) and could be further understood within Kearney and Silverman's (1993) functional model of non-attendance. The negative sensory environment may prevent children attending school because they wish to avoid "school-based stimuli that provoke negative affectivity" (Kearney & Graczyk, 2014, p.4). At this point, it is important to highlight the association between sensory difficulties and ASD and consider the participant group. Sensory processing difficulties are often a comorbid characteristic of ASD (Leekam et al., 2007). Therefore, these findings may be associated with the high proportion of participants whose child has an ASD diagnosis (n=148).

Subtheme: Broken feelings of trust

Losing trust in adults at school and the "breakdown of relationship with teachers" (P9) was a prominent theme in this study. Often, parents reported that this "lost trust" was due to "broken promises" of support (P41). For instance, P63 wrote how "staff promised things to happen which didn't happen again and again losing trust in what they said". Parents viewed this inconsistency as being a factor in the breakdown of key relationships with school staff:

> The relationship with staff has fell short in our case and my daughter feels she has no adults at school she can trust (P57).

Other parents wrote openly about feelings of safety: "they [school staff] did not offer a safe, trusted or secure environment or relationships from staff" (P2). These accounts echo Bussard's et al. (2015) findings where parents viewed school staff in a negative light. Further indicating the importance of trust, Havik et al. (2014) found parents perceived trusting relationships and emotional support from teachers as key

in supporting their child's return to school after a period of absence. The current study has thus further highlighted the importance of trust and meaningful relationships during SNA both for children and for parents.

5.3.3. Theme Three: Individual child experiences

Theme three is comprised of two subthemes (Figure 5.9).

Figure 5.9

Thematic Map for Theme Two, RQ1
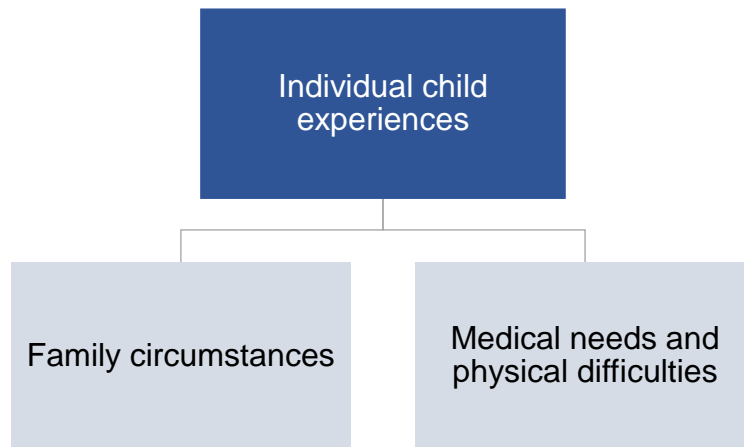
Subtheme: Family circumstances

Parents acknowledged difficulties within the family, such as parental divorce and bereavement, as factors influencing non-attendance. One parent noted their child's anxiety developed due to family upheaval: "anxiety related to parental relationships and subsequent divorce which led to a cross country move." (P246). Early childhood experiences were also reported. One parent noted their child "struggled to cope with complicated family history and relationships with birth family" (P119). Other comments focused on family ill-health and experiences of bereavement. Parents' recognition of difficult family and personal situations influencing their child's attendance resonates with existing research that suggests factors such as family functioning, family composition, and family dynamics can contribute to attendance difficulties (Carless et al., 2015; Kearney & Silverman, 1995). Within Melvin's et al. (2019) KiTeS model, family functioning forms part of a child's micro- and meso-

system and negative experiences within these systems can directly impact a child's attendance at school. This finding further highlights the need for professionals to take a systemic interactionist view of the problem that considers a child's individual experience at home as well as within school.

Subtheme: Medical needs and physical difficulties

Some parents reported their child's medical needs and physical difficulties prevented them from attending school. These parents wrote about their child's illness being a "trigger in the refusal" to attend school (P148), while P191 highlighted the impact that a medical condition can have on their child's mental health:

> Originally was off school for an extended period with a pain condition and had to use a wheelchair for a year. This affected self esteem and self image (Parent 191).

Existing literature has suggested that longer term non-attendance can occur after a period of absence caused by illness (Allison & Attisha, 2019; Melvin et al., 2019). Research has also shown that young people who have medical needs experience more absences from school and subsequent difficulties in returning (Shaw & McCabe, 2008; Rohrig & Puliafico, 2018). In relation to Bronfenbrenner and Morris' (2006) PPCT model, medical needs and physical disabilities can be understood as resource characteristics that may serve to disrupt the functioning of children's proximal processes (Stivaros, 2007). These characteristics interact alongside features such as gender, race, and ability and can influence future development. Rohrig and Puliaficob (2018) note that chronic illness is a risk factor for 'school refusal', yet there is limited research that takes account of the link between chronic illness and 'school refusal'. Therefore I would suggest that further research is needed that explores the impacts of physical difficulties or medical needs on school attendance.

5.3.4. Theme Four: My child's mental health

Theme four consists of one subtheme and one subtheme category. It captures parents' reports about the influence of their child's mental health on their ability to attend school (Figure 5.10).

Figure 5.10

Thematic Map of Theme Four, RQ1
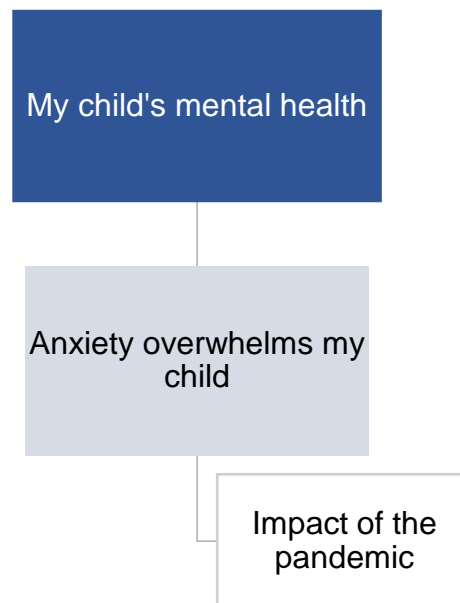
Subtheme: Anxiety overwhelms my child

Mental health was a recurring theme and echoes existing research that links emotional disorders to poor school attendance (Finning et al., 2019a; Lawrence et al., 2019). More specifically, for many parents, anxiety was reported to play a significant role in non-attendance. For example, P6 wrote: "he so wanted to fit in and not be seen as different but anxiety and lack of sleep meant he just couldn't cope". This extract demonstrates the severity of anxiety, while the vulnerability caused by anxiety was highlighted by P32:

> Has high social anxiety couldn't cope with amount of people. Doesn't want to be noticed or looked at and didn't feel at trust that he wouldn't be. Felt very vulnerable in the environment.

Several parents also wrote about the debilitating nature of their child's perfectionist behaviours. One parent recognised that the pressure to be 'perfect' in school, either academically or in appearance, was overwhelming for their child:

> She's a perfectionist, she behaves impeccably in school, best work etc… If her hair isn't perfect, or her homework isn't done, it's impossible to attend (P42).

Parents wrote about the self-perpetuating nature of mental health and school attendance. Time away from school was reported to exacerbate a child's anxiety about returning, thereby making the situation more ingrained and difficult to address. Indeed, non-attendance can reduce feelings of connectedness and increase missed learning for children, and, in turn, this can negatively impact mental health and lead to more absence (Lawrence et al., 2019). A useful way to view these influences is to refer to Gregory and Purcell's (2014) 'circularity of influence' (Figure 5.11). In this circular model, a child's school experience may impact their mental health, which might then impact their ability to attend, and in-turn this further effects their mental health. The individual child, their school setting, and their mental health are all viewed as being influential in their ability to attend school (Thambirajah et al., 2008).

Figure 5.11

Circularity of Influence of School Attendance and Mental Health (adapted from Gregory & Purcell, 2014)
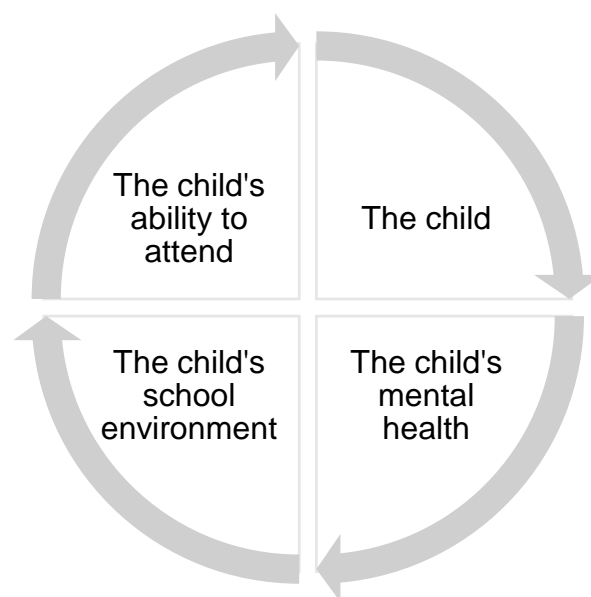
The current study thus supports research that reports the significant impact mental health can have on attendance and the need for an increased focus on supporting mental health in schools (Lawrence, et al. 2019). This also elaborates on the need for interactionist approaches that consider the reciprocal nature of interactions between the environment and the child (Place et al., 2000). Finning et al. (2019b, p. 187) argue that practitioners need to be aware that attendance difficulties can be an indicator of "emotional ill health, regardless of absence type". Thus, in line with existing research (e.g. Ingul & Nordahl, 2013; Melvin et al., 2019), the findings from this study suggest that greater awareness of mental health difficulties is an important factor in understanding and preventing non-attendance.

Impact of the pandemic. There has been worldwide concern about the impact of the pandemic on young people's mental health (Lee, 2020; Patrick et al., 2020). The current study provides qualitative insight into parents' views about the impact of the pandemic on their child's mental health and their thoughts about returning to school post-lockdown. Many parents reported that the uncertainty caused by the pandemic had "led to increased anxiety" for their child (P167). Parents believed this would cause more difficulties when returning to school. Several parents also wrote about the return to school and how difficult they thought this would be for their child: "can't imagine my child will return to school. She panics if I even mention school" (P74). In contrast, several parents reported their child had in fact benefitted from the lockdown: "he is happier as online schooling is great for him" (P42). Many parents reported positive impacts because the pressure to attend school had been removed. For example: "we now have work to do from school, no pressure to get into school which is better for all of us" (P130). This would suggest that during 'normal times', the pressures to attend school can impact negatively on children's mental health and, for some children, act to exacerbate their attendance difficulties.

5.3.5. Theme Five: The damaging culture of the system

The final theme focuses on parents' views on the wider education system and consists of two subthemes (Figure 5.12).

Figure 5.12

Thematic Map of Theme Five, RQ1
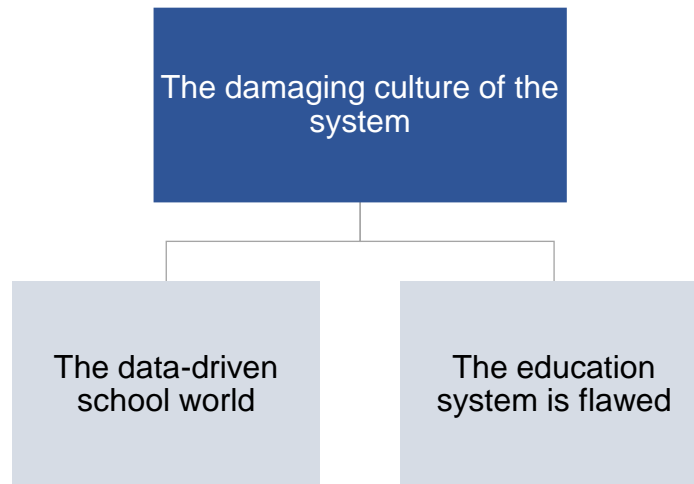
Subtheme: The data-driven school world

Across participants' accounts there was a sense that schools were viewed as being situated within a data-driven world and driven by attendance figures. This is reflected in P151's account who noted the impact of academisation on their school's culture:

> School was academised and the pressure to perform was ramped up beyond my child's ability to cope. The data was all that mattered (P151).

Other parents commented that the pressure on schools to have good attendance data outweighed the support for their child, which had significant further repercussions on their health and attendance. Parents' views conflicted with school's focus on data and several parents reported having made the decision to prioritise their child's wellbeing over an education that they could "catch up on" (P9). These findings can be situated within literature that considers the classification of non-attendance by schools. For instance, Birioukov (2016) argues that the pressure on schools to classify attendance and report attendance data leads schools to neglect consideration of the underlying causes of non-attendance. The wider impact of government attendance policy can be conceptualised as being part of a child's exosystem and macrosystem (Melvin et al., 2019). The use of data and the dichotomy between 'authorised' and 'unauthorised' notions of absence can be detrimental as it can limit understanding of the issue (Birioukov, 2016; Reid, 2008). A change in the recording of absences has been called for at a policy and school level

to encourage a more holistic and compassionate approach (Birioukov, 2016). The findings thus add weight to these arguments and provide insight into the implications of a 'data driven school world'. While previous research has highlighted the importance of using data to identify early patterns of attendance difficulties and as part of decision-making processes (Kearney & Graczyk, 2020), parents in this study did not report on the use of data in this way. As such, this suggests there might be a need for greater conceptual clarity and careful consideration over the use of attendance data which echoes recommendations laid out by researchers (e.g. Birioukov, 2016 and Kearney & Graczy, 2020).

Subtheme: The education system is flawed

Several parents perceived the education system to be flawed and unsuitable for their child. One parent wrote: "basically the system doesn't suit him, he's a square peg in a very round hole!" (P88). Others commented that the education system lacks creativity, and the current focus "towards rote learning" (P63) does not suit a lot of children. Further, several parents reported mainstream education was unsuitable for children with additional needs and there is a lack of funding to support children who experience SNA. P76 wrote about the unfairness and injustice of the wider education system, reporting that:

> The education system as a whole, is failing kids with mental illness and additional needs. It's not fit for purpose at all…we are punished continually and have to fight for anything we need. It's a scandal (P76).

I was further struck by one parent's view on how broken the system is for vulnerable children and their hope for this research to help improve the situation: "I hope your research is successful because this system is horrendous for vulnerable children and parents" (P4). These findings provide insight into the desperation felt by parents and highlights parental views that school is not necessarily a suitable environment for some children. To date, I have not found research that explicitly mirrors this theme in relation to SNA. On reflection, the high proportion of participants reporting that their child has an additional need (64%) may partly explain this finding.

[Signpost to reflexive account 3]

5.4. Research Question 2.1: Findings and Discussion

RQ2.1	What are parents' views on the support that is offered to them and their child for school non-attendance?

Descriptive statistics

I sought to elicit whether parents had regular contact with their child's school during periods of non-attendance (Figure 5.13) as existing literature highlights the importance of communication between home and school during non-attendance (Kearney, 2019a). The findings show that 70% (n=201) of participants selected 'yes', while 26% (n=77) reported they did not have regular contact. The final 4% (n=11) corresponding to 'not applicable' is likely to reflect the participants whose child was not currently on a school roll at the time of this study.

Figure 5.13

Parents in Regular Contact with their Child's School During Non-Attendance
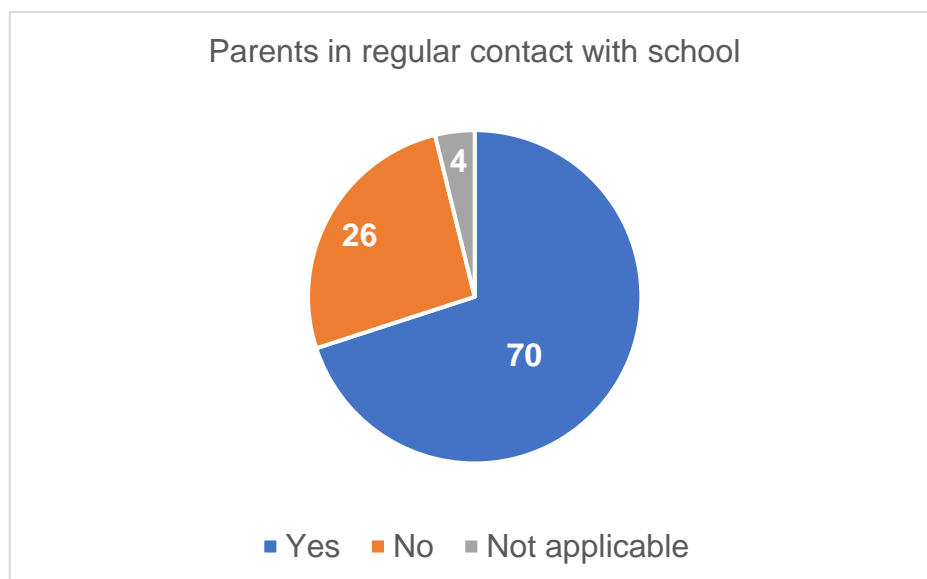
I also wanted to gain insight into whether parents had a key person assigned to them. The existing literature suggests that having a key person to communicate with regarding attendance difficulties has positive outcomes (Dalziel & Henthorne, 2005; Nuttall & Woods, 2013). Figure 5.14 shows that 73% (n=212) of participants reported being in contact with a key person, while 22% (n=63) reported they were not.

Figure 5.14

Parents in Contact with a Key Person at School
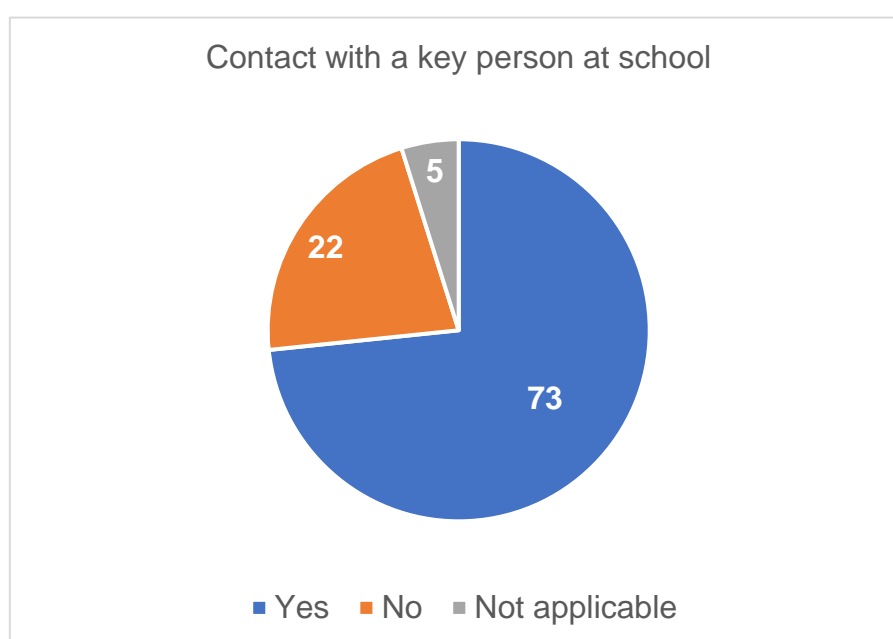
Participants were asked to what extent they believed support from school staff had been helpful. As shown in Figure 5.15, 33% (n=82) of parents believed that support from school staff was 'not at all' helpful. Overall, 67% (n=207) of participants believed that support had been helpful in some way with responses ranging from 'a little' (23%),'to some extent' (21%), 'a lot' (13%), and 'a great deal' (10%). The mean rating for these responses was 2.5 (*SD* = 1.3) which indicates varied and individualised views on support experiences. Qualitative findings will thus serve to provide more in-depth insight into these views.

Figure 5.15

The Extent to which Parents Feel Support from School Staff Has Been Helpful

Whether support has been helpful

(Bar chart showing Percentage on y-axis from 0 to 35)

- Not at all: 33
- A little: 23
- To some extent: 21
- A lot: 13
- A great deal: 10
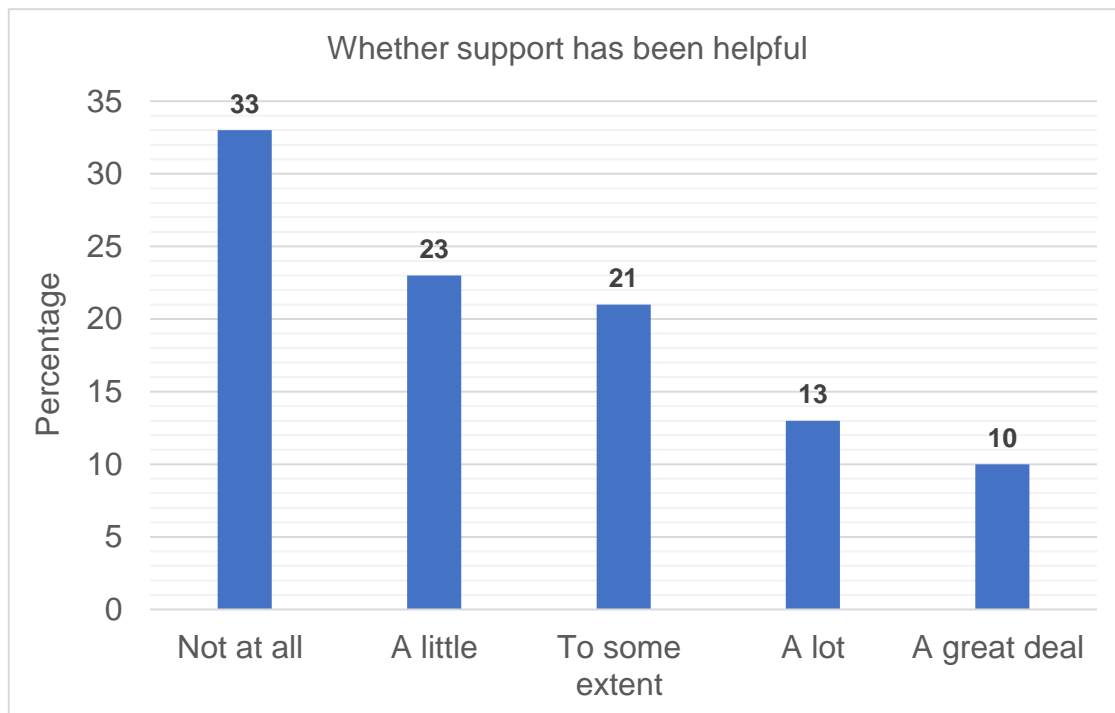
Qualitative findings

It became apparent during the familiarisation and coding phases of analysis that there were significant variations in parents' reported views on the support they have received, which could be perceived as being either positive or negative. To maintain clarity and succinctness, I have incorporated both types of experiences into overarching themes (Figure 5.16). For example, the theme *'We feel (dis)empowered'* consists of a subtheme that relates to parents' accounts of the kind and compassionate support received from staff (positive view), while the second subtheme captures parents' reports of support being a 'constant battle' (negative view).

Figure 5.16

Overall Thematic Map of Themes and Subthemes for RQ2.1: Parents' Views on Support Received for SNA

Timing and suitability of support	(Mis)understanding the complex problem	We feel (dis)empowered	Removal from school
Misplaced support	Attendance at all costs	Kindness makes all the difference	No other option but to de-register our child
Threats of prosecution	Parents are blamed	It's a constant battle	
Nurturing pastoral input			
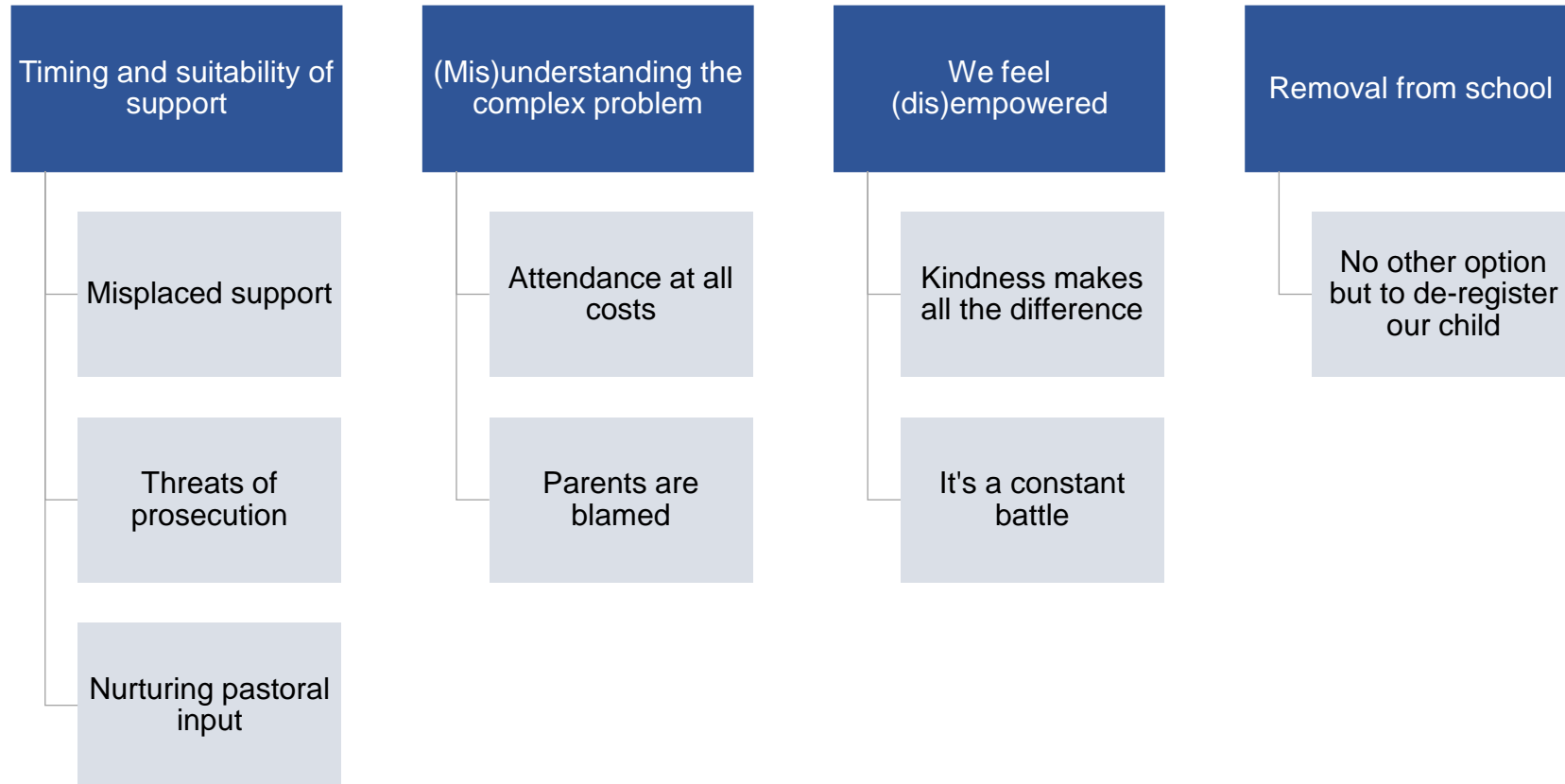
A fifth theme based on parents' reports of support during lockdown is named *'Our lockdown experience'* and consists of two subthemes (Figure 5.17).

Figure 5.17

The Final Theme of RQ2.1 (reflecting the context within which the data was collected)
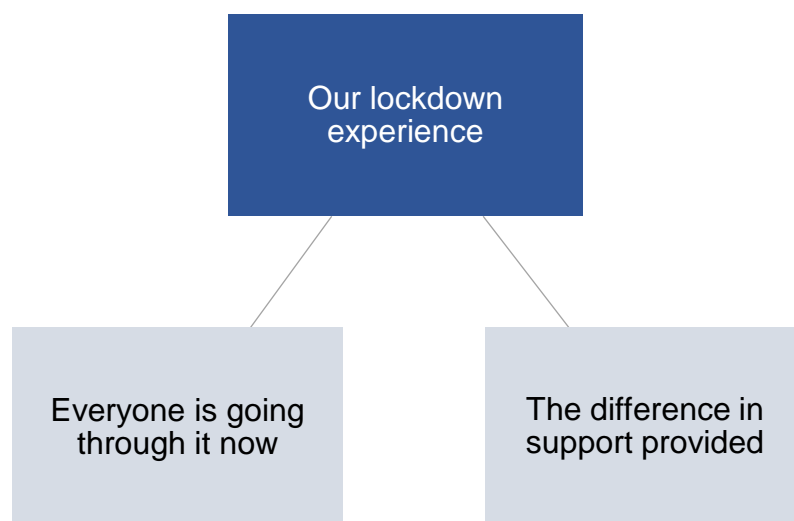
5.5.1. Theme One: Timing and suitability of support

This theme captures parents' comments about the nature of how support was established for their child's SNA. Some parents reported that school staff responded in a timely manner and pre-empted their child's difficulties, while others commented on a distinct lack of support. This theme consists of three subthemes (Figure 5.18).

Figure 5.18

Thematic Map of Theme One, RQ2.1
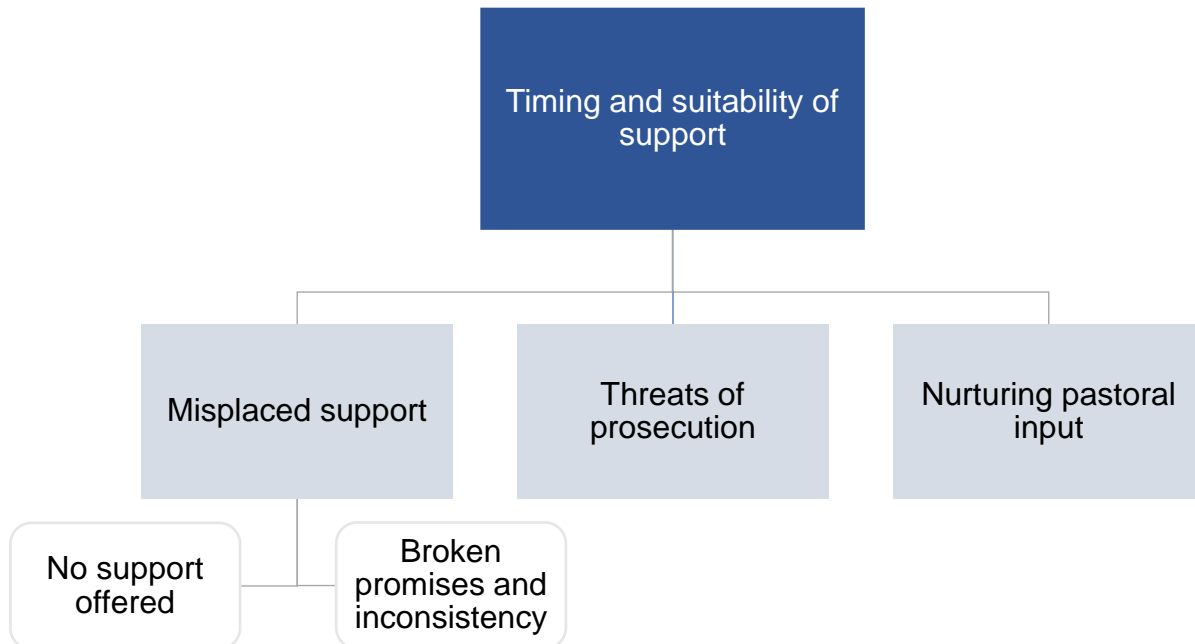
Subtheme: Misplaced support

This subtheme represents the views of parents who reported a lack of appropriate support to meet their child's needs. I have divided this subtheme into two 'subtheme categories' representing variations across parents' reports: '*No support offered'* and '*Broken promises and inconsistency'.*

No support offered. Several parents described experiences where they had not received any support. I decided to tally the total responses indicating that no support had been experienced. A total of 54 responses (18%) contained that word "none" in the open-ended response box when asked about what support they had received. Some responses were expanded upon, whilst others simply contained the single word. For example, P28 wrote: "none. Put him in the taxi and hope for the best that they won't use trigger words." Here, it seems that P28 relies on hope that staff will consider their child's needs appropriately. This might also indicate limited communication and partnership-working between home and school. When parents described inadequate support, there was a sense that the implications were felt across the whole family. For instance, P11 wrote about the effects of a delay in

accessing support, noting that "our whole family's lives have been turned upside down with the worry".

Furthermore, parents wrote about a lack of access to appropriate professional support when their child needed it most. The focus was overwhelmingly on the struggle to receive support from Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS). Several parents wrote about feeling 'stuck' without this support as they could not find a way out of their situation: "without greater understanding and accessible mental health support (rather than a CAMHS waiting list) it is difficult for any of us to know what to do" (P17). These findings align with research by Gregory and Purcell (2014) and Mortimer (2018) who found parents often experienced a lack of support for SNA and felt isolated as a result.

Broken promises and inconsistency. Several parents acknowledged the inconsistency and tokenistic nature of support offered to them. This subtheme indicates parents' perceived need for predictability and consistency for SNA (Havik et al., 2014). There were several comments about support being offered, but never put into place: "support staff promised things to happen which didn't happen again and again" (P47). Across the dataset, there was a sense parents had "lost all trust" (P38) because of this inconsistent and unreliable offer of support. Often these accounts indicated that the support being suggested by non-teaching staff (such as pastoral managers or SENCos) had not materialised in the classroom, which might indicate limited information-sharing amongst school staff. Browne (2018) similarly found parents had lost trust in staff and felt unsupported, while Havik et al. (2013) found that predictability was perceived as key to supporting children's attendance.

Several parents expressed that appropriate support was only established once a diagnosis had been received:

> We sought medical advice, had to wait ages and eventually got a diagnosis 9 months later. It wasn't until that point school started being helpful. Up till that point their threats and pressure to attend made the situation worse (P97).

Such findings resonate with those of Clissold (2008) who found parental discourses focused on the delay in receiving a diagnosis which impacted upon the support offered. However, as further pointed out by Clissold (2018) the presenting needs of a child do not change when a diagnosis is given. Thus, this arguably reflects a limiting

within-child view of the problem as there appears to be limited consideration of the wider bio-psycho-social-cultural factors associated with non-attendance (Clissold, 2018; Tonge et al., 2019).

[Signpost to reflexive account 4]

Subtheme: Threats of prosecution

For some parents, the threat of prosecution featured heavily in their accounts of support. All parents who wrote about prosecution viewed it as unhelpful. Further, parents reported how it impacted upon their own mental health, which hindered their already difficult situation. These experiences might be viewed as a negative perpetuating cycle as shown in Figure 5.19.

Figure 5.19

Visual Representation of the Negative Cycle of Threats of Prosecution as Reported by Parents
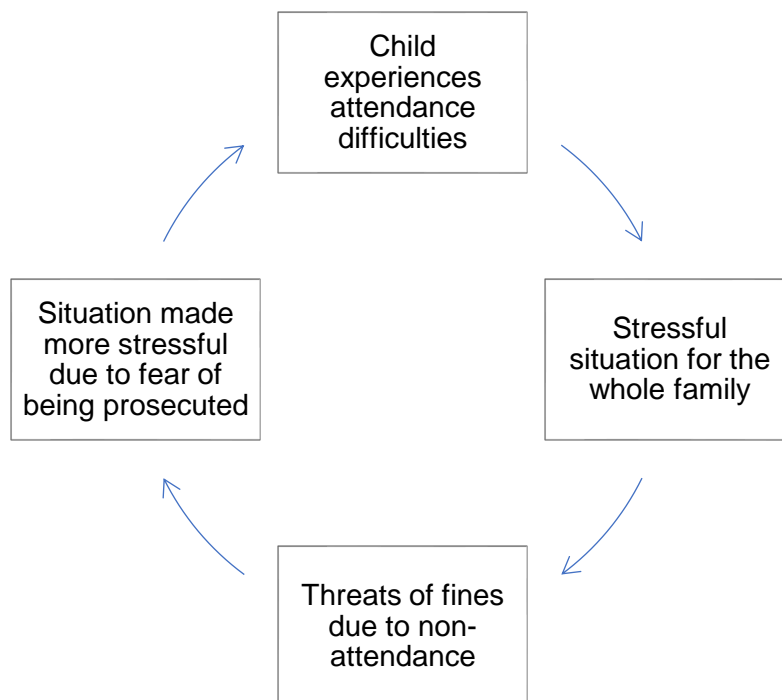
Indeed, several parents described the prosecution system as exacerbating the problem: "I think the current system of fining parents punishes vulnerable and poorly children more than it tackles truanting" (P136). Parents valued support that prioritised compassion and understanding over this legal, punitive approach:

If I'd been put under pressure about his attendance that will undoubtedly have affected how I dealt with him due to the threat of court etc (P95).

While previous research has acknowledged similar tensions associated with prosecuting parents (e.g. Archer et al., 2003), the current study has elaborated further on the emotional impacts on parents. These findings are consistent with research by Zhang (2004) who found that punitive methods such as fines did not improve attendance. Similarly, Nuttall and Woods (2013) argue for the removal of harsh consequences and prosecution in their ecological model of successful reintegration.

Subtheme: Nurturing pastoral input

In contrast to the previous subtheme, *'Nurturing pastoral input'* captures parents' positive experiences of pastoral support. Parents wrote about their child's access to nurture provisions and calm spaces in school which supported their emotional wellbeing. One parent commented their child had a "nurture group in school. Option to stay inside at break. Go into school early" (P8) demonstrating a flexible, individualised endeavour. Similarly, Mortimer (2018) found that young people valued having pastoral support and a safe place to go in school when they had returned from a period of non-attendance. Practitioners in Tobias' (2019) study believed children experiencing attendance difficulties were prioritising lower order needs, such as feelings of safety over school attendance (Maslow, 1943). If children are experiencing difficult environmental circumstances either at home, in the community, or at school, they may not feel safe enough to leave their home to attend school (Tobias, 2019). While the current study did not directly explore children's feelings of safety, it has highlighted parental perspectives on the need for children to feel supported and safe for them to attend.

5.5.2. Theme Two: (Mis)understanding the complex problem

Theme two consists of two subthemes (Figure 5.20) and captures parents' view that the complexities of SNA are not fully understood by school staff.

Figure 5.20

Thematic Map of Theme Two, RQ2.1
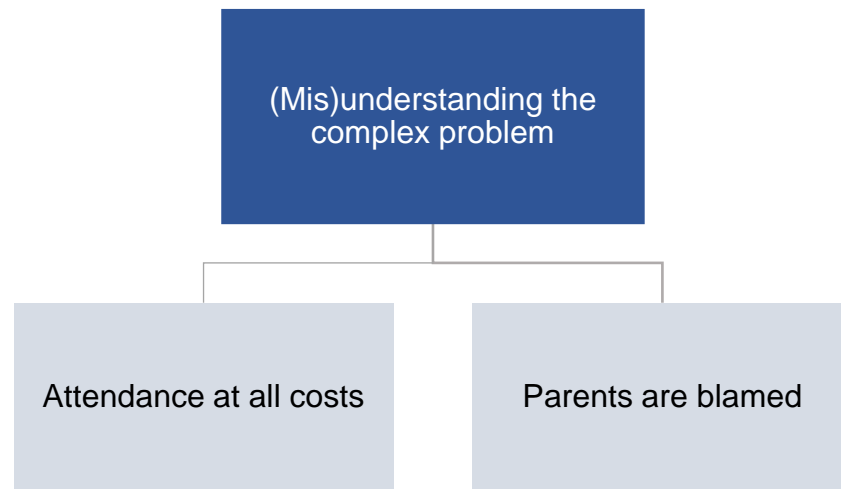
Subtheme: Attendance at all costs

Parents viewed attendance data to be the predominate drive for schools and that schools focused on this data rather than taking time to understand the problem. This subtheme resonates with the subtheme '*The data-driven school world*' in RQ1 and further reveals the wide-reaching implications of the drive for good attendance figures. Parents described instances where they felt attendance data were given priority which meant the school took a one-size-fits-all approach to support and left "vulnerable children under increased stress" (P136). These findings further highlight the problematic nature of the recording system for non-attendance which might negate attempts to understand the complex problem. This theme has similarly been reported in previous research on SNA (for example: Reid, 2008; Birioukov, 2016).

Subtheme: Parents are blamed

Parents reported feeling blamed for their child's non-attendance and that staff believed their child was 'choosing' not to attend. Consequently, appropriate support was not forthcoming because poor parenting was viewed as the cause and the problem was misunderstood. This was a recurring theme across the dataset as

parents acknowledged feelings of guilt. Parents reflected on how staff seemed to locate the problem away from the school:

> We feel that the fact she doesn't cope in school has always been blamed on us, the problem has been always framed as our problem or her problem not the school's problem (P90).

This suggests a within-child or within-family perspective is taken and further highlights the tensions that can exist between home and school. One parent reported feeling like they had been "gas lighted for years into thinking that it was my failing as a parent and 'attachment' issues, not that the school were not meeting her needs" (P66). Feelings of guilt was a recurring theme across parents' accounts. Despite asking for help, P60 reported feeling blamed: "…when you ask for help you should get help, not blamed and made to feel guilty". This is further illustrated in P115's account of their negative experience in school meetings:

> Honestly the only 'help' I have had is meetings at school where I am made to feel like I am useless and not trying my absolute best. I got up and left the first meeting as they were so accusatory.

Again, these accounts suggest a within-family view of the situation which disregards wider systemic influences on a child's attendance (Gregory & Purcell, 2014). Such accounts are consistent with existing research that identifies parental blame as a key negative experience for families (e.g. Bussard et al., 2015; Gregory & Purcell, 2014). Viewed within the systemic model of development (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006), parent-staff interactions and home-school partnerships have implications for a child's mesosystem and proximal processes (Melvin et al., 2019). The findings here elaborate on previous qualitative research and suggest that parental blame and misunderstanding the problem not only impacts the child, but also serves to establish negative home-school partnerships.

5.5.3. Theme Three: We feel (dis)empowered

This theme consists of two subthemes with one subtheme category attached to subtheme two (Figure 5.21).

