“DOING SCHOOL DIFFERENTLY”: AN EXPLORATION OF YOUNG WOMEN’S REFLECTIONS ON THEIR ATTENDANCE AT A PUPIL REFERRAL UNIT AND THE VIEWS OF STAFF SUPPORTING THEM

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Abstract

Pupil Referral Units (PRUs) are the most common form of alternative provision in England and aim to provide meaningful education to those who are disengaged from and struggling in mainstream. PRUs are predominately populated by male pupils although there is an increasing female pupil population (DfE, 2021).

The current research sought to explore the reflections of young women who have previously attended PRUs and gather the views of PRU staff supporting such pupils. The aim of this was to increase knowledge, awareness and understanding surrounding their unique perspectives in order to gain an insight into how PRUs can be supported and strengthened to improve positive outcomes for female pupils.

In Phase 1, individual semi-structured interviews were conducted with three female former PRU pupils. Interviews were analysed through Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis due to the emphasis on reporting and valuing their lived experiences. Five superordinate themes were generated from the interpretative analysis including: “lack of belonging”, “influence of peers”, “feeling safe”, “support from staff”, and “general perception”.

In Phase 2, four focus groups were conducted with members of staff from Pupil Referral Units in the South West of England. Interviews were analysed through thematic analysis. Five main themes captured their experiences of supporting female pupils including: “ways of working”, “relationships”, “responding to changing cohorts”, “falling short” and “influence of wider systems”.

The main conclusions of this research were that relationships are key to supporting disengaged female pupils and ensuring they feel safe and valued; ensuring that child voice is at the centre of decision making is crucial for pupil engagement; and wider systems such as peers, family and community can all have significant impact on pupil behaviour, motivation and identity. My findings lead to several implications for future research as well educational psychology practice including the need to provide training to school staff on understanding the different presentation of girls with needs; providing appropriate supervision and support to PRU staff considering how challenging their work is; and supporting the development of positive, trusting relationships between PRU staff and pupils. Underpinning

all recommendations is an emphasis on the importance of listening to the views of female PRU pupils and the staff supporting them.

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A special mention must go to my parents who taught me that listening to other people's stories without judgement is one of the most important skills in life. That lesson was invaluable when undertaking this project.

A huge thank you to all the brilliant and insightful staff I interviewed. It was clear you all have a passion for the work you do, and I hope I have done your views justice. The world needs more people like each of you.

Finally, I sincerely thank the three women, Dolly, Kitty and Alice[1], for giving up their time to tell me about their education and bring light to the experiences of an overlooked group. I feel honoured to share your stories.

[1] For anonymity, participants are referred to by their chosen pseudonyms

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Chapter 1 - Introduction

The primary purpose of this chapter is to provide the reader with an understanding of why I have chosen to research this topic and how it aligns with my professional hopes and goals. Following this, I will define 'alternative provision' and briefly detail the background and current socio-economic context in which this research sits. The chapter will conclude with a summary of each of the chapters, in order to give the reader an idea of the research project as a whole.

1.1. Overview

This research explores the experiences of young women who have previously attended Pupil Referral Units (PRUs) and the views of PRU staff currently supporting girls in their settings. Throughout the thesis I will be referring to 'girls' to indicate female pupils currently attending PRUs and 'young women' to describe the participants from Phase 1 as they are all adults (over 18). It is also important to note that my positionality is that gender is a social construct and extends beyond anatomy (Winter, 2015) – it relates to the ways in which an individual identifies therefore when I refer to girls or young women, I am including all people who identify as female.

My interest in Pupil Referral Units stems from my experiences as a Year One Trainee Educational Psychologist. During my local authority placement, I visited several Pupil Referral Units and was surprised by the ratio of male to female pupils. Indeed, the Department for Education (2021) reported that in the 2020/21 school year there were 12,785 young people attending PRUs, with 3,462 girls and 9,323 boys respectively. These figures highlight that girls constitute only 27% of the PRU population. Additionally, DfE (2021) reported that 32,436 young people attended local authority funded alternative provision settings in 2020/21 (8,216 girls and 24,209 boys which would equate to 25% of the broader alternative provision pupil population being girls). From these statistics, we can therefore see a pattern of over-representation of boys and under-representation of girls attending alternative provision more broadly as well as specifically in PRUs. There is not a simple explanation for why boys dominate the population of alternative provision settings.

Russell & Thomson (2011) suggest that settings were originally designed for boys with challenging behaviour and as such unintentionally side-line the educational, social and emotional needs of girls.

After my initial experiences of visiting Pupil Referral Units, I conducted a systematic review of the current literature to find out more. It became clear there was little research on girls who had attended PRUs. Their voices felt remarkably quiet within the research field. As a feminist and advocate for all voices being equal, I knew I wanted to provide a platform for young women to reflect on their experiences and share their stories. Beattie (2007) when describing girls in alternative provision highlighted: "the importance of the development of their voices, and their ability to make connections, in order to help them overcome their negative experiences of schooling, remaking the past, and dealing with their current and future situations" (p. 2). Encouraging girls to tell their stories, using their own words, can be an empowering personal process. My focus on wanting to ensure I accurately represented the lived experiences of the young women I interviewed informed the decision to analyse their interviews using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis. I will explain in greater detail my decision-making process in Chapter 4. I wanted to include the voices of professionals working in PRUs for the second phase of my research to highlight the personal, structural and systemic factors that play an important role in implementing quality provision for these young women.

Due to the nature of this qualitative research, I have engaged in much reflective thinking throughout the research journey. As advised by colleagues and supervisors, I have kept a reflective journal to document my thoughts. Excerpts from this journal will be included throughout the chapters to give the readers an insight into my reflections and thought processes. Although I do not have a personal connection to PRUs, the conversations I had with both the young women who attended PRUs and the professionals working within them have had a profound impact on me.

1.2. Background

Alternative provision (AP) can be described as “an organisation where pupils engage in timetabled, educational activities away from school and school staff” (Taylor, 2012, p. 4). Alternative provision includes Pupil Referral Units (PRUs), alternative provision academies, alternative provision free schools and a vast range of other organisations which provide schooling away from the mainstream site. Alternative provision can be used in a range of ways to support a young person: it could be used as their full time provision (either for a limited period or long term); or as part of a package involving more than one alternative provider or alongside a mainstream school (this is called dual registering and can also be short or long term). Some pupils will attend a short course at an alternative provision school used by their sending school as a motivator for the rest of their time in school; others will attend alternative provision part time and will not be placed anywhere the rest of the week.

Typically, the term ‘alternative provision’ includes public, private and third-sector organisations which may include: therapeutic independent schools; social, emotional and mental health (SEMH) schools; support and training run by charities; as well as training and vocational courses run by further education colleges, independent providers and the public sector (Trotman et al., 2018). It is important to note that alternative provision providers do not need to be registered schools and therefore are not required to undergo Ofsted inspections. In 2013, the DfE highlighted that the government expected those who are not legally required to follow their published statutory guidance on alternative provision to still use it as a guide for good practice however they are under no obligation to follow the same quality monitoring systems or standards as state maintained alternative provision settings. As such, unregistered alternative provision who are less strictly regulated may be of more variable and inconsistent quality.

The Department of Education (2013) have reported that Pupil Referral Units (PRUs) are the most frequently used alternative educational provision. As there is such a variation between different alternative provision providers, it seemed appropriate that my research would be centred on PRUs because they are the most common form of alternative provision. PRUs can be defined as short-stay, educational centres for those excluded (or at risk of exclusion) and for pupils who have been identified as vulnerable because of their social emotional and mental health needs (Ofsted, 2007). The main aim of PRUs is to

provide alternative, accessible education for a short period, to support children and young people (CYP) in achieving their potential whilst preparing them for their reintegration to mainstream education (Pillay et al., 2013). PRUs face many challenges in successfully fulfilling their purpose which include inadequate accommodation; ability to meet the needs of pupils of diverse ages and needs; limited numbers of specialist staff to provide a broad curriculum; and reintegration of pupils into mainstream schools (DfE, 2018).

Education in alternative provision settings is conducted on a smaller scale than mainstream schooling which can lead to a calmer atmosphere and approach (Trotman et al., 2015; Nicholson & Putwain, 2015). There is more flexibility within the curriculum and education can be more personalised to accommodate individuals' experiences, needs and aspirations (Thomson, 2014; Trotman et al., 2015; Nicholson & Putwain, 2015; McCluskey et al., 2015).

There is, however, some criticism of alternative provision. The Department of Education's (2018) report on AP reported that some pupils had moved between several schools or attended multiple alternative provision settings which was described as "a negative experience of being repeatedly uprooted and moved around, and often meant that settling into their current AP took a while" (p. 93). In regard to my research area of interest, I believed it would be interesting to consider what effects these moves and the transition between settings may have on girls' identity, sense of self and their educational experience. Additionally, the DfE (2022) SEND Review expressed concern that children and young people in AP have consistently poorer outcomes than their peers; the AP system is financially unsustainable and inconsistently providing quality education; and is viewed negatively by CYP accessing it.