Figure 5.21

Thematic Map of Theme Three, RQ2.1
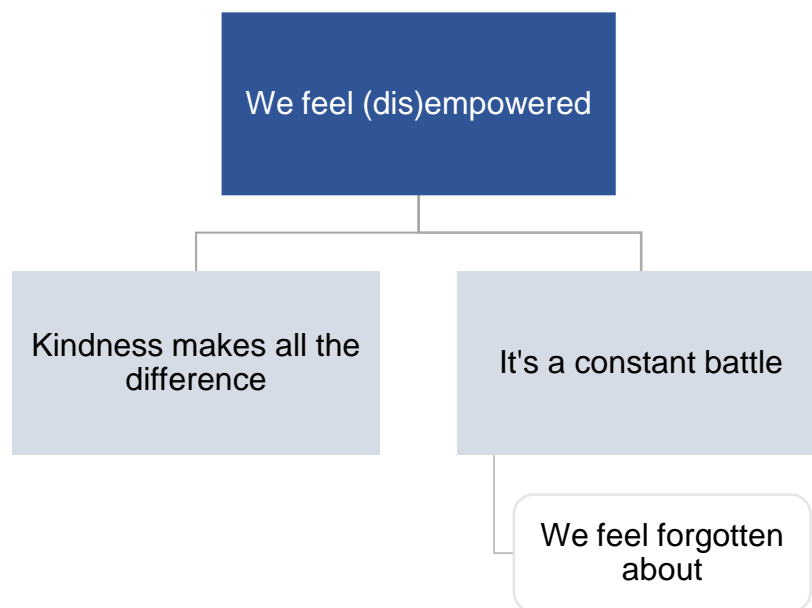
Subtheme: Kindness makes all the difference

In contrast to the subtheme '*Parents are blamed'*, some parents described how the simple act of showing kindness and empathy made all the difference to their situation. Parents viewed "trust and honesty" (P77) with staff as key because their situation was viewed in a non-judgemental way which helped them to feel empowered. Several parents expressed how they themselves received support from staff: "school staff have been like family to me" (P1) and "our school has been brilliant and have been in constant touch - they are also supporting me as well" (P89). One parent recognised the importance of kindness even when the problem was not necessarily well understood: "teachers don't really understand it but their kindness helped" (P31). This suggests positive relationships with staff are valued by parents which echoes previous research (e.g. Nuttall & Woods, 2013). These findings are in line with O'Mara et al. (2010) who similarly found that parents valued emotional support from school staff for attendance difficulties.

Similarly, Tobias (2019) found when participants (family coaches) prioritised the building of empowering, trusting relationships with parents of 'persistent non-attenders', there was a more successful outcome. Blackmon and Cain (2015) also found that success was more likely when staff and professionals prioritised

establishing positive relationships with the wider family. Again, these findings indicate a need for a wider systemic approach that prioritises partnerships between home and school. P199 wrote about how they and the school "came up with solutions together" and school "maintained a positive working relationship through regular contact and meetings". Positive experiences such as these are consistent with previous research. Epstein and Sheldon (2005), for instance, found that parents valued staff who recognised their emotional capacity as well as their child's difficulties, further highlighting the importance of the parent-school relationship.

Subtheme: It's a constant battle

The subtheme contrasts with the previous subtheme as it refers to parents' descriptions of feeling 'unheard' and experiencing a 'constant battle' for support. This is exemplified by P89 who reported:

> It has been the hardest 3 years of our lives. I wish that the school had been more pro-active and more encouraging, and we should not have had to battle so hard to get the support we needed to help my son! (P89).

Parents also described occasions where they felt ignored and their concerns dismissed by staff. These findings echo Browne's (2018) study on parental views of 'emotionally based school non-attendance' where parents also felt 'unheard'. The experience of not being listened to and the fight for support is suggested by parents to have worsened the problem for their child. Some parents recognised that if schools and parents had worked in partnership from the start, the problem "may not have escalated" (P135) to a more difficult situation.

We feel forgotten about. Several parents noted that communication with their school was limited. P159 described how they had "not had contact in months, always me trying contact them", while P9 reported that "professionals say that parents know their children best but rarely listen to us". Other accounts described limited communication as negatively impacting their child's feelings of connectedness with their school community. In this way, children felt disconnected from school life, which further prevented their full return:

He does not feel part of a school community. They have made no contact with him while he has been off…he doesn't feel they care (P178).

This finding is concerning given that existing research highlights the importance of hearing the child's voice during attendance difficulties (Baskerville, 2020; Billington, 2018). Moreover, Byrant et al. (2013) argues that a positive school climate where students feel heard and supported is a key facilitator in promoting attendance.

5.5.4. Theme Four: Removal from school

Theme four was constructed based on reports from parents that they had decided to de-register their child from school having "lost all faith" (P55) in the system (Figure 5.22).

Figure 5.22

Thematic Map of Theme Four, RQ2.1
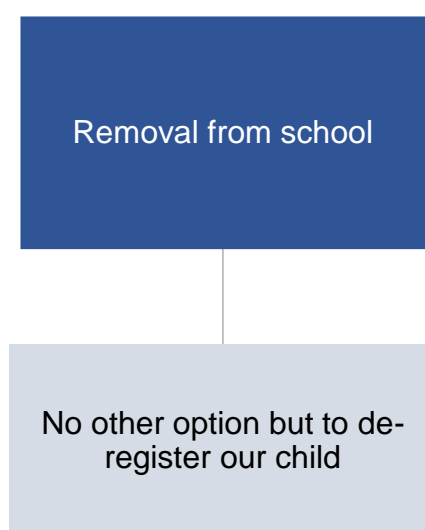
Subtheme: No other option but to de-register our child

Several parents wrote about taking their child off the school roll. Quantitative data showed that 7% of parents (n=19) reported that their child was no longer on the school roll. Parents described how they felt they had no other choice but to home-educate their child. While reasons for de-registering varied, there was a sense that the underlying reason aligned with a lack of support and parents' feelings of abandonment. Parents recognised the difficult feelings involved in such a decision: "we thought long & hard and decided to home educate" (P8). Of concern here is the

sense that some parents had in fact been encouraged to home-school their child. For example, P6 wrote: "we were told to take him out of school and home educate", while P20 commented: "school recently suggested removing my son as they are not able to meet his needs and help him overcome school refusal". These experiences may be understood within the concept of 'off rolling'. Off rolling can be defined as:

> The practice of removing a pupil from the school roll without a formal, permanent exclusion or by encouraging a parent to remove their child from the school roll, when the removal is primarily in the interests of the school rather than in the best interests of the pupil (Ofsted, 2018, p.8).

Similar findings were reported by Epstein et al. (2019) where 17 parents had taken their child off the school roll. Further, Bussard et al. (2015) found that parents felt their school was keen to remove their child and pass the problem on, while Totsika et al. (2020) highlighted the issue of undocumented home-schooling of children with ASD who experience attendance difficulties. Baynton (2020) explored parents' experiences of off rolling and found that prosecution for non-attendance was a push factor in some parents' decision to home educate (Kendall & Atkinson, 2006). The responses in the current study did not suggest threats of prosecution were the reason for de-registration. In contrast, parents' accounts focused on the lack of support and their child's unmet needs. However, I acknowledge that I was unable to explore parents' responses in more depth to elicit the reasoning behind their decision to de-register. This reflects the method of data collection and could be viewed as a study limitation (see section 8.5 for further limitations). Nonetheless, the findings provide insight into parents' views on support received which addressed the specific aim in this study.

5.5.5. Theme Five: Our lockdown experience

This final theme captures parents' views on support provided during the lockdown (Figure 5.23).

Figure 5.23

Thematic Map of Theme Five, RQ2.1
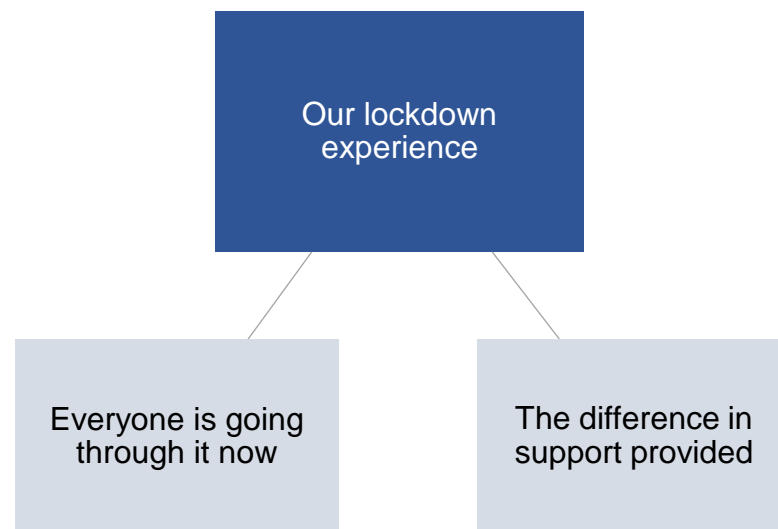
Subtheme: Everyone is going through it now

Parents reported that lockdown had created a unique situation where every family was essentially experiencing SNA. There was a sense across parents' accounts that the situation represented an opportunity to raise awareness of the stresses and strains they experience during 'normal times'. One parent hoped that lessons could be learned from lockdown that would impact support for non-attendance more generally: "hopefully they will now think outside the box of traditional school attendance for those who struggle at school and care about them" (P142). This subtheme also captures the feelings of 'togetherness' reported by some parents. Parents noted their child felt more connected with their peers because they were now being educated in the same way as them. P122 wrote about their son feeling "…happier as his class is all home educated now". Similarly, P38 wrote: "my child's norm has become his friends' norm and his state of mind has greatly improved". These positive experiences highlight the importance of connections and belonging to the school community. A limited sense of belonging can be a secondary cause of attendance difficulties, and so this finding highlights the importance of promoting feelings of belongingness amongst children who experience non-attendance (Kearney, 2008; Nuttall & Woods, 2013).

Subtheme: The difference in support provided.

It was interesting to note many parents' accounts of the significant discrepancies between support received during lockdown and support received prior to lockdown. Several parents noted that during lockdown schools were providing online learning, which they had not done so previously. Parents also experienced a dramatic improvement in communication with their school. P10 wrote about these changes:

> In the 3 years of my sons irregular attendance only 1 staff member has visited him, he has never had a call or email from his head of house until the covid 19 lockdown began and now she calls weekly.

P56 reported how the change in support has made them feel: "it's taken the whole of UK's schools to close, for my son's school to actually make an effort with my sons education and pay attention to my son's existence. its unbelievably sad". This view is echoed by parents who questioned why support and communication was not in place before lockdown. For example: "what I don't understand if they can do home packs now during covid why couldn't they send work home with my child's sibling before covid?" (P135). These findings are unique to the current study because of the timeframe of data collection and offer further insight into parents' views of support during lockdown.

5.6. Research Question 2.2: Findings and Discussion

RQ2.2	How do parents think support could be improved to help their child attend school more consistently?

RQ2.2 explores parents' views on how support for non-attendance could be improved. The questionnaire initially asked participants whether they believed support could be improved (Figure 5.24).

Figure 5.24

Participants' Views on Whether Support Could Be Improved

Do parents think support for their child's non-attendance could be improved?
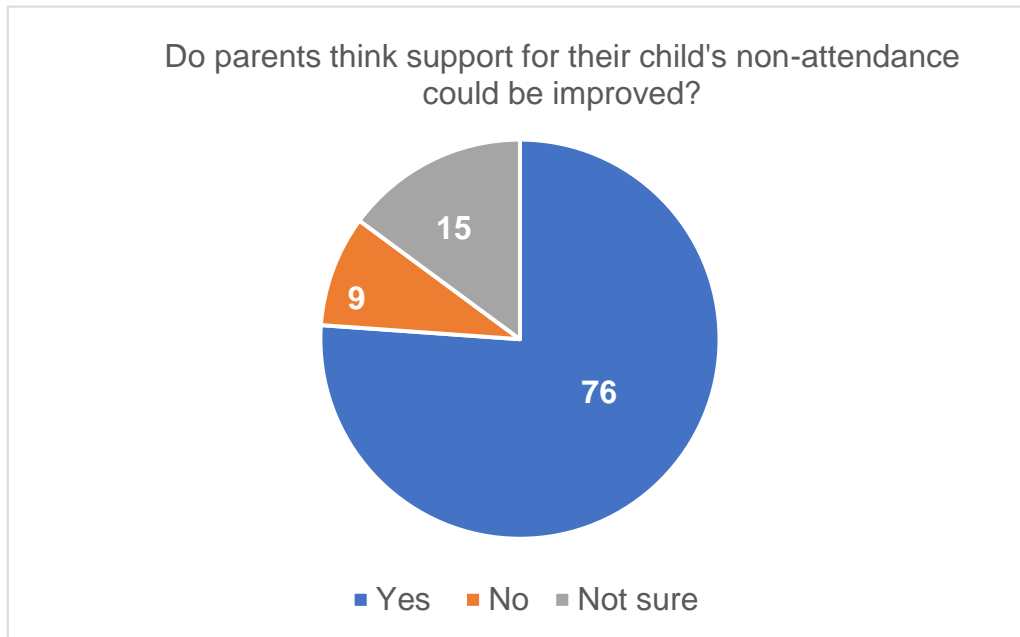
76% (n=220) of participants reported that they believed support could be improved, while 9% (n=26) of participants did not think support could be improved. Participants were then asked in what ways they thought support could be improved. Data was analysed across all responses as well as from across this section of the questionnaire.

Qualitative findings

Figure 5.25 shows the overall thematic map for RQ2.2.

Figure 5.25

Overall Thematic Map of Themes and Subthemes for RQ2.2: Parents' Views on How Support Could Be Improved

Build meaningful connections	Wellbeing over data	Improve whole school understanding	The whole system needs fixing
Reduce blame, build trust	Focus on mental health and wellbeing	Recognise labelling as an issue	Remove legal threats
Bridge the gap between home and school	Hear and see my child	Think outside the 'one-size-fits all' box	Systemic change
		Early preventative intervention	
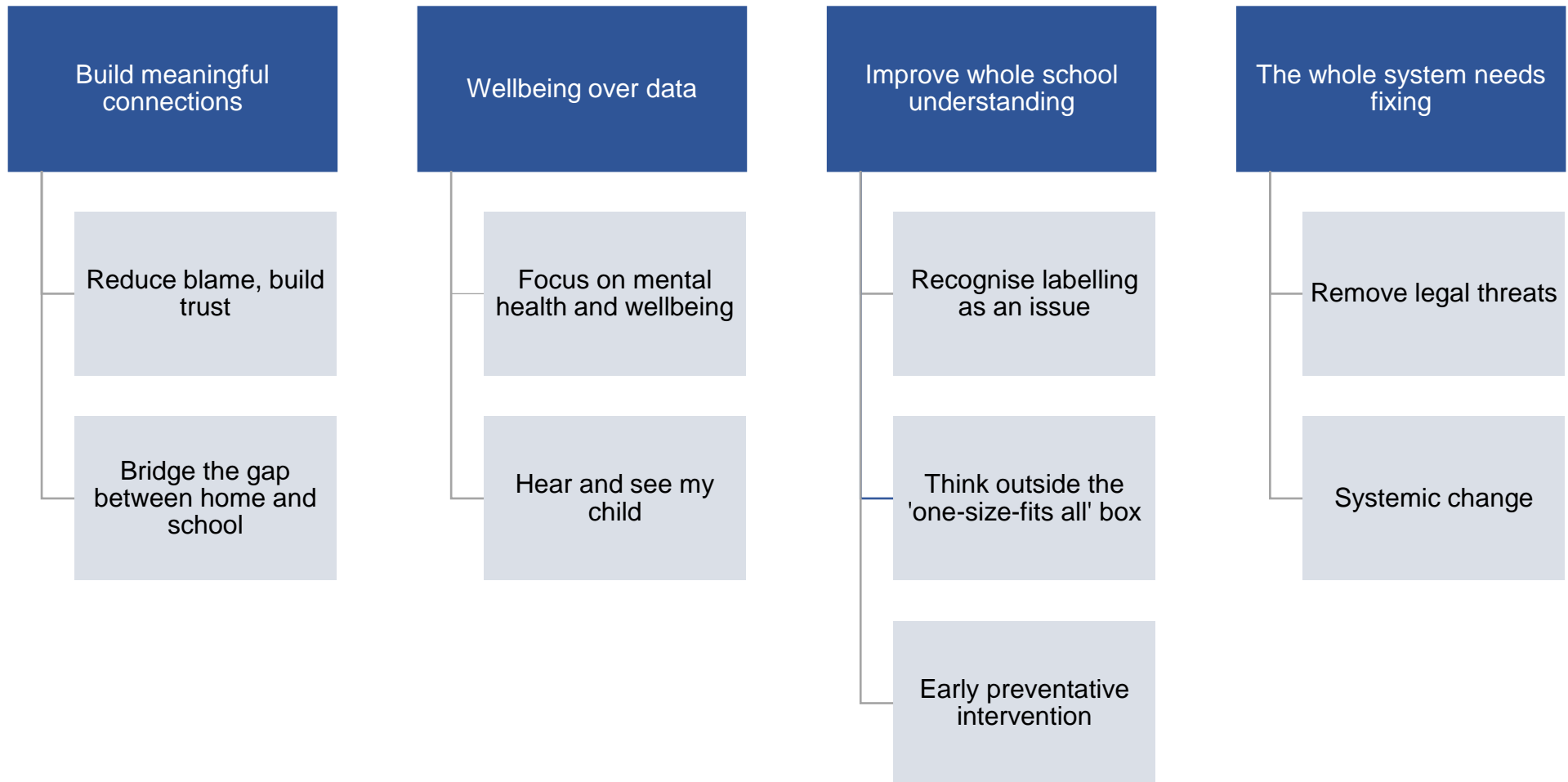
5.6.1. Theme One: Build meaningful connections

This theme captures parents' reports of the need for more trusting and collaborative relationships with school staff. Theme one consists of two subthemes (Figure 5.26).

Figure 5.26

Thematic Map of Theme One, RQ2.2
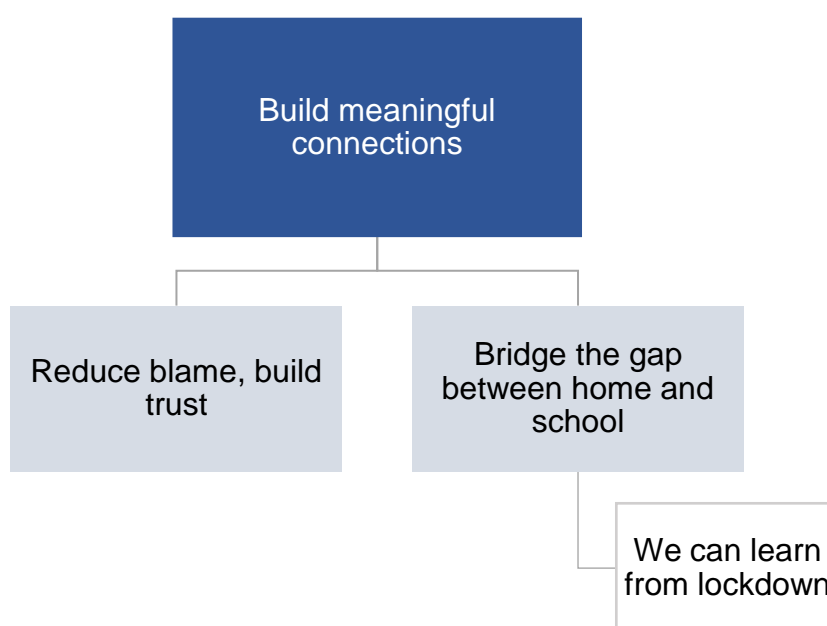
Subtheme: Reduce blame, build trust

The concept of trust was a recurring theme across the dataset. Mirroring existing research, several parents wrote about the importance of building trust and reducing blame (Sugrue et al., 2016). Parents noted a key area for improvement was school staff building trust with their child by "sticking to what they have agreed" (P210). Several parents suggested that building "lasting, trusting relationships" (P128) should be prioritised, while having a trusted adult at school was raised as an important intervention strategy for their child. As a result of building trusting relationships, parents noted that their child would feel safer when they were able to attend:

> Very important my son has a person to meet and greet and someone he can trust and feel safe to even go into school even for one hour (P104)

Positive relationships and trust have been shown to be important in addressing cases of SNA (Hallam & Rogers, 2008; Keppens & Spruyt, 2020; Sugrue et al., 2016). Hendron and Kearney (2016) found that poor student-teacher relationships was negatively related to the severity of non-attendance (Brouwer-Borguis, et al., 2019). Similarly, young people in Mortimer's (2018) study valued supportive relationships with adults when returning to school from a period of non-attendance, while Van Eck et al. (2017) found that 'chronic absence' was less of a problem where pupils perceived relationships with teachers as positive. This study's findings elaborate on existing literature by indicating that 'connections' with the school community should not only be maintained but in fact strengthened to support children to attend more consistently (Keppens & Spruyt, 2020).

Subtheme: Bridge the gap between home and school

Parents reported the need to prevent their child becoming more behind in their education by providing home learning. Without such support, P152 noted the gap in missed learning would become "wider and too much of an obstacle" for their son to overcome, exacerbating their difficulty in attending. Parents often reflected on the home-learning their child was receiving during lockdown and how this should continue once schools returned.

Further, parents described how schools need to be "more proactive in keeping in touch by phone or email." (P136) and have "regular meetings to discuss progress" (P208) so that they can be more involved in their child's support. One parent wrote how schools need to: "show some compassion! Work in partnership with parents not in an adversarial way" (P79). Similarly, P68 expressed strong feelings about the need for professionals to listen and learn from parents:

> Education professionals need to LISTEN to the families, parents know their children better than nearly every teacher, stop telling them they don't! LISTEN, LISTEN, LISTEN! (P68).

Another parent summarised the importance of partnership-working: "it's better when the system works together and involves the parent at every turn." (P146). The SEND Code of Practice (2015) emphasises the need for collaborative working between

home and school, while Nuttall and Woods (2013) suggest that developing positive relationships and meeting the needs of the family are key parts of an ecological model of successful reintegration.

We can learn from lockdown. When writing about lockdown, some parents expressed feelings of sadness and frustration as they compared their experiences to 'normal times':

> During the Covid crisis we have looked on at all the concern and support for families to educate their child at home with sadness that our child was invisible until this happened. We have lived this for years. (P98)*.*

Several parents wrote about how lockdown might have increased awareness of how isolating home-schooling can be, both for them and their child. These findings indicate that parents want to be 'seen' and 'heard' during periods of non-attendance. Many parents questioned why support was not available prior to lockdown. For me, these accounts reinforce the theme '*Build meaningful connections'* as it highlights the need for improved home-school communication and partnership-working.

5.6.2. Theme two: Wellbeing over data

Several parents wrote about the need to prioritise wellbeing over a "data driven" approach. To attend more consistently, parents reported the need for school staff to understand their child's difficulties more fully by hearing their voice and including them in decisions. This theme consists of two subthemes (Figure 5.27).

Figure 5.27

Thematic Map of Theme Two, RQ2.2
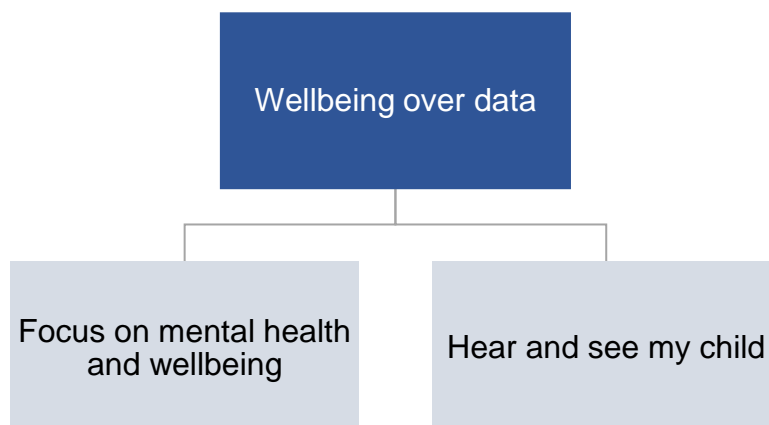
Subtheme: Focus on mental health and wellbeing

This subtheme emphasises the need to look beyond attendance data. Parents reported how schools need to "re-evaluate their priorities" (P75) when it comes to attendance and place their child's welfare above the need to maintain their attendance figures. Parents' accounts seemed to suggest that schools do not always recognise children's mental health as a factor in SNA. As such, parents wrote about the need for educators to re-examine the way they view mental health difficulties and avoid viewing it as different to physical health. These findings are consistent with recent research by Finning et al. (2019b) who suggest that educational professionals should be aware that poor attendance may be a sign of mental health difficulties. Finning et al. (2019b, p.197) also state that "absence may provide a useful tool to identify those who require additional mental health support". Indeed, research demonstrates the association between emotional difficulties and absence from schools, thus, these findings align with the view that greater awareness amongst school staff is needed (Finning et al., 2020; Lawrence et al., 2019).

Subtheme: Hear and see my child

Parents also wrote about the need for schools to listen, hear, and acknowledge their child's concerns and feelings. One parent noted that school staff "should listen to the child when they voice their reasons for not being able to attend and what they need to change." (P104). Another parent noted that staff can sometimes take a generic approach to the situation, indicating that support was not authentic. These findings are consistent with research reporting children's views. For instance, Rees et al. (2013) found that older children did not feel listened to, lacked trust, and did not feel comfortable discussing their attendance difficulties with their teachers. While Bishop and Baker (2015) found that children believed their voices were often ignored when support was needed.

To improve support for children, parents wrote about the need for children to feel valued in school. To achieve this, a more holistic and child-centric approach should be taken by staff:

> Firstly, they could make him feel wanted and valued by speaking to him. They could hear him and understand that he doesn't want to feel this way, he doesn't choose to have panic attacks (P273).

These findings align with Nuttall and Woods' (2013) study that found young people experiencing non-attendance wanted to feel valued and heard at school. Since the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (United Nations, 1989), pupil voice has become central to educational policy and practice and acknowledges the duty of professionals in involving children in decisions that affect them (Atkinson & Rowley, 2019). However, providing opportunities to elicit views becomes less accessible for children who are not attending school (Beckles, 2014). Despite this, Billington (2018) emphasises the need for adults to be aware of children's individual subjective experiences. Parents views in this study appear to echo Billington's (2018) findings that eliciting children's views is needed if effective reintegration into school is to be achieved.

5.6.3. Theme three: Improve whole school understanding

This theme captures participants' comments about the need for greater whole school understanding of children's attendance difficulties. This theme consists of three subthemes (Figure 5.28).

Figure 5.28

Thematic Map of Theme Three, RQ2.2
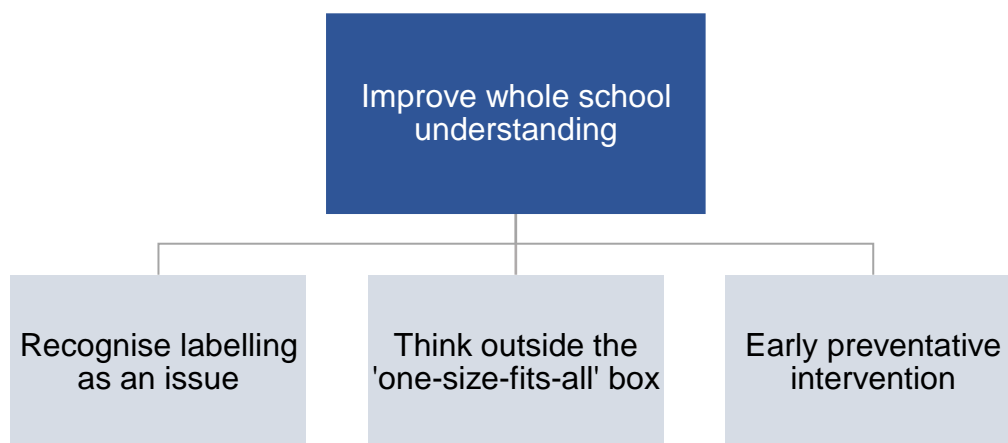
Subtheme: Recognise labelling as an issue

Several parents reported how non-attendance should not be labelled as 'refusal'. While many parents used the term 'refusal' in their written accounts, other parents openly wrote about the need to look beyond this label to avoid viewing non-attendance as a choice. For example, P26 wrote: "it shouldn't be called refusal and the school shouldn't put more pressure on the child or parents...both make everything far worse". Echoing this, P34 recognised preconceived assumptions that are attached to the word 'refusal': "the label school refusal has such stigma...the kids don't choose to refuse".

There is limited research exploring parents' views on the use of labels for non-attendance. However, parents' reports here are in line with the views of young people in Baker and Bishop's (2015) study who recognised the importance of language and the negativity associated with terms such as 'refuser'. Baker and Bishop (2015, p. 365) use an analogy of how unacceptable it would be to use the term "work refuser" for adults who are absent from work due to a mental health difficulty. This is a useful analogy as it mirrors several parents' views in this study. This finding elaborates on the tensions associated with labelling SNA and provides useful insight into the issue, especially given that research has suggested the labels assigned to pupils can impact the support and intervention they receive (Torrens Armstrong et al., 2011).

Subtheme: Think outside the 'one size fits all' box

Parents' wrote about how schools should look beyond the one-size-fits-all rhetoric. Several parents explicitly referred to the term "one size doesn't fit all" (P77) when describing how staff should not treat all children the same. Some parents again referred to how the lockdown might act as a catalyst for change: "hopefully the one size fits all education system we currently have will change after all this" (P133). In line with findings from RQ1, some parents acknowledged the need to address the limited understanding of masking in children with ASD by providing more training so that staff are better able to recognise masking behaviours. In addition, parents would like teachers to recognise that an academically able child or a child who displays

"good behaviour and quiet demeanour" (P53) does not always equate to a child who is happy in school. This would suggest that there is a need for more individualised approaches to address SNA, which is widely recognised as good practice, particularly for children with ASD (Preece & Howley, 2018). Given that there is limited research exploring the association between ASD, masking, and non-attendance, these findings have added further insight to existing literature.

Subtheme: Early preventative intervention

In line with existing research, parents wrote about the need to recognise and address the problem of non-attendance early on (Havik et al., 2014; Pellegrini, 2007). Parents described experiences of limited early support for their child and, in hindsight, intervening earlier would have made all the difference. Many parents echoed the following comment that "support needs to be there as soon as the problems start" (P213) and parents believed their situation could have been avoided if support was provided when difficulties first arose. For example, "I am angry that we didn't receive more support at the beginning when all of this could have been nipped in the bud" (P44). It seems from parents' accounts that limited understanding of the problem prevents this early response. Baker and Bishop (2015, p.366) suggest that a "swift but individually tailored response" is necessary to promote positive outcomes for SNA. While the DfE (2016) state that schools are responsible for acting early to address patterns of absence. Early identification is integral to the model of successful reintegration proposed by Nuttall and Woods (2013), and as such, the findings from this study align with these recommendations and further illustrate the negative implications of not taking such an approach.

5.6.4. Theme Four: The whole system needs fixing

The final theme captures parents' comments about the need to improve wider systemic issues associated with non-attendance. This theme consists of two subthemes (Figure 5.29).

Figure 5.29

Thematic Map of Theme Four, RQ2.2
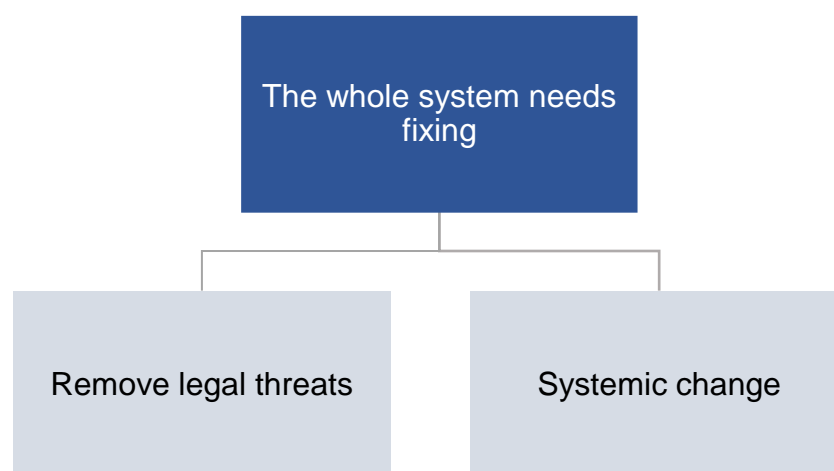
Subtheme: Remove legal threats

Several parents' accounts focused on the inappropriateness of legal threats for non-attendance, which mirrors findings from RQ2.1. There was a sense of conflict in P88's comment about being supported by the same members of staff who initiate the prosecution process: "If they could take away the fear of prosecution. How can they support you when they are the ones who report you?". To improve these negative experiences, several parents suggested the prosecution process needs modifying:

> LAs should not have the power to prosecute, this should be an independent organisation and parents of children not attending due to mental health / disabilities should not be prosecuted but alternative options offered which are easier to obtain than an EHCP (P102).

Here, P102 raises the point that children experiencing non-attendance due to mental health difficulties should not be prosecuted. In this way, the issue of labelling and the dichotomy between 'authorised' and 'unauthorised' non-attendance is again raised. These findings suggest legal threats create tensions between home and school which would prevent positive relationships and meaningful connections being formed (as in Theme one). The views of parents suggest that they have not experienced any positive impact from the use of fines. This indicates a need to look beyond their use and to consider the individual nature of non-attendance cases (Mortimer, 2018; Nuttall & Woods, 2013).

[Signpost to reflexive account 5]

Subtheme: Systemic change

Several parents referred to systemic change and 'fixing the system'. Some parents wrote about school accountability in relation to the decisions schools make and the need for attendance policy to adapt to reflect the complexities involved. One parent who experienced a lack of support at the early stages attributed this to the effects of a disjointed and difficult to navigate system: "the system is completely disjointed and everything takes far too long. We spent years battling to get the help we need" (P223). Similarly, another parent commented that the "whole system is broken" and that there "needs to be more awareness, less parent blaming and more accountability of schools who are failing children" (P102).

These views reflect a shift away from a within-child perspective and echoes existing research that identifies non-attendance as a multi-factorial problem (Kearney, 2008). These findings can also be situated within Bronfenbrenner and Morris' (2006) model as government attendance policy and wider education systems are represented parts of a child's exosystem and macrosystem (Melvin et al., 2019). Several parents perceived these wider influences and systems to negatively impact on their child's ability to attend school and the support they receive, and as such, emphasised the need for systemic change.

[Signpost to reflexive account 6]

5.7. Chapter summary

The findings in this chapter provide some insight into the complex nature of non-attendance and parents' varied views on the barriers to attendance. Parents' views on the support received also varied. Echoing existing research (e.g. Dannow et al., 2019; Malcolm et al., 2003) parents placed emphasis on school-related factors as barriers to their child's school attendance. Other factors identified can be viewed as individual factors (physical and medical needs), family factors (divorce and home circumstances), and wider systemic factors (the education system and government policy). As such, these findings also support existing research (e.g. Gren-Landell et

al., 2015; Ingul et al., 2019). While some parents reported having a 'constant battle' with regards to support, others reported a positive and caring approach to their situation. Most parents (76%) reported that they believed support for non-attendance could be improved. Relationships and home-school partnerships were viewed as important. These findings support existing literature that indicates that cases of non-attendance require an individualised, child-centred approach to the problem (Nuttall & Woods, 2013; Pellegrini, 2007).

In this chapter, I have explored the findings that address the RQs for study one. I have considered these findings within the existing literature. In the next section I will explore the link between the two studies which then leads on to the next chapter where I will explore the methodology chosen for study two.

This thesis is divided into two separate but linked studies (Figure 5.30). In study one, I explored parental perspectives of SNA and their experiences of support. I gained a broad, wide-angle perspective of parents' experiences. I aimed to build on these findings to develop semi-structured interviews with school staff in study two. Study one informed two major parts of study two: the participant sample and the research questions. I will now explore these in more detail.

Figure 5.30

Overview of the Link Between the Two Studies
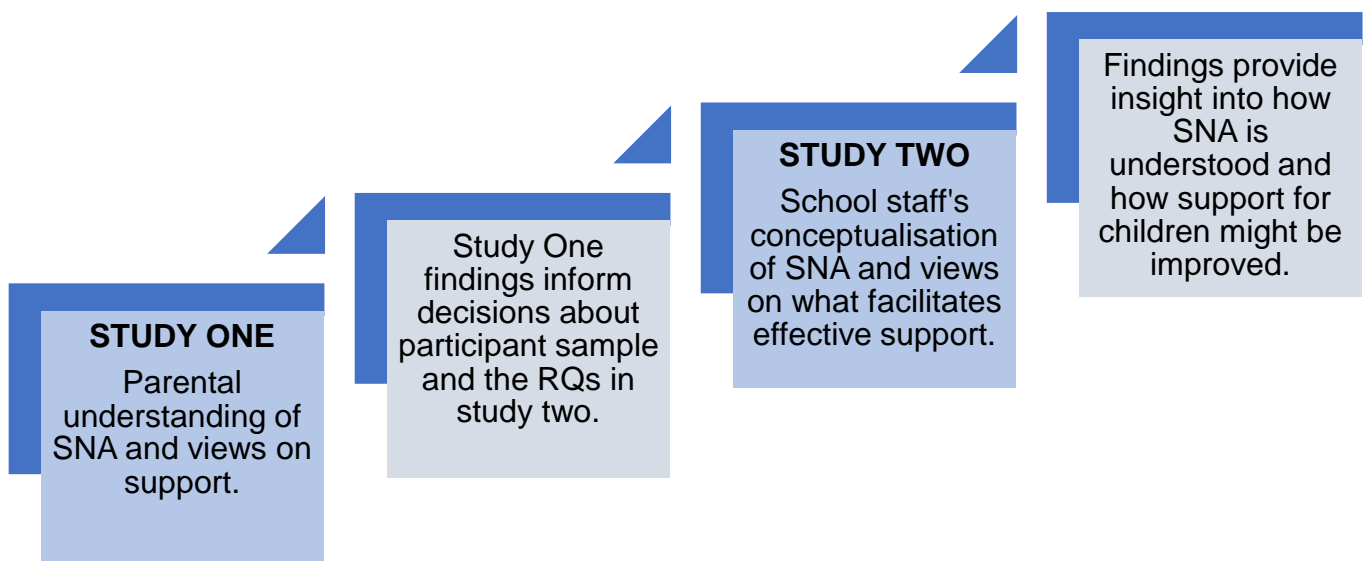
5.8.1. Participant Sample

Study one helped me decide who to recruit in study two. I decided that pastoral staff either in a managerial or non-managerial position would be most appropriate, owing to parents' acknowledgement of the key role of pastoral support for non-attendance (RQ2.1, Theme One). For instance, the findings within the subthemes "bridge the gap between home and school" and "focus on mental health and wellbeing" position pastoral staff as facilitators of this type of support. Additionally, existing research has tended to overlook an exploration of the views of non-teaching staff who play important roles in identifying and supporting SNA (Finning et al., 2020). Therefore, I decided to recruit school staff who were employed within a pastoral care role.

The second decision concerning participant sample was whether to recruit from primary or secondary schools. 59% of parents in study one reported that their child first experienced attendance difficulties in secondary school. Though, I acknowledge that these findings are limited to the sample of 289 respondents and not necessarily generalisable to the population. Attendance difficulties tend to be more complex and difficult to address at secondary age level and it has been reported that the mental health of secondary school pupils has been declining in recent years (Finning et al., 2020). Therefore, for these reasons, I chose secondary school staff as my target group.

5.8.2. Research Questions and Methods

Study one also helped me re-focus and develop my research questions for study two. I aimed to elicit pastoral staff's views on the role of school factors in SNA (RQ1.2). This was because parents attributed school factors to be the greatest influence on their child's non-attendance (Figure 5.5). Also, previous research has found that teachers underplay the importance of school factors (e.g. Gregory and Purcell, 2014; Dannow et al., 2018). Thus, I wanted to gather insight into pastoral staff's views to supplement this existing research. I explored the school factors raised by parents in the form of a card sort. The interview schedule was also based upon exploration of the data from study one (further explanation of this in section 6.6).

Chapter Six: Study Two Methodology

In this chapter, I will provide an in-depth exploration of the research design for study two, including participant recruitment, methods of data collection, and the rationale for the methods used. I will also explore ethical considerations, including those related to conducting online interviews.

6.1. Research Design

In this study, I use qualitative methods to address the aims and generate an understanding of the views of pastoral school staff in secondary school settings (Figure 6.1). I conducted online interviews with school staff to explore their understanding and views of SNA.

Figure 6.1

Research Design for Study Two
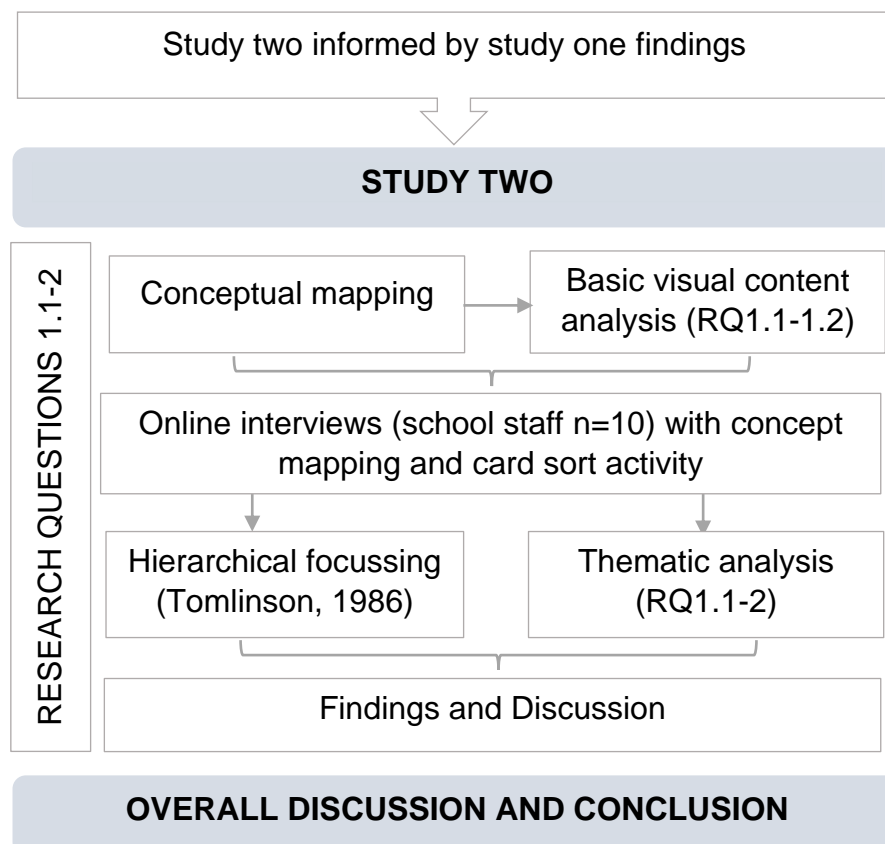
6.2. Participants

6.2.1. Participant Sample

As discussed in section 5.8.1, the target population for study two was defined as secondary school staff in a pastoral role with current or recent experience supporting students with school attendance difficulties. I aimed to recruit staff from either mainstream or specialist settings as I wanted to gain insight into experienced staff's perspectives in a way that might inform future practice. Staff with pastoral responsibilities, including Special Educational Needs Coordinators (SENCOs), pastoral managers, and attendance officers were chosen as the target population. These groups of staff have been overlooked in the existing literature on SNA (Finning et al., 2018). I was mindful that I might be limiting study two by excluding teachers and focusing on such a small group of staff members. However, a key theme from the analysis in study one was that parents valued pastoral input and trusting relationships between themselves, school staff, and their child (see section 5.6.1). The focus on teaching staff in the existing literature and the paucity of research involving staff in pastoral roles provides further rationale for my decision about the participant sample (Finning et al., 2019).

6.2.2. Recruiting School Staff

School staff were recruited from secondary schools within the UK (Figure 6.2). I made use of professional contacts and colleagues to recruit participants using purposive sampling (Patton, 2002). A research information sheet (Appendix T) was circulated via email to schools that I currently work with as a trainee EP. Interested participants were able to contact me for further information and to volunteer their participation, if they desired. I also circulated the information sheet to colleagues who worked within or with other secondary schools. I chose not to limit my participant recruitment to one local authority area to reduce potential bias towards one educational location. I also used the same Facebook group, 'Not Fine in School' (as this group is also open to professionals) following the same procedure detailed in study one. I recruited ten participants for online interviews. Interviews took place

across a four-week time frame from June to July 2020. All interviews lasted between 55 and 70 minutes. Participants were either at their home or at their place of work in a private room. Interviews were audio recorded using an audio recorder and transcribed within a few days of the interview taking place (See Appendix U for reflections).

Figure 6.2

Participant Recruitment Procedure

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                    ┌─────────────────────────┐
                    │    Ethical approval     │
                    │  granted on April 20th  │
                    └─────────────────────────┘
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Route 1: Email to secondary school SENCos within current EP service.	**Route 2**: Email to colleagues with study information sheet.	**Route 3**: Post on "Not fine in school" Facebook group aimed at professionals. Re-post on group after 1 week.

Await reply and follow up with phone call if needed.	Colleagues send out information sheet to most appropriate person in their schools.	Await contact from potential participants.

Arrange online interviews via Zoom as appropriate time for participants.

6.2.3. Sample Size

An important consideration in qualitative research is sample size. The issue about sample size is widely and continually debated in qualitative research (Terry et al., 2017) and according to Patton (2002), there is no recommended set number of participants for qualitative inquiry. As a researcher using reflexive TA, I recognise

that my interpretation and analysis of the data is likely to be different from another researcher's interpretation. Indeed, knowledge is being actively created from my own unique interpretation of the data (Malterud et al., 2016). Therefore, the issue of data saturation does not need to be considered as it is more compatible with other versions of TA (Braun et al., 2019). Braun and Clarke (2013) and Terry et al. (2017) both recommend a sample size of between 6-15 for a Professional Doctoral level research project that utilises interviews. Given the timescale and scope of the current research, and my use of reflexive TA, a sample size of ten participants was considered appropriate. Table 6.1 provides further information about the participants in this study. In total, there were seven different school represented in this study. Participant 1 and 3 worked at the same school, as did participants 7, 9 and 10.

Table 6.1

Participant information

Participant	Job role	School type	Recruitment procedure	Concept map	Card sort
1	Student Support Manager	Specialist	Local Authority (Route 2)	Yes	Yes
2	Pastoral Manager (recently retired)	Mainstream	Facebook (route 3)	Yes	Yes
3	Pastoral Support Manager	Specialist	Local Authority (Route 2)	Yes	Yes
4	Head of Additional Learning Support	Specialist	Facebook (Route 3)	No	Yes
5	Family Liaison Officer	Mainstream	Facebook (Route 3)	Yes	Yes
6	Attendance Officer (KS2)	Mainstream	Local Authority (Route 2)	Yes	Yes
7	Pastoral Lead (KS3)	Mainstream	Local Authority (Route 1)	Yes	Yes
8	Head of Year 8	Mainstream	Local Authority (Route 2)	Yes	Yes
9	Vice Principal (Attendance Lead)	Mainstream	Local Authority (Route 1)	No	Yes
10	Attendance Officer (KS3)	Mainstream	Local Authority (Route 1)	No	Yes

6.3. Study Two Methods

6.3.1. Semi-structured Interviews

Interviews allow for flexibility in approach, and for rich in-depth data to be gained (Robson, 2011). In addition, as part of the interview, I asked participants to complete a concept map activity prior to meeting with me online (see section 6.7). The interview also incorporated a Diamond 9 card sort (see section 6.8). I used a semi-structured interview schedule which allowed for follow up questions and deeper exploration of the topic (Robson, 2011). A semi-structured approach prevents participants' meaning being lost as they are given opportunity to lead the discussion (Fylan, 2005; Galletta, 2013). Semi-structured interviews also allow the researcher to build rapport with the participant and probe points that participants bring to the discussion by following their insights and ideas while not restricting the discussion. For these reasons, and in line with my pragmatic approach, I planned questions using hierarchical focusing (Tomlinson, 1989) which allowed me to prepare and feel more competent and allowed the participants to discuss the topic in their own terms (Cohen, et al., 2018)

6.3.2. Doing Online Interviews

The interviews were conducted online via an online video conferencing platform called Zoom Video Communications Inc. (Archibald et al., 2019; Zoom Video Communications Inc., 2016). Zoom is an online video conferencing system which is compliant with University of Exeter's Information Governance policies and GDPR. Online interviews can create unique challenges and provoke important considerations in research (Lo Iacono et al., 2016). Nehls et al. (2014) posit that online interviews should be viewed as a viable option for data collection and not as a secondary alternative; they are a convenient, cost-efficient, and an accessible alternative to face-to-face interviews (Gray et al., 2020). Furthermore, online platforms can allow access to participants who are not in the same locality as the researcher (Fielding, 2010), thus reducing bias in the sample. I chose Zoom as the online platform for interviews because it is accessible, widely used, and participants

did not need an account to use it (Fielding, 2010; Nehls, et al., 2014). Various researchers have found Zoom to be a positive experience for participants. Several advantages to this approach have been reported, notably:

- Its ease of use by participants and researcher (Gray et al., 2020).
- Its accessibility as it can be used on various devices and is not limited to a specific device or system (Horrell et al., 2015).
- Time saving abilities (not having to travel) (Deakin & Wakefield, 2013).
- Interviews can be stopped at any time and, arguably, this is seen as less intimidating than an in-person interview (Hai-Jew, 2015).

Importantly, research has found that when compared to face-to-face interviewing techniques, the quality of data obtained did not differ from online interviews (Cabaroglu et al., 2010; Deakin & Wakefield, 2013; Gray et al., 2020). The use of Zoom meant that the recruitment process was not limited to one geographical area and a broader recruitment approach could be taken (Archibald et al., 2019). In addition, thematic analysis does not rely on the nuances of the interaction between the researcher and the participant like some forms of discourse analysis, for example (Braun & Clarke, 2006) and thus, this method of data collection was deemed appropriate. The risks associated with conducting online interviews are explored further in Appendix V with details on how I addressed these potential concerns.

6.3.3. Building Rapport Online

As noted by Gray et al. (2020), online interviewing necessitates careful consideration of the issue of rapport-building because it will differ from face-to-face and could be more difficult to achieve (Cater, 2011). Barratt (2012) points out that good rapport between participants and researcher can yield richer data. Researchers using online methods also need technical skills to conduct successful online interviews (Rowe et al., 2014). Prior to online interviews taking place, I was in contact with participants through email which I believe helped build rapport (Deakin & Wakefield, 2013). Zoom also has screen-sharing function which can promote engagement and rapport (Archibald et al., 2019). During interviews, I shared the screen with participants to

display their concept maps. This gave participants the chance to lead and scaffold the discussion using their own ideas written on their concept maps. However, I was aware during online interviews that, as acknowledged by Wiederhold (2020), screen fatigue can sometimes be an issue. I planned for interviews to last approximately one hour and asked participants whether they would like a break at the start of interviews. Two pilot interviews were conducted to plan for and address these concerns, and any other difficulties that may have arisen (see section 6.9).

6.4. Constructing the Interview Schedule

I used Tomlinson's (1989) hierarchical focusing approach to guide the development of the interview schedule. Hierarchical focusing allows flexibility in exploring participants' own experiences and perspectives and to explore topics of interest that may not have been initiated by the participant. This approach ensured that the interview schedule was linked to my aims and research questions, while also allowing flexibility to elicit participants' own perspectives. This approach aligned well with the aims and pragmatic assumptions of my research. I recognise that my own assumptions, experiences, and knowledge will play a part in this research, yet during the interview stage I wanted to allow participants to express their views and experiences of non-attendance freely by not overly imposing my own constructions, prior knowledge, or assumptions.

The aims for this study were to elicit certain aspects of participants' perspectives and experiences of children's SNA. For example, how participants viewed school factors played a part in non-attendance (RQ1.2). An unstructured interview approach was therefore not considered appropriate to meet these aims as it would not allow for an exploration of these specific areas. Likewise, structured interviews would likely have limited participants' exploration of their novel views on SNA (Smith & Osborn, 2008). Appendix W and Appendix X provide details about the procedure taken when developing the interview schedule following Tomlinson's (1989) stages. The final interview schedule is provided in Appendix Y.

The wording of interview questions is an important consideration in research as poorly worded questions can affect rapport-building and lead to reduced data quality

(Braun & Clarke, 2006). To address this concern, I piloted the interview schedule with two participants. I was also aware of the potential for social desirability bias from interview data. Braun and Clarke (2006) argue that this may yield less useful data. However, this social desirability bias can be minimised and I followed the procedures as recommended by Bergan & Labonté (2020):

- Encouraged participants to base themselves in a private room away from others.
- Prioritised rapport-building at the start of interviews to help participations feel more at ease.
- Re-iterated the nature of the study, how data would be used, and the confidential nature of the data.
- Asked follow-up questions or prompted further response.
- Asked participants to provide examples where appropriate to further illustrate their responses.

6.5. Conceptual Mapping as a Data Collection Tool

The aim of the concept map task (see Appendix Z for participant instructions) was to elicit participants' understanding SNA prior to meeting with me online. I then allowed participants time and space to explore their maps, during which I facilitated discussions and asked follow-up questions where necessary with the aim of answering RQ1.1: *How do school staff conceptualise and make sense of school non-attendance?* (An example of a completed map provided in Figure 6.3). I asked participants to email a copy of their maps to me prior to the day of the interview. This gave me time to explore their ideas before commencing interviews and for me to share their map via the screen-sharing too. Seven out of the ten participants completed concept maps (See Appendix AA).

Figure 6.3

Example Concept Map Drawn by Participant 2
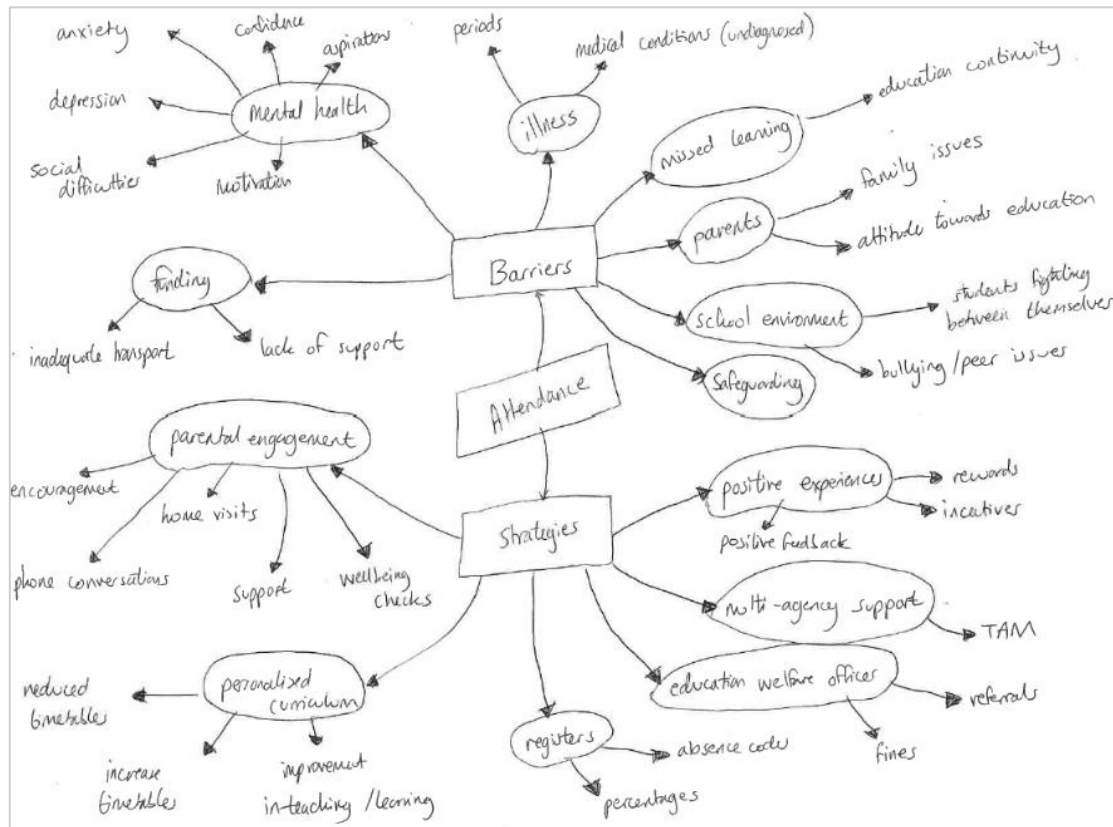
6.5.1. Rationale for Using Concept Maps

Concept maps were first used by Stewart et al. (1979) and allow participants to visually represent concepts and relationships of a chosen topic (Wheeldon & Faubert, 2009). The aim was to use concept maps as a visual approach to elicit perspectives and understanding of SNA and act as a stimulus for dialogue between myself and the participant (Conceicao et al., 2017; Kandiko et al., 2013). As part of the concept mapping task, participants were able to use words, labelled concepts, hierarchies of concepts, visual or graphic representations to record their understanding of SNA (Wheeldon & Faubert, 2009). I chose this method of data collection because it allows participants to express their ideas in their own ways and they are ideally suited to qualitative research (Butler-Kisber & Poldma, 2010; Wheeldon & Faubert, 2009). They can also address researcher bias as participant

experiences and views are prioritised in a participant-led approach (Wheeldon & Ahlber, 2019).

Likewise, Hall and Wall (2019) posit that concept maps can provide an overview of participants' understanding of a topic and quickly elicit complex concepts. Initially, I provided structured and detailed instructions to participants in the pilot study. However, on reflection and having discussed the pilot study with my research supervisors, I decided to make the instructions less prescriptive. The maps were thus participant-led, and this less structured approach allowed participants to interpret their own idea of what a concept map would look like so that they had more ownership over their maps. The data from the concept maps and subsequent discussions were synthesised into the overall thematic analysis.

6.6. Diamond Ranking Card Sort

During the interview I shared my screen with each participant and asked them to carry out a Diamond ranking card sort activity (Figure 6.4). Diamond ranking originates from the 'Thinking Skills' tradition and allows researchers to elicit participants' concepts through open-ended discussions (Hall & Wall, 2019; Rockett & Percival, 2002). The card sort activity was presented on a Word document and participants were given control of the screen which enabled them to sort the 'cards' (text boxes) into their desired position using their own keypad or mouse. I presented 12 statements and asked participants to rank their top 9 with the most important at the top and least important at the bottom. Participants had to discard 3 of the statements. Once the sorting was complete, participants were given space and opportunity to explain their chosen positioning.

In line with my pragmatic approach, this card sorting activity was chosen as an appropriate method to meet the aims of the study and to further address RQ1.2. The statements on the cards presented to participants were developed from the findings from study one i.e. parents' views on the barriers to their child's attendance, and from the existing literature on SNA. However, it was made clear to participants that

they were free to add their own statements if they wished and did not have to use the cards provided. Figure 6.5 shows an example completed card sort.

I align with Clark's (2012) view that the discussion and reflection process after the ranking of cards is the most important feature of the tool, rather than the actual positioning of the statements. This represents a more open approach to the diamond ranking tool, whereas in a closed version the participants would be asked to simply rank 9 statements into 9 positions and then a numerical rank would be assigned (Hall & Wall, 2019). Participants were also not obligated to maintain the diamond shape template. One participant ended up positioning the statements into a pyramid shape. I incorporated the discussions that led from the ranking task into the overall thematic analysis.

Figure 6.4

Screenshot of the Shared Screen Showing the Template and Cards Used for the Diamond Ranking Card Sort

Figure 6.5

An Example of a Completed Card Sort Showing the Participant's (P7) Positioning of School Factors

6.6.1. Rationale for Using Card Sorts Online

Card sorting allows participants to rank statements into a diamond pattern according to how the statements represent their views and opinions (Bucknall, 2007). It represents a way to promote dialogue between researcher and participant about the ranking process, while promoting thinking about participants' views (Hall & Wall, 2019). It is useful for eliciting participants' constructs and facilitating discussion and works well alongside other data collection methods, such as interviews (Bucknall, 2007; Clark, 2012). Conrad and Tucker (2019) suggest that card sorts provoke deeper participant reflection during interviews. With these points in mind, I decided that diamond ranking was the most appropriate method to elicit participants' views about school-based factors that influence SNA.

6.7. Piloting the Interviews

The interviews were piloted with two participants to assess the efficacy of the data collection tools and to explore how the methods were experienced in the real world (Malmqvist et al., 2019). These pilot interviews provided a chance to test out the logistics and technical elements of online interviews and to practice my interviewing technique (Gray et al., 2020; Robson, 2002). Malmqvist et al. (2019) suggest that novice researchers benefit from conducting pilot studies because they will be better prepared for the challenges that may arise and more confident in using the chosen methods. I felt that this was particularly important as I had chosen two methods of data collection that I had not previously used in research: concept maps and card sorting.

Prior to meeting with participants online, I had arranged the date and time, and emailed participants with the Zoom link and the concept map instructions. Pilot participants were both recruited as detailed in section 6.4.2 and asked whether they would be willing to take part in the pilot study and then feedback. Consent was gathered as per detailed in section 6.12.2. Following the pilot interviews, I received valuable feedback and subsequently made some adaptations. I also reflected upon

the data gathered from the interview and the extent to which they addressed the research questions (Appendix BB and Appendix CC).

6.8. Transcribing the Interviews

All interviews were recorded using an audio-recording device. Recordings were named using an anonymous participant number and stored on a password-protected laptop. I personally transcribed the interviews as soon as possible which meant that they were still fresh in my mind and I was able to reflect on the interview experience. Braun and Clarke (2006) posit that transcription is an important part of qualitative research as the researcher chooses how to transcribe the audio data and it is an interpretative process. Transcription is a labour-intensive process but represented a critical part of the research process and analytical journey, and so, I felt compelled to transcribe the interviews myself (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

6.9. Method of Analysis

Interviews were analysed using the same reflexive thematic analysis approach as detailed in study one (see section 4.10). Thematic maps were also created as in study one (see Appendix DD). The flexibility of thematic analysis means that it is an appropriate method of analysis for different research designs (Braun & Clarke, 2019). It is important to note however, due to the different nature of the data in study two, some slight variations in the approach were taken. Appendix K provides the process taken this study. During transcription, I listened to the recording several times to immerse myself in the data. Data were analysed RQ-by-RQ. I printed off paper copies of the interview transcripts so I could highlight and make notes, beginning the initial coding by hand as I found I could immerse myself in the data more readily this way (Appendix EE for sample coded extract). Appendix FF provides details as per study one with regards to the analytic process. Figure 6.6 shows the overall procedure taken.

Figure 6.6

The Process of Data Analysis for Study Two

Study two: Data Analysis Procedure

↓

Transcription of online interviews

↓

Analysed using reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2019)

Diamond 9 card sort incorporated into overall analysis and, in line with Towler et al. (2011), analysis of rank positions presented as stacked bar chart.	Concept mapping relational, open approach analysed using basic visual content analysis and incorporated into analysis.

Write up of overall findings and discussion (section 7.1)

6.9.1. Diamond Ranking Analysis

The diamond ranking card sorts were analysed in two ways. Firstly, the discussions that led from the ranking exercise were incorporated into the overall thematic analysis. While, as previous discussed, the aim of this activity was to facilitate discussion, I also wanted to visually represent participants' chosen ranking positions for clarity (in line with previous research by Towler et al., 2011). The results of the diamond card sorts were calculated based on the rank given to each of the 9 statements (see template in Figure 6.7) and an overall visual representation of the ranking across all participants has been presented (see Figure 7.13). This provided an initial visual representation of findings prior to the qualitative exploration.

Figure 6.7

The Ranking Positions of Each Card Position
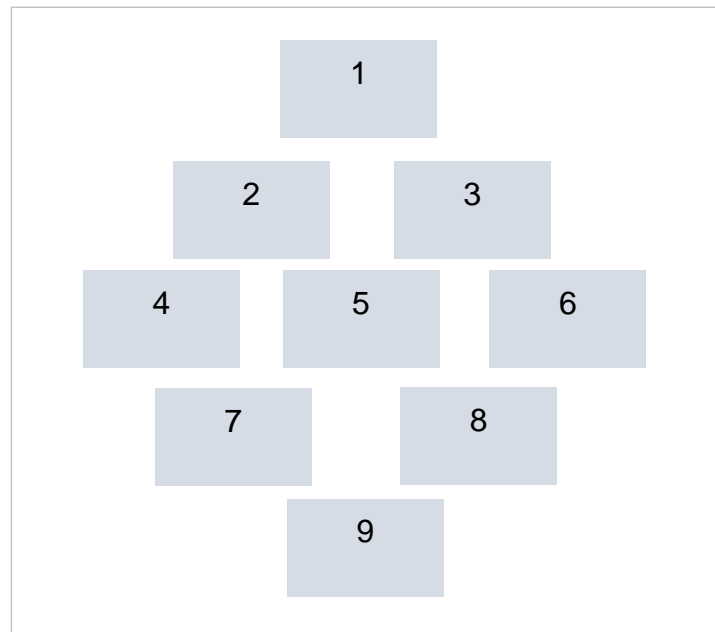
6.9.2. Concept Map Analysis

The content of the maps was analysed using a basic visual content analysis (Futch & Fine, 2014; Subramaniam & Esprívalo-Harrell, 2015). The participant-led discussions facilitated by the concept maps formed an important part of the interview and were incorporated into the overall thematic analysis of the data. The main purpose of using concept maps was to build rapport, facilitate discussion, and scaffold the interview. It was therefore decided that a basic visual content analysis was sufficient in capturing participants' views based on aims of the study. Screenshots of concept maps are provided throughout the discussion to maintain participant voice and provide a visual adjunct to the written analysis.

6.10. Ethical Considerations

As detailed in study one, this research was granted full ethical approval by the University of Exeter Ethical Committee on 20th April 2020 prior to starting the

research. Below, I will explore the additional ethical considerations that apply to study two.

6.10.1. Internet-mediated Research and Online Interviews

Internet-mediated research necessitates careful consideration of specific ethical issues (British Psychological Society, 2017). Gregory and Purcell (2015) state that SNA can be an emotive and sensitive topic for all involved, and this should not be underestimated when partaking in research with this group. As a researcher, it is paramount that the dignity and rights of the participants are fully considered and prioritised (Billington, 2018). I explore these considerations in the following paragraphs.

6.10.2. Participation Process

All participants were provided with an information sheet and consent forms prior to the online interviews taking place (Appendix T). The written information given to all participants included the study aims, what activities the participants will be involved in, and details about how they were able to withdraw at any time. Details were provided about the anonymous nature of participation and signed consent forms were returned to the researcher via email. Consent and privacy issues were re-visited and discussed with each participant prior to the start of the online interview. I used the screen sharing facility on Zoom to share the information and consent forms with participants. Participants were made aware that the online interview would last approximately one hour. This was reiterated verbally at the start and I checked that participants were happy with this.

All potential participants were given the opportunity to ask questions or clarify concerns. Participants were asked, prior to audio-recording, if they consented to being recorded. It was reiterated that the online interview would be audio-recorded only, and not recorded visually on screen. Audio files were transferred to a password protected computer, transcribed anonymously and then deleted. No identifiable information was included on the file or transcription.

[Signpost to reflexive account 7]

6.11. Chapter Summary

In this chapter, I have explored the research design and data collection methods for study two. I provided an exploration of the method of analysis and incorporation of the multiple data collection methods used. I have highlighted the rationale for the choices made and explored the ethical considerations involved.

In the next chapter, I will present the findings from study two, which are explored within existing literature and theory.

Chapter Seven: Study Two Findings and Discussion

In this chapter, I will present and discuss the findings for study two. Interviews with school staff were thematically analysed and findings will be presented RQ-by-RQ.

7.1. Research Question 1.1: Findings and Discussion

RQ1.1	How do school staff conceptualise and make sense of school non-attendance?

To address RQ1.1, I have included relevant screenshots of participants' concept maps that support the theme being discussed. It is worth noting that I regularly refer to participants' experiences of the COVID-19 lockdown as data was collected during this time. Figure 7.1 shows the overall thematic map for RQ1.1.

Figure 7.1

Overall Thematic Map of Themes and Subthemes for RQ1.1: Participants' Conceptualisation of SNA

subthemes marked by an asterisk (*) have not been reported in the write up.

School and classroom experiences	A vicious cycle of lost learning	The response to non-attendance	It's (also) about the parents	The inherent complexity of mental health
Engagement and motivation in learning	Missed opportunities and lost skills	Attendance as a red flag	Balancing parent responsibility	It can be debilitating
Positive school experiences		Looking for early signs	Parental attitudes to education	

7.1.1. Theme One: School and classroom experiences

Theme one captures participants' views about the nature of children's classroom experiences. Positive experiences in school were viewed as motivation for pupils to attend. This theme consists of two subthemes (Figure 7.2).

Figure 7.2

Thematic Map for Theme One, RQ1.1
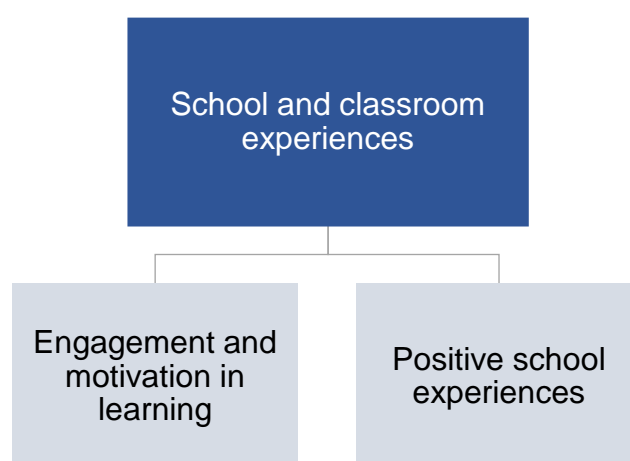
Subtheme: Engagement and motivation in learning

Participants talked about students' engagement in learning and the suitability of the curriculum and described the need for a more personalised curriculum for children experiencing non-attendance. Curriculum access was viewed as being key to promoting children's interest and motivation to attend school. P6 described the importance of curriculum access:

> … if children aren't able to access the curriculum because of learning difficulties or because they've missed certain things… that has a massive impact. If they feel like they can't do stuff, then they're not going to go in (P6).

Previous research has reported similar findings; an unsuitable curriculum and inappropriately pitched learning has been associated with 'chronic absence' (Van Eck et al., 2017). Participants also talked about prioritising access to the curriculum, which can only be achieved when students attend school. Concept maps from P1

and P7 show the terms 'personalised curriculum' and 'engaging students' as important factors when considering attendance (Figure 7.3).

Figure 7.3

Participants' Concept Maps Showing Learning Experiences as Key Concepts
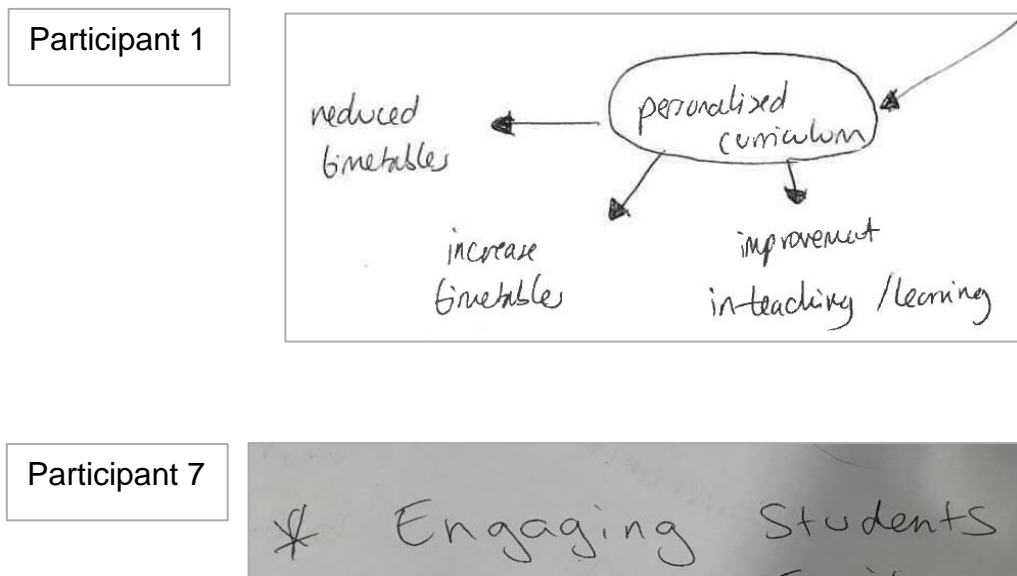
Participants further described instances where children's self-esteem may be affected if they are behind in their learning. Participants talked about how negative learning experiences and the presence of learning difficulties might impact a child's motivation to come into school:

> …we've got one boy who is, you know, literacy and numeracy is very, very low. We've had him for 6 years and he's never really attended properly (P7).

While these views might indicate a within-child perspective, they also highlight the recognition of the importance of inclusive education for all children. To address concerns regarding access to learning, P4 described the need for an interactive and interesting classroom experience:

> I think if they're interested in their courses. If their courses aren't just chalk and talk all the time, it has to be interactive (P4).

This suggests that participants perceive a child's engagement in learning and motivation to attend to be associated with teaching quality and the nature of the

curriculum. In parallel to these findings, Reid (2012) suggests that an inflexible, academic-focused curriculum can have negative impacts on attendance. Without inclusive education, children such as those who experience SNA may become even more marginalised (Beckles, 2014). Similarly, Finning et al. (2020) found secondary school practitioners viewed an unsuitable curriculum and the inability to tailor to individual students' needs as risk factors for non-attendance. It is interesting to note that participants tended to focus on the suitability of teaching and learning as risk factors for non-attendance, as oppose to individual within-child factors, such as a child's disengagement in learning due to their academic ability or other non-school factors (Lyon & Cotler, 2007).

Learning from lockdown. In relation to lockdown, several participants described the positive impact it had on the ability to tailor learning to individuals and improve pupil engagement. P9 described how the situation allowed for more individualised approaches to learning because there were fewer students in school. In this way, one student's school experience had significantly improved:

> We've got 45 vulnerable year 10s in 5 days a week…out of those 40 students, there's one particular boy… the fundamental reason [for non-attendance] is that he can't read, so this has been the perfect opportunity for us to literally give him a teaching assistant for an hour a day… he just reads and read, and actually, the impact it's having on him in terms of his self-esteem…it's really, really powerful (P9).

These comments are unique to lockdown but highlight the powerful impact of individualised approaches to children's learning. Similar findings are reported by Beckles (2014) where staff participants reported that children with special educational needs (SEN) or undiagnosed difficulties often experience barriers to curriculum access which impacts their motivation and, subsequently, their non-attendance. Previous research into children's views on non-attendance have similarly reported that they felt unmotivated when they perceived school as boring or too difficult (Beckles, 2014; Reid, et al., 2010).

Subtheme: Positive school experiences

It was evident from school staff's discussions that pupils are motivated to attend only when they feel valued and respected in school. To feel valued, participants

highlighted the importance of fostering positive school experiences. This can be achieved by building meaningful "relationships with peers and staff" (P9) where interactions are "based on empathy and compassion" (P4). Without these key experiences, participants viewed the potential for children's attendance to become problematic. School life was discussed by participants as something that should not only be about learning and exam results, but also about supporting children to feel like they are "getting a good deal" (P9). One participant suggested that positive experiences are key to engaging children and promoting attendance from the start of secondary school because "you've got a captive audience in year 7 and 8" (P8). By maintaining a consistent positive approach, P8 described how pupils would continue to be engaged in school by the end of year 11.

Feeling valued, respected, and safe in school featured on three of the concept maps drawn by participants (example in Figure 7.4).

Figure 7.4

Concept Map Drawn by P3 Showing Concepts of Respect and Safety

Further to this, "rewards" and "relationships" were mentioned on six of the concept maps and represents central concepts in participants' understanding of non-attendance (Figure 7.5).

Figure 7.5

Concept Maps Showing Positive Experiences as a Central Concept for Participants
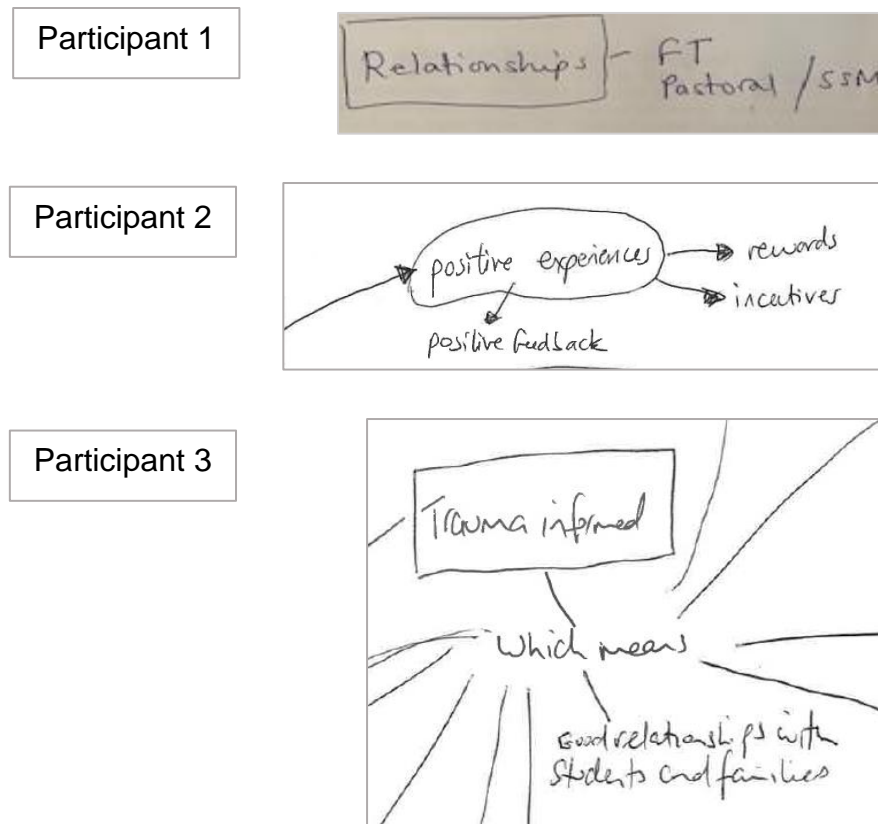
P5 talked about how children need a nurturing environment where there is "someone they can trust in the classroom". Participants across the study shared this narrative with the power of "positive relationships with staff" (P2) and connections with peers being described as key to positive school experiences. These views are consistent with research that has shown poor relationships between staff and students to be a risk factor for poor attendance (Egger et al., 2003; Finning et al., 2020). These findings highlight how pastoral staff in this study recognise the importance of positive relationships in schools and other school-based experiences. In contrast, previous research involving teachers has reported they underplay the importance of school-based factors in cases of non-attendance (Dannow et al., 2020; Gren-Landell et al., 2015). School staff in Finning et al.'s (2020, p. 22) study "went one step further, with Groups One and Three concluding that they do not believe school contributes to the problem [of SNA] for the majority of pupils". These discrepancies indicate the need for further exploration of the views of school staff on non-attendance. Findings in the

current study might also indicate the important role pastoral staff play in supporting children experiencing non-attendance and the potential for them to raise awareness of the issue in schools.

Learning from lockdown. Several participants described how lockdown had highlighted the difficulties some children experience at home and hence further emphasising the need to prioritise positive relationships in school. In these cases, school acted as a safe place for children:

> The students that are attending [during lockdown], the alternative for them at home is horrendous, so it is a place they feel safe and secure, they feel they've got positive relationships…they find it's a very different experience than they have at home (P7).

Lockdown was also discussed by P6 who talked about maintaining relationships with pupils while they are at home so that when they return to school "they've still got those relationships with people and it hasn't been a complete break". P2 described how some students seemed to be more "willing to come in" during lockdown and that the situation had "opened their eyes to a lot" because students realised that they can "talk to members of staff or another student*"* about difficult situations at home. This further indicates the importance of positive staff-pupil relationships. This importance has perhaps been emphasised because of the COVID-19 pandemic.

7.1.2 Theme two: A vicious cycle of lost learning

Participants conceptualised SNA in terms of a negative cycle of lost learning where missed education can result in longer term implications (Figure 7.6). Participants described how non-attendance will not only impact pupils' academic learning and progression but also their "softer skills" (P5) like social interactions, relationships, and their identity development.

Figure 7.6

Thematic Map for Theme Two, RQ1.1

Subtheme: Missed opportunities and lost skills

The concept of "missed learning" featured on three of the participants' concept maps (examples shown in Figure 7.7). Participants talked about children missing out on "the basics" (P5) and not having access to support that is only available within school. P8 regarded these gaps in knowledge and learning as "the biggest thing you've got to overcome" (P8).

Figure 7.7

Participant Concept Maps Showing 'Missed Learning' as a Key Concept
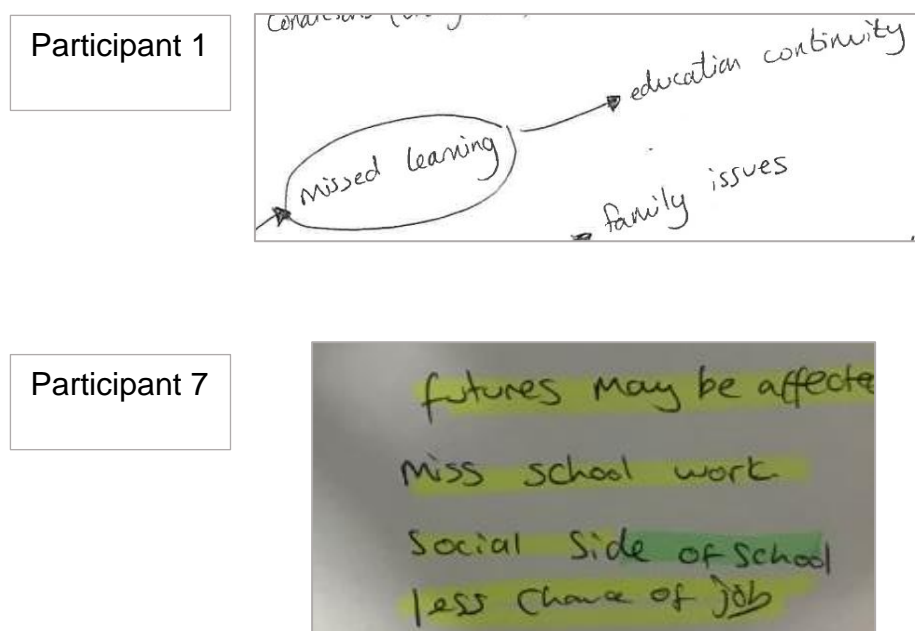
Participants described limited social skills development for children who are not attending. The impacts of this lost learning were perceived by P10 as being a vicious cycle:

> They weren't getting the learning that they needed to be able to get better, well enough and strong enough to then come back into school. They've missed so much. It's like a vicious cycle (P10).