1.3. Pupil population

Alternative provision settings are attended by pupils who, because of exclusion, illness or other reasons, would not otherwise receive suitable education (DfE, 2013). Parsons (1999) discussed experiences common to pupils excluded from mainstream as including: family breakdown, multiple moves/disruption, bereavement, disability, violence/abuse, major accidents/incidents, previous serious exclusion, poor basic skills, peer

pressure, limited aspirations/opportunities, poor relationships, bullying and dissatisfaction with the curriculum. Parsons noted that these will present major difficulties as young people attempt to cope with life and engage with their education. More recently, the DFE (2018) reported that special educational needs, social, emotional and mental health (SEMH) needs, poverty, low attainment, being from certain minority ethnic groups, being bullied, poor relationships with teachers, life trauma and challenges in their home lives are all factors which may increase the likelihood of exclusion. Indeed, the DfE suggests that pupils may fall under several categories, and this can have a multiplier effect on their vulnerability. In addition, pupils are more likely than the average school pupil to be known to social services, the police and to have had poor attendance in school (Taylor, 2012) although it should be noted that this is a causal link, not a direct correlation in one particular direction.

Attending educational provision away from the mainstream site is rarely the choice of the pupil or their parents/carers (Gazeley, 2010). Those who attend alternative provision are therefore the pupils who have not conformed to or been able to be 'held' by the structure(s) of mainstream schooling. Young people and their families often have little opportunity to influence decisions about what is offered to them. The theme of pupils conforming or not conforming will be explored later in this review in relation to gendered assumptions and expectations.

1.4. Socio-economic context

The Department of Education (2018) published a report on their vision for the future of alternative provision, with particular emphasis on 'creating opportunities for all'. The report detailed three main aims including:

- Establishing an evidence base for alternative provision through reviewing exclusions practice and supporting schools to implement effective systems for managing behaviour and supporting those with Special Educational Needs (SEN). They hope this will help reduce exclusions and promote the inclusion of all pupils, regardless of their level of need.

- Develop and share effective practice between AP settings, ensuring that the education provided is consistently being reviewed. They planned to launch an Alternative Provision Innovation Fund to support this goal.

- Strengthen partnership arrangements for commissioning partners, develop a bespoke alternative provision performance framework, and clarify the roles of schools, alternative providers and local authorities in delivering high quality alternative provision.

The Alternative Provision Innovation Fund (2018) totalled £4 million and was shared between nine successful applicants across 2 academic years. Bradford Central Pupil Referral Unit, Francis Barber Pupil Referral Unit, and Hospital and Outreach Education were given funds to support children to reintegrate into mainstream or special school placements. Cognus, Salford City Council, and Futures Advice, Skills and Employment were given funds to support children to make academic progress within AP and transition into further education or employment. Lastly, Anna Freud National Centre for Children and Families, The Tutor Trust and Talk Listen Change as well as Portsmouth Education Partnerships were given funds to support parents and carers to become more involved in their child's education. There is yet to be a review of any outcomes from the funding, although it is arguably positive that clear aims were established for improving positive outcomes for children accessing alternative provision and financial support was implemented.

As part of the SEND Review (DfE, 2022), there was an evaluation of the effectiveness of current alternative provision and suggestions for reform. The Review concluded that:

> Where good practice occurs, local leaders make a determined effort to collaborate and overcome disincentives in the current system. Where this does not happen, alternative provision lacks the leadership, quality, capacity, and stable funding to deliver a targeted outreach offer that has the confidence of mainstream schools (p. 58)

The government proposed to improve alternative provision in England by focussing more on early intervention; provide funding stability based on budgets created by current

AP settings; enable all AP settings to join a multi-academy trust; develop a bespoke performance framework for AP which focusses on progress, re-integration into mainstream, and supporting post-16 transitions; and more tracking of pupil movements as well as unregistered provision.

In summary, it is clear that while alternative provision can be successful and improve the outcomes for pupils, it is not consistently doing so. The government appears dedicated to reforming the system and ensuring that all children and young people receive the quality education they deserve. For effective change, proposed actions should be informed and strengthened by the views of those accessing alternative provision. Although the current research is focussed on Pupil Referral Units, I believe the findings will be appropriate for use to guide local or national policy on AP generally, to be inclusive of girls' perspectives and their needs specifically.

1.5. Research Aims

The aim of my research was to gain insight into the experiences of young women who had previously attended a Pupil Referral Unit. I wanted to hear former pupils reflect on their attendance and develop a deeper understanding of what it was like to attend a school in which there was a significant gender imbalance. In addition, I wanted to explore how their educational experiences have shaped how they make sense of their identity. Collins et al. (2000) highlight

> attention must be paid to what students bring to school as a consequence of their backgrounds, what happens to them during school (their experiences, choice and performances), the credentials, knowledge, capacities and dispositions that they take with them when they leave school (p.38)

The use of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis allowed me to share my participants' stories and experiences using their own words and descriptions. Secondly, I hoped that including the reflections of professionals working with girls in PRUs would help provide a holistic account of what is working well and what could be improved, particularly

in regard to what training and support could be provided by external agencies. Findings presented in this study may be of interest to Pupil Referral Unit staff and educational psychologists who are looking to support families with children accessing alternative educational provision.

An overview of the aims and research questions (RQs) for both phases of my research have been provided (see Figure 1). The aims and RQs will be discussed in greater detail in Chapters 4 and 5.

Phase 1	Phase 2
Aim: To gain insight into young women's thoughts, feelings, perceptions and reflections surrounding their experiences of attending a Pupil Referral Unit.	**Aim:** To explore how PRU staff reflect on their practice and consider the factors which influence the support they provide girls attending Pupil Referral Units.
Research Questions: 1. What are young women's reflections on their school experiences leading up to and including their attendance at a Pupil Referral Unit? 2. How do young women perceive differences (if any) between their experience of attending a Pupil Referral Unit in comparison to young men? **3.** Do young women think Pupil Referral Unit attendance had any impact on their identity and sense of self?	**Research Questions:** 4. What do school staff think are the facilitators of and barriers to meeting the individual needs of girls attending PRUs? 5. How do school staff make decisions about the support they provide for girls attending Pupil Referral Units? 6. What training, skills and resources do school staff feel they need to meet the needs of girls attending Pupil Referral Units?

Figure 1: Aims and research questions from both phases of the current research

1.6. Chapter summaries

My research is divided into two phases which will be reflected in the structure of this thesis. Following this introduction, Chapter 2 will be a review of the literature detailing the individual, behavioural and environmental factors which impact girls' identity and sense of self in alternative provision settings. I will explain within Chapter 2 why the literature selected is not specific to Pupil Referral Units. Chapter 3 will detail the overall methodology for my research, including my epistemological and ontological position. Chapter 4 will detail the specific methodological and procedural details of Phase 1 as well as highlight the

findings and provide a discussion Chapter 5 will detail the methodology, findings and discussion for Phase 2. Chapter 6 will be an overall discussion, encompassing similar themes drawn from both phases of the research and relating these to literature. In Chapter 7, I will explore the implications of my findings on educational psychology practice; discuss the strengths and limitations of the current research; make suggestions for future research; and provide my concluding remarks.

Chapter 2 - Literature Review

The aim of this chapter is to review relevant literature surrounding how young women might make sense of their identity within PRUs, which are typically male-dominated educational environments. I will begin by presenting Bussey's (2011) identity framework through which I will then systematically evaluate the literature relating to the individual, behavioural and environmental factors which may impact on girls' identity within alternative provision settings and how this may shape girls' educational experience. Factors will include peer relationships, opportunities, societal views and teacher assumptions. I will consider what the main limitations in the current research base are and what gaps could be addressed by future studies, including my own.

2.1. Search Strategy

For the literature review into experiences of girls and alternative provision, I used search databases including: EBSCO, Education Research Complete, British Education Index, Psychology and Behavioural Sciences Collection, Taylor and Francis Online, and APA PsychInfo. Additional searches were conducted on Google Scholar as well as on the government website (gov.uk) for grey literature, primarily Department for Education reports. Searches were conducted through January to July 2021 with an additional literature search conducted from February to April 2022.

The initial searches were undertaken using the following terms: (girls or females) and (pupil referral unit). It is important to note that there is very little literature which directly explores the experiences of girls attending Pupil Referral Units therefore my literature search had to be broadened with search terms such as: (girls or gender) and (alternative provision or pupil referral unit) or (pupil experiences) and (alternative provision or pupil referral unit).

I additionally used specific terms such as: (identity or gender identity) and (girls or females) and (alternative provision or pupil referral unit). I conducted searches in this area

through backward searching, whereby the reference lists of identified papers were searched for further articles which highlighted other key themes which prompted further searches. For example: (girls or females) and (peer relationships or friendships); (girls or females) and (exclusion). Furthermore, I used Google Scholar to search for relevant research and primary sources such as third sector and government publications on the demographics of pupils attending alternative provision.