Participants also discussed school absence in terms of missed skill development for learning and for furture career progression. This was especially true in terms of numeracy and literacy skills which were seen as "the basics for attaining those other subjects" (P5). Non-attendance was also described as impacting children "later on in life" (P7) because of these missed opportunities. Children who are not attending are missing out on the "chance to interact and have those social skills, if they're only at home with parents" (P7).

These findings resonate with the current reported impacts of the pandemic on children's attendance at school. As I write this thesis, many schools are experiencing disruption and further negative impacts of the pandemic on children's attendance due to self-isolation requirements (Appendix HH). The current study thus provides a timely and insightful exploration into the views and experiences of school staff during the pandemic.

7.1.3. Theme Three: The response to non-attendance

This theme captures participants' discussions about how non-attendance is addressed in their schools. Participants discussed the need to look for early signs of non-attendance and to see attendance as a 'red flag' for other difficulties in a child's life (Figure 7.8).

Figure 7.8

Thematic Map for Theme Three, RQ1.1
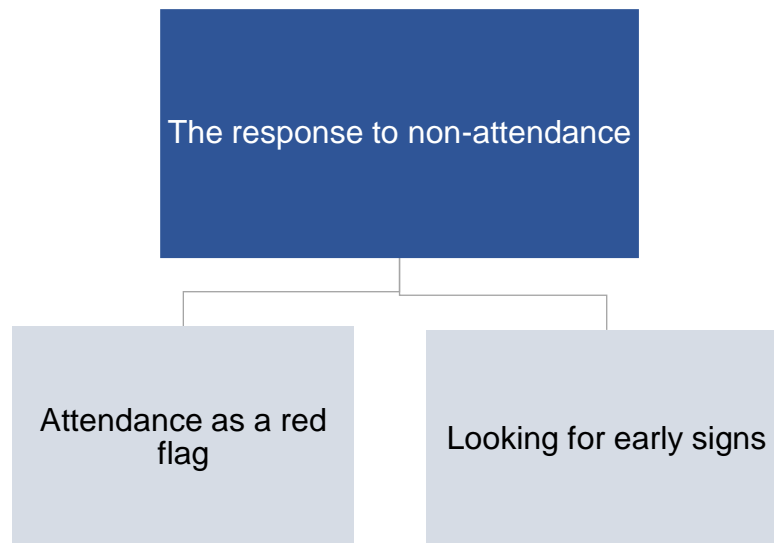
Subtheme: Attendance as a red flag

This subtheme represents participants' discussions around the wider significance of children's attendance patterns and how it can be the "number one signpost that things aren't well" (P7). This, according to some participants, can include safeguarding concerns. In this way, attendance was viewed as a 'red flag'. Further echoing these findings, P8 discussed how attendance issues are "a big sign of how home life is structured". Participants also described non-attendance as being a sign of significant problems such as "being involved in drugs" and how it could be caused by problems in a child's life outside of school. These findings are consistent with research by Gren-Landell et al. (2015) and Finning et al. (2020) who reported educational practitioners' recognition of difficult home life and conflict at home as being risk factors for non-attendance. These experiences may also be understood within Bronfenbrenner and Morris' (2006) ecological model as family factors form part of children's micro- and meso- systems. Tobias (2019, p. 30) used a grounded theory approach in a small-scale study with family coaches and similarly found that participants believed 'persistent school non-attendance' indicated a child felt unsafe and represents one way that children can "raise a red flag to show their distress".

The current findings support this view and suggest pastoral staff may be well placed to recognise these 'red flags' early on.
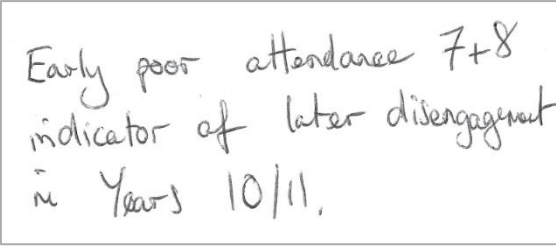
Subtheme: Looking for early signs

Participants discussed the importance of looking for early signs of non-attendance. This concept featured on five concept maps. The use of data and recording systems to monitor and track attendance was identified as key to successfully recognising these early signs. These views coincide with research by Kearney and Graczyk (2014) who advocate for a systems-level approach to attendance that is based on examining patterns in attendance data to identity students who may be at risk of absenteeism.

Further, several participants discussed how non-attendance in the earlier years of school can indicate more serious problems developing in later years (e.g. Figure 7.9).

Figure 7.9

Participant 8's Concept Map Showing the Importance of Early Non-Attendance

Participants discussed how these early patterns of attendance "in primary school or lower down" (P7), if unaddressed, can cause later difficulties. Similarly existing research advocates an early response to non-attendance as it can increase the potential for a successful return to school (Elliott & Place, 2012). Finning et al. (2018) equally found that educational practitioners recognised the need for early intervention. Pastoral staff views in this study also echo parents' views on the need for early responses to non-attendance in study one. However, parents also viewed there to be a lack of early intervention for their child's non-attendance which might indicate that in practice responding early is a challenging endeavour for school staff.

These discrepancies might be explained by the restrictive nature of attendance policies (as reported in section 7.3.4.). Participants described having limited power to adapt school policies and tailor support to individuals' needs. These views were reflected in P3's belief that in mainstream schools "there's a lot of red tape that you've got to adhere to, to actually help that individual student". These restrictions were described by P1 as being quite frustrating because the important decisions being made were out of their hands:

> We were kind of way down here doing the really important stuff but felt that everything was being decided way up the line.

Similarly, participants commented on the lack of "time and resources, and people" (P3) to meet needs of children with poor attendance early on. This is in line with findings from Finning et al. (2020) who found that practitioners viewed limited resources as a key challenge. These findings indicate the need for pastoral staff to work in collaboration with policymakers and senior leadership teams when addressing attendance difficulties. [Signpost to reflexive account 8]

7.1.4. Theme Four: It's (also) about the parents

Theme five captures participants' views that SNA is not just about the pupils themselves, but also wider familial and parental influences: "I do honestly think that non-attendance is not just about the student" (P1). This theme consists of two subthemes (Figure 7.10).

Figure 7.10

Thematic Map for Theme Four, RQ1.1
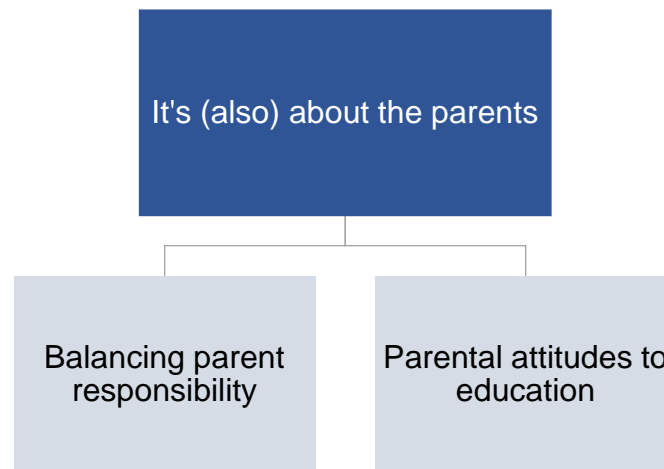
Within participants' concept maps, the term "parenting" or "parents" was referred to on six maps (Examples shown in Figure 7.11).

Figure 7.11

Participants' Concept Maps Showing "Parents" as Factors in Non-Attendance
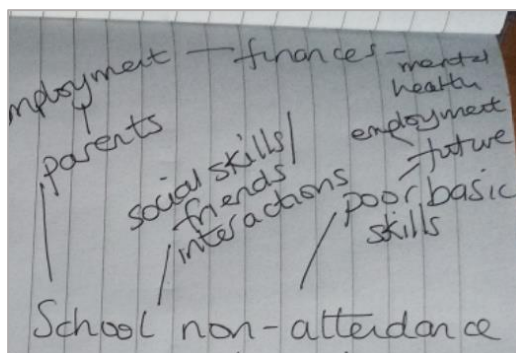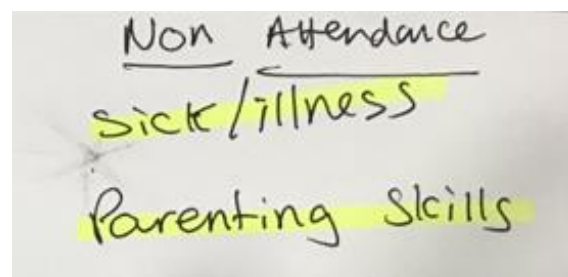
Subtheme: Balancing parent responsibility

Parental responsibility was emphasised as a key factor in understanding the reasons some children do not attend consistently. P7 expressed that "not only is it the pupil's responsibility to attend school, but obviously it's the parents and that's sometimes where it falls short", indicating the powerful influence parents can have on school

attendance. From P2's comments, there was a sense that responsibility should be shared between school and parents, which suggests equal accountability between the two: "…so ultimately as much as the responsibility for attendance is on school, it's the parents' responsibility to get them into school".

In contrast to this, some participants described a 'blame culture' towards parents which was viewed as harmful to the establishment of home-school partnerships. P5 discussed how non-attendance is often viewed as a choice and so parents are subsequently blamed and seen as "being a bad parent in not making them attend" and thus, parents can feel "got at". Several participants described how parents can become negative and defensive which P3 viewed as being understandable given the problematic situation:

> …you try to put yourself in that parent's shoes and how you'd feel… a group of professionals around the table telling you what you were doing wrong with your child. Straightaway it would get you on the defensive and you would stop listening and stop being engaged wouldn't you? (P3).

This suggests that the concept of parental responsibility needs to be carefully considered in cases of SNA. This finding resonates with Beckles' (2014) study who reported that school staff perceived positive parent-school relationships can be fractured if careful management of complex cases of non-attendance is not planned for.

Subtheme: Parental attitudes to education

Participants described "parental attitudes" (P2) to education as an important factor in understanding non-attendance. There was a sense that participants believed parents inadvertently "pass on their negative school experiences and attitudes to their children" (P2) which creates "an extra battle" when addressing non-attendance. Similarly, P3 described the child's upbringing as influencing attendance where a child might not attend because parents "don't question it" because attendance is not seen as important. Additionally, P8 described how parents' attitudes influence a child's school experience, suggesting that the school need to work together with these parents to rectify this:

> …they [the parents] have had a very negative experience of school and they're projecting that on their child. And so, they will be 'Oh don't go in tomorrow' and you know, it's… from that you start to almost unpick their experiences of school to try and make their children's experience of school better (P8).

It was also described how a chaotic home life can make a situation even more difficult and that this needs to be considered when responding to non-attendance (Dalziel & Henthorne, 2005). These findings echo those of Finning et al. (2020) and Hendron and Kearney (2016) where practitioners had similar beliefs about parental attitudes. Previous research has also indicated an association between family factors and attendance difficulties (e.g. Gase, et al., 2014; Reid, 2008; Taylor, 2012). As such, these views reflect a within-family perspective and non-attendance is conceptualised as an intergenerational problem (Lyon & Cotler, 2007).

[Signpost to reflexive account 9]

7.1.5. Theme Five: The inherent complexity of mental health

This theme consists of one subtheme (Figure 7.12). Mental health and wellbeing concepts appeared in all seven participant concept maps with terms ranging from "poor self-esteem", "anxiety" and "depression" (Figure 7.13).

Figure 7.12

Thematic Map of Theme Five, RQ1.1

156
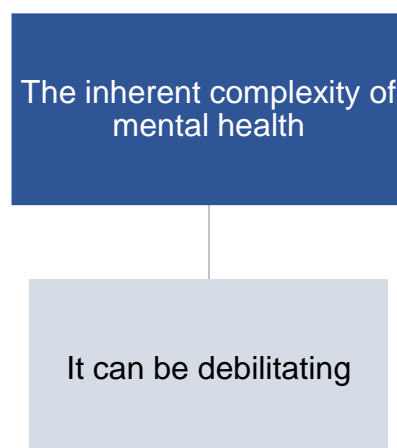
Figure 7.13

Selection of Concept Maps Displaying Mental Health Concepts
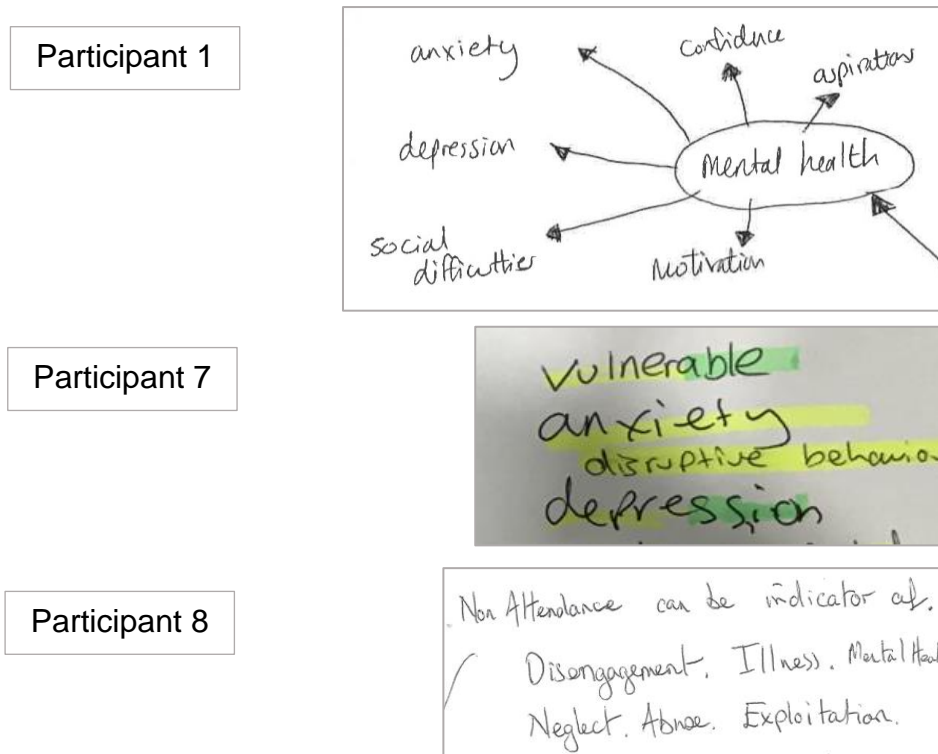
Subtheme: It can be debilitating

When participants discussed mental health, the overwhelming focus was on anxiety. For example:

> I think the basis of all of this is anxiety. If I had to sum up one reason why students were not attending school, it would be anxiety (P4).

Several participants described anxiety as being all-consuming and a deep-rooted difficulty for a lot of young people. Participants discussed anxiety as important to understanding non-attendance but noted that it is often difficult to recognise. For example, P1 talked about anxiety being "such a stealthy thing, I think, it creeps up on the individual and it can be quite difficult to spot". However, P9 noted, unlike physical illness, mental health difficulties "are the things that we can have an impact and make a difference on." Thus, indicating the potential role for school staff in supporting children who experience these difficulties. These findings are reminiscent of Finning et al. (2020) and Gren-Landell et al. (2015) whose participants also viewed child mental health as one of the most important risk factors for non-attendance. As such, and as suggested by Finning et al. (2020), schools need to be

aware of the association between non-attendance and wider mental health difficulties. Pastoral staff may be well placed at identifying, addressing, and promoting awareness of mental health difficulties.

Participants also talked about the associated difficulties related to poor mental health. These included sleep issues, peer relationship difficulties, and poor self-esteem. Self-esteem was described by several participants as being a key factor in understanding non-attendance (which is in line with Reid, 2007) (Example shown in Figure 7.14).

Figure 7.14

P5's Concept Map Showing a Link Between SNA, Mental Health, and Poor Self-Esteem
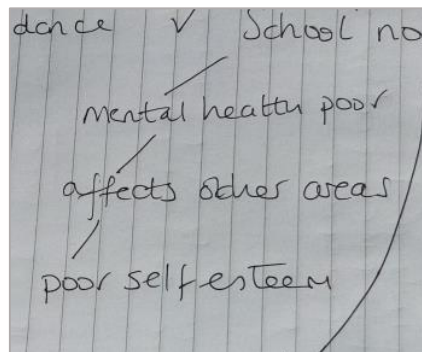
Mental health difficulties such as these can be viewed as within-child factors which can disrupt a child's development and impact their force characteristics such as motivation, self-regulation, and social avoidance (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006; Melvin et al., 2019). Further implications may be felt on a child's interactions with others and thus there can be far-reaching implications on a child's life and development (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006).

Learning from lockdown. Within this subtheme, I captured participants' discussions about the pandemic. Several participants discussed the impact of the pandemic on young people's mental health and recognised their anxiety about "going back to school" post-lockdown (P2). P3 discussed the impact of school closures on the return to school:

> We're going to have a really big struggle to get some of these young people to start attending school again because they've had that lack of continuity.

Participants identified implications would be felt across the whole school community. They described the worry felt by young people with regards to passing the virus on to family members during this "scary" time (P2). Whilst these comments are not strictly addressing the aims of my research, I wanted to highlight the views of participants concerning the significant impacts the pandemic has had on young people and their school experiences. Appendix FF provides a short reflection on the ongoing issues concerning the pandemic and school attendance.

[Signpost to reflexive account 10]

7.2. Research Question 1.2: Findings and Discussion

RQ1.2 examines how participants perceive school-related factors influence attendance difficulties.

RQ1.2	What school-based factors do school staff view to be barriers to attendance, and why?

Commentary on the Diamond Ranking. The diamond ranking activity as previously described sought to facilitate discussions around school-related factors. I have presented participants' overall rank positions of statements in Figure 7.15. This provides a supplementary visual representation of participants' ranking within the Diamond-9 template. As shown, the following factors were rated as top importance most often by participants:

- Conflict with peers
- School environment
- Feeling isolated
- Teacher's awareness and understanding of children's difficulties
- Teacher-pupil relationships
- School culture and ethos

This initial snapshot of findings for RQ1.2 will now be discussed more fully by drawing on the qualitative data gathered from interview discussions. Figure 7.16 provides the overall thematic map for RQ1.2.

Figure 7.15

A Visual Representation of Participants' Ranking of Cards
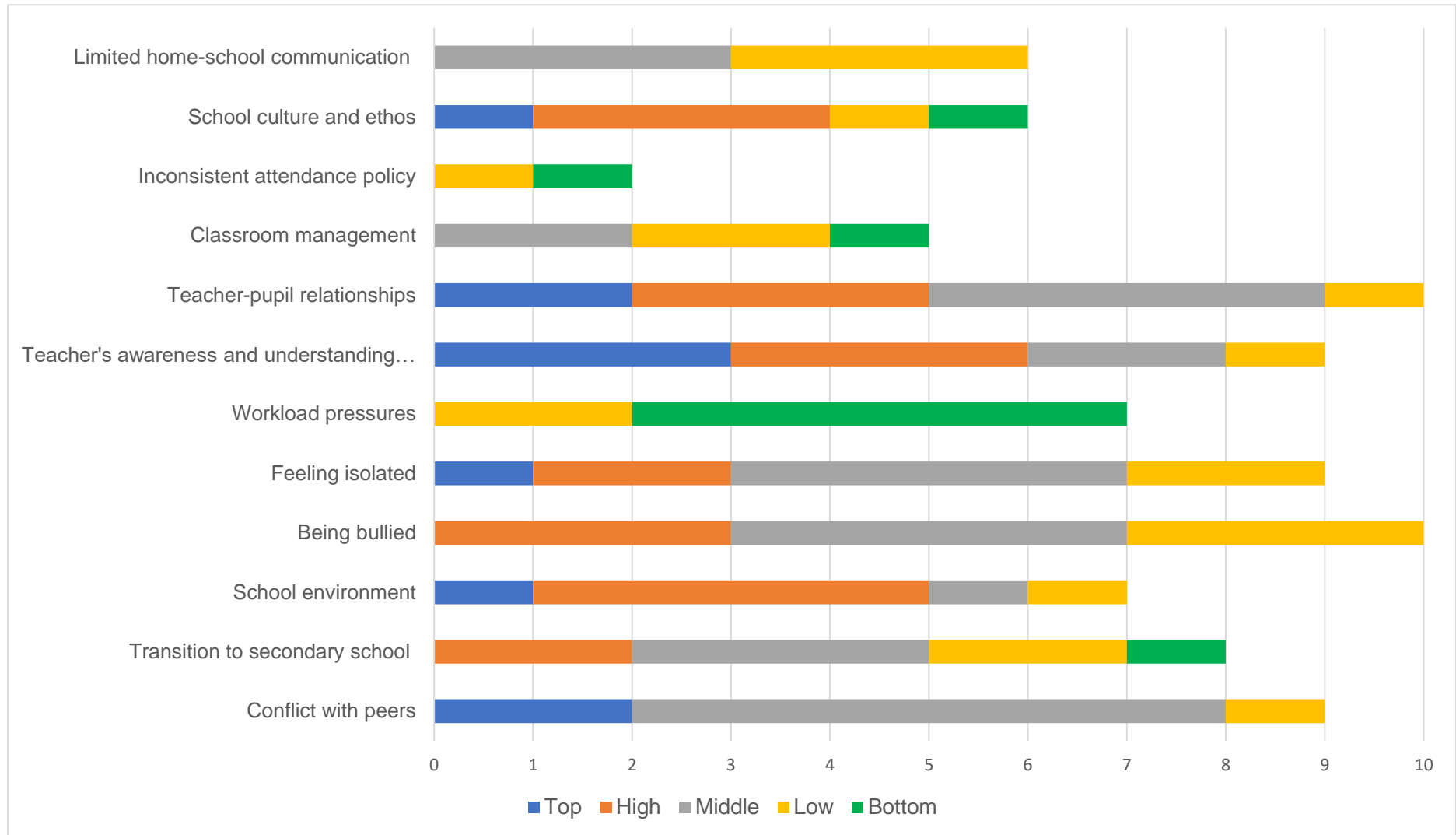
Figure 7.16

Overall Thematic Map of Themes and Subthemes for RQ1.2: Staff's Views on School-Based Factors that can Act as Barriers to Attendance

Feeling safe and valued in school	The pressured culture of a school	Transition to secondary school	Negative social interactions in school	Misconstruing students' needs
The spirit of a school	Expectations to conform	Negative transition experience	Being bullied	Children's difficulties can be misunderstood
The physical environment and space	Demands on staff and students	A critical time for everyone		Teachers who just teach
What can we learn from lockdown?				

7.2.1. Theme One: Feeling safe and valued in school

This theme encompasses participants' views regarding the significance of feeling safe in school. Participants described how children who feel unsafe in school are more likely to experience attendance difficulties. This theme consists of three subthemes (Figure 7.17).

Figure 7.17

Thematic Map for Theme One, RQ1.2

```
          Feeling safe and valued in
                   school
    ┌──────────────┼──────────────┐
The physical     The spirit of a   What can we learn
environment and     school         from lockdown?
    space
```
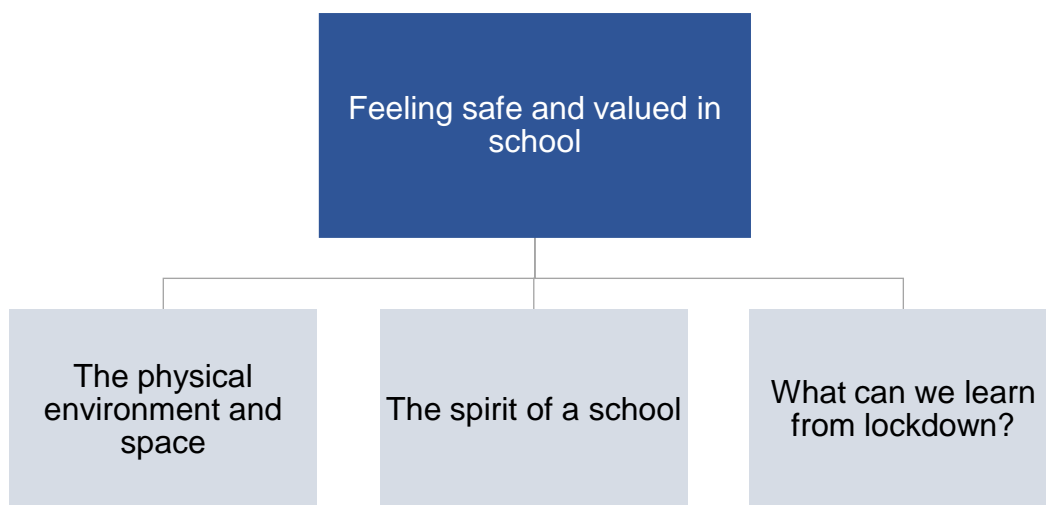
Subtheme: The physical environment and space

Research has shown that a poor physical school environment can be detrimental to children's feelings of safety (Maxwell, 2016). In this study, participants viewed factors such as noise and crowded corridors as significantly impacting children's feelings of safety. This finding resonates with parental perspectives in study one. Several participants noted that the environment of a school can be a fundamental barrier to attendance: "we get kids that stop attending completely and it's all because of the environment" (P2). Some participants felt that young people are not able to cope within such "overwhelming environments" (P5) which has detrimental impacts on their ability to attend. Similarly, Wilkins (2008) found that young people valued a calm learning environment of an alternative provision in their study. These findings are also consistent with findings from Baker and Bishop (2015) and Van Eck et al.

(2017) who reported that a positive learning environment can reduce 'chronic school absence'.

Subtheme: The spirit of a school

"*The spirit of a school*" refers to participants' discussions concerning the culture of a school and the sense that children get when they are in school. Participants described how a negative school ethos can impact children's feeling of safety. P3 suggested that the spirit of a school can be more important than the physical environment:

> Is it a caring, safe environment? Somewhere where they want to attend. I think I would value that above the actual physical space… (P3).

Further, participants described the need for schools to provide a relational, safe environment where children feel valued and part of a community. This was described as more important for children who experience a difficult home-life, suggesting that these children view school as their safe place away from home:

> I think high attendance should also be recognised for being what it is as the safe place for those really vulnerable kids. I think there needs to be bit of nurturing there and digging deeper (P8).

Participants also described the need for "a bit of predictability… and good relationships" (P3) where teachers act as "positive role models" (P7) in school to promote attendance for all children. This suggests that these school-related factors are viewed as measures that might prevent non-attendance occurring in the first place, echoing research by Dannow et al. (2020).

Subtheme: What can we learn from lockdown?

This subtheme captures discussions about the impact of having to be 'COVID-safe' on the school environment. This was reported to have had noticeable impacts on some children's experiences at school and on their feelings of safety, which further illuminates the significance of school environment on children's wellbeing and attendance. These experiences were both negative and positive. For instance,

participants described how children were in smaller classes during lockdown which meant some children were thriving in school. For example:

> They had been so good in the past few weeks because it was a smaller class, they've gone in everyday and they're enjoying school (P9).

P5 described similar experiences and raised pertinent questions about the school system being unfit for some children. This issue has been highlighted by the pandemic:

> …what is it saying about the school system you see, that we're cramming schools into too large classes, anyone who has sensory needs or… sort of interaction needs, they're not getting the attention they really need. As soon as they're in a smaller group, they start to thrive.

The positives of the COVID-19 situation are echoed by P7 who gave a powerful insight into how the adapted environment and smaller 'bubbles' or groups of children had allowed pupils to be "the best versions of themselves again", further emphasising the positive impacts of smaller class environments. The change was stark for one pupil who was normally very quiet, introverted, and 'hidden' in school. P7 described the pupil as: "beaming, she was smiling, she was talking to members of staff, she was talking to students…we wouldn't have had that before COVID-19".

However, participants also described the negative impact of COVID-19, indicating individual responses to the unique situation. P3 believed that COVID-safe measures made most schools "look horrible now. They look like scary places". It was also noted by participants that the return to school after lockdown will need to be carefully managed so that students are prepared for the changes to the environment.

[Signpost to reflexive account 11]

7.2.2. Theme Two: The pressured culture of a school

Participants described the pressure of being in a school, for both staff and students. The demands and expectations of school life can take its toll on everyone in school and this can have repercussions on attendance for children who may already be

experiencing their own personal difficulties. This theme consists of two subthemes (Figure 7.18).

Thematic Map of Theme Two, RQ1.2
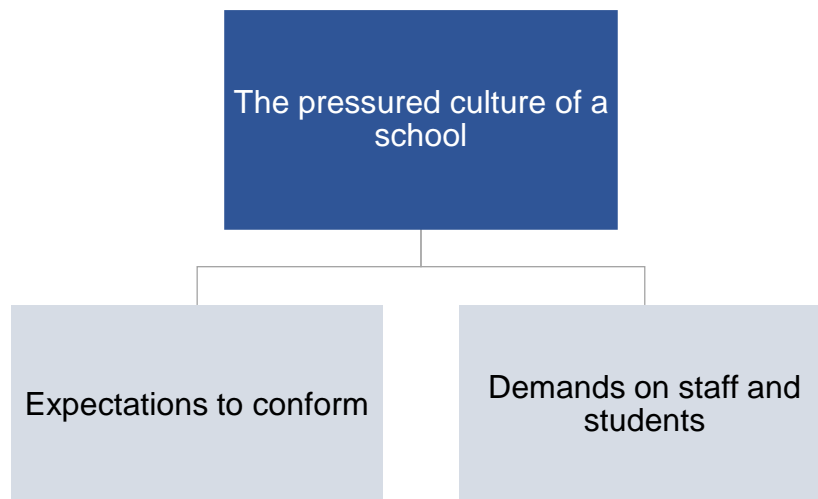
Subtheme: Expectations to conform

Participants discussed how the pressure to conform in school can become too overwhelming for some young people. P1 noted that in their experience, older children can sometimes feel "pressurised to answer questions and be part of the lesson when you were not feeling capable". Others discussed the behaviour policy in schools and expectations to follow strict rules that sometimes seemed restrictive and unsuitable. P3, for instance, talked about a school they had recently visited for training: "their new behaviour policy was that students had to walk round the corridors with their pencil cases in their hand in silence which just, which to me sounds horrific". P3 further reflected on this visit and suggested that this pressured and restrictive approach will have detrimental implications for some children:

> It sounds like a prison, sort of like a concentration camp. It's awful.
> Sometimes students just cannot do that, just not capable of doing that and
> they'll be lots of reasons why they can't. And is that a sign of success that
> they're silent as well? It just grates on me a little bit (P3).

This powerful account might indicate differing views between pastoral staff and policy makers. These findings also suggest that pastoral staff in this study recognise the need to look beyond non-attendance solely as a within-child problem and consider school environments and culture as playing a significant role.

Subtheme: Demands on staff and students

This sub-theme captures participants' views about the demands placed upon students and staff in schools. Participants discussed how these demands can lead to an overwhelming pressurised environment for everyone in the school (as expressed by P5 below). When participants described the demands of school life, it was often in relation to teacher-pupil relationships and the difficulty in forming individual positive connections with pupils. The pressure of being a 'good school' and the focus on academic achievement was perceived as being highly detrimental for some children.

> We know that a lot of kids find it really difficult. Everybody's being pushed towards achieve, achieve, achieve… it puts incredible pressure on everybody these days (P5).

Participants also talked about the "whole data drive" putting extreme pressure on teachers which can then be offloaded on to the students and can be "really detrimental to those teacher-pupil relationships" (P2). P1 explained the powerful influence these demands had on children in their experience:

> It's all about data, it's all about results, and it wasn't enough about each individual student…. I think work pressure is just an unbelievable barrier for a lot of students (P1)

The detrimental impacts of pressure on teachers to deliver the curriculum was also described by participants; teacher-pupil relationships are impacted because teachers do not have the time or resources to meet pupils' needs in the classroom. P5 described the drive to be "perfect" and the "hassle of exams, expectations, hitting percentages" does not fit within a caring and inclusive school culture because teachers are not able to achieve both. Indeed, these findings support those by Dannow et al. (2020) who reported that when teachers acknowledged such demands and reduced them, more positive student-teacher relationships were experienced which supported children's return to school.

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7.2.3. Theme Three: Transition to secondary school

Transition to secondary school can be make or break for some children (P10).

The above quote signifies the importance participants placed on transition when discussing school-related barriers to attendance. Participants across the study described the transition to secondary school as being "the point where a lot goes wrong for a lot of our children" (P6). As previously discussed, research has shown that SNA often emerges during transition points between educational settings (Pellegrini, 2007). These findings thus provide further qualitative insight into these experiences from the perspectives of pastoral staff (thematic map in Figure 7.19).

Figure 7.19

Thematic Map of Theme Three, RQ1.2
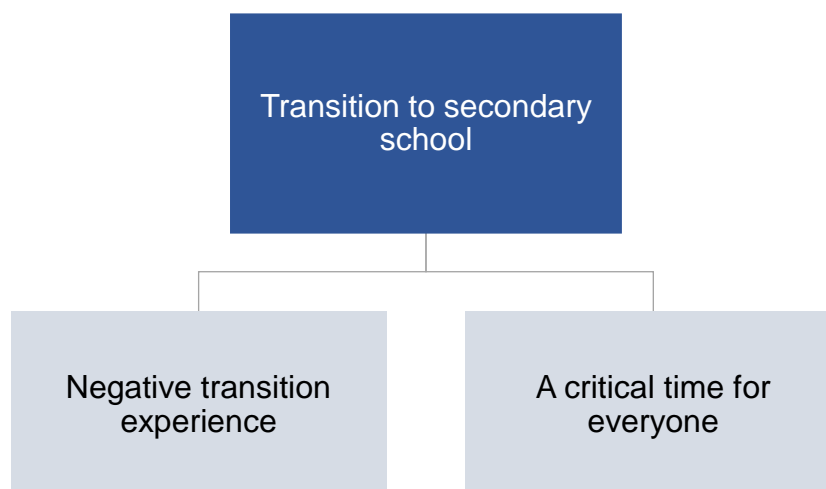
Subtheme: Negative transition experience

Participants highlighted the importance of 'getting it right' with regards to the big step up to secondary school (e.g. P7 below). If this transition experience is a negative one, it can impact on attendance. These findings are also in line with parental perspectives as outlined in study one. For example, P7 discussed how "transition to secondary school is always quite scary, quite daunting, if that hasn't been successful, then they aren't going to attend". Participants described how the jump to

secondary school happens at a key time in a child's development and the change from a small nurturing primary school to a large competitive secondary school can create barriers to attendance for some children (mirroring research by Maxwell, 2016).

Subtheme: A critical time for everyone

Transition was viewed as a critical time where it will be the "biggest step" (P3) in education for most children. Participants highlighted the need to consider transition experiences for all pupils, not just those children "…that we think automatically about" (P5) because some students who "might be really anxious" could get overlooked. The difficulty in recognising children who might struggle with the transition was further described by participants. As noted by Jindal-Snape and Miller (2008), children can experience a sense of loss during the transition to secondary school. Children often lose long-term friendships created at primary school which can have detrimental impacts on their wellbeing and sense of belonging if transition is not managed appropriately (How, 2015). These changes in relationships and peer interactions can be understood within a bioecological systems framework as influencing the child's proximal processes (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006; Melvin et al., 2019).

7.2.4. Theme Four: Negative social interactions in school

This theme was developed based on how participants described the harmful effects of bullying on children's attendance (Figure 7.20).

Figure 7.20

Thematic Map of Theme Four, RQ1.2
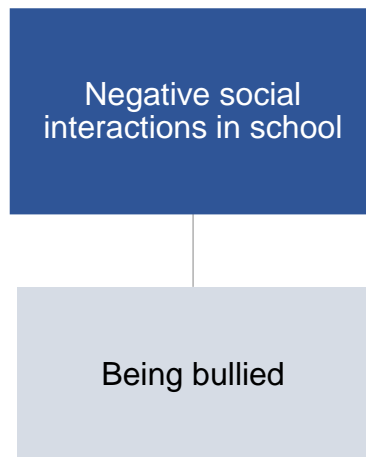
Subthemes: Being bullied

In line with previous research that has shown bullying to be associated with SNA (e.g. Finning et al., 2020; Ingul et al., 2019), participants discussed 'being bullied' as a key risk factor as it can "really stop a young person even cross that school threshold" (P4). Participants expanded on this and described the changing nature of bullying and the impact of social media on bullying. In the past, bullying was more about "someone who physically bullies somebody", whereas now it is "more emotional bullying, people's concept, self-esteem" (P5). Participants described how social media has turned bullying into an 'invisible form'. Bullying was described as a problem that is difficult to address. A conflict arises around who should address the issue as often it can be occurring outside of school. P1 noted that if bullying is "going on outside the school environment, that's where it becomes really tricky".

Across participants, it was evident that bullying has drastic impacts on a child's ability to attend. Participants described how bullying can lead children to feel isolated and that they do not "fit in with other children" (P6). These feelings of isolation caused by difficult social interactions in school was described as a "primary reason for children not to attend school" by P4 and was echoed across most participants. Such findings are consistent with the literature that identifies peer bullying as a precipitating factor to non-attendance (Goodman & Scott, 2012; Lauchlan, 2003; Reid, 2014). Participants' views also appear to correspond to parents' views in study one on the complex and difficult nature of bullying.

Learning from lockdown. Within this theme, participants described the changes in school since lockdown which led to some children feeling less socially isolated. This highlights some of the positive changes to the school 'system' because of the pandemic. The smaller class sizes meant that some children, who may have struggled with peer interactions and bullying previously, were now able to form more positive peer relationships. Participants noted how building these relationships could take precedence during lockdown: "it's been quite nice to see that children who are normally isolated, they've actually built new friendships because certain pupils aren't in the school" (P7).

7.2.5. Theme Five: Misconstruing students' needs

Participants discussed the impact of teachers who do not fully understand their pupils' needs (both learning and emotional needs). This theme consists of two subthemes (Figure 7.21).

Figure 7.21

Thematic Map for Theme Five, RQ1.2
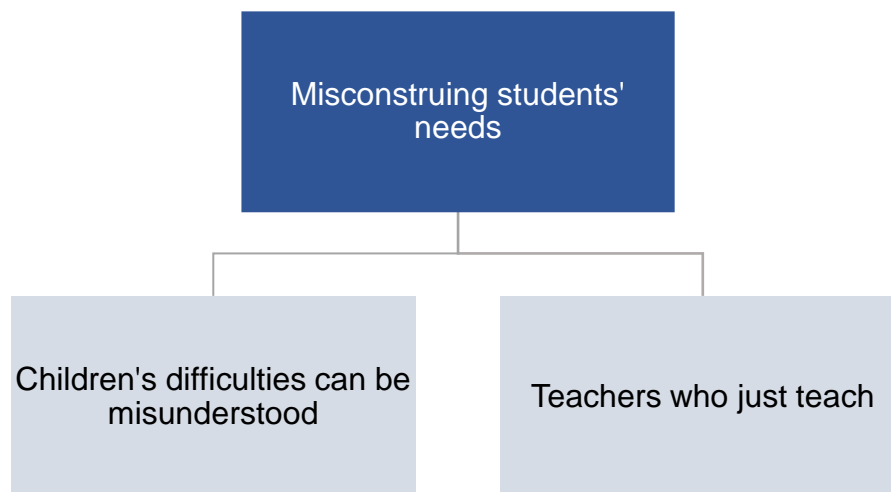
Subtheme: Children's difficulties can be misunderstood

In parallel to study one, misunderstanding children's difficulties was described as an important influence on non-attendance by most participants. Participants suggested that some teachers might overlook difficulties if the child is academically able or if they are masking their difficulties in the classroom. For instance:

> If students are deemed as high functioning, if they are academically very able, then teachers think or take for granted that on a social and emotional level, these students can function on the same level, but they can't (P4).

Some participants have found that teachers and other staff members can make inappropriate remarks to students who experience attendance difficulties which can have further detrimental impacts (P1 below). This indicates a limited whole-school understanding or awareness of attendance difficulties.

> When they did come into school, certain members of staff would make a comment and say, 'Nice to see you today' [said in with a tone of sarcasm] or 'Oh you've come in today, have you?' which is completely the wrong thing to say (P1).

Further, participants described how some teachers have unreasonable beliefs about attendance (e.g. P1: "entrenched thinking and attitudes to non-attendance"). These findings are consistent with previous research. Reid (2006) highlighted that limited staff knowledge and training in SNA is a particular concern. Pastoral staff's views might suggest that there is limited whole school understanding of the complexities and multi-factorial nature of non-attendance, which might prevent appropriate support being established (similarly reported by Pellegrini, 2007 and Thambirajah et al., 2008). Thus, further indicating a need for more training and improved awareness in schools.

Subtheme: Teachers who just teach

Participants described occasions where teachers were unable, or missed the opportunity, to fully understand their pupils' needs because of the pressure and expectation to "just teach" (P10). P4 discussed the classroom experience being

harmful because teachers are overworked and "stressed out as soon as they get in the classroom". Further, participants described some teachers who just want to teach and are not willing, or do not have the time, to form positive bonds with their students. P7 described teachers who are "just focused on delivering their lesson" and, as such, neglect to fully consider their pupils' needs. P1 suggested that there is limited relationship-building with students because of the 'just teach' rhetoric. A school system that simply comprises a "conveyor belt of exams rather than about individual children" was discussed by P6 and suggests that the pressure felt within the education system can be a factor in children's non-attendance (similar findings are reported by Dalziel and Henthorne, 2005).

7.3. Summary of RQ1.1 and RQ1.2

Findings from both parts of RQ1 indicate school staff acknowledge the complexities and challenges of non-attendance. Pastoral staff described the multi-factorial nature of the reasons behind attendance difficulties. While previous research has shown teaching staff tend to underplay the influence of school-related factors on non-attendance (e.g. Finning et al., 2020; Gren-Landell et al., 2015), it appears that the participants in this study recognised the importance of these factors. Pastoral staff might therefore be well-placed members of the school to support such difficulties. It could be argued that these findings might be indicative of the method of data collection and facilitation of discussions during the interviews. However, participants' concept maps (which were completed prior to the interview) also demonstrated the importance of school-related factors, suggesting that pastoral staff in this study have differing views to teachers as indicated in existing literature.

7.4. Research Question 2: Findings and Discussion

RQ2	What do school staff view to be the facilitators of effective support for families who experience school non-attendance?

RQ2 explores school staff's views on how support for children experiencing attendance difficulties can be facilitated. Figure 7.22 shows the overall thematic map of themes and subthemes.

Figure 7.22

Thematic Map of Themes and Subthemes for RQ2: Factors that Promote Effective Support for Non-Attendance

Supportive wider school network	Know your families, know your students	The power to tailor support and collaborate	See the individual
Develop a sense of community and belonging	It's all about relationships	Flexibility in our approach	Listen to the young person
Awareness and communication across the school	Positive & proactive communication with parents	Joined up working with external professionals	
Quality reflective teaching			

7.4.1. Theme One: Supportive whole school network

This theme encompasses views expressed by participants about the need for a whole-school approach where all staff are 'on board' and aware of the complexities of non-attendance. This theme consists of three subthemes (Figure 7.23).

Figure 7.23

Thematic Map of Theme One, RQ2
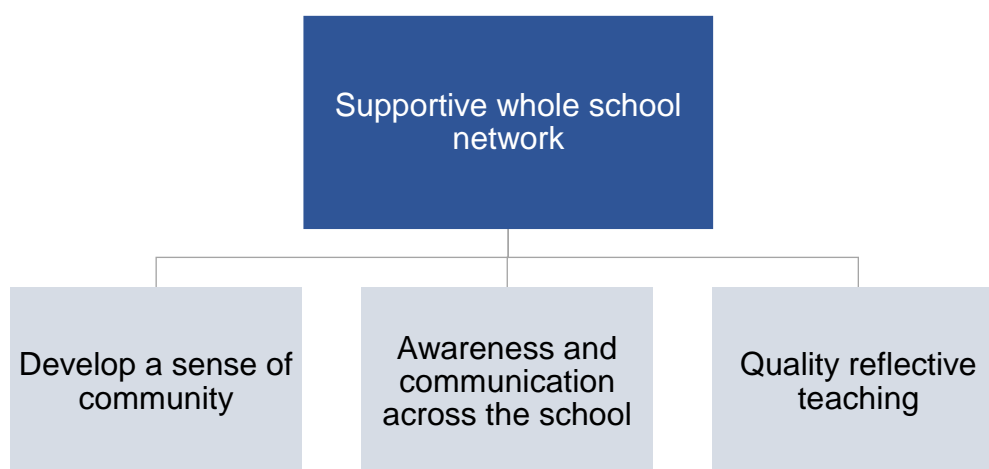
Subtheme: Develop a sense of community

Across the interviews, there was a sense that participants valued a whole school ethos and approach to attendance that establishes a sense of positivity. This sense of community was viewed as essential in promoting pupil's attendance. This can only happen when everyone is involved and active in supporting all children. By developing children's sense of school belonging, participants suggested that school staff can better meet the needs of children. This was also reflected in P3's comments: "it's as simple as making the school a place they want to be and want to come to everyday". P9 drew parallels between students' experiences of attendance and staff's attendance at work: "if you don't like where you work and you're not feeling massively supported, you'll think 'sod it, I'll stay at home'". This suggests that staff also need to feel part of a positive community for students to feel supported.

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Participants also discussed the need to make school a rewarding and inviting place to be that is not solely about achieving results. P1 noted that having a compassionate approach is sometimes the missing piece for developing a "positive school experience" (P2), while P10 suggested a nurturing approach is key: "it's that bit of TLC [tender loving care] that is needed." Furthermore, participants talked about making school a positive experience by using reward schemes to promote attendance and by making "attendance high profile" (P8). To achieve this, participants described using tangible and individualised rewards when students do attend, which can give them "another reason to come to school" (P2). P8 noted that it is "all about acknowledgement and celebration" of the small achievements, regardless of students' overall attendance pattern. However, as noted by P10, a school's reward system needs to avoid tokenistic endeavours and be authentic because "if the kids don't buy into it, then it doesn't work". These findings echo research by Reid (2013) who argues the need for attendance rewards to be genuine and fully understood by pupils. This would suggest that forming positive relationships with students where their voice is heard and considered is an important part of developing a positive school community.

Reward schemes to promote attendance have been shown to be successful in previous research (e.g. Epstein & Sheldon, 2002). Participants' descriptions of their approach to reward schemes varied, but it was evident that the main purpose of these schemes was to promote experiences for children to feel valued and respected. These findings could be understood within the concept of school climate which has been shown to have a positive influence on attendance (Maxwell, 2016; Wilkins, 2008). Nuttall and Woods (2013) also reported personalised rewards are important in establishing successful support for children experiencing non-attendance because it showed that they had not been forgotten about and staff cared about them.

Subtheme: Awareness and communication across the school

This subtheme relates to how participants described the need to improve communication within schools so that the problem can be better understood. P1 noted that "you'd need all your teaching staff completely on side, supportive, and prepared to set work and support". P7 also viewed collaboration with teachers as key: "teachers always need to be involved and that's why we as

pastoral workers like to work with them as much as possible." This collaborative approach was echoed in P8's comments about teachers needing to communicate their knowledge about students. In this way, participants viewed small changes that teachers make in the classroom as key to supporting children.

However, the limited communication amongst staff was highlighted by several participants as a continuing problem. Rather than simply knowing about a child's problem or difficulties, participants described putting knowledge into action, otherwise there will be no tangible impact on children's attendance. P3 acknowledged that sharing information can be difficult due to safeguarding and confidentiality. Despite this, P3 also considered it essential to improving understanding about "why the child has not been there, or what might be impacting upon their attendance." P1 echoed this view but specifically noted that administration staff must also be 'on board':

> But I think it has to be very joined-up and has to be a whole school thing, and from that point of entry into the school. The school receptionist… if they say something that the child can think or be upset about, you just can't have that (P1).

Overall, these findings indicate a need for greater whole-school knowledge about attendance difficulties. These findings are encouraging as they suggest that only small changes in the way staff react or comment on a child's attendance can make a positive change in how children experience school when they do attend. EPs are likely to play a key role here by establishing training and building awareness to effect positive change.

Subtheme: Quality reflective teaching

The need for high quality teaching was recognised as a key factor in effective support for children. Participants described consistent teaching approaches and "clear structures and clear routines" (P9) as being essential so that students know what to expect. Participants noted how clear expectations can promote a more positive whole-school experience and will therefore have positive implications for attendance. Participants discussed school as being more

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inviting to students when they are able to experience "really good or outstanding teaching and learning" (P6). Reflective practice was described by participants as being important to this endeavour. P4 discussed how staff need "to be aware of their own unconscious bias…and their own perceptions" of pupils' needs and difficulties. This is reflective of Thambirajah et al.'s (2008, p.58) argument that practitioners who support cases SNA are required to "examine their own attitude, motivation and feelings evoked by the case". This would indicate a need for professional reflective practice and a role for the EP in the facilitation of supervision practices in schools. This coincides with Nuttall and Woods' (2013) study where supervision was viewed as invaluable in supporting staff members when dealing with cases of 'school refusal'.

7.4.2. Theme Two: Know your families, know your students

This theme was developed from participants' views about the importance of working in partnership with families. All participants considered the need to work closely with families and to understand their situation from a wider perspective. This theme consists of two subthemes (Figure 7.24).

Figure 7.24

Thematic Map of Theme Two, RQ2
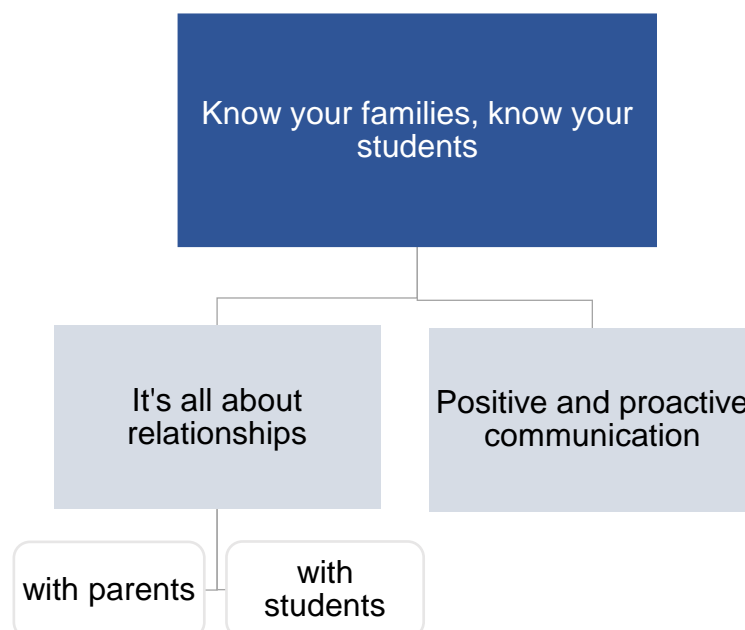
Subtheme: It's all about relationships

At this point, I would like to return to P3's concept map which shows "trauma-informed" as being a main central concept for non-attendance (Figure 7.25). This approach, where relationship-building is prioritised, was a central theme for participants when discussing support for attendance difficulties.

Figure 7.25

P3's Concept Map with "Trauma Informed" as a Central Concept
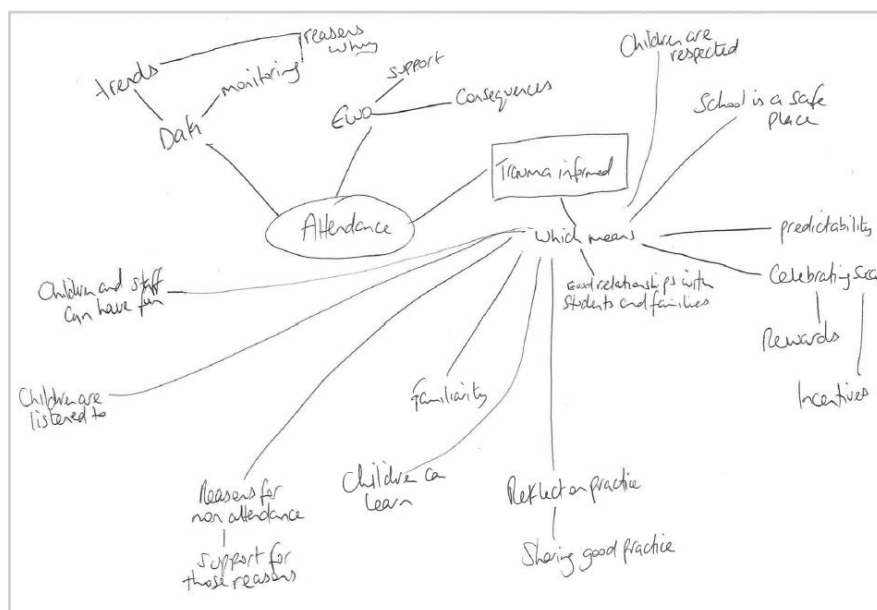
With parents. Several participants considered relationships with families as critical to supporting children's non-attendance. P9 described how knowing your families is "the key to all of it" but expressed feelings of frustration because this does not seem to be given priority in schools:

> It frustrates me sometimes, it's not difficult; if you've got a decent relationship with students, and a decent relationship with parents, and they know behind it … all you want them to do is be successful, then I think getting them on board is key.

P4 noted that "if school and parents work together, it normally has the best result for the child." This joint approach can improve school staff's understanding of the situation as they are able to get to know the family and "why they're [the child] not attending school" (P3). This approach is also echoed

in P2's concept map (Figure 7.26) where positive parental engagement is noted as a strategy in supporting non-attendance.

Figure 7.26

P2's Concept Map Showing Parental Engagement as a Key Strategy
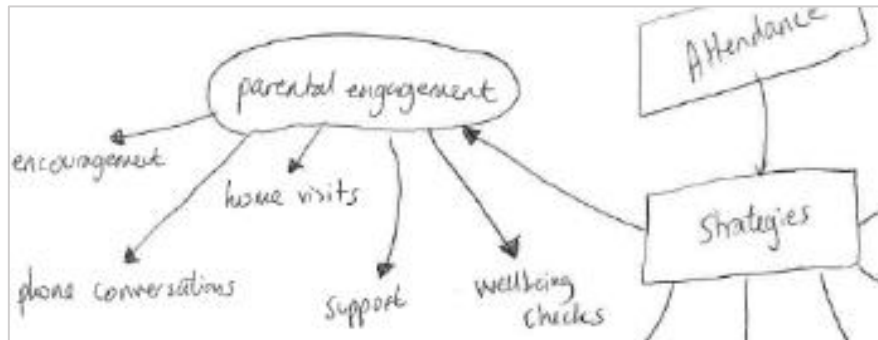
P2 suggested that phoning home to explore why a child has not attended and suggesting strategies to support the parent can be helpful. Likewise, Dalziel and Henthorne (2005) reported that some parents require extra support from school to help their child attend more regularly. However, participants also recognised instances where at times it had been difficult to build these positive partnerships with parents because some parents do not seem to want their help. This, according to P2, can create a significant barrier to promoting attendance. This coincides with a study by Kearney (2008) who suggested how some parents may not seek support for their child's attendance due to past negative encounters with professionals or because of their own negative school experiences.

With students. To facilitate support, participants described the importance of positive relationships with children themselves: "it's having relationships of trust based on empathy and compassion between the teacher and the student and their peers" (P4). P10 described the situation as something that always "goes back to relationships" and a restorative approach for children would allow them to move forward on their return to school. While P7 acknowledged the need to connect with children: "it's having that connection. If you have a connection with a child, you'll get a reaction from them. I'm a strong believer in that" (P7). This suggests that positive relationships with students can be powerful in helping them feel connected and valued in school. However, time and resources can act as barriers to building these strong connections. To counter this, P8

discussed the need to "ring-fence" time so that relationships can be prioritised on pupils' return from a period of non-attendance. These findings are promising given that the importance of collaborative and positive partnerships between home and school during children's school reintegration after a period of absence has been reported in the literature (Nuttall & Woods, 2013; Van Eck et al., 2017). Positive student-teacher relationships have also been shown to reduce non-attendance and can be constructed as a preventative measure (Kearney & Graczyk, 2014).

Subtheme: Positive and proactive communication with parents

Communication with parents was raised as a key facilitating factor for most participants. Participants discussed the need to prioritise communication with home so that the best outcomes for the child can be reached. Taking a proactive approach with parents early on was viewed as an important way to get to know families. Participants described the power of building positive lines of communication, as discussed by P7 who viewed this as being critical for successful outcomes:

> I find that when school and home are working closely together, the result is a better ending then if school and mums or dads are against school (P7).

Linked to this was the issue of fines and prosecution. It was suggested across all participants that prosecuting parents for SNA is "not the answer" (P1) and only serves to break down relationships with parents. Fining parents was perceived as ineffective in facilitating home-school partnerships and in creating lasting change. This echoes study one findings where parents viewed prosecution as detrimental to support for them and their child.

Participants also acknowledged the need for school staff to build relationships by going out into the community and taking the time to get to know families' circumstances:

> Having someone who goes out to the families, out to these most vulnerable families, and does some work with them, I think that's really powerful (P9).

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These findings suggest that participants place significant value on developing partnerships with families and improving parental involvement, which has previously been shown to improve attendance (e.g. Sheldon, 2007). Reid (2014) indicates the need for improved parental involvement in children's attendance difficulties, while Ingul et al. (2012) reported that poor parental engagement is a risk factor in 'problematic absenteeism'. Thus, these views are encouraging as it appears participants in this study give precedence to relationship-building with parents, further indicating a key role for pastoral staff in supporting cases of SNA.

7.4.3. Theme three: The power to tailor our support and collaborate

This theme captures participants comments about their desire to adapt approaches to support the unique needs of individual students. This theme consists of two subthemes (Figure 7.27).

Figure 7.27

Thematic Map of Theme Three, RQ2

Subtheme: Flexibility in our approach

This subtheme reflects participants' views that having the flexibility to adapt their approach is essential. Participants recognised the complexity of SNA for everyone concerned and that no single factor can explain why a child experiences such difficulties (mirroring research by Finning et al., 2020 and Kljakovic & Kelly, 2019). The need to avoid viewing the problem within a "one-rule-fits-all" approach because "it's not as simple as that. It's such a grey area" (P1) was also a common narrative across participants. Participants often discussed the need to adapt the attendance policy and prosecution procedures to support families more effectively. This view is reflected in existing research which recognises the restrictive and often rigid nature of attendance policy (Birioukov-Brant & Brant-Birioukov, 2019).

Several participants noted tensions between different staff members with regards to employing an individual approach to non-attendance, which made the situation more complex. For instance, P1 talked about "fights" and "arguments" with other staff members, further suggesting a need for improved whole-school awareness. Without the backing to tailor support, the pastoral role can be "tricky" (P2). Despite these tensions, participants stressed the importance of continuing to see "each student as an individual who may react to a learning environment in a different way" (P4), whilst also highlighting the pressure on teachers to achieve this. Likewise, Finning et al. (2018, p. 219)

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found that educational practitioners recognised that "one size doesn't fit all" in cases of non-attendance. These findings suggest that participants experience tensions and barriers to such an approach and that pastoral staff might sometimes feel powerless or lack control over their ability to make positive change or implement suitable support. P2 reported that pastoral staff need more powers to adapt their way of working to meet the needs of individual children:

> I know schools do have pastoral members of staff, but I don't think there's enough of them and I don't think they have enough powers as well (P2).

In line with this, participants who described having some autonomy and good working partnerships with SLT felt they were more able to tailor support. For example: "the headteacher did allow me to take a caring and a sort of TLC role." (P10). Tailoring support to individual cases of SNA is cited in existing literature as an important intervention approach (e.g. Dalziel & Henthorne, 2005; Kearney & Graczyk, 2014). However, despite some participants' reports of flexibility, others highlighted the impact of restrictive attendance policies. P1 described the rigidness of policy as being too simplistic:

> The policy wasn't allowing me to support in the way that I wanted to… I just felt that it was sometimes just too much sticking to the policy and not enough exploring the real reasons and trying to be a bit more supportive (P1).

Further, P1 described how students can feel under pressure because of attendance policies and that students "just felt like it was a big stick beating them over the head about attendance". This suggests that a conflict exists between individual children's needs and the 'one-size-fits-all' nature of restrictive attendance policies. Again, these findings echo those from parents in study one and suggest that, while attendance policy may suit most students, it can be detrimental to students who require a more relational and individualised approach due to their difficult situations.

Subtheme: Joined up working with external professionals

To collaborate and tailor support, participants discussed the need to improve collaborative working with external agencies. In this way, a better understanding can be gained and support for the whole family can be prioritised. This was discussed with the view that students would benefit from a collaborative, joined-up approach. A "multi-agency approach" was cited on two concept maps (Figure 7.28).

Figure 7.28

Concept Maps Showing Multi-Agency Working as a Key Concept
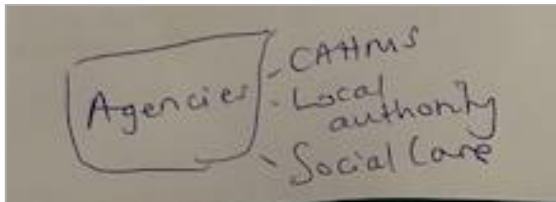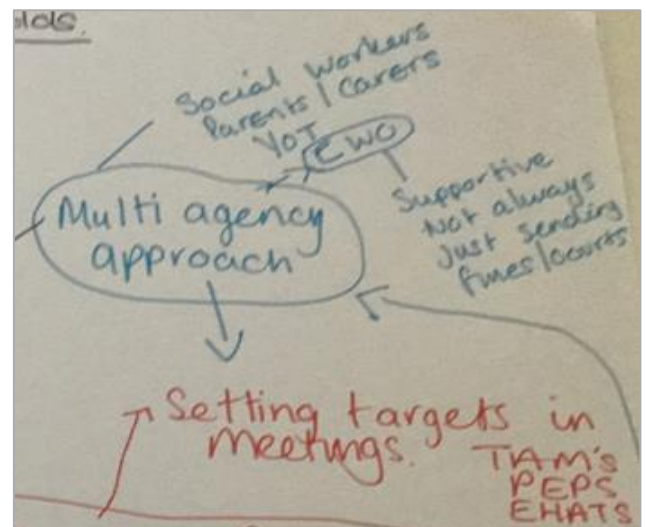
Most participants highlighted the importance of "everyone working together" to address the needs of children (P9). P4 conceptualised this way of working as a "triangle of involvement" between the parents, the school, and external agencies where they are "all working together and listening to each other". It was suggested that children would benefit most when they are placed at the centre of everyone's efforts (Figure 7.29). P6 discussed how their school has a daily dialogue with external agencies "so that everyone is aware of what's going on" (P6). Likewise, Beckles (2014) found that external support was viewed as useful when addressing attendance difficulties. Further research by Elliott and Place (2012) Jand Gregory and Purcell (2014) also demonstrates the value of external agency involvement, while Nuttall and Woods (2013) advocate for

external professionals to take on a supportive role with parents to help their child's return to school.

Figure 7.29

A 'Triangle of Involvement' to Support the Child
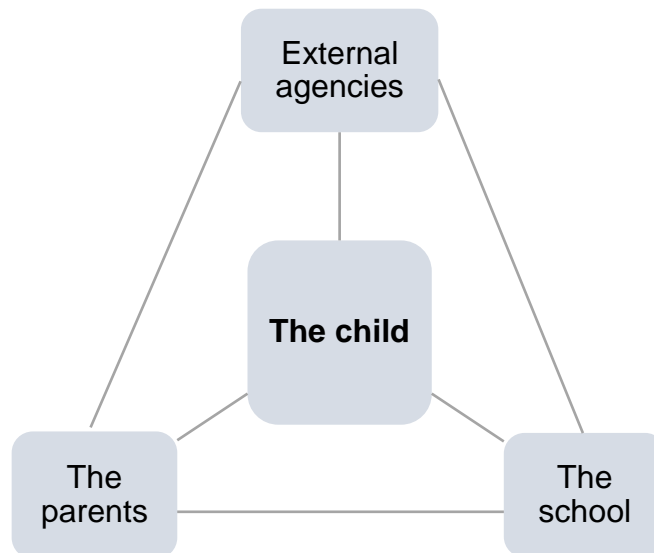
7.4.4. Theme Four: See the individual

Participants talked about the need to move towards seeing the individual child. This theme consists of three subthemes (Figure 7.30).

Figure 7.30

Thematic Map of Theme Four, RQ2

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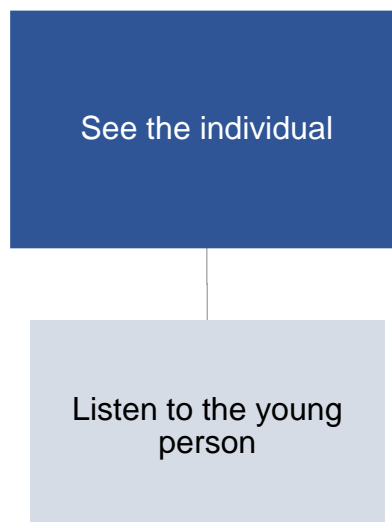
Subtheme: Listen to the young person

Gaining the child's voice was viewed as key in achieving successful support. By hearing the voice of the child, a more comprehensive understanding of the situation can be gained. P2 noted how young people's voices are given priority in their school when supporting them back into school after a period of absence:

> There's always a discussion with that young person, usually led by that young person as well… so they have ownership over that, and they're more likely to attend (P2).

Given that previous research has reported children experiencing SNA often feel unheard, these findings are encouraging and further highlight the potential key role pastoral staff can have in supporting non-attendance (Beckles, 2014; Toplis, 2004). Billington (2018) indicates the importance of actively listening to pupils who are missing education, and the best support can only be established when working jointly with the child. Participants noted that a key part of the pastoral role is to give students this opportunity to talk about their worries or difficulties. According to P7 this is something children might not feel comfortable doing with their teachers:

> They do talk about home life, they do talk to me about some things they wouldn't speak to a teacher about, which could be a bit sensitive (P7)

In this way, pastoral staff could be viewed as mediators between the student and their teachers. Several participants also highlighted the importance of restorative approaches to behaviour management in school, which echoes research suggesting that children value recognition of positive behaviours (Nuttall & Woods, 2013).

7.5. Chapter Summary

Findings from study two suggest that pastoral staff acknowledge the complex nature of non-attendance as being situated inside and outside of the school context. Anxiety was viewed as a key component in a child's non-attendance by all participants, while participants also talked about the curriculum being inaccessible to some children, which can have far-reaching implications for the

individual young person (Kearney & Graczyk, 2014). Pastoral staff in this study acknowledged the impacts of various school factors on attendance and there was a sense that the school climate and school culture can have an overriding influence on children's ability to attend. To support families more effectively, participants described the need for collaboration amongst the whole school team as well as with external agencies. Seeing the individual and tailoring support to individual children and families was viewed as key to improving support for SNA.

In this chapter I have explored the findings for study two in relation to existing literature and relevant theory. In the next chapter, I will provide an overall discussion of the findings from both studies.

Chapter Eight: Overall Discussion

In this research, I aimed to explore parental and pastoral staff views on school non-attendance. More specifically, in study one, I set out to explore what parents viewed to be the barriers to their child's attendance and their views on the support received for non-attendance. I also wanted to gain insight into how parents believed support could be improved. In study two, I set out to explore school staff's understanding of SNA and investigate their views on how school-related factors played a role. I also aimed to explore staff's views on what facilitates effective support for SNA. In this chapter, I will present the overarching themes and overall discussion for both studies. I will highlight the congruences between the two stakeholders in this research (parents and school staff) and, based upon these findings, I will provide a framework for consideration in practice. I will then discuss the implications of the research, the limitations, and the suggested avenues for future research.

8.1. Overarching Themes

An overall finding from this research, and one that I did not readily anticipate, was the congruences between parents and pastoral staff's views on non-attendance. In the following section, I will explore these paralleled findings. Consideration is first given to the 'barriers to attendance'. Then I will consider 'support for non-attendance' with a focus on participants' views on support and how this support could be improved (Figure 8.1).

Figure 8.1

Presentation of Overarching Findings
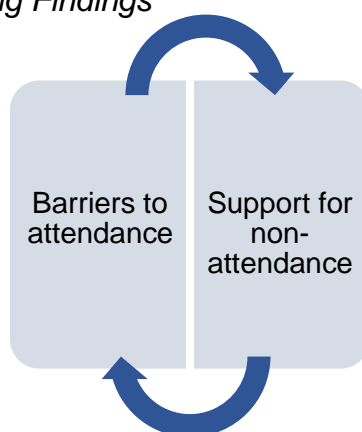
8.2. Barriers to Attendance

I present the overall discussion in relation to RQ1 in study one and RQ1.1 and RQ1.2 in study two as 'barriers to attendance'. Both parents and school staff identified an array of factors that can act as barriers to attendance. This research has revealed several congruences in views between parents and pastoral staff in this respect. Figure 8.2 shows how several key overarching themes were shared. The figure also shows the discrepancies in views pertinent to each participant group.

Figure 8.2

Diagram of the Congruences and Discrepancies Across the Two Studies: Participants' Views of the Barriers to Attendance
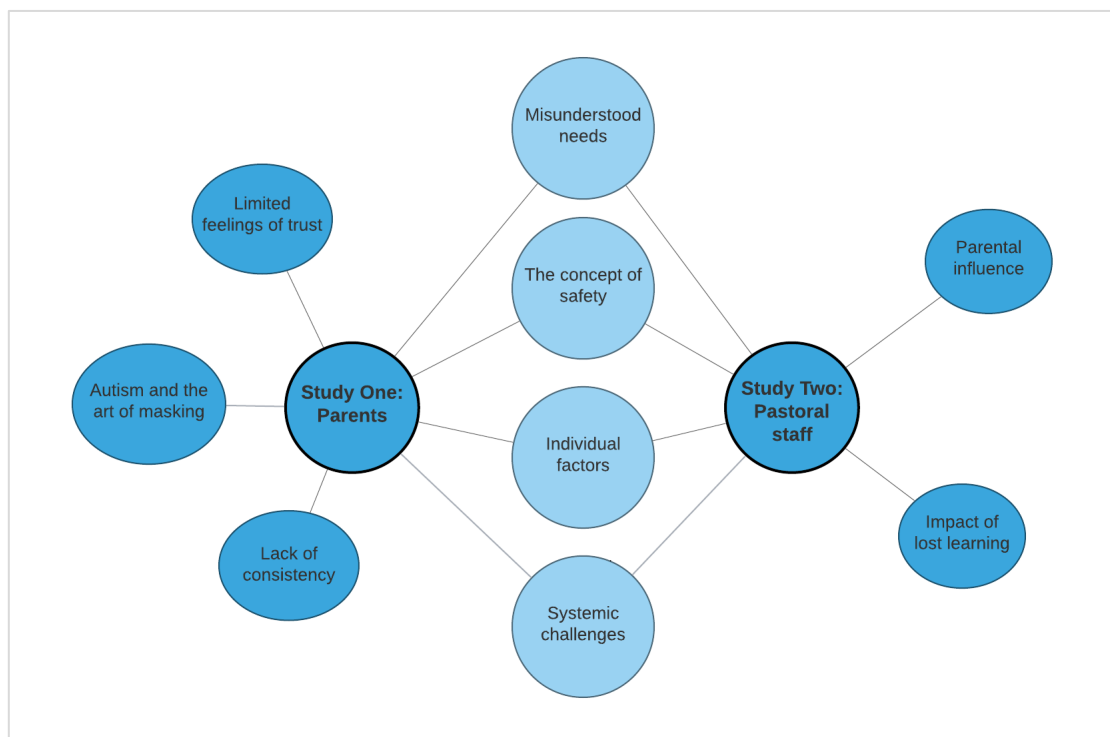
8.2.1. Misunderstood Needs

A salient theme evident across parental and school staff views was the perceived lack of understanding of children's needs and difficulties. This limited understanding was viewed as a key barrier to attendance. For parents, there was a focus upon ASD and limited staff knowledge about the associated

'masking' of difficulties. Pastoral staff also recognised masking as an issue but tended to situate the misunderstanding of children's needs externally with other members of staff, such as teachers and reception staff. Pastoral staff in this study also viewed the pressure to teach and to deliver the curriculum as a barrier to attendance because this meant there is limited time to understand children's individual needs in the classroom. These findings suggest that improved understanding of children's learning needs and difficulties could act as a preventative measure for non-attendance and highlights the need for systemic, whole school understanding of 'hidden difficulties', such as those associated with ASD. These findings are significant because they suggest possible important discrepancies between a child's difficulties associated with ASD (or other 'hidden difficulties') and school staff's understanding of those difficulties (Totsika et al., 2020). The findings have also emphasised the need for further research into the association between ASD and attendance difficulties (Munkhaugen et al., 2019).

8.2.2. The Concept of Safety

Safety was a recurring theme across both studies. When participants talked about school-related factors, it was often centred around the concept of safety and feelings of belonging. Bullying and transition to secondary school were identified as key factors that impact feelings of safety in school, and therefore, children's ability to attend. School staff provided insight into the challenges of addressing bullying when it occurs via social media or outside the school gates. Staff also identified the positive changes that had occurred in school because of lockdown which further indicate the importance of feeling safe in school. Parents often wrote about the absence of meaningful connections (including trust and consistency) with school staff as a significant barrier to attendance because they themselves felt unsupported in the difficult situation (which echoes research by Dannow et al., 2019). These findings indicate that both children and their parents may lose a sense of safety and connectedness with their school during periods of non-attendance, which serves to make the return to school even more challenging.

8.2.3. Individual Factors

Factors that related to the individual were identified by both parents and school staff. These factors included mental health difficulties and medical and physical needs of the child. Parents identified anxiety as an overriding barrier to attendance. Similarly, when staff talked about mental health, the prominent focus was on the debilitating nature of anxiety. While anxiety has been shown to be a risk factor for non-attendance, research also suggests that depression and other mental health problems can be strongly associated with attendance difficulties (Finning et al., 2019; Fornander & Kearney, 2020). Thus, these findings suggest a need for wider awareness and understanding of mental health in young people and how this can be addressed. In relation to practice, EPs are well placed to achieve such an endeavour as they work at individual, group, and systemic levels within schools (Greig et al., 2019). A discrepancy between school staff and parents' views concerned the impact of lost learning. While staff highlighted the negative impacts of lost learning on the individual child, parents tended to be less concerned or aware of their child's missed learning and placed more emphasis on the impact of non-attendance on their child's emotional wellbeing.

8.2.4. Systemic Challenges

Wider systemic challenges within education were identified in both studies as being barriers to attendance. For instance, the pressure from government and demands on students and staff. Some parents reported the education system was simply unsuitable for their child due to the pressures associated with performance and attendance targets. These findings suggest that there are wider policy-level and government-level factors to consider in cases of non-attendance. This has implications for professionals working at different levels within a child's micro- and meso-system (Melvin et al., 2019) and necessitates further exploration of wider systems-level responses to attendance difficulties.

Parental influence. Pastoral staff raised concerns over the powerful influence parents can have on children's attendance. This theme might indicate a move

away from viewing non-attendance as an emotionally based problem, towards an understanding situated within a within-family perspective (Gregory & Purcell, 2014). School staff tended to focus on parental attitudes to education and their negative past experiences of school. However, participants also recognised the negative impact of parental blame, which was also a prominent theme across parents' accounts in study one. These findings are significant because, although pastoral staff identified parental influence as a barrier to attendance, they also recognised the need to support parents and address these negative influences by forming positive partnerships with families (section 7.4.2).

8.3. Support for Non-attendance

I will now present the overall discussion in relation to RQ2.1 and RQ2.2 in study one and RQ2 in study two as 'Support for Non-attendance'. Within brackets next to each subheading, I have included a key word to describe each overarching theme. These words form part of the 'pillars of support' in an overarching framework presented in Figure 8.4.

Parents' views and experiences of support varied, indicating the individualised nature of the complex problem. Recurring themes across the dataset demonstrated positive and negative experiences. At times, I had a sense that parents' responses were filled with emotion and on many occasions, I felt their desperation. My feelings here might be reflective of my practitioner role and experiences working on cases of non-attendance as a trainee EP. Parents' accounts of positive support appeared to be underpinned by positive relationships and the building of trust where staff were compassionate, non-judgemental, and prioritised their understanding of the complex problem. Staff's views on what facilitates effective support for non-attendance often coincided with parents' views (Figure 8.3).

Figure 8.3

Diagram of the Congruences and Discrepancies Across the Two Studies:
Participants' Views and Experiences of the Support for Non-Attendance
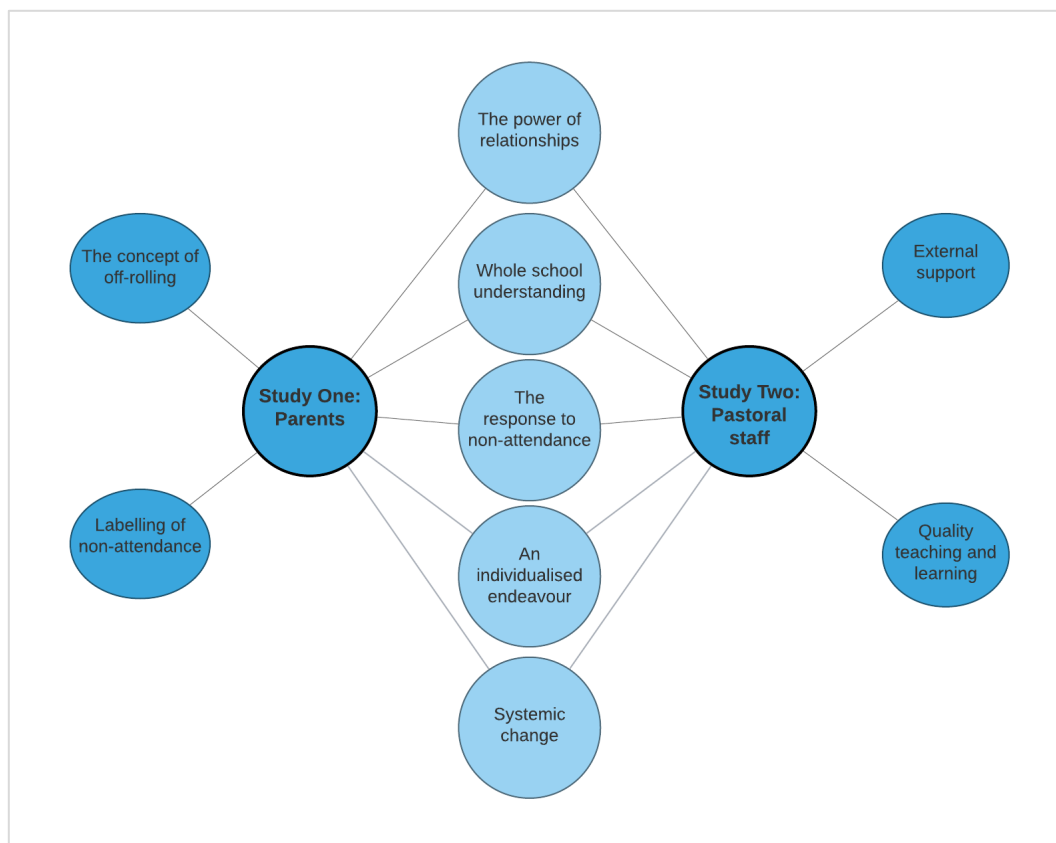
8.3.1. The Power of Relationships (Partnership)

Across both studies, there was a salient theme around the power of positive
and meaningful relationships. These relationships encompassed parent-staff
relationships, child-staff relationships, and peer relationships. When parents
wrote about positive experiences, it was often in relation to a relational
approach where they felt supported and respected. In direct contrast, other
parents described their experiences of feeling unsupported and fighting a
'constant battle' with the school.

The relational support was perceived by parents to off-set the challenging
nature of their situation, indicating the powerful influence establishing positive
partnerships between home and school can have. Bryant et al. (2013) similarly

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found that supportive and trusting interpersonal relationships between all stakeholders (parents, staff, and children) were highly valued. These findings also resonate with suggestions from Finning et al. (2020) that small changes in how school staff support families can make meaningful differences. Parents' views on how they felt blamed for their child's non-attendance seemed to act as a barrier to forming these trusting and meaningful relationships as it eroded opportunities to develop connections with staff. Viewed within Bronfenbrenner's model, these findings suggest that the lack of home-school communication and collaboration within the child's mesosystem has implications for their ability to attend school more consistently during a period of SNA (Clissold, 2018). The theme '*Know your families, Know your students*' in study two mirrored parental perspectives in this respect. Thus, 'partnership' forms the first 'pillar of support' in Figure 8.4.

8.3.2. Whole School Understanding and The Response to Non-attendance (Prevention)

Across both studies there was acknowledgement of a need for improved whole school understanding and awareness of SNA and mental health. Both studies reflected the view that schools need to recognise and respond to the problem of non-attendance early on to prevent the issue becoming more difficult. Staff also recognised the need for quality teaching and learning which prioritises time for reflection on practice. EPs may have a role to play in this respect as they are skilled in providing supervision to school staff (Dunsmuir & Leadbetter, 2010).

At this point, I would like to return to the concept of safety. My thoughts and feelings throughout this research, and during the COVID-19 lockdown, regularly returned to this key question: *Do children feel safe in school?* While feelings of safety could be conceptualised as an individual psychological factor (Nuttall & Woods, 2013), the findings from this research suggest that feelings of safety encompass a wider, whole-school phenomenon. Echoing research by Bryant et al. (2013), the current research suggests that school can act as a 'safe haven' for vulnerable children where barriers to attendance are mitigated. This was further exemplified during the national lockdown when schools remained open for vulnerable pupils. A predictable, consistent, and safe school environment

where positive relationships are prioritised by all stakeholders was highly valued by parents and recognised as key by pastoral staff. Therefore, 'predictability' forms part of the 'pillar of support' in the framework in Figure 8.4.

8.3.3. An Individualised Endeavour (Personalised)

Parents and staff identified a need to 'see the individual child' and avoid a 'one-size-fits-all' approach in cases of non-attendance. This view is reflective of the individualised and complex nature of attendance difficulties which cannot always be addressed through a universal approach (Nuttall & Woods, 2013). As part of this individualised endeavour, findings indicated that tailored approaches can only be successful when the child's voice is heard. Parents often associated their child being listened to with feeling valued which further indicates the importance of positive and meaningful relationships. This personalised endeavour forms another 'pillar of support' in Figure 8.4.

Despite these shared views, staff identified significant barriers to adopting such an approach and most participants reported having limited power to adapt attendance policy to meet individual children's needs. Pastoral staff might thus feel hindered in their approach by restrictive attendance policy and procedures in school. In this way, this research has not only highlighted the need to tailor support for children, but it has contributed to an understanding of the need for pastoral staff to have greater autonomy to adapt policy and individualise support in cases of non-attendance.

8.3.4. Systemic change

This research has highlighted the systemic challenges experienced by both parents and school staff in relation to SNA. Across both studies there was a sense that systemic change and a shift in wider school practices is needed to successfully address the complexities of non-attendance. Parents wrote about the system needing to be 'fixed' because of its disjointed and inaccessible nature. Prosecution for non-attendance was also viewed as being detrimental across both studies. There was a sense from school staff that a 'systems of

support' approach was needed where external agencies work together more readily so that families can be supported early on (Kearney & Graczyk, 2014).

Discrepancies between the studies

An important finding in study one was parents' reports of de-registering their child from school. While some parents' accounts suggested their decision was solely based on the lack of support received, others indicated that the school encouraged them to de-register. This finding is concerning given that it may be reflective of the contentious concept of 'off rolling' (Baynton, 2020).