2.2. Initial Search

As boys dominate the population of alternative provision, most of the current research exploring AP includes male participants. There is little research which specifically investigates how AP is experienced by girls. However, there is a small, growing body of literature which identified themes such as:

- friendships and peer relationships (Douglas, 2013; Lee, 2018), particularly social exclusion and bullying (Alexis, 2015; Thacker, 2017)
- sense of belonging (Warner, 2021)
- gender identity (Carlile, 2009; Skelton et al., 2010; Russell & Thomson, 2011)
- the positives of alternative provision and what works well (Clayton, 2013)
- the importance of feeling included in decision-making process (Martin, 2015)

When initially reviewing the literature on girls' education in alternative settings, it was clear that identity was a common theme (Carlile, 2009; Skelton et al., 2010). I explored theories linked to identity development such as social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979) which would suggest that assignment to a group (for example, gender) produces an allegiance to that group; and self-categorisation theory (Turner et al., 1987) which suggests that when gender is salient individuals are more likely to identify and self-categorise as their gender. Bussey's identity framework (2011) draws on principles from social cognitive theory and provides a robust account for the development of gender identity specifically.

2.3. Bussey's identity framework (2011)

Bussey (2011) theorised that factors on an individual, behavioural and environmental level interact to co-create gender identity and are instrumental to change gender identity over time (see Figure 2). Individual factors include how people understand their physical sex and gender, self-regulation, agency and other socio-cognitive processes such as self-efficacy. Behavioural factors relate to what people do – how gender is signified by individuals' behaviours by doing or enacting gender in everyday life, people selecting environments e.g. what friends an individual selects, what school subjects and career choices they consider. Environmental factors include social, cultural, historical and structural contexts in which an individual is situated. It can relate to how other people react to a person's gender identity as well as how others might model gender, how groups can work together to change and modify how others think of gender, and the social benefits and disadvantages related to gender in society. Bussey posited that individual, behavioural and environmental factors are multidimensional and can mutually influence each other. In this model, developmental change in gender identity is an ongoing and continuous process which is not confined to childhood but is negotiated throughout adolescence and into adulthood, as contexts fluctuate over space and time.

It is important to note that Bussey recognised that "not all people of the same-gender category are alike" (p. 605) and researchers should be cautious not to assume individuals' identity is solely based on their biological sex. Furthermore, Bussey emphasised that "while two people may equally identify with their gender, the pattern of gender-related behaviours they display might be quite different" (p. 608).

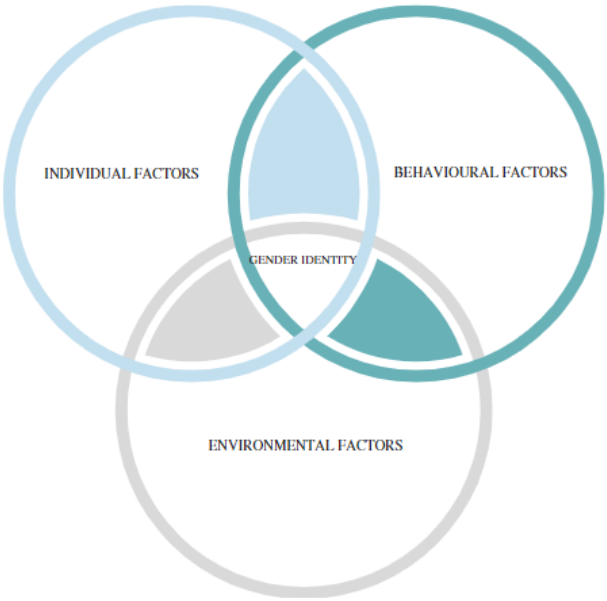

Figure 2: Venn diagram showing the interdependent relationship between individual, behavioural and environmental factors from Bussey's identity framework (2011).

Bussey's model is based on Bandura's (1986) social cognitive model which suggested that learning occurs in a social context with a dynamic and reciprocal interaction between person, environment and behaviour. The theory focussed on "how people operate cognitively on their social experiences and how these cognitions then influence behaviour and development" (Nabavi, 2012, p. 11). The social cognitive perspective on gender is that the stronger the influence gender has within society, the environment and its culture, the more people develop goals and aspirations based on gender and regulate their behaviour according to their gender.

Bandura and Bussey (1999) highlighted that gender identity is strongly shaped by one's immediate environment such as parents and peers. The idea of parents contributing to gender identity links to family systems theory. In family systems theory (Kerr & Bowen, 1988) the family unit is viewed as a complex social system in which interactions between family members influence each other's behaviour. Beliefs, values and expectations held by the family as a whole have an influence on individuals over time. Zentner and Renaud (2007) proposed that identity formation within a family involves three processes: family transposition (the beliefs and values parents want to pass on to their children); filial accurate perception (the extent to which the child received the message transmitted from

the parent); and individual re-elaboration (the extent to which the child reconsiders the family belief systems). In the context of gender identity, it may be that an individual's family belief system encourages an individual to act in either gender-affirming or gender-contrasting ways. Environmental contexts can play a role in encouraging individual re-elaboration. For example, contexts such as being the only girl in a large group or being teased for gender nonconformity have been found to impact gender identity (Deaux & Major, 1987; Mehta, 2015). Mehta (2015) highlighted "gender identity is likely to vary within an individual based on where they are, who they are with, and what they are doing" (p. 491). Therefore, when we consider gender identity in the context of alternative provision settings, which are typically male dominated, we might expect to see one of two things: either a strong identification with being female or a dissociation from traditional femininity.

The strength of Bussey's model is that it provides a holistic understanding of gender identity development and places importance on the contextual factors as well as within-child factors. This has practical implications for school staff by highlighting the need for a safe school environment in which CYP can develop their gender identity and create their own belief systems.

2.3.1. Individual factors

Masculinity is stereotypically associated with traits such as independence, assertion and aggression while femininity is stereotypically associated with expressive traits such as being nurturing and supportive (Dean & Tate, 2016). Egan and Perry (2001) proposed that gender identity can be understood through an individual's self-perceived similarity to gender categories. Pomerantz and Raby (2011) posit that young women simultaneously accept and refute gender as an aspect of their evolving sense of self. At times gender is merely a difference between them and their male peers and at others it is used against them to exclude or discriminate. Indeed, girls' agency within their own construction of gender identity should be considered. Powell (2020) suggested that girls can be complicit in reproducing narrow, constraining, gender stereotypes in fear of transgressing them and becoming socially excluded. It is important to note that factors such as ethnicity, class, race and poverty are important intersections in the formation of individual agency but the scope

of this literature review is not able to cover all these areas in depth. Class will briefly be explored in the environmental factors section.

Russell and Thomson's (2011) qualitative study which used a multiple case-study design to explore girls' experiences of attending AP found interesting constructions of identity. Across the six case studies, from data gathered through observational methods and semi-structured interviews with 85 people including young people, parents and staff, the authors identified three dominant discursive positions that some of the girls took within the male-dominated alternative provision settings. The first was "trouble-stirring" which was typically explained by dressing in a provocative way through purposely exhibiting their body and physical features. Staff believed that young women who fell under this identity category exaggerated their feminine behaviour, language and dress as a reaction to the maleness of the provision. The second practice was "adopting boyish behaviours" which was described as girls who often wore tracksuits, trainers, caps, no make-up and paid little attention to their hair. These girls tended to socialise with other boys, they distanced themselves from other girls and were viewed as masculine. In this capacity, they were including themselves with the majority of the pupil population (e.g. boys) and avoiding peer exclusion. The third identity option girls attending alternative provision adopted was "remaining quiet" which involved avoiding attention, blending into the background and disappearing. Staff did not view these girls as 'difficult' or 'problems', therefore they could easily be missed and their needs forgotten about within AP. Other louder students may require more attention from staff. As suggested by the authors, the identity most favourably viewed by staff was "remaining quiet" which is consistent with the stereotype that girls are well-behaved, quiet and unassuming. It is likely that the girls in this category are anticipating positive social outcomes, such as approval, for acting in way that is congruent with stereotypical feminine behaviour. Furthermore, it is interesting to note that Russell and Thompson suggested that all of the aforementioned identities operate in reference to boys and this is evidence that alternative provisions programmes are consistently designed with "boys-as-norm in mind" (p. 306). In their conclusion, they suggested more research needs to investigate girls' experiences in male-dominated alternative provision settings which is a gap in which my research will sit. A potential limitation from this study is that all six AP sites chosen to be included in the research were selected by the Local Authority based on 'good practice'. As

such, this bias may have had implications on the data in that 'good' AP settings may provide quite different experiences than 'less good' settings.