Another significant finding in study one was parents' view on labelling. As explored in the literature review (section 2.3.1), the 'labelling dilemma' with regards to non-attendance is an ongoing complex issue, and it is suggested that labels for non-attendance (such as 'school refusal') can be reductionist and fail to fully represent the problem (Kearney, 2008). Parents wrote about the need to look beyond the label of 'school refusal' because of its negative connotations. This resonates with Pellegrini's findings (2007), and thus contributes to an understanding of the 'labelling dilemma' from parents' perspectives. This finding is significant and has implications for practice as the way professionals label and view non-attendance can impact the support experiences of families (Torrens Armstrong et al., 2011). Based on these findings, it is suggested that practitioners (including school staff, EPs, and external agencies) consider how they label non-attendance (Gregory & Purcell, 2014). School staff did not discuss labelling of non-attendance which might suggest a need for increased awareness and a thus a potential role for EPs to engage in training with schools.

External Support. While parents recognised the value of external support, they primarily wrote about how support had been inaccessible (largely in relation to CAMHS). Pastoral staff discussed the need to work closely with external professionals. External support was viewed as part of a 'Triangle of Support' where external agencies, the school, and the parents work in partnership to support the child at the centre. Similarly, Kljakovic and Kelly (2019) suggest an integrated approach to support where the local authority, education, and health services work in partnership. However, as Elliot and Place (2019, p.4) suggest, "while a multisystemic response to intervention approach is considered

attractive, the practicalities of operating this across disparate professional borders are likely to present a long-term challenge". These challenges are reflected in the views of staff in study two. Thus, future research might explore the ways multi-agencies view the problem of SNA and how joined-up working can be more successfully facilitated.

Figure 8.4 *A 'Pillar of Support' Framework: Representing Key Findings Across Both Studies in Relation to Supporting Children Experiencing SNA*

Prevention

Partnership

THE INDIVIDUAL EXPERIENCE

EXTERNAL SUPPORT

ATTENDANCE POLICY

Home-school Links

Positive partnerships with parents

Support for parents

The School

Staff awareness and understanding

Eliciting the child's voice

The Child
Feelings of safety

Mental health

Feeling valued and listened to

Being 'kept in mind'

Trusting relationships

Predictability & consistency

The language of non-attendance

Reflective practice & quality teaching

Consistent communication

Home learning opportunities

POSITIVE RELATIONSHIPS

Predictability

Personalised

8.4. What can be learned from the lockdown experience?

School attendance and the COVID-19 pandemic

A distinctive contribution of this research reflects the timeframe within which it was conducted. The COVID-19 pandemic can be viewed as a macro-level crisis that continues to have far-reaching impacts on young people's lives (Benner & Mistry, 2020). Whilst conducting research during a pandemic meant there were more practical and ethical challenges to be addressed (BPS, 2020), it also provided an opportunity to learn from participants' experiences during this unique time. In this research, both parents and staff reflected heavily on the situation. I have summarised the findings as follows:

- Parents and staff in this research recognised the significant impacts of the pandemic (both positive and negative) on children.
- Many parents wrote about the negative impacts of uncertainty on their child's anxiety. This was viewed as having an impact on their ability to return to school post-lockdown and signifies the overriding influence anxiety can have on children's ability to attend school.
- In contrast, some parents wrote about improvements in their child's mental health because the pressure to attend school had been removed. Some parents reported their child felt more connected to their peers because they were now in a similar situation as them.
- Parents seemed hopeful that lockdown might present an opportunity to raise awareness of non-attendance and home-schooling. Some parents hoped that lockdown might result in change to the education system where more flexibility could be provided for home-schooling.
- Parents wrote about the difference in support provided by school during lockdown compared to pre-lockdown times and were concerned about what would happen post-lockdown with respect to this support.
- Pastoral staff reported how the lockdown had highlighted the importance of attending school for vulnerable children who experience difficulties at home. Staff recognised how school could be a 'safe place' for these children where they are able to build meaningful connections with staff and peers. Staff also described

how some of these children had begun to appreciate attendance at school during this time.

- Being 'COVID-safe' was described by staff as having both positive and negative impacts on children's school experiences. Smaller classes during lockdown were viewed as positive for children who would normally struggle in school as the physical environment was more suited to their individual needs.

- Smaller classes also created an opportunity for students to develop healthier peer relationships and connections and it allowed staff to adopt a more individualised and nurturing approach with students.

8.5. Limitations and Future Research

Despite a carefully considered methodological approach in this research, it is important to consider the limitations that are nonetheless evident. I will now explore these limitations and provide suggestions for future research.

Firstly, the research project was restricted by the constraints associated with the COVID-19 pandemic. This meant that I was unable to recruit children as participants. Eliciting children's views in relation to their non-attendance is critical in understanding the problem and establishing effective, empowering, and individualised support for their reintegration to school (Billington, 2018). Thus, future research might seek to prioritise the child's voice in research on non-attendance. Indeed, once qualified as an EP, I hope to continue to study non-attendance and will seek out opportunities to extend the current research by recruiting children who experience SNA (as was originally planned prior to the pandemic).

Generalisability. At the beginning of the research process, I quickly ascertained that SNA is a complex problem that cannot be viewed as a homogenous phenomenon (Malcolm et al., 2003). The total number of participants in study one (n=289) only represents a small proportion of parents experiencing non-attendance in the UK. Thus, I acknowledge that the sample population and data gathered from the questionnaire cannot be generalised to the wider population of parents who have a child experiencing SNA (Oliver, 2014). However, I did not intend to generalise the findings but to contribute to the understanding of the nature of attendance difficulties and how support could be improved for families based on participants' views. Thus,

the concept of generalisability is not necessarily viewed as a limitation in this respect.

Purposive sampling. I acknowledge that recruiting parents from a social media platform limited the sample to parents who are actively involved in their child's non-attendance. Thus, whilst I sought to recruit parents with any experience of non-attendance, the participant sampling method inevitably excludes parents who are not aware of their child's non-attendance and those families who do not use social media or do not have internet access (or simply those who are not aware of the support group). The sample is therefore skewed by the people who use social media (Thomas, 2017). However, as described above, I acknowledge that the sample population and data gathered from the questionnaire cannot be generalised to the wider population of parents who experience SNA (Oliver, 2014). The findings nonetheless provide unique insights into the views of participants (Yardley, 2000). Future research might seek to recruit a wider sample of parents by using different methods of recruitment and data collection methods.

An unanticipated yet insightful outcome of the participant sample was the high proportion of the participants who reported their child as having an ASD diagnosis. As this was not an intended aim of recruitment, this might be viewed as a limitation. However, this research has inadvertently highlighted the difficulties some children with ASD experience in attending school and mirrors existing research that demonstrates non-attendance to be a persistent and prevalent problem within this population (O'Hagan et al., 2021; Totsika et al., 2020). Avenues for further research have therefore been indicated and research might adopt in-depth qualitative exploration with children with ASD who experience attendance difficulties.

In study two, purposive sampling might have reduced the diversity of participants. A selection bias may also be a limitation because of the self-selecting nature of recruitment (Thomas, 2017). Participants had an interest in non-attendance and experience in supporting children with attendance difficulties. Practitioners who are less involved in supporting attendance, or those members of staff with less awareness of the issue, are likely to hold differing views (Finning et al., 2020). Future research might seek to explore these views as well as perspectives of other stakeholders, such as policy makers, local authority personnel, and senior leadership

teams to ascertain congruences and discrepancies in views. Further exploration of the dichotomous coding of non-attendance (i.e. authorised versus unauthorised) and how this relates to the experiences of families might also be useful.

Online questionnaire. Feedback from the pilot stage of data collection suggested the online questionnaire provided an accessible and appropriate method for parents to share their views. However, I am mindful that participants' responses varied greatly in detail and length, and the questions may have been interpreted differently by different participants. Despite this, the anonymous nature of the questionnaire allowed parents freedom to express their views in their own time and private space without any judgement or influence from myself as the researcher (Braun et al., 2020). On reflection, I acknowledge that I was unable to expand on topics raised by participants (such as de-registration from school) which limited my ability as the researcher to further elicit and interpret parents' accounts.

I also acknowledge the limitations and challenges associated with qualitative data analysis. I closely followed Braun and Clarke's (2019) process of reflexive thematic analysis throughout and acknowledge that coding is subjective and will thus reflect my own individual interpretations of the data. I continually reflected on this process and provided personal reflexive accounts (Appendix E) to make my thought processes and reflexivity transparent.

Respondent bias. While the anonymous nature of the online survey in study one reduced the potential for respondent bias, I am mindful that a potential limitation in study two relates to my influence as researcher on participants' responses in interviews. I adopted measures to reduce respondent bias, such as conducting pilot interviews, checking responses for clarity, and providing reassurance of the confidential nature of the research. However, the issue of respondent bias cannot be fully mitigated. Furthermore, when compared to doing face-to-face interviews, there was less opportunity to observe participants' body language or emotional cues during online interviews (Gray et al., 2020). Despite these limitations, the restrictions caused by the COVID-19 pandemic meant that online interviews were the most appropriate and, in fact the only viable, method of data collection.

Further to the suggestions for future research outlined above, I am also mindful of how the COVID-19 pandemic has impacted upon children's attendance and school

experiences. Future research might adopt an in-depth, longitudinal approach that explores the implications of the pandemic on children's school attendance. I would also suggest that future research expands on the current findings with regards to the labelling of non-attendance. Whilst research has begun to acknowledge and address the 'labelling dilemma' (Gregory & Purcell, 2014), it appears from the findings in this research that these considerations are not necessarily widely acknowledged in practice. Owing to the congruences between parents and pastoral staff's views in this study, I also suggest that future research might further explore the importance of the pastoral role in supporting families during cases of SNA.

8.6. Implications for Practice

In this section, I will explore the implications of the findings for practice with regards to understanding and supporting non-attendance. While I acknowledge the findings in the current research are not widely generalisable, the research has nonetheless highlighted possible avenues for consideration for EPs, families, schools, and the wider implementation of policy. I will explore each of these in turn and relate the discussion points to the framework displayed in Figure 8.4.

8.6.1 Implications for school staff

Whole school understanding and awareness

To address non-attendance, the complex problem first needs to be understood. This research has highlighted parents' and school staff's views on the need for increased understanding of children's difficulties. To improve understanding, I posit that an interactionist, multi-systemic view of non-attendance that considers environmental stressors, as well as within-child factors, needs to be adopted in schools (Gregory & Purcell, 2014; Pellegrini, 2007). Findings from this research also indicate the powerful impact all members of school staff can have on a child's school experiences and their ability to attend. Thus, all staff throughout the school should have access to training to improve awareness of the difficulties involved. Staff supervision and school training could serve as an important way to develop awareness and understanding, including for those in non-teaching positions and administration roles. This whole school approach might encourage a shift in thinking

and thus promote small positive changes that can influence children's attendance (Finning et al., 2020). For instance, using compassionate and empathetic language when interacting with children, and changing the way schools label non-attendance (i.e. shifting away from a within-child 'refusal' label). Findings also suggest that support from school staff needs to be consistent and predictable. Parents reported lacking feelings of trust with school staff because support was inconsistent and unpredictable. The importance of the simple act of 'keeping promises' (such as meeting the child at the school gates on the day of their return) is indicated as being key for children who experience SNA.

Positive relationships

The current research has highlighted the significance of building positive relationships and communication between home and school (Reid, 2008). The findings also suggest that pastoral staff have a particularly important role to play in building trust and facilitating positive relationships with both families and children. I am mindful that the findings reflect only the views of a small sample of pastoral staff, yet they indicate that a shared understanding of the complex problem of non-attendance might exist between parents and pastoral school staff. Parents who experienced positive support for SNA often cited home-school partnership and kindness from staff as the foundation of their experience. Parents want to feel listened to and not blamed during periods of non-attendance, as opposed to the 'out of sight, out of mind' narrative that some parents reported. A key implication therefore would be for schools to promote the role of pastoral staff within a whole-school team approach in cases of non-attendance (Finning et al., 2018). Pastoral staff may be well placed to adopt the role of a 'key person' between home and school with the aim of maintaining consistent communication, building trust, and supporting families (which was viewed as valuable by parents in study one) (Baker & Bishop, 2015).

Promoting feelings of safety

Mirroring Tobias' findings (2019), this research has highlighted the need to promote children's feelings of safety within the school setting. For some children, school is a safe place that allows them to escape from a difficult home life (Bryant et al., 2013).

This was acknowledged by pastoral staff through their experiences of lockdown and further indicates the need for schools to provide a safe, consistent, and predictable environment for all children to help prevent non-attendance (Ingul et al., 2019). Transition was viewed as a key time when children may lose their feelings of safety, while bullying was reported to have significant implications on a child's ability to attend because children no longer felt safe or respected. Moore et al. (2019, p.5) state that "schools cannot function well if pupils are frequently absent or do not feel safe". Thus, the findings are in support of existing literature, and indicate that all professionals (including EPs and school staff) who are involved in supporting non-attendance should be aware of children's feelings of unsafety and address environmental factors that might be causing such feelings (Tobias, 2019).

8.6.3 Implications for families

The findings suggest that parents highly value the home-school partnership and consistent communication when their child is not attending school. Many parents reported feeling blamed for their child's attendance difficulties which only served to create a more difficult situation as the partnership between home and school was eroded. The findings also demonstrate the difficulty that both families and school staff experience in accessing external support for attendance difficulties. The current research has thus indicated the importance of adopting a systemic interactionist perspective, as opposed to simply viewing non-attendance as a within-child problem. This can only be achieved if a collaborative systems approach is adopted. Throughout this research, I have drawn upon Bronfenbrenner's bioecological systems model (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 200) and Melvin et al.'s (2019) KiTeS framework to make sense of the findings. It is indicated that such theoretical perspectives could be used to improve support so that families and professional better understand the complex problem of SNA.

8.6.2 Implications for educational psychologists

The individual experience

Findings from this research suggest that there are small, positive changes that can be implemented in schools to improve the situation for families and individual

children experiencing non-attendance (echoing findings from Finning et al., 2020). For instance, by:

- Providing the child with remote schoolwork to complete at home.
- Greeting children with compassion on their return to school.
- Ensuring there is a key adult who can 'meet and greet' the child on arrival to school.
- Individualising the child's timetable to include an earlier start to the school day to allow time to settle in.

While these "small, positive shifts" (Finning, et al., 2020, p. 10) in the way schools respond to a child's attendance difficulties lie predominately with the school, I suggest that EPs have a key role to play in facilitating such practices by working in partnership with the child, the family, and the school. By using consultation skills and solution-focused practices, EPs can facilitate positive change and implementation of personalised small adaptations to the school environment. However, this can only be achieved once the child's voice has been elicited.

Support for parents

EPs work at the individual and family level and can use techniques such as conflict resolution to address tensions or contradictions in views that might exist (Aucott, 2014; Gregory & Purcell, 2014). EPs are skilled in adopting a holistic perspective to encourage shared understanding and reconcile different views (Cameron, 2006). Thus, EPs are well placed to support families and schools by acting as advocates for parents and as mediators between the family and the school (Pellegrini, 2007). The findings suggest that the EP role would fit well in supporting the development of partnerships and reframing views by looking beyond the 'blame' culture identified in this research.

The child's voice

A key finding related to the importance of hearing and acting upon the child's voice. Many parents reported that their child felt ignored and misunderstood. Findings suggest that positive changes in support at school can only happen once the individual child has been 'seen and heard'. School staff will also need to be aware

that positive outcomes will likely be achieved only when the child is at the centre of everybody's efforts. EPs work closely with school staff, parents, and the children themselves, and are trained in eliciting pupils' views using psychological techniques such as Personal Construct Psychology (Kelly, 1995). EPs therefore have a key role to play in prioritising the child's voice when they are experiencing attendance difficulties and subsequently facilitating positive change.

Supervision and reflective practice

The present research has highlighted the complex nature of SNA, both for families and school staff. Non-attendance can be an emotive and complex topic, and so I would also propose that pastoral staff require professional supervision, facilitated by EPs, to explore difficult and complex cases (Gregory & Purcell, 2014). EPs are also well placed to support school staff through whole-school staff training at a systemic level and by eliciting views of key stakeholders. The findings indicate that pastoral staff recognise that both quality teaching and reflective practice in their schools is key to promoting attendance and as a preventative measure to attendance difficulties. Thus, supervision with school staff and the use of Coaching techniques to develop staff's confidence in recognising children's needs in the classroom is a key implication for EPs (Smith, 2020).

Children's mental health

Findings indicate that schools would benefit from external support in relation to children's mental health owing to its association with SNA. Previous research has suggested that EPs are well placed to support schools to develop wider approaches that address children's mental health and emotional wellbeing (Greig et al., 2019). EPs have a key role to play in promoting inclusion for all pupils, including those children who experience non-attendance and associated mental health difficulties (Gregory & Purcell, 2014). In practice, this might include whole-school training on children's mental health which incorporates psychological theory, such as Ecological Systems Theory (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006), that encourages an interactionist perspective when considering SNA.

Labelling of non-attendance

Parents identified the negative labelling of their child's difficulties as problematic. The labelling of non-attendance as a choice (i.e. 'school refusal') might be indicative of a limited understanding of the problem (Baker & Bishop, 2015). These findings further indicate the need for a wider, multi-systemic view of SNA that considers environmental factors (Lauchlan, 2003). EPs are well placed to promote thinking and understanding of labelling by adopting this wider, holistic perspective which looks beyond viewing non-attendance solely as a within-child problem (Gregory & Purcell, 2014). Again, in this way, EPs have a key role to play in training school staff and other professionals, as well as using consultation approaches to move away from a within-child view (Farrell et al., 2006). EPs can challenge misconceptions about children who experience non-attendance by encouraging a shared understanding and use of alternative discourses or 'labels' to effect positive change in schools (Pellegrini, 2007).

8.6.4 Implications for policy and monitoring practices

Attendance policy

A key theme in this research is the restrictive nature of school attendance policy which impeded pastoral staff's ability to provide flexible and individualised support. This can be viewed as a significant barrier to meeting the needs of children experiencing non-attendance. Pastoral staff reported that effective support would more likely be achieved if they were able to adapt policy and have autonomy to personalise support to the individual child. Therefore, the findings indicate a need for attendance policymakers and senior leadership teams to re-consider the implementation of attendance policies in schools. Further research that adopts an action research approach might be beneficial in exploring these wider systemic issues.

Prosecution for non-attendance

Similarly, parents reflected on the negative impact of prosecution for their child's non-attendance. As such, a key implication could be the need for local authorities and wider government policy to be adapted so that it considers the underlying

causes of non-attendance, rather than automatically adopting a punitive approach. Implementation of attendance policy will need to be carefully considered during cases of non-attendance because of the complex individualised nature of the problem. The findings mirror that of existing research that suggests support for non-attendance needs to be tailored to the individual child because of the complex and individualised nature of the problem (Lauchlan, 2003; Nuttall & Woods, 2013). Thus, a reconsideration of the way attendance policy is implemented in schools for SNA is advocated, while further research into the tensions between different stakeholders and the barriers to adapting policy might also be needed.

Pastoral staff identified non-attendance as a potential sign of other difficulties in a child's life. Early identification and intervention of these 'red flags' can only be achieved if attendance patterns are closely monitored and acted upon (Kearney & Graczyk, 2014; Pellegrini, 2007). As such, at a school-level and local authority level, there is a need to ensure careful monitoring and recording of absences in a way that can promote early responses to non-attendance.

[Signpost to Appendix GG: Final Reflexive Account]

8.7. Dissemination of my research

I aim to disseminate my research in various ways. Firstly, I will share my findings with the participants who took part. This will be achieved by posting a document of key findings to the Facebook group. In this way, I hope to reach wider audiences as well as the participants who took part in my research. For study two, I will directly share the key findings via an email to each participant. I will also emphasise that participants are welcome to forward on to colleagues and further afield. Secondly, I will share my findings with the EP service that I am currently training with by organising an online Continuing Professional Development (CPD) session with the EP team. I will share details about how I conducted my research and highlight the framework for consideration in practice (Figure 8.4). In addition, I aim to facilitate discussions about the labelling and conceptualisation of SNA with colleagues. Since completing this thesis, I have developed and designed guidance and information for local schools on attendance difficulties. This guidance was in response to the

COVID-19 pandemic and the return to school after the lockdown. I have also worked with EP colleagues on a presentation about school non-attendance. This was presented online to the wider local authority education team. A longer-term goal would be to publish my findings in a relevant journal paper and present to colleagues and wider educational professionals at conferences.

8.8. Concluding Statement

This research has highlighted the complexities and challenges of school non-attendance from the perspective of parents and pastoral staff. By adopting a pragmatic approach, I have been able to focus on the research problem and research aims while attempting to extend existing research and suggest future actions for SNA (Creswell & Clark, 2017). The findings have contributed to understandings of the complex problem of non-attendance and have shed light on the congruences and inconsistencies between parents and pastoral staff views, which has not previously been explored in the existing literature (Dannow et al., 2019). Pastoral staff not only recognised similar risk factors and barriers to attendance as parents, but they also expressed similar views with regards to the support that is required to meet the needs of children. In this way, it is suggested that pastoral staff are well placed to initiate and lead on support for families who experience attendance difficulties by establishing positive partnerships in the first instance.

This research was conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic. When I began the research process (prior to the pandemic), I could not envision how this unprecedented situation would unfold and subsequently impact my research. Nor did I fully appreciate the substantial impact the pandemic would have on schools and on children's mental health and wellbeing (Patrick et al., 2020). The pandemic has had significant repercussions not only on the research process itself, but also on my own thinking and reflections. Conducting this research during a pandemic raised ethical and methodological challenges, yet it has also provided unique and timely insight into SNA during a time that saw a national closure of schools. As I write this concluding statement, schools are continuing to experience extensive impacts of the

pandemic in relation to school attendance and school closures. The findings in relation to the pandemic have supported existing research that indicates the importance of school belongingness, home and school partnership, and the significance of children's feelings of safety in school.

Throughout this research, I have referred to the bioecological model of human development (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006) and Melvin et al.'s (2019) systems framework to make sense of the findings. The research has indicated the complex nature of SNA does indeed reflect these wider, systemic factors and therefore necessitates a multi-factorial approach to address the problem (Melvin et al., 2019). Both parents and staff's views on the barriers to attendance and support for non-attendance fit broadly within these frameworks (i.e. school factors, individual and family factors, proximal processes, and government policy level). The research has also indicated possible areas for improvement in supporting children who experience non-attendance. These include the development of trusting relationships within a positive school climate, improving whole school understanding of children's needs and attendance difficulties, ensuring predictability of support, and the need to elicit and act upon the views of the child themselves.

Finally, this research has emphasised the important role EPs can take in supporting cases of non-attendance. Supporting children who experience attendance difficulties will continue to challenge all those involved because of the complex nature of the problem. Sadly, there will likely be further far-reaching and longer-term challenges associated with children's school attendance because of the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic (Appendix HH). By considering the complexities within a holistic perspective that places the child at the centre of all endeavours and within a collaborative multi-agency approach, practitioners are likely to better understand the problem and support families through a potentially very difficult and challenging situation.

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Appendices

Appendix A: Thesis Timeline

February 2020	March 2020	April 2020	May 2020	June 2020	July 2020
Critical data collection period					
COVID-19 school closures and restrictions					
Respond to restrictions (Re-submit ethics)					
		Data collection (Study 1)			Data collection (Study 2)
			Data analysis (Study 1)		
	Supervision	Supervision	Supervision		

August 2020	September 2020	October 2020	November 2020	December 2020	January 2020
Data analysis (Study 2)					
		THESIS WRITE UP			
		Re-visit literature review			Submit draft to supervisors
	Supervision		Supervision		Supervision

Appendix B: Reflections on the COVID-19 Pandemic

"Losing the child's voice": On March 16th, the UK went into an unprecedented 'lockdown' in response to the COVID-19 pandemic and threat to life caused by its rapid spread. Here I reflect on the implications for my research:

Prior to this lockdown, I had planned to include children and young people in my research. Indeed, my research was heavily focused on hearing the voice of the child in matters of school attendance because there is a distinct gap within the literature that explores the experiences of children themselves when they struggle to attend school. I thus had to cancel the planned in-person interviews with these potential participants. I contacted their parents to reschedule.

However, it became clear that the lockdown was not going to be over quickly, and I started to wonder how I might adapt my research to meet the restrictions that prevented me meeting face-to-face with participants. After many discussions and reflections during this time, I decided to trial an online interview with one of my participants using Zoom. On May 8th I met online with 'participant 1' and their parent to explore whether this would be feasible and suitable for my research. The online interview proved to be somewhat challenging as the child found it difficult to engage with me via online methods. Once I had reflected on the experience, I realised that it would not be appropriate to continue my research by adapting the interview method with children to take place online. I had effectively 'lost the child's voice' and, as a trainee EP, at the time I felt disappointed and slightly deflated by this fact. However, after reflecting upon this and discussing the changes with my supervisors, I realised that in the circumstances this was the correct decision, both for myself and my research project, and for the children who were in the middle of lockdown and school closures. In the future, I would like to re-visit my research and add-on another study by including the voice of the child. This is something that I am passionate about and will proceed with once I am a qualified EP. After further discussions with my supervisors and colleagues, I decided to adapt my research in a way that I would recruit adults. I decided Study One would recruit parents of children experiencing attendance difficulties because they act as advocates for their child and, legally, they are viewed as being responsible for the child's attendance. Additionally, from my experience as a TEP, I know that SNA can cause much distress to the parents and it is the parents who work closely with the school when non-attendance is experienced. I decided on online survey method of data collection would address the aims of this study and would meet the requirements of no face-to-face contact.

On reflection, having now completed all data collection, I am pleased with how I adapted my research in such an unprecedented time. As I write this reflection, the UK has just entered another national lockdown (05.11.2020) and so, I am continually reflecting on how this might impact my work as a TEP and as I write up my thesis.

Appendix C: Literature Review Search Terms

During the literature search, I used the following search programmes: EBSCO, JSTOR, ERIC, PsychINFO, Web of Science and ScienceDirect. I also used textbooks and Google Scholar to search for relevant literature on attendance difficulties. The search terms used included: 'school absenteeism', 'school refusal', 'emotionally based school refusal', 'emotionally based school avoidance', 'school attendance', 'school non-attendance', and 'truancy'. Relevant UK government documents and policies were also accessed. I also made use of the International Network for School Attendance (INSA) website. This is a voluntary organisation that aims to disseminate information and strategies for school attendance difficulties, including current and past research papers. During the literature searches, it became apparent that the complexities surrounding the definitions and terminology of SNA causes some confusion amongst researchers and practitioners (Dannow et al., 2020; Elliot & Place, 2019). Within this literature review, I have aimed to bring together the existing research both to make sense of this confusion and in relation to the aims of each study comprising this thesis.

Appendix D: The Child's Voice Literature

> Commentary: This section is taken from my original literature review prior to adaptations made to my research in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. I feel it is still relevant and important to include in my research despite not directly including children in my research.

The Child's Voice

There is growing recognition of the need to increase the child's voice in decision making and education (Gregory & Purcell, 2014; Woolfson et al., 2008). Since the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (United Nations, 1989), pupil voice has become central to educational policy and practice, which acknowledges the duty of professionals in involving children in decisions that affect them (Atkinson & Rowley, 2019). Engaging children in decision-making can create a higher sense of engagement and promote self-esteem (Shier, 2001). However, providing opportunities to elicit views becomes less accessible for children who are not attending school, and thus, this population is seen as being hard to reach for research purposes (Beckles, 2014).

Research that has included the child's voice highlights the negative experiences they feel when they cannot attend school. Rees et al. (2013) found that older children did not feel listened to, lacked trust, and did not feel comfortable discussing their attendance difficulties with their teachers. In support of this, Nuttall and Woods (2013) found that feeling safe, feeling a sense of belonging, and experiencing positive relationships were valued by children experiencing SNA. While Pennick (2012) further highlights children's difficulties appeared to go unnoticed within the school system. Similarly, Bishop and Baker (2015) found that children believed their voices were often ignored when support was needed, and adults tended to influence the reframing of their views. Moreover, the young people recognised the importance of language and the negativity associated with terms such as 'naughty' and 'refuser' (Baker & Bishop, 2015). Although a useful insight into

children's experiences, this study only recruited four participants who were based within the same local authority.

More recently, Billington (2018) used an active listening approach which attempted to explore children's stories without setting a prior agenda. Billington (2018) emphasises the need for adults to be aware of children's individual subjective experiences and the importance of empowering them to communicate while jointly problem-solving and reducing preconceived ideas about how to support them. Clearly, eliciting children's views in relation to their non-attendance is critical in establishing effective, empowering, and individualised support for their reintegration to school (Billington, 2018). With regards to Educational Psychologists (EPs), this is relevant because EPs have a key role in ensuring children are listened to and understood (Billington, 2018). EPs also have a role in challenging the perceptions of teachers and other professionals to help build trust between school and the young person (Pellegrini, 2007).

Appendix E: Reflexive Accounts

Reflexive Account 1: The COVID-19 pandemic

In March 2020, the UK went into a national lockdown in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. These restrictions placed upon our everyday lives had a significant impact upon my research plans. At the time of the lockdown, I had secured 4 interviews with children and their parents. My original plan was to include children in my research to gather their views on their attendance difficulties. However, after adapting my interview methods to use online and piloting an online interview, I decided to adapt my research to include parents and school staff instead, rather than children. This was a difficult decision to make but one that was necessary owing to the difficult situation caused by the pandemic. On reflection, I wondered whether I could wait to see what happens with the restrictions and continue to include the children as participants once restrictions had reduced. However, owing to the school closures and reported impacts on children's wellbeing during this time, I believe I made the right decision. I adopted study one to include parents instead of children and school staff in study two. Originally, I planned to conduct focus groups with school staff. As this was no longer possible, I decided to conduct individual online interview instead.

Reflexive Account 2: Using Facebook to recruit participants

I acknowledge that by recruiting parents from a support group on Facebook, I may be restricting the sample to parents who are seeking support and are involved in their child's non-attendance. While I have taken a broad approach to study one (in that I am not specifying participants' experiences of non-attendance by length of time / 'type' of non-attendance / age of child etc), I realise that the parents in the Facebook group are likely to be parents who are heavily involved in their child's non-attendance. Thus, I am recruiting parents who might condone their child's non-attendance or who are not aware of their child's attendance difficulties. I am also neglecting to recruit those parents who are not aware of the group or who do not have internet access. Despite this, as a practitioner psychologist, I hope that the findings from this research will begin to further highlight the challenges and support experiences faced by parents in cases of non-attendance. While the findings will not be generalisable to all parents (which is not what I aimed to do in this study), I hope that, nonetheless, the sample of parents obtained will provide insightful data on the challenges involved and how support can be improved.

Reflexive Account 3: 17th November 2020

I am very much aware that this is my own personal conceptualisation of the data and the themes generated from the data reflect my own assumptions, experiences, and values. I am regularly reflecting and wondering: How might data be interpreted differently by different researchers? How does my EP experience influence the themes and my interpretation? I acknowledge that particularly my professional experiences will impact the way I interpret parents' accounts and the overall analysis of data from study one. I also realise that this is only a limitation if I fail to acknowledge my own influence on the data. In line with my pragmatic approach to this study, I hope to put into practice the suggestions and implications

that I am making from it. I acknowledge that I am not an "impassive, objective observer of the social world" (Oliver, 2014, p. 188). Decisions I made and assumptions I brought to this research will impact upon the data gathered, and vice versa. There is a dynamic interplay between myself, the participants, and the context of the research (Oliver, 2014). Therefore, I have come to realise the important influence my positioning and accept that knowledge gained and bound within my own assumptions and bias as a practising educational psychologist. I acknowledge that someone in a different profession or with different values to my own might have interpreted data in a very different way. This is not viewed as a limitation within my pragmatic approach and values as a researcher.

Reflexive Account 4: Labelling and Diagnosis

I have a keen interest in the impacts of labelling and completed my master's Dissertation study on labelling of students in post-16 education. This interest, and my experiences of labelling within educational psychology and as a practitioner, may have influenced my interpretation of the data at this point in my research. Several parents noted their experiences of obtaining a diagnosis for their child and when I read these accounts, I was interested in how this impacted upon the way they received support for their child's difficulties. Why should a label impact the support a child receives? A child's needs do not change when they are diagnosed, so why does this affect their experiences in school? I feel that the education system relies heavily on diagnoses and labels and am passionate about understanding this field so that I can make tangible differences in practice. On reflection, therefore, my interest in this topic may have influenced my interpretation and interest in the data that reflected parents' experiences of labelling and diagnosis.

Reflexive account 5: Response to parents' accounts

At times, I was struck by parents' accounts of the support for non-attendance. I sensed frustration and anger in several responses and I now reflect on how this might have impacted upon the way I immersed myself in the data. I was especially struck by one parent account and sense of desperation: "the system needs changing please help if you can." (Parent 90). One of the reasons I wanted to conduct this research, was the reports of families feeling incredibly 'stuck' in their situation and somewhat desperate to receive appropriate support. This quote reaches out to me.

I also reflect upon how my role as an educational psychologist influences the way I construct and interpret data and how my underlying assumptions or preconceived ideas about SNA influences my research, as well as my emotional influence (Haynes, 2012). I feel that the use of survey design in this research allowed me to remain distanced from the participants' responses and allowed the participants to express their views in a non-judgemental and safe way.

Reflexive account 6: Summary of study one
At this point, I reflect again on my responses to parents' written accounts. Despite the written form of data in study one, I continually 'felt' the emotion expressed by parents in their accounts. As parents were able to write about their experiences in an anonymous format, I wonder whether they were more able to reflect and be more honest in their responses compared to interview data. In an interview, my 'in the moment' responses to their verbal responses may have impacted on their ability to share their views and open up about their thoughts and experiences. Being a trainee EP, I feel this might have also impacted upon their response if I had carried out interviews as opposed to an online survey. The negative experiences some parents reported having with professionals may have also influenced their willingness to partake in an interview with a professional.

I am also reflecting on parents' 'cry for help' in this research; or at least, that is my interpretation of the data. At times, I have experienced feelings of frustration in response to parents' accounts and this has made me even more passionate about this research and the practical implications that might come from it.

Reflexive Account 7: Study 2 Methodology (30th June 2020)
At this point, I return to my positionality and the role of the researcher in research. I am aware of potential power imbalances between myself and the participants. I acknowledge my privilege as a researcher and the power that I might exert over participants. Being a trainee EP, I recognise the influence of the researcher-practitioner role and, at times, I noticed and reflected upon how my dual identity of 'researcher' and 'practitioner' overlapped (Arber, 2006). Part of my practitioner role is to support teachers and school staff and encourage problem-solving in practice. I felt that at times I was falling back into my practitioner role during interviews. As discussed by Finlay (1998) the research-practitioner role gives "insider status" and thus, a potential power imbalance between participant and researcher. All participants were made aware of my professional identity which allowed them to position me in relation to themselves (Finlay, 1998). My position in the research and my identity as a researcher-practitioner was made transparent. Further to this, and to address concerns about my role in the research, I kept a researcher journal to reflect upon my thinking, assumptions, and feelings throughout the data collection process (Arber, 2006). Maintaining reflexivity in this way, and by considering the subjective nature of research, Conneeley (2002) highlights that rigour may be improved.

Reflexive Account 8
I wonder if being a trainee EP has impacted upon staff's responses to my questions. Have they responded honestly to my questions?
Has my role influenced their responses?
Do they feel intimated at all by my presence? Do they reply to questions in a way that they think I would want to hear?

I have continually reflected on these questions during the interview process. Whilst the answers to these questions are unknown, I have reflected on the ways I have tried to reduce such bias (see methodology and limitations).

Reflexive Account 9

This theme (It's (also) about the parents) makes me wonder about the different conceptualisations of non-attendance and whether the participant sample in study one coincides with school staff's views of parents in study two i.e. staff's responses in respect to parents in this study seem to reflect more of a 'truancy' conceptualisation of non-attendance as they discuss parents who are not necessarily concerned with their child's non-attendance.

Parents in study one are those who are involved in supporting their child to attend school because they were recruited via a support group on social media. While this could be viewed as a limitation, it also raises the issue of how non-attendance is conceptualised and how this impacts support for families/children.

Reflexive Account 10: Mental Health and impact of COVID

Reflecting on these comments about the impacts of COVID, I wonder if this has increased understanding or empathy for children who experience anxiety-related difficulties in attending schools during 'normal times' as was found in parents' views in Study One? There has been a great deal of media coverage and discussion regarding the impact of the pandemic on young people's wellbeing.

I also reflect on the impact of the pandemic on my own mental health and anxieties. While I do not believe this had impacted upon my research, it has played a large part of my life during the whole of my research process. This research has been a welcome escape from the media coverage of the pandemic and my own circumstances.

Reflexive Account 11

The powerful narratives around the change in environment because of COVID really struck me as an important finding in this research. I had to adapt a great deal of my research because of COVID and did not plan to be gathering data on COVID in such a way. The positive aspect of collecting data during lockdown was that I was able to get first-hand experiences about how the situation was impacting upon the lives of parents and school staff first-hand. I could also gather insight into how children were experiencing the situation. These insights were sometimes positive and sometimes negative. Now the schools have returned, and we are on the other side of first national lockdown, I wonder what impact this is having on children now?

1st November 2020: Another lockdown announced but schools will remain open. I wonder about the impact of this on children.

Study One

RQ1	What do parents view to be the barriers impacting their child's ability to attend school?

Rationale. There is currently limited research that elicits parents' views on attendance difficulties and what they view to be the reasons for non-attendance (Heyne et al., 2020). Research shows that understanding the factors associated with SNA is key to early intervention and successful support (Clissold, 2018). Parents are key stakeholders in SNA (Heyne et al., 2020, p.1024) and there has been "inadequate attention to the voices of all stakeholders" in research on SNA and in understanding the issues involved.

RQ2.1	What are parents' experiences and views of the support that is offered to them and their child for school non-attendance?

Rationale. Few studies to date have focused on the intervention and support experiences and views of parents when their child experiences non-attendance. Further insight is needed to increase understanding about support for SNA that could facilitate development of more effective strategies (Browne, 2018).

RQ2.2	How do parents think support could be improved to help their child attend school more consistently?

Rationale. Van Eck et al. (2017) highlights the need to explore parental perspectives about what they find helpful in supporting their child's attendance. Yet, there continues to be a paucity of research into parents'

beliefs about how they can be better supported when their child is experiencing attendance difficulties. By including the parental voice in this way, important knowledge can be gained about their first-hand experiences. This will allow for consideration of practical solutions to the complex problem of SNA.

Study Two

RQ1.1	How do school staff conceptualise and make sense of school non-attendance?

Rationale. There is limited research that takes account of staff in non-teaching roles, despite these roles being key in identifying attendance problems, and supporting children and parents during periods of non-attendance (Finning et al., 2020). How school staff understand and make sense of SNA will influence their decisions about the support they provide (Finning et al., 2020). Developing consensus on the conceptualisation of attendance difficulties is also an important priority for future research (Finning, 2019a; Heyne et al., 2019a; Kearney, 2008b).

RQ1.2	What school-based factors do school staff view to be barriers to attendance, and why?

Rationale. There is a paucity of studies that examine the role of school-based factors as risk factors for SNA (Dannow et al., 2020; Havik et al., 2015). School factors have often been underplayed by school staff in existing research on SNA (Finning et al., 2020). Yet, these factors are likely to be those that staff members are more able to control and research has indicated the importance of considering school-based factors in cases of non-attendance (Ingul et al., 2019). Thus Finning et al. (2020) suggest that greater

awareness about the role of school factors in attendance difficulties is needed and staff should be encouraged to consider these factors.

RQ2 What do school staff view to be the facilitators of effective support for families who experience school non-attendance?

Rationale. To identify how school staff believe help for children and their families could be developed and improved upon when they experience non-attendance. This will allow for comparison with parents' experiences of support and how the barriers might be addressed in practice. Existing research has focused on exploring school staff's views on the causes of SNA, and while RQ1.1 takes this approach, RQ2 investigates school staff's broader views on support and intervention (Finning et al., 2018).

Commentary: Below is the call for participants for the pilot study that was posted on the Facebook group with agreement from the organiser of the group. I have also included the final call for participants.

PILOT CALL FOR PARTICIPANTS

Hello. My name is Kerrie Lissack and I am a trainee Educational Psychologist. I am undertaking research into school non-attendance (primarily prior to Covid-19 crisis but I would also like to explore the impacts of the current crisis). I previously posted on here a while ago recruiting for phase one of my research with children. I am now looking for parents to complete a questionnaire for another phase. The link below takes you to more information and the **pilot** version of my questionnaire. I am looking for about 10 people to complete the questionnaire and provide some feedback so that I can improve on it for the final edit (I will then post the final version on here for more people to complete).

If you are interested in taking part, please press on the link and follow the instructions.

Thank you for your help with my research.

Kerrie Lissack (kl470@exeter.ac.uk)

[link provided here]

FINAL CALL FOR PARTICIPANTS

Hello. My name is Kerrie Lissack and I am a trainee Educational Psychologist. I am undertaking research into school non-attendance (primarily prior to Covid-19 crisis but I would also like to explore the impacts of the current crisis).

Having gathered feedback from a pilot questionnaire, I have now created the final edit and am looking for parents/guardians to complete the survey. I hope the data I collect from parents/guardians will improve our understanding of school non-attendance and how schools can better support children and families.

If you are interested in taking part, please press on the link and follow the instructions.

Thank you for your help with my research.
Kerrie Lissack (kl470@exeter.ac.uk)

[link provided here]

> Commentary: This consent information was provided at the start of the online questionnaire. Participants were required to read this and select "yes" to the statement "I confirm that I have understood and agree with all of the above" before commencing the questionnaire.

PARENT VIEWS AND EXPERIENCES OF SCHOOL NON-ATTENDANCE

Section 1: Participant Information

Thank you for expressing an interest in this research, and for volunteering your time to participate. Before you take part in this study, I would like you to be fully informed about the nature of this research, why it is being done, and what it will involve. Please take time to read the following information carefully.

The purpose of this research is to explore the views and experiences of parents whose child is experiencing school non-attendance. Please note that this research is focusing on the issue of school non-attendance prior to the current COVID-19 crisis and subsequent closure of schools. While I would like to gather some insight into what impact the school closures have had on your child's situation, I am primarily gathering information about your experiences of school non-attendance prior to the current crisis. This study is being conducted by Kerrie Lissack, Trainee Educational Psychologist, at the University of Exeter, supervised by Dr Andrew Richards and Dr Chris Boyle. You will be invited to complete an online questionnaire, which will take approximately 20-30 minutes to complete. The questions will relate to:

- Your views of your child's school non-attendance.
- The experiences of the support you have received in relation to your child's non-attendance.
- How you think support could be improved.

Participation in this study is voluntary and you have the right to withdraw from the study at any time simply by contacting the researcher. Your responses will be confidential and no identifying information such as your email or IP address will be recorded. All information and data collected by the researcher will be kept strictly confidential, and stored in a password protected electronic format, with no identifying information associated with the files. Some questions are open-ended allowing you to write as much or as little as you would like. The findings of this research will be published as part of the researcher's doctoral thesis and may be submitted for further publication within an academic journal article. This research study has been approved by the University of Exeter ethics committee and complies with the HCPC and BPS Standards of Ethics.

If you have any questions about this study, the nature of the research, or how the information you provide will be used, please do not hesitate to contact the researcher (kl470@exeter.ac.uk). By selecting 'yes' on the initial question below, you indicate and agree that:

- You have read the above information
- You voluntarily agree to participate
- You are at least 18 years of age

Thank you for your participation. I confirm that I have understood and agree with all of the above:

Select "yes" box

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Appendix I: Rationale for Questionnaire Items

Questionnaire item	Rationale for inclusion (source reference)
Section 2: Background information 1. How old is your child? 2. What year group is your child currently in? 3. Does your child have an additional need? If so, what category does it fall into?	These initial questions are exploratory and introductory in nature. They serve to gain insight into the nature of the child's non-attendance and provide background information.
4. At what school stage did your child begin to show signs of difficulties in attending school? 5. How long has your child experienced difficulties in attending school?	School non-attendance has been shown to be more prevalent in secondary-aged school children (Pellegrini, 2007). The timing of the move to secondary school can be situated within Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems model at the chronosystem (Melvin et al. 2019). Melvin et al. (2019, p.6) state that "consideration of chronosystem factors is thus required to achieve a comprehensive understanding of absenteeism and SAPs." These questions provide further background information and highlight the significance of transitions in a child's non-attendance.
Section 3: Barriers to attendance 6. To what extent do you feel [*transition experiences/school factors/peer factors/home factors/community factors/wider cultural factors*] have been a factor explaining your child's non-attendance? Please provide some more detail about why you think this.	Research indicates that SNA can be caused by many complex, ecosystemic factors (Ingul et al., 2012; Melvin et al., 2019). It has also been shown that parents emphasise the impact of school factors over other factors (Malcolm et al., 2003). These questions are initial starting points in the form of Likert questions for parents to consider the various factors that may influence their child's non-attendance. Participants were then able to write about their views and experiences in the open-ended box to provide more qualitative information about why and how they viewed these factors to be influential to their child's non-attendance.
7.Are there any other factors not listed above that have influenced your child's non-attendance? Please provide details.	Included this question because I wanted to let participants expand on their answers to the previous closed questions. I did not want to restrict their responses. A focus on gaining their own narrative about what they think has influenced their child's attendance difficulties.

Section 4: Support for non-attendance 8. What support was provided to you by school staff when your child first started experiencing difficulties attending school?	Included to gain insight into how non-attendance was first responded to. Research indicates that early intervention is key in addressing school attendance difficulties (Heyne, 2019). Therefore, to address one of the aims of this study (To gain insight into the views and experiences of support parents receive), it was important to ask parents about what early intervention they had received, if any.
9. Do you have regular contact with your child's school regarding their attendance? 10. Do you have a key person at school you can talk to about your child's attendance?	An approach recognised in the literature to address non-attendance is having a key person at school to communicate and liaise with (Nuttall & Woods, 2013). Research has shown positive impacts of this approach (Dalziel & Henthorne, 2005; Epstein & Sheldon, 2002). Research also indicates that positive home-school partnership is more likely to effectively meet the needs of children and reduce non-attendance (Malcolm, et al. 2003). Therefore, I included this question to gain a sense of this type of support that parents may or may not have received.
11. What arrangements are in place at present to support your child's school attendance?	Included to gain a sense of the support hat is experienced by parents for their child's attendance difficulties, and thus, begin to address RQ2.1. There is limited research on the support experiences of parents for non-attendance (as demonstrated in the literature review).
12. To what extent do you feel the support from school staff has been helpful? 13. Please explain why you have given this rating.	A Likert scale question to begin to introduce the topic of whether support has been helpful. Then an opportunity to expand on this answer with an open-ended response.
14. Have you received any involvement from organisations outside of the school? 15. Please describe the support you have received.	Multi-agency working and partnerships is often needed to effectively address the complexities of children's school attendance difficulties (Archer et al., 2003). This question was included to gather information about support that is received external to the school e.g. CAMHS, counselling for their child.
16. To what extent do you feel that the support you have received from other agencies/professionals has been helpful? Please explain why you think this.	Yet the Tobias (2019) notes that different professionals involved can cause a disjointed approach. This question aimed to elicit the views of parents in relation to support provided form external agencies and whether this support has been a positive or negative experience.

17. Do you think support for you and your child could be improved in relation to school attendance? 18. If yes, how do you think support for your child from school staff could be improved?	These questions provided participants an opportunity to write about their experiences of support and whether they believed they could have been supported more effectively.
19. With regards to COVID-19 and school closures, how do you feel your child has been affected with regards to their education and/or mental health? 20. What impact, if any, do you think the Covid-19 crisis will have on your child's return to school when schools re-open?	Owing to the timeframe within which this questionnaire was available to participants (during the lockdown) I did not want to circumvent the significant impacts of COVID-19 on the lives of the participants and their children. As most children in the country were not attending school during this time, it was pertinent to ask these questions and gather insight into their experiences.
21. Finally, are there any other comments you would like to make relating to your child's school non-attendance?	Included to provide an opportunity to share any further points about their experiences and views that have not been covered in previous questions.

Appendix J: Pilot Questionnaire Feedback

Commentary: The questionnaire was piloted for two days on 23rd and 24th April 2020. I received 23 responses. Below are the comments provided from the pilot questions asked at the end of the questionnaire.

Question	Sample of participants' comments	Reflections and actions taken by researcher
Question 1: How long did it take you to complete? Did you feel it was too long, or there were too many questions?	"It took 10 minutes; length was fine" "1 hour; not too long". "Length was fine". "Amount of questions just right". "It was long but necessary in order to get detail so understandable and didn't mind". "A bit too long". "Fine". "I was worried it was going to be really long, but it was a lot shorter than I imagined!"	Average time taken for the pilot question was recorded to be 32 minutes. I feel that this is appropriate, and feedback was positive with regards to the length.
Question 2: Did you feel you had a good understanding of the instructions presented at the start of the questionnaire?	"Understood instructions hopefully!" "Yes." "Instructions clear". "Yes." "Yes." "Yes." "Extremely clear."	All feedback about instructions was positive. No changes required.
Question 3: Did you manage to answer all questions? If not, were there any particular reasons for this that you think the researcher should know about?	"Answered all questions" "Yes." "Only those that didn't apply". "Yes." "Yes." "Yes."	Feedback positive about answering questions. No action taken.
Question 4: Were there any questions that didn't make sense? Which ones?	"Understood all questions - one factor was socio/economic ? quite broad or open to interpretation - I wondered about the social expectations of school so probably going way off!" "None". "No". "No".	For the question concerning socio/economic factors, I have expanded on this to make it clearer. I have also added a box for further comments if needed.

Question 5: Was the language used clear and easily understandable?	All answered "yes".	No action needed.
Question 6: Was the layout of the questionnaire clear?	"Yes". Yes". "Yes". "Yes". "Yes, however I needed more room in some answers e.g. how has her mental health suffered from Covid-19; box seemed very small!"	I have expanded all the answer boxes to allow for more space for written responses.
Question 7: Is there anything you would improve?	o "The statement that has to be read and agreed to at the beginning could maybe be divided up a bit more, so that it is easier to speed read". o "Question 3: I think primary/secondary are too broad as it would be useful to know whether there are particular age groups in which school refusal becomes a problem". o "Question 4 is hard to answer as for my son, his attendance has fluctuated from 0 to 90% over the last 5 years". "No". "No". "No". "No, all seems clear".	o I have re-organised the introduction instructions page at the start of the questionnaire to make it easier to read. o I have expanded on the choices in response question 4 (At what school stage did your child begin to show signs of difficulties attending school?) to include the different key stages rather than just primary and secondary school stage. o For question 4 (How long has your child experienced difficulties in attending school?), there is an 'Other' option that respondents can select if they need to expand on their answer.

Further generic feedback:
o The questionnaire was well structured and gave opportunity to give further details.
o The questions were fine however as I have numerous children a way to answer for them all or at least both my school refusers in 1 questionnaire would be good.
o Very good questionnaire. Good, simple questions, and not too long. One thing that may help in getting more accurate answers is to have an 'additional comments' box after each question. My son has had 3 failed secondary placements so my answers vary depending on which placement a situation occurred.
o Was all good.
o Yes, very good.
o It was a good experience. Thank you.
o I actually enjoyed answering honestly.

- No, all clear and ok. I felt I must have clicked not quite the right answer somewhere though because my son is now home educated but the questions continued being school centred.
- Really in-depth questionnaire hope my answer help you really easy to understand good luck in your future.
- Fab survey
- Clear questionnaire that covered all aspects of school avoidance and all parties involved.
- All good, excellent questionnaire
- All good.

PARENT VIEWS AND EXPERIENCES OF SCHOOL NON-ATTENDANCE

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- You voluntarily agree to participate
- You are at least 18 years of age

Thank you for your participation. I confirm that I have understood and agree with all of the above:

Select "yes" box

***

Section 2: Background information

1. How old is your child?

2. What year group is your child currently in?

	Key stage 1 (year 1-2)
	Key stage 2 (year 3-6)
	Key stage 3 (year 7-9)
	Key stage 4 (year 10-11)
	Other (please specify)

3. Does your child have an additional need?

Yes	No

b) If so, what category does it fall into?

Autism	
ADHD	
Anxiety	
Depression	
Literacy difficulty	
Medical condition	
Physical disability	
Other	

4. At what school stage did your child begin to show signs of difficulties in attending school?

	Nursery or Primary School key stage 1 (year 1-2)
	Primary School key stage 2 (year 3-6)
	Secondary School key stage 3 (year 7-9)
	Secondary School key stage 4 (year 10-11)
	Other (please specify)

5. How long has your child experienced difficulties in attending school?

	Less than 3 months
	3-6 months
	6 months – 1 year
	1 – 2 years
	Over 2 years
	Other (please specify)

~

Section 3: Barriers to your child's attendance at school.

Question 5

a) To what extent do you feel **transition experiences** (e.g. transition from primary to secondary school) have been a factor explaining your child's non-attendance?

1 (not at all)	2 (A lot)	3 (To some extent)	4 (A little)	5 (A great deal)

b) To what extent do you feel **school factors** (e.g. teacher relationships, exam pressure, the school building) have been a factor explaining your child's non-attendance?

1 (not at all)	2 (A lot)	3 (To some extent)	4 (A little)	5 (A great deal)

c) To what extent do you feel **peer factors** (e.g. bullying, friendship issues) have been a factor explaining your child's non-attendance?

1 (not at all)	2 (A lot)	3 (To some extent)	4 (A little)	5 (A great deal)

d) To what extent do you feel **home factors** (e.g. parental divorce, parental ill-health) have been a factor explaining your child's non-attendance?

1 (not at all)	2 (A lot)	3 (To some extent)	4 (A little)	5 (A great deal)

e) To what extent do you feel **community factors** (e.g. difficulties with neighbours, the walk to school) have been a factor explaining your child's non-attendance?

1 (not at all)	2 (A lot)	3 (To some extent)	4 (A little)	5 (A great deal)

f) To what extent do you feel **wider social/political/cultural factors** have been a factor explaining your child's non-attendance?

1 (not at all)	2 (A lot)	3 (To some extent)	4 (A little)	5 (A great deal)

Please provide some more detail about why you think this:

6. Are there any other factors not listed above that have influenced your child's non-attendance? Please provide details:

Section 4: Support for school non-attendance

The questions in this section focus on the support you have received in relation to your child's school non-attendance.

7. What support was provided to you by school staff when your child **first** started experiencing difficulties attending school?

8. Do you have regular contact with your child's school regarding their attendance?

Yes	No	Not sure

9. Do you have a key person at school you can talk to about your child's attendance?

Yes	No	Not sure

10. What arrangements are in place at present to support your child's school attendance?

11. To what extent do you feel the support from **school staff** has been helpful?

1 (not at all)	2 (A lot)	3 (To some extent)	4 (A little)	5 (A great deal)

12. Please explain why you have given this rating:

13. Have you received any involvement from organisations outside of the school?

Yes	No

14. Please describe the support you have received:

15. To what extent do you feel that the support you have received from other agencies/professionals has been helpful?

1 (not at all)	2 (A lot)	3 (To some extent)	4 (A little)	5 (A great deal)

16. Please explain why you think this:

17. Do you think support for you and your child could be improved in relation to school attendance?

Yes	No	Not sure

18. If yes, how do you think support for your child from school staff could be improved?

19. With regards to Covid-19 and school closures, how do you feel your child has been affected with regards to their education and/or mental health?

20. What impact, if any, do you think the Covid-19 crisis will have on your child's return to school when schools re-open?

21. Finally, are there any other comments you would like to make relating to your child's school non-attendance?

Appendix L: Reflexive Thematic Analysis Process

The stages of reflexive thematic analysis for both studies (Braun et al., 2019)

Phase	Description of the process	
Reading and familiarisation of the data *Aim: to immerse myself in the data in a relaxed way while being thoughtful and curious*	• **Study one**: Reading and re-reading the data, note down initial ideas.	• **Study two**: I transcribed the data from the interviews. Listened to the recording several times to immerse myself in the data.
Generating codes *Aim: to engage in systematic and rigorous coding to make sense of the data and identify meaning across the dataset.*	• **Study one**: transferred data into NVivo software and started the coding process. • NVivo folders for each initial code were created, and extracts were copied into the relevant initial code folders (Appendix N). An example of the list of codes for R1 one are provided in Appendix O (152 initial codes were produced at this stage).	• **Study two**: Interview transcripts were printed off and initial coding by hand, highlighting text and noting down initial codes (Appendix EE). • Coding interesting features across the entire dataset. • Highlighting data and reducing data to collated chunks of text; codes help to organise the data into initial shared patterned meanings.
Constructing themes *Aim: to build, mould, and give meaning at the intersection of data, researcher subjectivity, and RQs (copied).*	• Collate initial codes into potential themes. • Gathering all data relevant to each potential theme. • Used word document to set up a table with codes and corresponding data extracts. Started to bring together codes and extracts into potential themes. • Initial codes, subthemes and themes were put into tables (Appendix P and FF). • Data extracts were revisited to check if they fitted within the initial subthemes and themes. • At this stage, I produced general thematic maps of candidate ('prototypes') themes for each research question (Appendix M and DD) to visually represent how the codes, subthemes, and themes fitted together with the aim of further immersing myself in the data and establishing the boundaries of each	

	potential theme, exploring themes and subthemes and connections between them.
	• Testing out earlier coding processes in relation to overall dataset and the RQs.
Revising themes *Aim: to revisit candidate themes (developed at stage 3) and ensuring themes are coherent and distinct. "Letting go" of themes that do not work in relation to the RQ and dataset.*	• Having produced the initial, somewhat 'messy' initial thematic maps, I then began checking that the themes worked in relation to the coded extracts (level 1) and the entire dataset (level 2). • Themes and subthemes were reorganised, re-named, removed, some themes and subthemes were amalgamated in response to checking and re-checking the data extracts to ensure themes were distinct and coherent. • A final thematic map was produced having reviewed themes again in relation to the research question and ensuring they reflected the original data.
Defining and naming themes *Aim: to create definitions that make clear the central organising concept of each theme to clarify the nature and scope of each.*	• I then created a table for theme and subtheme definitions for each research question. • Re-checking the coded data to ensure fit within the central organising concept of the theme. • During this process, I was able to develop the theme names to better encapsulate the idea.
Producing the report *Aim: to carry out a final review of how well the themes fit together and to produce a write up of the analysis alongside the discussion, making revisions where necessary.*	• I selected vivid and compelling data extracts for each theme and subtheme to present in the findings and discussion section for each study. • A final analysis of data and themes in relation to the research question, literature, initial notes, and definitions. • Weaving the analysis with existing literature for the discussion brought up some final revisions to the themes.

Appendix M: Example Thematic Maps (Study One, RQ One)

Initial thematic map (Map 1)

Commentary: I developed this initial candidate thematic map from the codes and subthemes developed in the previous stage (Stage 3; constructing themes). It shows how the candidate ('prototype') themes fit together with the subthemes and with each other. As the map shows, some candidate themes crossed over at this stage, therefore they were not succinct and lacked clear boundaries. The aims of this stage of the thematic map process was to identified potential crossovers and visually see how the subthemes fitted together and under each potential theme.

Social aspect of school

Feeling isolated

Poor home-school partnership

Relationships in school

Lack of communication

Negative peer interactions

No one to talk to

Breakdown of trust

Bullying

My child has no friends

With peers

With adults

Racist incidences

Cultural competence

No being listened to / feeling dismissed

Professionals not "getting it"

Everyday transitions

Difficult transitions

Hidden disability

Unrecognised needs and difficulties

Academic v. social/emotional needs

Poor self-esteem

Masking of difficulties

Big leap to secondary school

I am different to everyone

Sensory difficulties

Unmet need

Space and crowds

Child's Individual traits

Trauma

Acceptance of a difficulty

Difficulties associated with Autism

Inconsistent approaches

The school environment

Anxiety

Family situation

Parental divorce

Square peg, round hole

Data-driven

Onset of puberty

Illness/ bereavement

Expectations and pressure

The wider education system is unsuitable

"Attendance at all costs"

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Developed thematic map (Map 2)

Commentary: I then started to develop the initial map by checking the data against the potential themes and subthemes and in relation to the RQ. As the map shows, some of the themes and subthemes were re-organised to generate more succinct and defined themes. At this stage, there were still some subthemes that crossed over and further refinement was needed. For example, "the school environment" and "difficult transitions" were connected, while "Belonging and connection" and "Relationships in schools" also crossed over with connections between subthemes. Themes were further refined by re-visiting the data and checking the meaning of data extracts which led to the final thematic map being produced.

Belonging and Connection
- breakdown of trust
- negative interactions with peers
- My child is bullied at school
- not feeling safe
- Racist incidences

Relationships in school
- Feeling isolated
- Lack of home-school communication

Unacknowledged needs and misunderstood differences
- No being listened to / feeling dismissed
- Unmet need
- Difficulties associated with Autism
- Hidden disability
- The perceived need for a diagnosis
- Professionals not "getting it"
- Parental concerns are dismissed
- Lack of staff awareness and training

Individual traits and experiences
- Poor self-esteem
- Illness/bereavement
- The pandemic
- Anxiety
- Trauma
- Onset of puberty
- Comparison to peers
- Parental divorce

The school environment
- Space and crowds
- Sensory difficulties
- Classroom management
- Inconsistent approaches

Difficult transitions
- Everyday transitions
- Big leap to secondary school

School ethos and culture of education
- Data-driven
- "Attendance at all costs"
- Expectations and pressure
- Square peg, round hole

Final thematic map (Map 3)

Commentary: Having re-visited the data several times, I now considered the themes and subthemes in relation to the entire dataset and the RQs. Final themes and subthemes were decided upon and re-named to encapsulate meaning. It is worth noting here that I decided to include 'subtheme categories' into some of the subthemes to avoid losing any of the meaning encapsulated within each subtheme. These were reminders to myself of what was encapsulated within the subthemes.

Lost feelings of belonging and connection
- Difficult transitions
- Overwhelming sensory environment
- The power of negative peer interactions
  - Bullying is an issue
- Breakdown of trust
  - Broken promises

Unacknowledged needs and misunderstood differences
- Hidden difficulties
  - Unmet needs
  - Autism and masking
- Limited understanding
  - Lack of acceptance

Individual traits and experiences
- Family circumstance
  - Difficult home life and experiences
- Medical needs and physical difficulties

My child's mental health
- Anxiety overwhelms my child
- Impact of the pandemic

The damaging culture of the system
- School ethos
  - "Attendance at all costs"
  - Schools are data-driven
- The education system is flawed
  - Square peg, round hole

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Final map presented in Discussion chapter

Commentary: For clarity to the reader, I decided to re-arrange the thematic maps into the form as shown below. The subtheme categories were removed for clarity and succinctness. I also made some final amendments during the write up stage having re-visited the data a final time to ensure the themes fully encompassed the data.

Unacknowledged needs, misunderstood differences	Lost sense of belongingness and safety	Individual child experiences	My child's mental health	The damaging culture of the system
Limited understanding and acceptance of need	The power of negative peer interactions	Family circumstances	Anxiety overwhelms my child	School ethos and the data-driven school world
Hidden difficulties and the art of masking	Broken feelings of trust	Medical needs and physical difficulties	Impact of the pandemic	The education system is flawed
	Difficult school transitions			
	Overwhelming sensory environment			

Appendix N: A Selection of Participant Responses and NVivo Coding (Study One)

Sample of participant responses

16: His social communication difficulties create the most anxiety/phobia and the relationships with teachers.

17: Developed anxiety in year 6 when teacher was struggling in a mixed age and ability class, lots of disruptive behaviour and all adults and children in the classroom environment not coping. My son became collateral damage in the 18 month period leading up to the teacher and TA resigning. I think my son's underlying Aspergers meant he could not accommodate all this, and he became acutely highly anxious. This anxiety is now fully associated with school environment and after initial positive transition to secondary just can't cope. He is very bright but just can't get back into school no matter how much he wants to be with his peers. He is generally well-liked and popular.

18: Pressure of secondary school work. Moving between classrooms. Teachers don't know their pupils and treat the classes as a conveyor belt. Ignore children who are neurodiverse as no time to teach differently to those requiring additional support.

19: Believes she is not believed and lost trust in the teaching staff. Very strong difference between a primary and secondary setting.

20: Already suspected ASD/anxiety/learning difficulties but assessment taking far too long, plus my (mums) I'll health and death of grandma exacerbated everything.

21: His social age is much less than his peers his elder brother transitioned to secondary school and he lost that support his ya left the school and his class teacher was new to school the school in general didn't understand his needs didn't really have a good understanding of sen and as such the relationship broke down at the beginning of year 5 he began refusing to go and became really anxious I moved him to a school with a senco who has a

great understanding of his needs but my son still can't manage to go he has found everything a challenge and has no self esteem

22: Lots of transition LOTS

23: Transition caused problems - totally unexpected. Everyone thought she was the most ready out of her peer group, but she has struggled from a week and a half into Year 7. She refuses to go to school.

24: He was not given any extra transition and this I feel had a detriment effect; on him. He gets very stressed and anxious during exams , won't do homework. Has no friends in school.

25: Have to literally walk my child into the classroom and collect her from the classroom. Kids like to wind my child up because she reacts so quickly and then gets the blame. Doesn't cope with change of surroundings at all wont join in to new situations even if my child wants to. Gets bullied a lot . Cant get out of bed always late to everything including school. Wont even go to shops

26: The transition to secondary school was when the non attendance started, before that it was odd days and weeks off but somewhat managing to go in. Transition overwhelmed her and was very poorly supported. The school building and teachers were important, all too much change, too big, too noisy, not used to so many teachers instead of just one. Support staff promised things to happen which didn't happen again and again losing trust in what they said.

27: My son has masked his difficulties to the point where he became exhausted and with growing pressures of year 6, unable to keep it up. He began to avoid school so he would not be seen as dysregulated in class. As a boy, his peers have been critical of his emotional outbursts as they display often through tears and distress. My son has two teachers but I would say only one "got it" until recently which has also been problematic.

28: The staff at the school continue to use known triggers which escalate my sons behaviour. They secluded him, he becomes violent and now they want to restrain him. But they will not make allowances by adopting communication pathways for him and insist on imparting their will. Who would want to go to school with all that going on.

29: Suspected ASD. Doesn't cope well with change. High expectations on themselves. Doesn't make friends easily.

30: Social, sensory, learning, physical and emotional needs not being met in school despite very clear EHCP actions.

31: His autism played a huge part but as he was 'academically capable' and behaved well it wasn't considered early enough. Also his peers moved towards a level of independence and he didn't.

32: Has high social anxiety couldn't cope with amount of people. Doesn't want to be noticed or looked at and didn't feel at trust that he wouldn't be. Felt very vulnerable in the environment Also struggled with the travel.

33: Increased pressure at school to do well made the situation worse. My daughter also is asd and has anxiety so has social issues and just wanted a friend but struggled to make as she is so shy. She was hyper aware of noise and crowds and imagined people looked at her.

34: My daughter has eds (elhers danlos syndrome) and has constant widespread pain, fatigue and a host of other issues.. Her anxiety started in yr7 and has progressively become worse.. She only manages 1-2 days a week (pre COVID) and has been on the Camhs waiting list for counselling for 2 yrs.. She has also just started being assessed for asd as they think she has been masking.

transitioned to secondary school and he lost that support his

ya left the school and his class teacher was new to school the

school in general didn't understand his needs didn't really have

a good understanding of sen and as such the relationship

broke down at the beginning of year 5 he began refusing to go

and became really anxious I moved him to a school with a

senco who has a great understanding of his needs but my son

still can't manage to go he has found everything a challenge

and has no self esteem

22: Lots of transition LOTS

23: Transition caused problems - totally unexpected. Everyone

thought she was the most ready out of her peer group, but she

has struggled from a week and a half into Year 7. She refuses

to go to school.

24: He was not given any extra transition and this I feel had a

detriment effect; on him. He gets very stressed and anxious

during exams , won't do homework. Has no friends in school.

CODE STRIPES

Coding Density

- Lack of support
- Lack of understanding from teachers
- Not coping with significant change in secondary school
- Pressure to perfrom
- Issues around masculinity
- Lost trust in adults due to not fulfilling agreements
  - Everything is a challenge
- Feeling anxious about school
  - Lacks self-esteem

- Transition difficulties

- Soci

26: The transition to secondary school was when the non attendance started, before that it was odd days and weeks off but somewhat managing to go in. Transition overwhelmed her and was very poorly supported. The school building and teachers were important, all too much change, too big, too noisy, not used to so many teachers instead of just one. Support staff promised things to happen which didn't happen again and again losing trust in what they said.

27: My son has masked his difficulties to the point where he became exhausted and with growing pressures of year 6, unable to keep it up. He began to avoid school so he would not be seen as dysregulated in class. As a boy, his peers have been critical of his emotional outbursts as they display often through tears and distress. My son has two teachers but I would say only one "got it" until recently which has also been problematic.

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CODE STRIPES

Coding Density

- Transition difficulties
- Lack of support
  - Not coping with significant change in secondary school
    - Pressure to perform
    - Issues around masculinity
    - Lack of understanding from
  - Lost trust in adults due to not fulfilling agreements
- Everything is a challenge
- Social isolation in school
- Lacks self-esteem
- Feeling anxious about school

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Appendix O: List of All Codes (Study One, RQ1)

> Note: This list of codes followed from the coding process in NVivo. I then started to group similar codes together, with the outcome of this stage shown on Map 1 in Appendix L.

Academic pressure	School environment is not welcoming
Action by school was too late	School ignoring our difficulties
Bereavement and family difficulties	School is a punitive and rule-based environment
Breakdown of trust with staff	School lacks respect for difference (Autism)
Broken promises	School not effectively addressing needs
Bullying and peer pressure	School not implementing professional recommendations
Bullying led to anxiety	School not meetings child's needs
Bullying was not addressed	School not right for my child
Challenging home situation	School not seen as a safe place
Child - 'I'm different from my peers'	Sensitive personality
Child's individual medical needs	She feels a lack of trust
Complex needs not understood (Autism)	She lacks self-esteem
Conflict amongst peers not being addressed	Shift in expectations for homework
Difficult family and home life	Significant personal/family losses
Difficult relationships with teacher	Social aspects of school life are hard
Difficulties making and maintaining valued friendships	Social interactions are overwhelming
Early intervention was missing	Social interactions within the school environment
Everyday transitions provoke worry	Social isolation in school
Exam pressure from teacher(s)	Social side of school not supported
Family member illness caused distress	Social situation causing anxiety
Feeling ignored	Social situations are challenging
Feeling isolated	Square peg, round hole
Feeling isolated due to friendship difficulties	Staff do not understand needs
Feelings of being bullied or unfairly treated by peers	Staff lack knowledge/understanding of autism in girls
Feelings of unsafety	Staff lack knowledge/understanding/acceptance of ACEs/early trauma

Feelings of unsafety in school	Staff lack of cultural competence
Friendship fallout was key	Staff lack time to understand my child
Friendships make or break the school experience	Staff not taking problem seriously
He does not fit into the system	Staff unaware of severity of problem
Hidden bullying issues	Struggles to make friends
High expectations and pressure to do well	Teachers do not always understand my son's needs
Impact of early trauma	Teachers do not have time to support non-academic needs
Inappropriate support going back into school	Teachers do not understand or address needs
Inconsistent approaches by staff	Teachers have negatively impacted my daughter's self-esteem
Individual medical and psychological needs	Teachers do not understand or address needs
Interventions were inconsistent and not tailored	Teachers have negatively impacted my daughter's self-esteem
Issue exacerbated by parental divorce	Teachers lack understanding about the situation or needs of the child.
Issue of masculinity expectations	Teachers' inappropriate reactions
Lack of belief and support from teachers	Teachers' lack of empathy / negativity
Lack of communication between primary and secondary school	Teachers' lack of time to understand needs or differentiate.
Lack of communication with school when not attending	Teaching styles
Lack of compassion in relation to anxiety	The need for friendships
Lack of connection to key adults	The change in pressure going into year 8
Lack of differentiation to meet needs	The education system
Lack of staff training and differentiation in the classroom	The power of diagnosis
Lack of support and understanding from teachers	The role of environment
Lack of support for my child	The school day is emotionally challenging
Lack of understanding of needs leading to lack of trust in adults	There is no quiet place in school he can go to
Lacking trust with peers	Too many lessons in secondary school
Language barriers	Too much pressure and workload for a child
Less pressure during lockdown = anxiety declined	Too scared to attend
Lockdown = more anxiety	Toxic system
Learning from home now (lockdown)	Transition into year 8 comes more expectation and less support
Looked After Child	Transition support not appropriate
Loss and bereavement	Transitioning from class to class is scary
Lost trust in the adults at school due staff not fulfilling agreements	Trauma experiences
Mainstream not suitable	Traumatic experiences leading to generalised anxiety
Making connections with new people is hard	Trying to fit in to norms
Masking of difficulties	Unable to cope with primary to secondary changes

MH difficulty actively discredited by staff	Undisclosed bullying difficulties
Mismatched education system	Unexpected difficulties with transition
Misunderstanding needs (Autism)	Unfulfilled promises
Moving between classes	Vicious cycle of negative experiences
My child cannot self-advocate	Vulnerability in the social environment
Negative approach to behaviour by staff	Wider educational system and changes
Negative peer interactions	Wider political issues
Negative relationships with peers	Wider societal issues enabling inequalities
Negative school-parent relationships	Wider systemic problems
No exam adaptations	
No individualised support	
No support despite professional advice	
No support from professionals	
No support plan in place to address needs	
Not being listened to by professionals	
Not being listened to with regards to worries	
Not coping with the significant change in secondary school	
Not enough space in school	
Not understanding or acknowledging difficulties	
Overwhelming expectations to conform to rules	
Overwhelming social interaction and change	
Parent's battle with school understanding needs	
Parents' concerns dismissed	
Peer interaction difficulties	
Perfectionism	
Physical barriers in school – medical needs	
Playground difficulties – no one likes me	
Poor communication amongst staff	
Poor cultural understanding of BME families	
Pressure to perform	
Racist incidents not taken seriously = lost trust	

Theme	Subthemes	Codes
Unacknowledged needs, misunderstood differences	Limited understanding and acceptance of need	• Lack of belief and support from teachers • Limited differentiation to meet needs • Lack of staff training and differentiation in the classroom • Lack of support and understanding from teachers • No support plan in place to address needs • Not being listened to by professionals • Not understanding or acknowledging difficulties • Parent's battle with school understanding needs • Poor cultural understanding of BME families • School ignoring our difficulties • School not implementing professional recommendations • Staff do not understand needs • Staff lack knowledge/understanding/acceptance of ACEs/early trauma • Staff lack of cultural competence • Staff lack time to understand my child • Staff not taking problem seriously • Staff unaware of severity of problem
	Hidden difficulties and the art of masking (Autism)	• Staff lack knowledge/understanding of autism in girls • Complex needs not understood (Autism) • School lacks respect for difference (Autism) • Masking of difficulties • Misunderstanding needs (Autism)

Lost sense of belongingness and safety	The power of negative peer interactions	• Bullying and peer pressure • Bullying led to anxiety • Bullying was not addressed • Conflict amongst peers not being addressed • Difficulties making and maintaining valued friendships • Feeling ignored • Feeling isolated • Feeling isolated due to friendship difficulties • Feelings of being bullied or unfairly treated by peers • Friendship fallout was key • Friendships make or break the school experience • Hidden bullying issues • Making connections with new people is hard • Negative peer interactions • Negative relationships with peers • Overwhelming social interaction and change • Peer interaction difficulties • Playground difficulties – no one likes me • Social aspects of school life are hard • Social interactions are overwhelming • Social interactions within the school environment • Social isolation in school • Social side of school not supported • Social situation causing anxiety • Social situations are challenging • Struggles to make friends • The need for friendships • Undisclosed bullying difficulties
	Broken feelings of trust	• Breakdown of trust with staff • She feels a lack of trust • Broken promises • Unfulfilled promises • Racist incidents not taken seriously = lost trust

		• Difficult relationships with teacher • Lack of connection to key adults • Lacking trust with peers • Lost trust in the adults at school due staff not fulfilling agreements
	Difficult school transitions	• Unexpected difficulties with transition • Transition into year 8 comes more expectation and less support • Transition support not appropriate • Transitioning from class to class is scary • Unable to cope with primary to secondary changes • The change in pressure going into year 8 • Everyday transitions provoke worry • Lack of communication between primary and secondary school • Moving between classes • Not coping with the significant change in secondary school
	Overwhelming sensory environment	• Too many lessons in secondary school • There is no quiet place in school he can go to • Vulnerability in the social environment • School as a scary place • Feelings unsafe • School environment created lots of anxiety • School not seen as a safe place
Individual child experiences	Family circumstances	• Bereavement and family difficulties • Challenging home situation • Difficult family and home life • Family member illness caused distress • Impact of early trauma • Issue exacerbated by parental divorce • Looked After Child • Loss and bereavement • Significant personal/family losses • Trauma experiences

	Medical needs and physical difficulties	- Child - 'I'm different from my peers' - Child's individual medical needs - Individual medical and psychological needs - Physical barriers in school – medical needs
My child's mental health	Anxiety overwhelms my child	- She lacks self-esteem - Perfectionism - The power of diagnosis - Lack of compassion in relation to anxiety
	Impact of the pandemic	- Less pressure during lockdown = anxiety declined - Lockdown = more anxiety - Learning from home now
Damaging culture of the system	School ethos and the data driven school world	- Academic pressure - Exam pressure from teacher(s) - He does not fit into the system - High expectations and pressure to do well - Mismatched education system - Square peg, round hole - Toxic system - Wider educational system and changes - Wider political issues - Too much pressure and workload for a child - Overwhelming expectations to conform to rules of secondary school - Pressure to perform - School environment is not welcoming - School is a punitive and rule-based environment - Shift in expectations for homework
	The education system is flawed	- The education system - Wider societal issues enabling inequalities - Wider systemic problems

Appendix Q: Example of Data Extracts and Themes (Study One)

Theme	Subtheme	Example Data extracts
Lost feelings of school belonging and connection	The power of negative peer interactions	• **P56:** Teasing, bullying, subtle peer pressure sapped him of any confidence and self-worth/esteem and he gradually withdrew • **P12:** Bullying has a significant affect and prevents your child from wanting to go to school • **P175:** Finds school too difficult, has problems socialising in the playground. Thinks no one likes him. • **P87:** Bullying became a lot worse in years 6 and 7 and she's now been out of school almost 1.5 years • **P7:** Feels at odds with the other kids, is terrified of the popular kids, has suffered some low level bullying • **P90**: Bullying from other children has raised anxiety do much it resulted in school avoidance • **P3:** Bullying has a significant affect and prevents your child from wanting to go to school. Not having any / many friends isolates them and makes them feel shame, guilt and anger. Lowering their self esteem either further. • **P70:** "Finds it difficult to make friends" • P9: finds it hard to make and maintain friendships. Have been some bullying issues. • **P195:** She had a number of issues amongst peers in year7 which included bullying from a number of different kids. • **P176:** She had a fall out with best friend in year 9 which triggered school avoidance.
	Broken feelings of trust	• **P2:** They did not offer a safe, trusted or secure environment or relationships from staff. It was high on judgement, low on understanding and support. • **P53**: School unable to meet needs, work to difficult for ability, lost trust in all adults at school didn't feel it was a safe place. • **P258:** My child lost respect for staff and trust in the school system, staff punished and humiliated him instead of being supportive.

		• **P9:** Breakdown of relationship with teacher, no trust. • **P41**: She has lost trust in school. • **P58:** felt let down/unable to trust figures of authority. • **P57**: The relationship with staff has fell short in our case and my daughter feels she has no adults at school she can trust. • **P114:** Does not feel safe at school or trust the adults in school. • **P15:** They have lost his trust and failed to engage a bright and academically able child in learning. • **P179:** Breakdown of trust between child and school • **P26**: Support staff promised things to happen which didn't happen again and again losing trust in what they said.
	Difficult school transitions	• **P13:** Transitioning into year 8 has been the cause of my son's school-refusal/anxiety, (& separation anxiety) less support, more work pressure, more homework • **P23:** Transition caused problems - totally unexpected. Everyone thought she was the most ready out of her peer group, but she has struggled from a week and a half into Year 7. She refuses to go to school. • **P24:** He was not given any extra transition and this I feel had a detriment effect; on him. • **P26:** The transition to secondary school was when the non attendance started, before that it was odd days and weeks off but somewhat managing to go in. Transition overwhelmed her and was very poorly supported • **P41**: My daughter struggles with transition between setting and home. • **P42:** Transition failed, school did not implement the required support to keep my child safe in school or able to learn • **P118**: My son found transitions very hard to deal with as the change was huge. He couldn't put it into words and had no trusting relationship with anyone at school to explain. • **P131**: The transition from a Waldorf Steiner school to mainstream secondary was very challenging - to a punitive, pressured, rule-based system • **P137:** Transition was a problem because no extra support was given, issues with teachers not understanding the child's needs were not addressed.

	Overwhelming sensory environment	**P44:** Sensory issues were also a huge factor **P78**: My son has sensory issues which made the school environment difficult for him to cope in and these came to ahead when he transferred to secondary **P157:** M/s secondary school. The noise, busy-ness, physical size of the school, fear of being late to lessons, fear of someone bumping into him, sensory issues **P166:** School day is very challenging, the classroom environment very stressful, our son struggles with sensory difficulties and changes in routine **P183**: From a sensory perspective, school was too overwhelming...too loud, too large, too busy. Uniform was uncomfortable. **P195:** The sensory environment (size noise close proximity of so many people moving around etc) of high school has been impossible. Too loud too shouty too much change too many different teachers and rooms and seating positions. She is terrified of being in detention but cannot answer when put on the spot by teachers.

Appendix R: Certificate of Ethical Approval

GRADUATE SCHOOL OF EDUCATION

St Luke's Campus
Heavitree Road
Exeter UK EX1 2LU

http://socialsciences.exeter.ac.uk/education/

CERTIFICATE OF ETHICAL APPROVAL

Title of Project:

School non-attendance: Exploring the perspectives of parents and school staff on barriers to attendance and support offered for non-attendance.