An explanation for differences in girls' self-efficacy and ability to embrace their identity (whether it does or does not conform to stereotypical gender behaviours) is likely to involve individual differences such as one's own life experiences. In addition, adolescent girls in a co-ed environment could be subject to more conflict in their gender identity, with the pressure to compete with boys academically whilst simultaneously developing their femininity to be attractive to boys (Booth & Nolen, 2012). Moreover, as they are having to compete with other girls to be popular with boys, their female gender identity may be reinforced and almost exaggerated which is one of representations seen in Russell & Thomson's (2011) study.

2.3.2. Behavioural factors

Aapola et al. (2005) have observed that the public is both fascinated by, and fearful of, the many and varied images of today's girls. The mixed reaction regarding girlhood largely stems from how the adult world perceives both the current opportunities and constraints confronting girls as they negotiate adolescent femininity. On the one hand, modern femininities represent diversity and complexity — allowing girls more flexibility in expanding traditional norms of femininity. However, going beyond normative boundaries has also heightened public anxiety, as evidenced by increased problems with self–esteem, body image, motivation, aggressiveness and promiscuity, as girls today pursue conflicting expectations for perfection, popularity, toughness and sexuality (Currie et al., 2009). Female adolescence is typically a highly controlled and managed process, with considerable social pressure being applied to ensure that girls transition into normative womanhood. This ongoing process occurs in a variety of interactional contexts (e.g. family, school, peer groups), and is further influenced through media (e.g. magazines, social media, reality tv).

During adolescent identity development, young people seek clues in their present situations about the adult they may become. Both one's own current successes and the successes of people like oneself are useful in predicting who one may become: one's future

adult identity (Elmore & Oyserman, 2012). It is possible that gender may become an even more salient determinant of identity and behaviour during puberty. Physical changes can emphasise gender and there is evidence to suggest that gender-congruent behaviour is favoured by most adolescents as it is seen as 'normal' (Hannover, 2000).

2.3.2.1. Peer relationships

Peers serve as important role models who communicate messages about their own values and provide important sources of information adolescents draw on to form their ability and value perceptions (Fan, 2011). For example, research suggests that adolescents choosing friends with negative academic behaviours are more likely to experience a decrease in their own motivational beliefs and academic behaviours over time (Ryan, 2000). Similarly, Barry and Wentzel (2006) examined the influence of best friends on adolescent prosocial behaviour over a 2-year period and found that the behaviour of friends predicted involvement in positive academic and social goals when measured. The authors suggested that prosocial behaviour might be explained in part by the individual's observation and imitation of his or her best friend's behaviour.

In addition, friendship has positive effects on child wellbeing. Laursen et al. (2007) highlighted that children without friends are reported to go through heightened levels of sadness or even depression. Additionally, youth who experience conflict and inequality in their relationships not only have low self-esteem but have been found to be less involved at school than those who have stable and intimate friendships (Keefe & Berndt, 1996).

Research on girl-girl friendships specifically shows this to be a valued and important aspect of their everyday lives: it is argued that girl-girl friendships tend to be closer, more intimate and sometimes more difficult than those of boys (Besag, 2006). Brown (2003) highlighted that adolescent girls spend more time with their friends than boys do; they have smaller groups of friends than boys; they expect and receive more kindness, loyalty, commitment, and empathic understanding from their best friends than boys do; and are more likely than boys to have open, self-disclosing relationships with their female peers. With limited opportunities to build single sex relationships in male- dominated alternative

environments, the effects of being socially and educationally excluded from friends at school may be different and/or more severe for girls than boys (Brown, 2003; Stanley & Arora, 1998). This possibility points to some of the work that is needed to explore what happens in alternative education provision. It is important to note, however, that this will not be the experience for all girls. Indeed, many girls claim to not enjoy female friendships and as noted from Russell & Thomson (2011) many girls in alternative provision choose to adopt a more masculine gender identity and engage in male friendships.

A possible function of the close-knit friendships often formed amongst girls is to gain 'privacy' and to form a kind of 'counter-space' which affords different opportunities and creates community (Pomeranz et al., 2004; Thomson et al., 2005). This latter degree of counter-spatial agency was not possible when girls found themselves a minority in male-dominated alternative provision. However, that may not be the case for all girls who attend alternative provision settings and depending on the specific setting's gender ratios as well as individual personalities, there will be opportunities for girls to create their own peer-group which may be supportive and encouraging.

2.3.3 Environmental factors

2.3.3.1. Societal attitudes

Research studies concur that children come to understand gender as a social category and will eventually attempt to see themselves in relation to how gender is conceptualised in their culture and come to adopt a gender identity that is in line with or diverges from societal expectations (Diamond et al, 2011). Indeed, it has been noted that media, educational policy and school dialogue all contribute to the perpetuation of a gendered narrative around 'good girls' and 'bad boys' (Martino & Meyenn, 2001). In turn, this creates a gender gap through which people feel the education system has failed boys and only boys (Francis & Skelton, 2005). Girls become a hidden problem receiving an inequitable amount of attention. Moreover, girls can experience multiple exclusions; their

'acting out' behaviour is often interpreted by school authorities as offending the rules of their school and the socially accepted norms of gendered behaviour (Lloyd, 2005).

The dominant gender narrative of how girls in education are expected to act is also intertwined with social class and ethnicity narratives. Feminist research has shown how social class and ethnic minority status shapes girls' educational experiences. Rudoe (2014) suggested that middle class girls are typically viewed as the hardest working and most ideal pupils as they are the least likely to present disruptive and 'difficult' behaviour. This narrative has practical implications; for example, the chances of getting into 'better' schools are far slimmer for working-class girls than those from middle class backgrounds (O'Brien, 2003). Further obstacles are encountered when stereotypical social class expectations are used to provide career advice, sending working-class girls down conventional routes such as child-care and hairdressing (Francis & Skelton, 2005).

It has been shown that gender differences exist in the acceptability of different temperament traits; that is, in boys and girls, similar temperament may be viewed as more or less appropriate or desirable depending on cultural gender role norms and expectations. Lloyd (2005) argued that such girls are "doubly disadvantaged" (p. 136) insofar as they fail to adhere to stereotypical social and gender norms. They are 'feared' and rarely trusted and their disadvantage may increase again once they are disengaged and excluded from schooling and not accessing their school-based rights to speak or be listened to. As such, they are silenced, marginalised and denied the opportunity to express their views on barriers to participation. Furthermore, while boys and their 'underachievement' dominate media and policy discourse, girls are viewed as the beneficiaries of the apparent 'feminisation' of schooling and are often ignored (Francis, 2010). Francis and Skelton (2005) suggest that the lack of discussion of girls acts as a silent 'unsaid' that serves to further marginalise them. The gap of girls' voices within educational literature more generally as well as within AP literature specifically is where I hope my research can fit and I can provide a space for young women's experiences to be heard.

2.3.3.2. Teacher assumptions

Literature suggested that teachers may view girls' quiet and persistent ways of working as more mature and 'teachable' than those of energetic and active boys (Keogh, 2003). They may also view the behaviour of inflexible boys as difficult because boys may not easily adjust to the many changes in classroom demands (Keogh, 2003).

Osler (2006) provided a potential explanation for this by suggesting that teachers are often able to ignore the types of behaviour commonly exhibited by girls in need. Girls' behaviour such as withdrawal from class participation, truancy and self-harm (Osler & Vincent, 2003) may disrupt their individual learning and their own mental health but is less likely to impact on class discipline when compared with a more typically male behaviour such as physical aggression. Osler (2006) interviewed girls and professionals for their study investigating female exclusion. Their participants noted how students who experience problems with the curriculum tend to engage in gender-stereotypical misbehaviours, which make boys particularly vulnerable to disciplinary exclusion and which among girls may lead to self-exclusion. One headteacher from a PRU suggested that boys are more likely to act out whilst girls are quieter and withdraw from school, both physically and emotionally (Osler, 2006). In addition, a mainstream pupil noted how it is almost deemed cool when a boy gets into trouble but for girls this is considered a put-down and they may view themselves more negatively. In turn, teachers may view girls more negatively too. Boys who do not cope with the curriculum act out. Unfortunately, these quieter, more internal struggles are consequently less likely to lead to disciplinary exclusion or to sanctions or support, meaning that girls do not have equitable access to resources which are designed to meet the needs of students in difficulties (Crozier & Anstiss, 1995). In addition, Reay (2001) suggested that girls who behave in ways that run counter to traditional forms of femininity are labelled more negatively than boys who behave in similar ways.

Carlile (2009) conducted ethnographic research investigating the effects that professionals' assumptions about gender-identity and sexuality had on support planning for young people at risk of or subject to permanent exclusion. Carlile concluded that teacher fatigue (due to multiple administrative, financial and emotional pressures) may play a significant part in the perpetuation of gender-based assumptions. The author suggested, however, that there is a space for the exertion of professional agency in reflecting on these

attitudes and assumptions. Teachers are in a central position to change pervasive narratives about how pupils should act based on their gender identity. One such method of beginning to enact changes is in the use of language surrounding students. Carlile described how

> I was helping a young person at risk of permanent exclusion get started in a new school, and the head of year explained to the boy sitting in front of him: 'when you start here, you'll see lots of bitchy girls and silly boys (p. 30)

This is an example of school staff using language which is inherently gendered. It should be noted, however, that Carlile's work is based only on one, urban local authority and may not be entirely representative of the national picture.

2.3.3.3. Gender ratios within classroom

Lavy & Schlosser (2011) conducted an exploration of the mechanisms of the gender peer effects which showed that a higher proportion of females in a class leads to a better classroom and learning environment. Students who have more female peers report a lower level of classroom violence and disruption and better relationships with other students and with teachers. The effects on improved classroom environment appear to come from a change in the classroom composition and not from changes in students' individual behaviour or in their study effort. The benefits from a higher proportion of girls in the classroom are also due to lower fatigue and burnout among teachers, which likely affects their productivity (Lavy & Schlosser, 2011).

Understanding the effects of classroom gender composition is therefore important to assess the consequences of imbalanced sex ratios in coeducational public schools, and to determine an optimal grouping of students into classrooms and an efficient allocation of resources within and across schools. Therefore, it is pertinent to consider what effects may be caused to girls' education when they are placed in settings which are disproportionately populated by boys such as PRUs.

2.3.3.4. Opportunities

It has been argued that the mainstream education system produces and perpetuates gendered identities and the gendered norms of wider society (Carlile, 2009; Rudoe, 2014). This pattern may be exacerbated within alternative provisions as settings typically offer gender stereotypical courses e.g. mechanics and trades for the boys, hairdressing, beauty and childminding for the girls (Russell & Thomson, 2011) which may lead to some young women missing opportunities to discover other career options. These findings are 11 years old however the DfE (2018) also reported that many AP providers have gaps in the qualifications they can provide, especially in vocational areas such as landscape construction, travel and tourism, and retail. One PRU, as an example, commented on how with an increasing number of girls attending their setting, they were having to reconsider the opportunities and courses they could provide (DfE, 2018). They were trying to move away from sport and construction qualifications to find avenues which suited the girls' areas of interest better. In this circumstance, it is important to consider and listen to the voice of young women about what they want and not to make assumptions about their interests based on gendered stereotypes. It is interesting to consider how boys whose interests do not conform to gendered stereotypes of male interests may also be impacted by limited opportunities.

However, research by Nind et al. (2012) highlighted how alternative provision settings can provide an opportunity for a new 'social space' in which young women can thrive. Using a range of visual methodologies, the authors explored the educational experiences of three young women placed in an SEMH provision. The study also asked the young women to express their ideas around curriculum and provision development. Observing the young women's engagement with the tasks and the information they shared, the research highlighted that the AP provided a positive space for the young women. The community of the school allowed the young women to present a different part of themselves, and they highlighted the importance of relationships as key to feeling successful (Nind et al., 2012). Furthermore, the authors highlighted that a sense of community allowed the development of a collective identity, within which potential and

growth could be recognised. As with many of the studies currently populating the literature on girls and alternative provision, the authors only used a very small number of participants. Although this can provide extremely detailed and meaningful information, it does also compromise the ability for the study to make generalised conclusions.

2.4. Conclusion and the current research

Although some research has explored girls' experiences and perspectives on their alternative education, it is still lacking depth, and this is the gap in which I hope my research can fill. Bussey's (2011) identity framework suggested that gender identity can be understood through individual, behavioural and environmental factors. This research will therefore be guided by Bussey's framework, considering the ways in which Pupil Referral Unit attendance has impacted girls' identity, sense of self and how they reflect on their experiences, with reference to the environment of their setting; the events which led up to them leaving mainstream; and their relationships with peers and teachers.

Reflective commentary:

I was somewhat surprised by the lack of research into girls' experiences of Pupil Referral Units and alternative provision more broadly, especially considering the increase in AP female pupil population every year. The distinct lack of female voice in the literature was clear and made me feel even more passionate about my research. While conducting my literature search, it became clear to me that I wanted my research to be exploratory in nature and allow my participants to speak freely about their experiences, regardless of whether they were positive or negative. I wanted to provide a space to make sense of their educational journey and how it may have impacted them at the time.

Chapter 3 – Overall Methodology

The aim of this chapter is to provide the reader with an understanding of my ontological and epistemological positioning across the research project as a whole and how this informed decisions about my chosen methods. Specific methods for each phase including data collection, participant sample and procedures will be explored in Chapter 4 (Phase 1) and Chapter 5 (Phase 2) respectively.

3.1. Ontology

Ontology can be described as the study of reality and existence, considering what is real and true. The social sciences increasingly appear to accept that the social world and social reality cannot be explained by universally applicable and transcendent laws in the way positivism may suggest. Moore (2005) suggested that although the world may exist physically independently of people, truth and meaning cannot. I align myself to a relativist ontological standpoint which assumes that reality as we know it is constructed intersubjectively through the meanings and understandings developed socially and experientially. In their seminal work on the social construction of reality, Berger and Luckmann (1966) described how the understanding and construction of reality is individual to each person and therefore uniquely meaningful to them in forming an understanding of the world around them. Consequently, relativist researchers should endeavour to explore individuals' conceptualisations of their own social world.

Madill et al (2000) argued that the same phenomena can be understood in different ways depending on the unique perspective of each person and therefore all knowledge is provisional and relative. Through research we can therefore attempt to understand individual points of view, but this understanding will always be related to this particular person, in this particular context, at this particular time (Larkin et al., 2006).

3.2. Epistemology

Epistemology is rooted in philosophy and is concerned with how truth and 'reality' can be discovered through research (Schwandt, 2015). A researcher's epistemological stance is one of the primary components to be clarified as it has significant impact on the design of the research project and the specific techniques used to gather, analyse and interpret data (Carter & Little, 2007). Favouring a relativist ontological position, it felt appropriate for my epistemological position to be interpretivist.

Interpretivism considers differences such as culture, circumstance, as well as the passage of time in the development and understanding of different social realities (Alharahsheh & Pius, 2020). Interpretivist researchers do not seek the answers to their research questions in rigid ways but rather they listen to the reality experienced by their participants from their participants' own account (Willis, 2007). Lewis-Beck et al. (2004) described interpretivism as a term that is used to identify approaches to social scientific research sharing particular ontological and epistemological assumptions, concerning the interpretation of the constructed meanings that individuals produce as part of their everyday lives. Interpretivism posits that the social world can only be understood from the standpoint of individuals who are participating in it (Cohen et al., 2007, p. 19). Therefore, for interpretivists to fully understand the context of their participants' experience, qualitative methods which provide rich and detailed information are most suitable. Indeed, Thomas (2003) reported that qualitative methods are usually used by interpretivists, because the interpretive paradigm "portrays a world in which reality is socially constructed, complex, and ever changing..." (p.6). Furthermore, Creswell (2009) stated that "qualitative research is a means for exploring and understanding the meaning individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human problem" (p.4). As my research is exploratory in nature, I felt an interpretivist standpoint would be the most suitable approach.

There are, however, some criticisms of interpretivism. There is debate about the reliability in making generalisations about particular phenomena as the data collected is dependent on specific context, viewpoints, and values of the participants chosen (Saunders et al., 2012). However, interpretivist researchers do not claim to provide generalisable findings but rather prefer to invert their focus to the fundamental aim of qualitative studies; to produce detailed, rich descriptions as well as a deep and contextualized understanding of

particular human experiences (Polit & Beck, 2010). Another criticism levelled against interpretivism is that due to the subjective nature of findings, they can be affected by the researcher's own interpretation, own belief system or culture which may lead to bias (Pham, 2018). Interpretivist researchers endeavour to limit bias by engaging in reflection throughout the analytical process and exhibit reflexive thinking.

3.3. Research Aims

In the current research, I aimed to talk with people who had attended or worked in Pupil Referral Units to develop a deeper understanding of their experiences within that specific educational environment. I endeavoured to do this through a process of 'deep attentiveness, of empathetic understanding' (Punch, 2009). The first phase of my research involved interviewing young women who had previously attended Pupil Referral Units to explore how they reflected on their time there and made sense of it. The experiences shared by the young women interviewed in the first phase of this research were then used as a basis for designing realistic vignettes to present to focus groups of PRU staff in the second phase. More detail on the method, sample and procedure involved with each phase of the research will described in the following chapters (4 and 5). Within these chapters the findings and a discussion of the results will also be reported.

Chapter 4 – Phase 1

In this chapter, I will begin by explaining the methodology used for the first phase of the research before presenting the findings generated through Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA). There will subsequently be a critical discussion of those findings in relation to previous literature and theory.

4.1. Methodology

This section aims to outline the methodology used in Phase 1 of my research. It begins by presenting the purpose of this phase and a description of the research design process. Following this, I will explain the data collection methods used (individual semi-structured interviews) and give a description of the participant sample. There will then be a critical discussion regarding IPA as my chosen methodology. This section of the chapter will conclude with ethical considerations made when designing and carrying out the research.