Researcher(s) name: Kerrie Lissack

Supervisor(s): Andrew Richards
Chris Boyle

This project has been approved for the period

From: 20/02/2020
To: 30/09/2021

Ethics Committee approval reference: D1920-047 (04-20)

Signature: Date: 20/04/2020
(Professor Dongbo Zhang, Graduate School of Education Ethics Officer)

Appendix S: Ethical Procedures

The University of Exeter Code of Good Practice in the Conduct of Research (2017), BERA (British Educational Research Ethics Framework, 2018), British Psychological Society's (BPS) code of human research ethics (2014), and BPS (2018) Code of Ethics and Conduct was strictly followed throughout this study:

Autonomy	• The participants were made fully aware of the purpose of my research before and during their participation. • I produced an information sheet with detailed information about the study's purpose and procedures for data gathering and analysis. • I made clear to participants that they were able to withdraw from the study at any point, without giving a reason and without the threat of any adverse effect.
Beneficence and social responsibility	• This research aims to gather insight into the experiences of parents and school staff in school non-attendance. It is a worthwhile piece of research because it aims to improve understanding of school attendance difficulties. • It will also build upon current literature.
Non-maleficence	• The research was fully approved by ethical procedures before commencing and it will avoid any possible harm to all participants involved in the research process.
Scientific integrity	• This research was undertaken with the highest standards of integrity by ensuring all procedures outlined are strictly followed. • Support was sought from my supervisors where needed, who are experienced in undertaking research at this level. • A detailed and thorough research proposal was produced prior to seeking ethical approval. • Ethical approval was confirmed before any commencement of data collection or recruitment.
Valid consent	• Informed valid consent was sought from potential participants. • Full information about all aspects of the study were provided to potential participants and they were given time to consider the information.
Confidentiality	• Online interviews took place in a private room which will not be overlooked or overheard from others. • Participants were informed of the process of confidentiality. • Personal data collected in this study remained unknown to all but the research team and was only discussed with my research supervisors where needed. • Data was collected, stored and destroyed in accordance to data protection guidelines. Interviews were audio recorded, and these recordings were kept on an encrypted memory stick, and deleted within a specified time frame after the study is complete.
Giving advice	• The study is participant-led, and I do not plan to give any advice during the research process.
Deception	• This study does not involve any deception. • I made my research aims and the process transparent and explicit to the participants.
Debriefing	• At the end of interviews, I explained to the participants what the next stage of the research will be. They were given my contact details in case they wanted to contact me after their participation.

UNIVERSITY OF
EXETER

School non-attendance: An exploration of the views of parents and school staff.

I am a trainee educational psychologist at the University of Exeter, and as part of the training in Child, Community, and Educational Psychology at the University of Exeter, I am undertaking research that will explore school non-attendance. The aims of the study are:

- Study One: To explore parents' views on school non-attendance, the perceived factors influencing their child's non-attendance, and factors they perceive would be helpful in supporting their child to attend school more consistently.

- Study Two: To explore how school staff understand school non-attendance, to investigate their views regarding the facilitators to supporting children experiencing non-attendance and to explore how they view support could be improved.

In study one, parents who have a child experiencing attendance difficulties were asked to complete an online questionnaire which enabled me to gather their views. In study two, I am recruiting school staff (SENCos / attendance officers / staff with pastoral responsibilities) who are/have been involved in supporting children experiencing attendance difficulties. I am writing to find out if you are interested in participating in study two of this research project.

What is involved?
- An online interview (via Zoom) lasting approximately 50 minutes. The interview will involve me asking you some questions and doing a card sort activity (using a shared screen).
- A conceptual mapping exercise where I ask participants to map their understanding of attendance difficulties prior to attending the online interview (instructions will be provided).

The information gathered will be included in the write-up of the research; your participation will be completely anonymised. However, if any of the information shared during the research puts you or others at risk of harm, I would be required to break confidentiality and seek advice.

What are the possible disadvantages and risks of taking part? There are minimal risks to taking part in this study. However, the discussions surrounding the reasons for young people's non-attendance at school may be distressing to some due to the potential sensitive nature of the topic. If you do experience any distressing feelings, you will be able to discuss these with me, the researcher (contact details below), or access online support services (information below).

How will my information be kept confidential? The University of Exeter processes personal data for the purposes of carrying out research in the public interest. The University will endeavour to be transparent about its processing of your personal data and this information sheet should provide a clear explanation of this. If you do have any queries about the University's processing of your personal data that cannot be resolved by the research team, further information may be obtained from the University's Data Protection Officer by emailing dataprotection@exeter.ac.uk or at www.exeter.ac.uk/dataprotection.

Interviews will be audio-recorded and transcribed. All data will be treated as anonymous and confidential. It will be accessible only by myself; the researcher, and stored on an encrypted USB stick, backed up using OneDrive, and transferred and stored on a secure file space as soon as possible after interviews have ended. Audio-recorded information will be deleted as soon as it is transcribed. Audio and transcribed data will be held and used on an anonymous basis, with no mention of any participants name. Any personal and contact details will be stored separately from the transcript information and may be retained for up to five years. Once the analysis is completed the data will be deleted. Any written notes or written data will be shredded and confidentially destroyed.

Third parties will not be allowed access to interview tapes and transcripts except as required by law or in the event that something disclosed during the discussions causes concern about possible harm to you or someone else. If at any point during the study you wish to withdraw, you can inform me via email. You do not need to give me a reason for withdrawing. If you wish to withdraw your responses from the study after the focus group, you have two weeks from the date of the meeting to inform the researcher via email.

What will happen to the results of this study? The research results will be written up as part of my thesis project as part of the Doctorate in Child, Community, and Educational Psychology at University of Exeter. In the future, the study may also be written up for publication in a relevant journal and/or presented at professional conferences. All personal data and names of participants will remain anonymous throughout.

Who is organising the research? The research is organised by the University of Exeter. I am supported during my research by two research supervisors: Dr Andrew Richards and Dr Chris Boyle (contact details below).

Who has reviewed this study? This project has been reviewed by the Research Ethics Committee at the University of Exeter [D1920-047 (04-20)]. If you are willing to be involved or would like to find out more information before agreeing to participate, please contact me directly via email (kl470@exeter.ac.uk).

Confidential support services
Samaritans: Online www.samaritans.org; Telephone 116 123; Email
jo@samaritans.org

Further information and contact details
For further information about the research please contact:

Kerrie Lissack (Trainee Educational Psychologist)
Email: kl470@exeter.ac.uk

If you have concerns/questions about the research you would like to discuss with someone else at the University, please contact:
Research Supervisors
Dr Andrew Richards: a.j.richards@exeter.ac.uk
Dr Christopher Boyle: c.boyle2@exeter.ac.uk
Or, Gail Seymour, Research Ethics and Governance Manager:
g.m.seymour@exeter.ac.uk

Thank you for taking the time to read about my study and your consideration in taking part.

<div align="center">********</div>

SCHOOL STAFF CONSENT FORM

I have been fully informed about the aims and purposes of the project.

I understand that:

- there is no compulsion for me to participate in this research project and, if I do choose to participate, I may withdraw at any stage;
- I have the right to refuse permission for the publication of any information about me;
- any information which I give will be used solely for the purposes of this research project, which may include publications or academic conference or seminar presentations;
- if applicable, the information, which I give, may be shared between any of the other researcher(s) participating in this project in an anonymised form;
- I will be audio-recorded which will be confidential and this will be deleted as soon as the information is transcribed;
- all information I give will be treated as confidential;
- the researcher will make every effort to preserve my anonymity.

....……………   ……………

(Signature of participant)   (Printed name of participant)   (Date)

…………………………………………………………………

 (Email address if you request to have a copy of the findings).

....……………   ………..

(Signature of researcher)   (Printed name of researcher)   (Date)

One copy of this form will be kept by the participant; a second copy will be kept by the researcher(s). Your contact details are kept separately from your interview data.

Appendix U: Doing Online Interviews: A Reflection

Doing online qualitative interviews

Study Two remained the same with regards to participants, school staff in a pastoral role. However, the methods were also adapted to reflect the restrictions in place Originally, I had planned to undertake focus groups in schools with school staff. Prior to lockdown, I had secured one school who wanted to take part. However, owing to the restrictions this was no longer feasible. I therefore decided to adapt Study Two so that data collection took place through individual online interviews instead.

My original plan was to ask participants to carry out a card sorting activity and produce a concept map of their thoughts around SNA. Again, I reflected heavily upon how I might adapt these ideas to take place online. After discussions and trial runs with colleagues, I produced an online card sort activity which participants were able to complete via a shared screen on Zoom. The concept map idea was still suitable as I was able to send instructions prior to meeting participants online, and then I shared the completed map online so that participants could talk through their ideas.

I was initially apprehensive about recruiting participants and conducting interviews during the pandemic, especially as schools were still open and adapting to the changes in school life. However, as initial contact about the study was through either myself or a gatekeeper via email, I felt that this gave ownership over the decision to the potential participants.

Appendix V: Risks and Mitigations for Online Interviews

Process taken to address possible issues arising by using Zoom for online interviews (based on recommendations by Gray et al., 2020)

Recommendation	Process undertaken
Do a test run	• Test with a colleague before undertaking live interviews. • Check for technical issues and how to resolve. • Check audio and visuals before and during interviews to ensure clarity.
Technical information	• Information sheet: provide information about how to access Zoom interview and what is involved e.g. sharing of screen etc. • Information on what device they can/should use.
Contingency planning	• Plan a backup with participants in case of technical issues on the day. • Allow time for unexpected delays. • Information provided on the protocol if connection issues or technical problems: email/phone contact.
Consider distractions	• Account for interview time taken up by distractions.
Provide a link to the meeting	• Once a date and time is agreed, researcher sent out the link via email and as a calendar invite to the participant. • Easily accessed and direct link to the Zoom meeting.
Storage of data	• I decided to audio record the interviews on a separate audio-recording device, following ethical guidelines for storage and deletion (see ethics section). • No visual or audio recordings of the live Zoom meeting were taken.
Internet connectivity	• Ensured internet was strong and good quality. • Gray et al. 2020 suggests using a hardwire connection, but this was not possible. No WiFi issues during trial runs. • To improve quality, no other devices connected to Wi-Fi during the interview
Visual reminders	• Information sheet and consent forms provided to participants at the start of the interview. • Visually presented via a shared screen for clarity and ease.
Consent	• Consent was signed and returned prior to agreeing a date for interviews. • Before audio-recording the interview, I revisited the consent form by sharing it with participants on screen and confirmed with the participant that they understood the information and were happy to proceed. • I verbally asked if it was ok to audio record their verbal consent on a separate recording to ensure confidentiality.

Appendix W: Development of Interview Schedule (Study Two)

Stage (Tomlinson, 1989)	Process taken by researcher
1. Initial analysis of topic domain Aim: as the researcher, to outline content and hierarchical structure of the research domain.	• Consideration of the topic based on the existing literature, the research 'problem', and my own experiences of non-attendance. • Alongside this, consider the RQs, and produce an initial concept map of the topic in hierarchical format (See Appendix V).
2. Determining interview focus Aim: Having set out the topic domain, the researcher now identifies the aspects that they wish to elicit from interviewees.	• Decide on research focus. • Identified elements of the topic domain (stage 1) I wanted to elicit from participants (See Appendix V: elements with asterisk* taken forward to stage 3) based on what elements are most relevant in relation to the RQs.
3. Constructing interview agenda Aim: Design a hierarchical framework of interview questions which progress from open and general questions to closed and specific questioning.	• Develop questions that cover all aspects of the concepts identified in stage 2. • Time was taken to develop questions that would allow the interviewee the chance to provide their own exploration by moving from opened questions to more specific questions. • Questions and prompts written into an agenda.
4. Interview procedure Aim: The interview is carried out with an open-ended, non-directive style to reduce researcher influence.	• Conduct the interviews. • I printed off a copy of the schedule and used a this as a notetaking framework to note any partial responses to questions so that I could return to them if necessary. This ensured participants could lead the discussion but allowing a full exploration of the hierarchical questioning.
5. Interview transcription Aim: To produce a verbatim transcript of the interview and prepare for analysis.	• Before finalising the interview schedule, pilot interviews were carried out with two school staff members. • Final version of the interview schedule is provided in Appendix W. • Interviews were transcribed following guidance by Braun and Clarke (2006).

Appendix X: Stage One Hierarchical Focussing - Initial analysis of topic domain

LEVEL 1	LEVEL 2	LEVEL 3	LEVEL 4
Understanding and experiences of school non-attendance			
	The terminology and definitions used for non-attendance		
		Legal nature of non-attendance Fines and prosecution	
			School refusal Truancy School avoidance Extended school non-attendance School anxiety
	Understanding the causes of attendance difficulties		
		*Individual factors *Community factors *School factors *Wider cultural factors *Political factors	
	Understanding school-based barriers to attendance and school experiences that influence school attendance/non-attendance	*Peer interactions*Bullying *Teacher-pupil relationships *School environment *Transitions. *Awareness and understanding. *Classroom management *Attendance policy *Exam pressures	
Meeting the needs of children who experience non-attendance			
	Facilitators and barriers to supporting non-attendance	Facilitators: *Early identification *Flexibility *Relationships / home-school partnership *School environment	
		Barriers: *Relationships *Communication *Time *Resources *Parental factors	
			Wider cultural and systemic factors

Appendix Y: Final interview schedule for Study Two

Introductions and role description			
Could you tell me a little about your role in school and the type of school you work for?	Prompts: Years in role Responsibilities		
How are you involved in supporting students who experience attendance problems?	Prompts: Age ranges Length of time		
Making sense of school non-attendance			
1. Concept Map: Could you talk me through your concept map? **			
	What do you understand by the term "school non-attendance"?		
Thinking about children who have good attendance at school, what are your views of this?			
	What do you think supports good attendance?		
Thinking about children who have poor attendance at school, what are your views and experiences of this?			
	What do you think are the barriers to attendance?		
	Do you think these factors apply to all cases of SNA?		
		Any examples from your practice?	
		Individual factors	

		Community factors School factors Wider cultural factors Political factors	
School factors involved in SNA			
2. Introduce online card sort activity (instructions below)			
	Do you feel you have any control over these factors?		
		What factors, specifically in school, do you believe impacts attendance? Prompts: Peer relationships / bullying Teacher-pupil relationships Environment Transitions Awareness/understanding Classroom management Attendance policy Exam pressures	What makes you think that? Elicit examples from participants' practice.
Supporting children			
3a. On a scale of 1-10 how confident do you feel in being able to meet the needs of children with attendance difficulties?			
	What would one step up on the scale look like?		

3b. What sort of support have children experiencing SNA received?			
	How do you identify children at the early stages of SNA?		
		What universal support is there? How record and monitor attendance?	
	How do you engage parents?		Elicit examples: communication with parents/home, early support, identify, a system in place? Key person?
	Have you worked in collaboration with external agencies/support?		
3c. What have been the challenges supporting these children?			
3d. What support strategies have been successful?			
	Elicit examples		
		Why do you think these strategies were successful?	
Improving support: Facilitators			
4. Are there any ways in which schools and other professionals could support children with SNA more effectively?			
	How do you think this support could be implemented? What facilitators would promote such support?		

Would you like to add anything else about your experiences of school non-attendance?			

Concept Map:
** Participants given the opportunity to explain their ideas represented on their concept maps (completed and sent to me before the interview and shared on the screen so both participant and researcher can view it). If needed, follow up questions to focus on exploring what staff believe to be the reasons for school non-attendance (see above).
***Diamond ranking instructions:**
Participants to engage in the online "card sort" using a shared screen. This is in the form of a Diamond-9 template with themes taken from study one. The card sort activity will elicit discussion.
- Show online card-sort activity; explain it is a Diamond 9s card sort.
- Ask participants to look over the school factors that might explain school non-attendance.
- I will explain that the statements represent the views of others and they may not be the views of the participant, so if they would like to they can write their own cards. Then sort them what they view to be most important drawing on examples from their experiences.

Dear participant,

Thank you for agreeing to take part in my study. I wondered if you would mind completing a concept/mind mapping task before we have our interview. We will use your map as the foundation for our conversation. The aim of this is to draw a concept map that represents your views on the topic of school non-attendance. **I have listed instructions below, but please feel free to interpret this task as you wish and do what feels right for you; the guide is available just in case you need it.**

3-step guide:

1. **List ideas**: **write down all the words, concepts and/or phrases** that come to mind when you think about school attendance/non-attendance (you might want to include ideas from your experiences in school; what promotes good attendance; the challenges you have faced; successes; thoughts around reasons for non-attendance).
2. **Start to draw a map**: begin to **organise words and phrases** in a way that makes sense to you (this could be a hierarchical structure with general concepts at the top leading to more specific, or a simply a network of ideas with ideas stemming out from the middle). This is when the map begins to take shape.
3. **Connect the concepts (optional step)**: **try linking your ideas together** into a structure with linking words (e.g. 'causes', 'leads to', 'between', 'helps') between each word/phrase.

An example of a concept map:
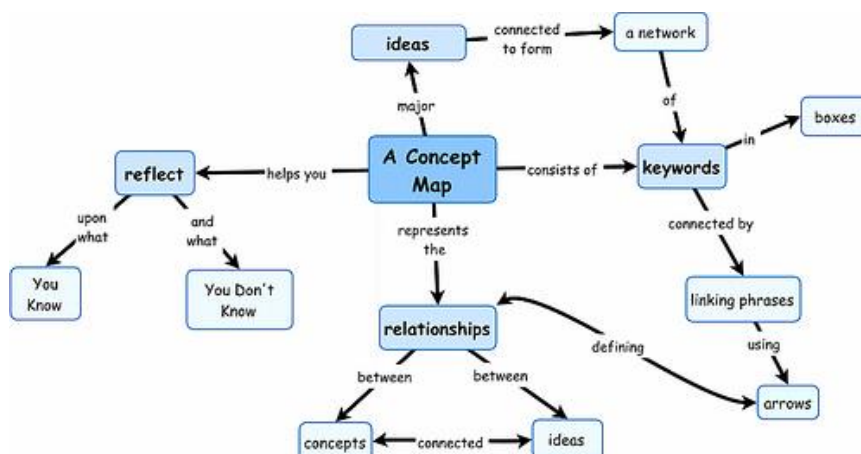
Please note that all information provided will be fully anonymised. If possible I wondered if you could send me a copy prior to our interview (as a photo or scanned document) to kl470@exeter.ac.uk.

The next stage will be to meet for an online interview. I will begin by using the conceptual map as a starting point to the interview to discuss, clarify and expand on any of the ideas presented within your conceptual map. The interview will last approximately 40 minutes. It will be audio-recorded and transcribed by myself. The data will be kept confidential.

Many thanks for taking part in my research. If you have any questions or would like further information please contact me by email: k470@exeter.ac.uk.

School Attitude / Ethos

Ofsted / School Policy — How is this presented to students/parents?

↳ 96% goal

Communication ⟨ Students — Assemblies by SLT

Parents — Website
— Letters
— Graphs
— RAG system

Relationships — FT
Pastoral / SSM

Rewards + Sanctions

No end of year trip

Non-uniform days
Lunch passes

Feelings ⟨ Students ⟨ useless
Pressure
no self-esteem
Judged

Parents — angry
— useless

Pastoral
caught in the middle

Agencies — CAHMS
— Local authority
— Social Care

Participant 2

Barriers
- **Mental health**: anxiety, confidence, aspirations, depression, social difficulties, motivation
- **illness**: periods, medical conditions (undiagnosed)
- **Missed learning**: education continuity
- **parents**: family issues, attitude towards education
- **school environment**: students fighting between themselves, bullying/peer issues
- **Safeguarding**
- **funding**: inadequate transport, lack of support

Attendance

Strategies
- **parental engagement**: encouragement, home visits, phone conversations, support, wellbeing checks
- **positive experiences**: rewards, incentives, positive feedback
- **multi-agency support**: TAM
- **education welfare officer**: referrals, fines
- **personalised curriculum**: reduced timetable, increase timetable, improvement in teaching/learning
- **registers**: absence codes, percentages

Participant 3

- **Attendance**
  - Data — monitoring — trends — reasons why
  - EWO — support — Consequences
  - Children and staff can have fun
  - Children are listened to
  - Reasons for non attendance — support for those reasons
  - Children can learn
  - Familiarity
- **Trauma informed** — Which means
  - Children are respected
  - School is a safe place
  - predictability
  - Celebrating success
  - Rewards
  - Incentives
  - Good relationships with students and families
  - Reflective practice — Sharing good practice

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Participant 5

Knowledge for life

friends – security

employment — finances — mental health

parents

social skills/ friends interactions

employment — future

poor basic skills

School attendance   v   School non-attendance

secure

achieving

future

Uni/College Job

structure

prep. for life

mental health poor

affects other areas

poor self esteem

Undiagnosed disabilities

masking??

ASD/ADHD/DLD

legal

|

EWO

|

prosecution fines

Participant 6

use Trauma Informed approach

flexible timetables

Individual approach

bespoke packages

How we support

1:1 Support. or Small groups with high staff ratios

Pick up from home.

School Transport. Book Taxi   Mini Bus

Attendance

1:1 Staff.

Holding people to account.

SLT – Member responsible

Pastoral team – Daily checks Weekly monitoring.

Teachers/mentors – Phone calls

Social workers Parents/carers VOI EWO

Multi agency approach

Supportive not always just sending fines/courts

Setting targets in meetings.   TAM's PEPS EHATS.

Promoting Pos Attendance

Rewards

Hot Chocolate Friday

Trips

Certificates

Home visits 6 weekly Rew

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How to avoid

✳ Good patterns early on

✳ Reward schemes.

✳ Engaging Students

✳ Support ── Family support worker
                ── Target support
                ── Parenting support

✳ Social inclusion units ── Ptu's

Attendance

Successful
Good relationships
opportunities
No Gaps in Education

✳ Good patterns from early on ✳

Trauma
Responsibility
income ???
Support
Medical
area Low/High

Non Attendance

Sick/illness
Parenting Skills
Relationships
Vulnerable
anxiety
disruptive behaviour
depression
Grades will effected
bullying

No intrest in school
Self-belief
futures may be affected
miss school work
Social side of school
less chance of Job

Promotes Good Attendance.;

Rewards Vouchers/House points.
Acknowledgement
Postcard. /Visible Praise.
School knows that.
Coverage of syllabus.
Healthy structure/routine
Value education. @Home

Thorough systems ensure
attendance is checked
Daily text. 3 day call.
Attendance officer.. ___checks___ →
___for.___
Home visit
EWO   WPN.
    MIE.

Solutions. Reduced Timetable.
(Alarm
Clock.)   late Start
    Early Finish,
    Time Elsewhere.
Parental support.
Signposting.
ELSA. THRIVE.
CAMHS.

Attendance

Pastoral.
Tutor relationship.*
Patterns. /Siblings.
Parental distrust of
Education. Experience of.
Medical Care Plan?

Non Attendance can be indicator of.
Disengagement. Illness. Mental Health
Neglect. Abuse. Exploitation.
High Fixed term exclusion.
Caring Siblings/Parents.
Bullying. Dislike subject.
Avoidance of detention.
Punctuality — who is home?
    — Siblings.

Can lead to.

Risk! | County Lines! Exclusion +
        | FTE

Early poor attendance 7+8
indicator of later disengagement
in Years 10/11.

Appendix BB: Study Two Pilot Interviews – Adaptations

Prior to undertaking the pilot interviews, I sought feedback from both of my supervisors regarding the questions in my interview schedule. I then piloted the interview with two participants who were willing to take part in the pilot stage of interviews. The following feedback, reflections, and adaptations were made at this stage of data collection:

Pilot participant school roles:

- Pastoral support manager
- Head of learning support

Interview schedule		
Feedback from participant	**Reflection**	**Adaptations to final schedule**
Some questions highlighted for lack of clarity (supervision discussion)	Some of the original pilot questions were somewhat ambiguous and difficult to answer e.g. "What do you consider to be the reasons some children find it difficult to attend?".	I re-worded questions so that they focused more on the experiences of the participants in their role at school e.g. "Thinking about children who have poor attendance at school, what are your views and experiences of this?"
Questions in the interview: Pilot participant 1: "The questions asked aided discussion and I liked how you adapted the questions during the interview so that you didn't repeat yourself and tried to avoid asking any questions that had already been answered through discussion". Pilot participant 2: "all the questions were pertinent and well thought through" P2: "you allowed me to speak freely and fully but you also guided the discussion well."	This positive feedback was welcoming and improved my confidence in being able to adapt the interview to individualise it to the participant.	No adaptations need, though I will keep in mind the positive experience from the participant and replicate this in the final interviews.
Length of interview: P2: "The amount of questions was just right, and I think you were good at assessing whether I had already covered something	I was previously concerned that I had too many questions. However, owing to the feedback and the fact that a lot of the questions were covered by both participants during	N/A

so as not to repeat the question unnecessarily". P1: "I thought the interview was a good length. I felt the conversation flowed naturally and wasn't dragged out at all"	their exploration of the concept map, I did not feel this was a concern anymore.	
Conceptual mapping		
Feedback from participant ➡	**Reflection** ➡	**Adaptations**
P1: "It [concept map] was useful to have plenty of time to think about non-attendance beforehand and identify some of the barriers/strategies to improve attendance". P2: "the concept task was really helpful this morning when I was thinking about the issue of attendance/non-attendance. It helped me organise my thoughts better".	Such positive feedback from the concept map task has confirmed its usefulness as a tool to provoke thinking and ideas prior to attending the online interview. Both participant's concept maps were detailed and used at the start of the interview to facilitate discussion and build rapport.	N/A
Discussion with supervisors: we talked about how the instruction sheet (Appendix x) for the concept map task.	Instructions were a little too restrictive and I did not want participants to feel there was only one way of doing the mapping task. Also, I was concerned that the participants would be put off participating if they did not understand the task. I had originally said that the interview would take no longer than 40 minutes, on reflection this was not a long time especially considering the online nature of the interview.	I re-wrote the instructions to be less restrictive and explicitly pointed out that the map is led by the participant and the instructions are only acting as a guide if needed. Re-wrote to "approximately" 40 minutes.
Diamond 9 Card Sort		
Feedback ➡	**Reflection** ➡	**Adaptations to the card sort**
The number of cards used in the card sort (9).	I initially planned to use 9 cards on the card sort task. However, on reflection from pilot interviews, I decided to	Added 3 card statements to the card sort: these were further developed from study one findings.

	add 3 more so that this would encourage further discussion and thinking about the most important factors.	
Labelling of Diamond levels	Feedback from the pilot interviews warranted some thought about how each 'level' on the Diamond template were labelled. Initially they were labelled "Top", "High importance", "Middle importance", "Low importance" and "Bottom" in line with previous research (Towler et al. 2011) (See Appendix x). After discussions with P2, I realised that these descriptors may impact the sorting process and restrict participants' thinking and understanding of the task.	I decided to re-name the levels with simply "Top" and "Bottom" allowing participants to lead the sorting and construct their own thoughts about what each level might represent.
No blank cards	Having discussed the Diamond 9 card sort with my supervisors, I decided that I needed to add a number of 'blank cards' to make clear to the participants that they are able to add their own statements or completely use their own set of cards.	Added a number of blank 'cards' to the shared document.
Movement of cards on the screen	At times during the pilots, participants found it difficult to easily move the cards on the screen owing to the set up of the textboxes.	I numbered the cards so that if there were problems during the task, the participant could let me know where they wanted each card placed and I could move them.
P2: "I found the card sort more challenging to order what impacts on attendance, as they were all important, however I felt that it brought out some interesting discussions". P1: "I liked the card-sort exercise and it really helped me focus on what the main issues and triggers are surrounding non-attendance".	Feedback from the pilot interviews was encouraging. My aim in this task is to provoke discussion around school factors, and although described as challenging by P2, I feel with the above adaptations it is a useful tool and addition to the online interview.	N/A

Appendix CC: Adaptations to the Card Sort

PILOT Diamond 9 template and cards:

Conflict with peers or friendship issues.	Transition to secondary school.
The school environment e.g. noise, no. of pupils, moving between lessons.	Being bullied or experiencing a difficult peer event.
Feeling isolated or alone in school.	Exam or workload pressures.
Teachers' awareness and understanding of children's difficulties.	Teacher-pupil relationships.
Teachers' classroom management.	

Top

Higher importance

Middle importance

Lower importance

Bottom

Post-pilot adaptations with annotations

Numbered the cards to allow easier communication with participant if any technical difficulties encountered.

| 1. Conflict with peers or friendship issues. | 2. Transition to secondary school. |

| 3. The school environment | 4. Being bullied or experiencing a difficult peer event. |

| 5. Feeling isolated or alone in school. | 6. Exam or workload pressures. |

| 7. Teachers' awareness and understanding of children's difficulties. | 8. Teacher-pupil relationships. |

| 9. Teachers' classroom management. | 10. Inconsistent attendance policy |

| 11. School culture and ethos | 12. Limited staff interaction with parents |

Top

Bottom

Blank cards

......?

Re-named the levels of the Diamond with only "Top" and "Bottom" positions.

Blank cards added to allow participants to add their own thoughts.

Added 3 new cards which reflected further themes from study one findings (No.10,11,12).

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Initial thematic map (Map 1)

Developed thematic map (Map 2)

School life and the nature of attendance
- What is the root of the problem?
- The individual student
- One size does not fit all
- Accessing the curriculum
- Quality teaching in the classroom
- Feeling valued is important

School policy and the education system
- The system is flawed
- Restricted by policy
- A red flag for later problems
- Monitoring system = early response

Monitoring attendance for early action
- Proactive response to attendance
- Safeguarding

Parents' attitudes to education

It's (also) about the parents
- Partnership with parents
- Parental responsibility
- Parents need our support too
- Mental health of parents

The vicious cycle of lost learning
- Later life implications
- Gaps in knowledge
- Lack of social skills development
- Identity development
- Learning of skills is missed
- Wider implications for young people's lives

Mental health of young people
- Complexity of mental health
- Aspirations and motivations
- Overwhelming nature of anxiety
- Influence of social media

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Final thematic map (Map 3)

School life and the nature of attendance

- Accessing education
  - Quality of teaching
  - Learning difficulties
- Positive school experiences
  - Feeling valued and safe
  - Positive relationships
- The complex root of non-attendance
  - The individual
  - One size does not fit all

The response to non-attendance

- Attendance as a red flag
  - Indicators of other problems
- Attendance policy can be restrictive
- Looking for early signs

It's (also) about the parents

- It's the parents' responsibility
- Parents' attitude to education
- Parents feel powerless; we need to support them too

The vicious cycle of lost learning

- Gaps in learning and knowledge
  - Social skills
- Missing out on the basics
  - Numeracy and literacy
- Wider implications on young people's lives
  - Identity
  - Being out of school

The inherent complexity of mental health

- Overwhelming nature of anxiety
- Motivations and aspirations of the young person

Final map presented in Discussion chapter

School and classroom experiences	The response to non-attendance	It's (also) about the parents	The inherent complexity of mental health
Engagement and motivation in learning	Attendance as a red flag	Balancing parents' responsibility	It can be debilitating
Positive school experiences	Looking for early signs	Parental attitudes to education	

Appendix EE: Sample Coded Interview

Participant 1

I: Ok great, so, if we use your concept map as a basis for our discussion. My first question is; what do you understand by the term 'school non-attendance'?

P1: Um, I suppose in its most basic sense, it's where a student is not in school. Where they are not able to physically be in the school building. Um, we had quite a number of students, um, who had, agreements for part-time timetables, um, but I had to really really fight to be able to offer that to students who needed that so that it didn't go against their attendance figures. So even though they may not be in school for the full week, they weren't going to be penalised by the punitive system that as in place, um, if that makes sense.

[margin note: Absence from school.]

[margin note: Not able rather than a "Choice".]

[margin note: A Battle to be flexible + adapt support.]

[margin note: The focus is on data?]

[margin note: Unfair System]

[margin note: Views it as a Punitive approach.]

I: Yes, absolutely. So, who would you have to discuss that matter with in school? The managers?

P: Yeah. I mean, obviously, I was a student support manager and I support... We had a progress manager for key stage 4 and she looked after all the academic side of things and I supported the pastoral side, but we answered to the senior leadership team who answered to the head teacher, who answered to the Local Authority and government and Ofsted. So, we were kind of way down here doing the really important stuff but felt that everything we really felt was being decided way up the line, really.

[margin note: Academic V. Pastoral.]

[margin note: "The system". Hierarchical Structure]

[margin note: Limited Power "on the ground".]

I: And did you feel that was a barrier to your ability to support the students who were struggling to attend?

P: For me, definitely, yes. I had a colleague who had the same role as I did, but she was responsible for key stage 3. She was very policy-driven and by-the-book. I was a much more on an emotional needs level and I had many fights and arguments with her and, um, not so many fights and arguments with the head teacher because I could usually put the case across for the individual, and I had strong feelings about the needs of the student and non-

[margin note: following Policy.]

[margin note: "The Individual Child"]

[margin note: Needing to adapt Policy to meet student's needs.]

Importance of attendance.

attendance for some students is non-negotiable. That's just how things are in their life and their particular part of their journey.

I: Can you think of children who have good attendance at school, what do you think supports good attendance?

Attendance figures

Ofsted defines good attendance

P: Yeah. Um, so obviously, Ofsted would say to be an outstanding school you need to have 96% attendance for your cohort as a whole. Um, and the school where I was just working, um, our attendance on the whole was excellent and good attendance was the norm for the majority of the students

Socioeconomic factors.

Majority of pupils.

and I suppose, really, the demographics of where the school is, students mostly are very supported at home, education is highly valued, parents have high aspirations for their children and believe it is important for them to be in school, and obviously, I subscribe to that too. But, there's a percentage of

Parental Influence.

Influence of a child's home life.

the cohort who don't have the home life that we wish they had. They don't have the emotional support or the academic support, um, some of them have serious mental health issues or there's domestic abuse in the home or whatever. And for that smaller percentage, I felt really strongly that there was more need for support for them and for their families instead of the, kind of,

Difficult home lives.

More support need

Families

Mental Health

carrot and stick approach which I think most schools probably do have to employ that approach because they are being judged on their attendance

Pressure for good figures!

figures as much as their results.

Judged on their school data.

I: So, thinking about that home life you mention, do you think that has a major impact on a child's ability to attend school or not?

P: Yeah. I think what I found last year, more than in my, well I found it as a teacher anyway, but I think the level of parental support or parental mental

Parental factors

Powerful home + family factors

health. I dealt with students last year who didn't come to school because of issues with the parents, rather than with the student themselves. So it's a very complex thing and that's why I think it's very difficult to have one rule fits all non-attendance because it's not as simple as that. It's such a grey area, um...

NOT a one-size-fits all approach!

I: Definitely.

P: That's what I found last year; I was fighting the case for certain individuals who just could not come to school for whatever reason. Um, and I... my take on it was to support, whereas the school policy was that you get letter one after so many days non-attendance, then you get letter two, and then parents have to come in and provide medical proof or whatever, and then you know, parents get fined and I actually had to go to court for a hearing for one parent. And I just... you know, it criminalises parents for sometimes issues that have not been properly supported. That's how I felt. That's probably quite an 'out there' opinion for me to have, I must say. I think I was very much in the 'parents' camp'. And although I've been a teacher all my life and I know it's important to be in school, but I also know that for some individuals it's more important for them to have a structure that supports them and that might be learning from home. And I think with all of the lockdown experiences, you know, I think, and I hope, that maybe the attitude towards attendance in school could change a little bit. I don't know.

I: Mmm

P: Children weren't being supported in the home. They weren't getting the learning that they needed to be able to get better, well enough and strong enough to then come back into school. They've missed so much. It's like a vicious cycle.

I: Just thinking about policy then, looking at your concept map, looking at communication. Did your school communicate that policy to parents and children?

P: Well, it's funny you should ask that because when I started the role, more or less a year ago now, I didn't think the school were as up front as they should have been about the importance of 96% attendance and it was during last year when I was in the role that we started to develop, as a school, much

Handwritten annotations:
- Advocating. Battle to be heard?
- Universal approach.
- Prosecution Unfair system.
- Supporting the Parents
- Impacts of non-attendance + home life →
- Policy vs. Needs of Child.
- Misunderstanding the problem.
- The need for flexibility.
- Hopefull about changes due to lockdown (COVID).
- Spiralling Problem.
- Lost Learning
- Need to be clear about attendance

Appendix FF: Study Two Analysis Progression (RQ1.1)

List of Codes – Participants' conceptualisation of school non-attendance

Accessing the curriculum
Anxiety as an underlying difficulty
Anxiety can be overwhelming
Attendance at primary school
Attendance as a sign of other problems
Attendance policy is detrimental
Attitudes of the parents towards education
Basic skills are impacted
Complex nature of MH
Difficult home life
Early signs = later challenges
Feeling valued
Finding your identity
Gaps in knowledge
Gaps in learning
Home life
Impacts the whole family
Involve the parents
Lack of social skills development
Lack of social skills development
Learning life skills
Less access to support aspirations
Medical needs
Monitor to understand
Motivation: it's all about motivation
Motivation: Lessons from lockdown
Motivations to succeed
One size doesn't fit all
Parental attitudes
Parental expectation
Parental responsibility
Parents' mental health
Parents' responsibility
Poor teaching quality
Proactive response to attendance
Realistic about attendance
Relationships in school
Restricted by policy
Safeguarding reasons
School can be safe space
Social media and MH
Support for parent
Support for parents
The key is to support the parents
What is the root of the problem?

Table of codes, subthemes, and potential themes

Theme	Subthemes	Codes
School and classroom experiences	• Engagement and motivation in learning	• Accessing the curriculum • Relationships in school • Poor teaching quality • Motivation: it's all about motivation • Motivation: Lessons from lockdown • Motivations to succeed
	• Positive school experiences	• School can be safe space • One size doesn't fit all • Feeling valued
A vicious cycle of lost learning	• Missed opportunities and lost skills	• Less access to support aspirations • Lack of social skills development • Learning life skills • Finding your identity • Gaps in knowledge • Gaps in learning • Basic skills are impacted
The response to non-attendance	• Attendance as a red flag	• What is the root of the problem? • Safeguarding reasons • Realistic about attendance • Monitor to understand • Attendance is sign of other problems • Attendance policy is detrimental
	• Looking for early signs	• Attendance at primary school • Restricted by policy • Proactive response to attendance • Early signs = later challenges
It's (also) about the parents	• Balancing parents' responsibility	• The key is to support the parents • Support for parents • Parental responsibility • Involve the parents • Impacts the whole family • Difficult home life
	• Parental attitudes to education	• Parental attitudes • Parental expectation • Parents' mental health • Home life • Attitudes of the parents towards education
The inherent complexity of mental health	• It can be debilitating	• Social media and MH • Medical needs • Complex nature of MH • Anxiety as an underlying difficulty • Anxiety can be overwhelming •

Example of data extracts and themes

Theme	Subtheme	Example Data extracts
The response to non-attendance	Attendance as a red flag	• **P10:** It's very difficult to increase attendance if you're just sat at the end of a phone, not going out and speaking with families. Like I say finding out the root of why there is an issue with attendance. • **P8:** When I look at the year group as a whole, umm, the number one signpost that things aren't well is attendance. • **P6:** It's a big sign of the home life is structured. Children who are late is a big barometer signal saying 'somethings not right in this house'. This is either a latchkey child, they're leaving the home without a parent in the home, or something is not right in that home. It may be drug or alcohol abuse, and also the value of education. • **P2**: There's a lot of safeguarding reasons for not being in school. Being involved in drugs and sort of sexual exploitation, there could be other things going on that could be contributing to not attending school.
	Looking for early signs	• **P7**: Yeah, we have, every morning, I sit down with a programme called SIMS and it tells me who isn't in, who is in, and it will also tell me the reasons if they're not going to be in so I can check. Also at the end it will have their attendance percentage. So if they're normally below 92% then we make contact as soon as possible. So it doesn't drop any further. • **P9**: I went back to the start and put why children might have low attendance, and kind of, the way, is how early patterns in primary school or lower down, so they can take that concept through to secondary school. If that has been missed, then it can have an impact on them later on in their education. • **P8**: Umm, and then at the bottom I've mentioned if you've got a child that's digging their heals in in year 7 and 8, and it's becoming a battle at home, and then mum comes in, invariably, what you will see if that is not addressed and improved, a tricky child in 7 and 8 is a school refuser in 10. It will quite often present as very challenging. To me, it's that flag that we spoke of, umm, what we're going to see later; this is just a taste of it.

Appendix HH: Final Reflexive Account

Implications for my practice

As a result of carrying out this research, I have greatly developed my knowledge of the difficulties and challenges involved during cases of non-attendance. As a trainee EP coming to the end of training, I aim to use this knowledge to improve my practice when working on cases of non-attendance. When I began this research, my initial experiences of working on cases of non-attendance was very much one of 'being stuck' and difficult to navigate. This was especially true when the problem has been on-going and is entrenched. However, having completed this research, I now feel more confident as a trainee EP and moving into my career as an EP. Leading on from the findings from this research, I have been able to reflect upon the EP role and believe that EPs possess the necessary training and skills to adopt systemic, whole-school approaches to non-attendance. This could be through consultation, training, or supervision practices.

Views and experiences of pastoral staff in this study suggest that they have a key role to play in supporting children's attendance, working in partnership with families, and recognising the impact of school-factors on a child's ability to attend school. Therefore, I view the EP role as critical in working alongside pastoral staff to support them to implement intervention and raise awareness within schools of these factors. EPs can play a preventative role in schools also by becoming involved early on in cases of non-attendance, and I now feel this would be something I could suggest to schools within my role as an EP. The importance of the partnership between home and school has been highlighted in this research. As an EP, I feel confident that I would be able to highlight this key element of support. EPs can act as mediators and facilitators in this respect, and I trust that EPs can make meaningful differences by supporting the relationship between school staff and parents during cases of non-attendance.

Though the child's voice was neglected within this research, I also feel that eliciting the child's voice in cases of non-attendance is crucial and EPs are well placed to achieve this. Looking into the future, I would like to extend this research to include children who experience non-attendance to see how their experiences of support and reasons for non-attendance differ from those found in the current study.

Appendix GG: Current COVID-19 Situation and School Attendance (December 2020)

As I write this thesis, the country is continuing to experience significant impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic. Many schools are experiencing disruption caused by the need for students to self-isolate. As such, the impact of inconsistent school attendance is becoming a widely discussed and debated topic in the media and within schools, and beyond. These experiences signify the timely nature of the current research. Many topics have arisen because of these unique attendance issues, including: the use of fines for non-attendance during a pandemic, lowering of entry requirements to university (due to disrupted learning experiences), and feelings of safety and anxiety in schools. These issues are mirrored in the current research as being important considerations for families experiencing non-attendance prior to the pandemic. As such, I hope that this research (which integrates experiences during lockdown) can begin to promote understanding and support for families.

Below are some headlines regarding school attendance during the COVID-19 pandemic.

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By Hannah Richardson
Education and social affairs reporter

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