4.1.1. Purpose of research

The purpose of the first phase of my research was to hear the reflections and lived experiences of young women who have previously attended a Pupil Referral Unit. I chose to explore this topic because it was clear there was a significant gap in existing knowledge on how alternative provision settings are experienced by female pupils. I wanted to provide a space for an under-represented group of people to share their educational experiences. I hoped that the insight gained from listening to girls with lived experience of Pupil Referral Units could be used to consider the strengths and limitations of PRUs in meeting their needs. Collins et al. (2000) highlight

> attention must be paid to what students bring to school as a consequence of their backgrounds, what happens to them during school (their experiences, choice and performances), the credentials, knowledge, capacities and dispositions that they take with them when they leave school (p. 38)

Exploratory investigations are concerned with describing phenomenon, as opposed to explaining or evaluating the information. As such, my goal was to provide a depth of rich data, not necessarily breadth. I endeavoured to ensure that young women's voices were at the heart of my research, and they were able to describe their experiences in their own words which is why there is extensive reporting of their views through verbatim extracts from their interviews.

4.1.2. Research questions

The research questions were developed following a review of the literature as shown in Chapter 2 and based on the aims of this research. For Phase 1, the research questions were as follows:

1. What are young women's reflections on their school experiences leading up to and including their attendance at a Pupil Referral Unit?

2. How do young women perceive differences (if any) between their experience of attending a Pupil Referral Unit in comparison to young men?

3. Do young women think Pupil Referral Unit attendance had any impact on their identity and sense of self?

4.1.3. Research Design

As the focus of my research centred on listening to the stories told by former PRU pupils and hearing their lived experiences, it was appropriate to conduct an Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) study. Indeed, when designing this research, I was aware of the very personal nature of the information I was interested in exploring which was one of the primary reasons for adopting IPA. Smith et al. (2009) argued that "the very choice of IPA as a methodology, the rationale for its adoption, will be centred upon the perceived

need for sensitivity to context through close engagement with the idiographic and the particular" (p. 180). IPA researchers have two main aims, the first of which is to understand their participants' world by describing 'what it is like'. Typically, this aim leads to a focus on the participants' experiences of a specific event, process or relationship i.e. in the current research, attendance at a PRU. The second aim is to develop a more overtly interpretative analysis, which positions the initial 'description' in relation to a wider social, cultural, and theoretical context (Larkin et al., 2006).

IPA is grounded in philosophy and influenced by three key areas: phenomenology, hermeneutics and idiography (Smith, 2011). I will briefly explain each of these in turn to provide the reader with a more detailed understanding of the focus and aims of IPA research.

4.1.3.1. Phenomenology

IPA draws on the phenomenological ideas of Husserl who argued that there is value and merit in simply describing an experience, without categorising or grouping it within our pre-existing understanding of the world (Smith et al., 2009). As such, phenomenological research encourages researchers to explore a phenomenon while bracketing aside what they believe they already know about that phenomenon (Moran & Cohen, 2012). The researcher is required to bracket off or put aside past knowledge or presuppositions (Tuffour et al., 2017) to explore phenomena without assumptions or pre-existing bias. This is considered a significant challenge in phenomenological research and Willig (2008) suggested that few researchers can claim fully suspend their assumptions, but rather they engage in a critical examination of their own biases and thoughts. Smith et al. (2009) posited that "like Husserl, we see phenomenological research as systematically and attentively reflecting on everyday lived experience" (p. 33). Regarding the current study, I aimed to suspend my assumptions about the ways in which I supposed females would experience attendance at a PRU.

4.1.3.2. Hermeneutics

For IPA researchers, hermeneutics is concerned with interpretation, for example, of text, discourse and events. The interpretative process in IPA involves a double hermeneutic process. This process assumes that the 'the researcher is making sense of the participant, who is making sense of x' (Smith et al., 2009, p. 35). IPA acknowledges the dual role of the researcher in that they are understanding the experience through both the participant's telling and their own experiential lens. The hermeneutic nature of IPA acknowledges that the researcher's knowledge, experience and assumptions influence the research process. Smith et al. (2009) suggested the researcher adopts a 'spirit of openness' (p. 27) and should endeavour to be reflexive throughout the research process.

4.1.3.3. Idiography

The third area which informs IPA is idiography which is concerned with how phenomenon is experienced by individuals. IPA research aims to highlight both similarities and differences within a sample of individuals (Allan & Eatough, 2016). Insights are formed from intensive and detailed engagement with each individual case. Each individual case is valued for its own merits before comparing patterns across cases. In the current research, I endeavoured to include a wealth of interview extracts from each participant to honour their idiographic accounts and individual voice.

4.1.4. Data collection

For Phase 1, I used interviews to gather data. Qualitative studies are most commonly based on data collected from techniques such as interviews, diaries or focus groups. Typically, the techniques are utilised to allow for flexible and open-ended inquiry. The interviewer is encouraged to be curious and facilitative as opposed to challenging and interrogative. Qualitative data collection is committed to a degree of open-mindedness, so researchers are encouraged to try and suspend or bracket-off any preconceptions when designing and conducting interviews (Smith et al., 2009).

Due to my focus on eliciting personal accounts to provide rich information which was likely to include complex life histories and experiences it made sense to conduct one-to-one interviews. This allowed for clarification and ensured a detailed understanding of each participants' perspective. Indeed, understanding people's motivations and decisions, or exploring impacts and outcomes, generally requires the detailed personal focus from individual interviews. Feminist theorists and researchers of the 1970s onwards have urged researchers to "begin with experience" (Harding, 1991; Smith, 1987) and to rely on "the authority of experience" (Diamond & Edwards, 1977). As such, feminist researchers have embraced interviewing as a method of making experience hearable and subjecting it to systematic analysis. DeVault and Gross (2012) highlight that through using open-ended/semi-structured interviews and championing active listening, feminists have brought forward a wealth of previously untold stories which is what I aimed to do through this piece of research. I chose to use semi-structured interviews because although the semi-structured interview guide had pre-determined questions and themes to be covered, the guide also offered the opportunity to follow up and investigate interesting responses which may not have been expected. The guide allowed flexibility to probe for more detail and for the order of questions to be changed for convenience.

Smith et al. (2009) argued that a literature review helps identify gaps in which research questions can fit. My interview schedule was designed after the completion of my literature review and included topics which appeared important throughout the existing body of literature. These included individual, behavioural and environmental factors such as identity, peer relationships, and societal views. The interview schedule (see Appendix A) was used flexibly, and the order of questions could be altered to fit the natural flow of the interview. I devised multiple prompts in case participants struggled to understand the meaning of any given question. The interview was piloted with a female former PRU pupil (who had expressed interest in the project through my recruitment poster but did not meet the criteria as she had attended over 8 years ago). The aim of piloting was to ensure all questions made sense and were accessible. Feedback from the pilot interview suggested the schedule was acceptable as it was.

Interviews were recorded using Microsoft Teams and audio recordings were taken on my phone as a back-up for any unforeseen technical issues. All interviews were scheduled at a time convenient for the participant and lasted no longer than an hour. Interviews took place between March and October 2021. I transcribed the interviews verbatim using orthographic transcription (Braun & Clarke, 2013). Orthographic transcription involved identifying who is speaking and recording both actual words and non-semantic sounds (e.g. umm). I followed the transcription notation system outlined by Braun and Clarke (2013) for handling various features of the participants' speech.

4.1.5. Participants

To recruit participants for Phase 1, I used purposive sampling. Purposive sampling is characterised by a deliberate choice of participant due to the specific qualities and experiences they possess (Etikan et al., 2016). Purposive sampling is typically used in qualitative research to identify and select participants who are well-informed within the researcher's area of interest as well as being available and willing to participate. I contacted the Special Educational Needs Coordinators for PRUs in the Local Authorities in the South-West of England and asked if they would be able to help identify appropriate participants. I also contacted the SEN parent information, advice and support services in the afore-mentioned areas as well as post 16 settings who might have been able to identify potential participants. I advertised my recruitment poster on Twitter and asked EP colleagues to share the poster to any settings or young people they thought might be appropriate (see Appendix B). Through purposive sampling, I hoped there would be less risk of participants being unable to communicate their experiences as SENCOs would likely only approach young women they thought were able to talk about their education in an expressive way. Selected participants needed to be able to articulate their experiences and opinions in an articulate, expressive, and reflective manner (Etikan et al., 2016).

Several PRUs agreed to contact former pupils for me and gained consent to pass their details onto me. I was given the names and contact details for roughly 25 young women. Unfortunately, when I contacted these former pupils, almost all said they were not interested in participating or simply did not respond. Only one participant was recruited through her former PRU. A potential explanation for the lack of interest may be that former

pupils did not fully realise what participating would entail or perhaps they felt obliged to say yes to passing on their details but had no real intention of participating. Some young women may have been worried that their personal reflections would be shared with their former settings.

As my recruitment was lacking uptake, I decided to try opportunistic sampling through social media. I searched the term 'Pupil Referral Unit' on YouTube and Tik Tok, which led to sending a message to one woman from each platform explaining that I was a Trainee Educational Psychologist conducting research into females and PRUs and whether they would be interested in sharing their experiences with me through an interview. Both women agreed to receive an email with my information sheet and subsequently agreed to participate in the research. The decision to send only one initial message on social media before moving to email was centred on the belief that email is a more private, secure and professional platform, which would ensure the safety and confidentiality of my participants as well as maintain the integrity and professionalism of my research project.

I chose to only interview young women over 18 who had previously attended a Pupil Referral Unit as opposed to girls currently attending. My rationale for this decision was that I hoped the distance and time away from the setting would allow the participants to give a more reflective account of their experiences. In qualitative research, retrospective interviewing can provide rich data, particularly pertinent if the researcher is interested in the meaning and psychological significance participants have placed on an experience. See Table 1 for the inclusion criteria for my participant sample and an explanation for the rationale behind each condition.

Inclusion Criteria	Rationale
Young women over 18	Participants would have finished compulsory education. Additionally, they can provide their own informed consent and do not need parental consent. I felt this was important as some young people may not feel comfortable asking their parents if they can participate in a research study.

Have attended a Pupil Referral Unit within the past 5 years.	I wanted participants to be close enough to their time in education to remember it clearly and be able to provide rich information.
Attended a Local Authority maintained Pupil Referral Unit	Alternative provision covers a vast range of educational settings. I felt that LA-maintained PRUs were more likely to be similar in their purpose and function as opposed to independent AP settings therefore limit some of the variation in participant narratives.

Table 1: Inclusion criteria and rationale for participant sample.

Larger sample sizes are possible within IPA studies but less common as it is time-consuming to collect and analyse the data in the depth needed in IPA. Smith et al. (2009) suggested "between three and six participants can be a reasonable sample size for a student project using IPA" (p.51). They argued that it is more problematic to have too many participants than too few given the time-consuming and detailed nature of IPA.

Contextual information about the three participants who did take part in the research including their age at the time of interview, and how long they attended their PRU for, can be found in Table 2.

Participant Pseudonym	Age at time of interview	Length of PRU attendance
Dolly	19	2 academic years (Year 10 – Year 11)
Alice	21	3 academic years (Year 9 – Year 11)
Kitty	18	4 academic years (Year 8 – Year 11)

Table 2: Participant information including age and length of PRU attendance.

4.1.6. Data analysis

Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis appeared the most appropriate as it is primarily used in studies focussing on lived experience and exploring these on their own terms, in participants' own words, which fitted well with my aims. One of the focal points for IPA researchers are the perceptions and views of participants (as opposed to fixed and 'real' understandings) which also fits well with the ontological and epistemological positioning. In addition, Reid et al (2005) argued that IPA is a particularly valuable approach to adopt when researching an area that has previously lacked exploration. This seems particularly pertinent to this research as investigations aiming to explore female pupils' experiences of Pupil Referral Units appear to be particularly scarce.

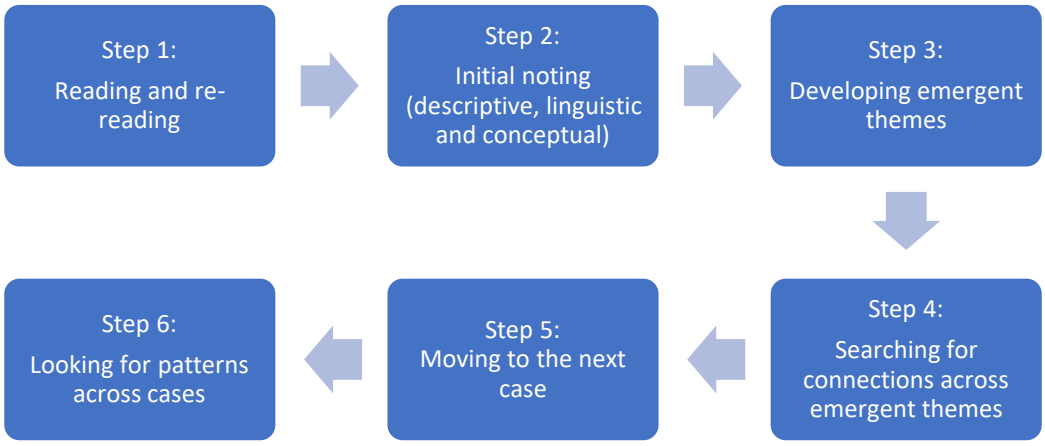

Figure 3: The six-step process for Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis as outlined in Smith, Flowers & Larkin (2009)

I followed the six-step process outlined in Smith et al. (2009) for my analysis (see Figure 3) which started by reading the transcriptions multiple times to begin familiarising myself with the data. For each participant, I made initial colour-coded notes based on descriptive, linguistic and conceptual comments (see Figure 4 for an extract of coded transcript). Descriptive comments entailed "taking things at face value… highlighted the objects which structure the participant's thoughts and experiences" (p. 84). Linguistic comments referred to participants' use of "pronoun use, pauses, laughter, functional aspects of language, repetition, tone, degree of fluency" (p. 88) as well as metaphors and

figurative speech. Conceptual comments move away from the explicit content of the interview and shift focus towards "the participant's overarching understanding of the matters that they are discussing" (p. 88) and required a process of reflection and interpretation from myself. It was during this stage of commenting that I had to be particularly aware of my own positionality and potential bias, which was done through a reflective log and frequent conversations with my research supervisors.

Transcript	Initial comments (Descriptive, Linguistic, Conceptual)
Alice: Yeah. I had to pay private as well. Um… because yeah, the NHS, where I was 18 it was almost seen as like it's not important. Like you've come this far, why would you need a… why would you need a label? It's one of those things where like if you don't have the answer, you're just in limbo. You don't ever feel like you have a reason…	Alice explains how it was not deemed important by others to receive a diagnosis. Power dynamics at play – it was not important for adults around Alice, but it was important for her to understand herself better. 'in limbo' – unresolved, waiting, dwelling, uncertain (all very uncomfortable feelings to process)

Figure 4: Extract from Alice's interview with initial IPA comments

Once initial codes had been made, I re-read my exploratory comments to develop concise statements (emergent themes) capturing broader ideas (see Appendix C). Emergent themes were subsequently drawn together by identifying common links between them using the concepts of abstraction (similar themes brought together), subsumption (emergent theme becomes subordinate theme), numeration (frequency in which theme is supported signifies importance) and function (what function it serves). This produced several subordinate themes with related emergent themes. I checked subordinate themes against the transcript in order to ensure they could be linked back to the participants' words. Once subordinate themes had been captured for each individual interview, I began searching for connections across cases. The subordinate themes were drawn together, and this resulted in several superordinate themes for the group each with several related subordinate themes (see Appendix D).

4.1.7. Ethical considerations

The research was carried out was in accordance with the British Psychological Society Code of Ethics and Conduct (2018), Health and Care Professions Council (HCPC) code of practice (2016) and British Psychological Society Code of Human Research Ethics (2021). This is of importance given the potential vulnerabilities of recruiting young adults. The research was submitted to and approved by the University of Exeter Ethics Committee (see Appendix E for the certificate of ethical approval).

Gilbert (2008, p. 146) posited that "researchers always have to take account of the effects of their actions upon those subjects and act in such a way as to preserve their rights and integrity as human beings. Such behaviour is ethical behaviour". Some of the ethical considerations I made included gaining informed consent; keeping participants anonymous and their information confidential; and ensuring participant wellbeing.

4.1.7.1. Informed Consent

I purposefully chose to include participants over the age of 18 only as these young women were able to provide their own informed consent. All participants were fully and truthfully informed about the nature of the research using a participant information sheet (see Appendix F). Additionally, participants were offered the opportunity to be sent the list of interview questions ahead of time to ensure they felt comfortable with the proposed questions.

Sabar and Sabar Ben-Yehoshua (2017) highlighted the potential challenges of obtaining informed consent when qualitative research can change focus and course during the analysis and write up. As my interview guide allowed for flexibility within the interview process and there was the potential for some questions to bring up topics which were not expected, it was important to consider the implications of this regarding consent. I hypothesised that any slight changes to the questions asked were unlikely to be significantly different to those planned. However, I ensured all participants knew that they had the right to withdraw at any point of the interview and could ask for their interview not to be used, up until the point of analysis. Participants e-signed consent forms (see Appendix K) prior to

starting the interview but were also asked for verbal consent at the start of the interview and asked if they felt comfortable to continue half-way through the interview.

4.1.7.2. Anonymity/Confidentiality

Participants chose their own pseudonyms. Transcriptions were written using their pseudonyms and subsequently used in the final write up of the findings and discussion. Participants were informed that anything they told me during the interview was confidential unless there were safeguarding concerns, which would have been reported to the appropriate people.

4.1.7.3. Participants' Emotional Wellbeing

Due to the nature of this research, participants were asked to talk about personal feelings and experiences, therefore it was crucial that I, as the interviewer, monitored how the interview was affecting the participant (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014). I was mindful of participants' emotional wellbeing and be careful not to push participants if I could see they were beginning to feel distressed. Half-way through the interview, all participants were asked if they needed a break or were happy to continue with the questions. All participants expressed they were comfortable and completed the full interview.

When planning my interviews, I considered that disclosures could be made concerning issues such as current or historic abuse from family, friends, partners or school staff, or poor mental health, resulting in self-harm or suicidal ideation. As I have received safeguarding training through my role as a Trainee Educational Psychologist, I knew that if a disclosure was made, I would listen non-judgementally, allow my participant to tell their story using their own words and gently inform them that I would have to pass my concerns on to the appropriate people. Following the interview, I would have sought supervision from my research supervisors to discuss who it would be appropriate to pass my concerns onto e.g. the police, health or social care. Depending on the nature of the disclosure, I may also have signposted my participants to relevant charities or support helplines e.g. Young Minds, Samaritans, Papyrus, Women's Aid.

Furthermore, there was a need to acknowledge and reflect on the position and power of myself as the researcher within the interview process. This felt especially important considering the interview process is one-sided with me asking personal and potentially triggering questions. I held the power as I was providing the platform and enabling participants' voice (Clarke et al., 2011). This was one of the reasons I gave participants the opportunity to choose their own pseudonyms so that they felt a sense of control over the data once the interview was over.

4.1.8. Summary of methodology

In this section of Chapter 4, I have provided information regarding the research design. I have discussed the methods used for data collection and analysis (semi-structured interviews and Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis); the participant sample (3 female former PRU pupils); as well as the ethical considerations made. In the following section, I will present the findings from Phase 1.

4.2. Findings

This section will provide a phenomenological and interpretative narrative of the research findings. Five superordinate themes were generated from the interpretative analysis and these were shared by all three women: 'sense of belonging', 'influence of peers', 'feeling safe', 'support from staff' and 'general perception'. Each superordinate theme has a number of related subordinate themes (see Table 3).

Super-ordinate theme	Subordinate theme
Lack of belonging	Rejection by mainstream Feeling like an outsider Desire to be socially included
Influence of peers	Exposure to mental health needs Substance use Competition
Feeling safe	Violent boys Vulnerable girls PRU as prison
Support from staff	Relational approach Levels of SEMH knowledge Quality of teaching
General perception	Troubled and reckless girls Lack of expectation

Table 3: Superordinate and subordinate themes from Phase 1 IPA analysis.

The superordinate and subordinate themes will be presented and discussed in turn. Tables have been included to provide a visual representation of the prevalence of subordinate themes across participants. Transcript extracts in the form of quotations will be included in order to present the phenomenological core from which my interpretations have developed. I have aimed to include a variety of quotes from each participant to ensure their individual voices as well as collective experience are heard. Extracts from at least half the participants who related to each subordinate theme will be included to support the claims made (Smith, 2011). These will be in the form of direct quotations from the interview

transcript (followed by the line number, so that it is possible to return to the transcript and check the extract in context). Throughout the analysis I have aimed to explore both depth and breadth, whilst also highlighting both shared and distinct experiences, therefore capturing convergence and divergence between experiences. I wanted the themes to have been shared by all participants, however, I have included some themes which only two participants spoke about. The rationale behind that decision was that for those participants, those specific themes were extremely salient and important throughout their interview, and I wanted to ensure their voice was heard.

4.2.1. Lack of belonging

This superordinate theme captures the lack of belonging the women felt, both in relation to their mainstream schools and subsequently their Pupil Referral Units. In turn, there was an effect on individuals' sense of self and often their behaviour. See Table 4 for the related subordinate themes and the prevalence of these across participants.

Subordinate theme	Alice	Dolly	Kitty
Rejection by mainstream	x	x	x
Feeling like an outsider	x	x	x
Desire to be socially included	x	x	x

Table 4: Pattern of sub-ordinate themes across participants.

4.2.1.1. Rejection by mainstream

All participants reflected on their time at mainstream and the breakdown of their school placement prior to starting at a Pupil Referral Unit. They spoke about feeling let down by the system and not being given enough support to meet their needs. Alice believes she could have succeeded in mainstream but "just wasn't given the chance" (line 758). She felt that her mainstream school did not do enough to investigate the underlying causes of her behaviour but simply viewed her as a difficult child who they could not support. She

describes how her parents were given an ultimatum whereby they were told "either we absolutely get rid of her, she's got nothing to do with this school, or what we can do is pay for her to go to a Pupil Referral Unit" (lines 258-261). Alice's use of emotive language suggests that this rejection from mainstream school made her feel like a burden and that she was unworthy of receiving the support she needed. She reflects on her behaviour at that time citing she was "screaming out for help" (line 269) but she perceived that nobody was listening.

Similarly, Dolly spoke about the decline in her behaviour and how she went from a "great student" (line 343) to a "completely different person" (line 338) who was rejected from all mainstream schools. Dolly attended several mainstream secondary schools before she was permanently excluded and placed in a PRU in Year 10. Dolly initially moved school because she was no longer able to catch a lift with her Aunty and would have to get two buses every morning, so she transferred into a school closer to her home. Dolly detailed how her new secondary school "was a lot more laid-back so the structure and the rules weren't so much in place" (lines 290-292) which meant she felt she was able to "get away" (line 300) with more behaviour. She reflected that things went downhill over a period leading to several fixed term exclusions. Subsequently, her mother was given the choice of "you either remove her from the school so it's not on the record that she's been excluded or her very first day back… I'm permanently excluding her" (lines 314-317). Dolly returned to her original secondary school but struggled to manage the more structured environment. The behaviours she had almost been excluded for continued in her original school leading to their decision to place Dolly on a managed move. She describes how she "got put to panel and no one accepted me, like, all the other schools were there and no one else said yes" (lines 1506-1508). It is interesting to consider the impact this rejection from all mainstream schools across the city would have made Dolly feel. She described to me how "looking back at it now like yeah it was hard" (lines 396-399) but at the time she did not feel upset because she did not care about school.

All participants discussed how their rejection from mainstream education meant they felt they had no other options but to attend a Pupil Referral Unit. None of the women felt they had been consulted or actively included in the process of transitioning into alternative

education. The lack of control over their education suggests that the women's voices were not valued or considered important by their mainstream schools. The women all spoke about finding the transition into alternative education difficult. The difficulty was often explained by a lack of transition support. Most were told they were starting to attend a PRU immediately and given little time to adjust to the idea of leaving mainstream. Alice highlights "there was no transition period, there was no… just thrown into the deep end" (lines 340-342) while Dolly similarly recounts "it was like straight-away like you're here tomorrow and they were like… I was like I've not been given any warning, I would at least like another day to be able to like say goodbye to my friends…" (lines 437-448).

4.2.1.2. Feeling like an outsider

When the women began attending their PRUs, all felt a sense of disappointment about neither fitting in at mainstream or in alternative education. This lack of belonging was based on multiple different factors. For Dolly and Kitty this was based on perceived differences in their behaviour and attitude in comparison to their peers, whereas for Alice, this was based on an unwelcoming school environment. Alice spoke about feeling excluded within her PRU as "they didn't even have a female toilet" (line 368) and were unprepared for hosting a female pupil. She describes how this made her feel masculine and exacerbated the differences between herself and her peers. She questioned "am I not meant to be here?" (line 375) further emphasising her lack of belonging and insider status to the PRU pupil population. In addition, Dolly found the transition into the PRU difficult and struggled to gain initial feelings of kinship with her peers. She stated that "I was very different to all of them" (line 554) and "the children there didn't really know what to do with me because I was so different" (lines 675-677). Dolly described how her peers othered her by saying "you're too good for this, you're too good for us" (line 1431). This was difficult for Dolly to digest as she had implicitly been told she wasn't good enough for mainstream but was too good for a PRU leading her to intense feelings of isolation and being an outsider in all domains of education.

Alice identified that at that time she felt like a "lost soul" (line 281). The impact of feeling isolated and different from her peers had a significant impact on Alice's emotional

wellbeing. Kitty similarly highlighted that feeling like an outsider could have an impact on one's identity and self-esteem. She spoke about how she "didn't really feel like [she] fitted in at school" (line 1299) which added to a "kind of frustration that [she] couldn't be like normal" (line 1262). These reflections suggest the importance of school belonging on a positive sense of self.

4.2.1.3. Desire to be socially included

The importance of feeling connected and involved with a peer group sharing the same educational experience was emphasised by all three women. Their reflections highlighted that friendships were an important aspect of emotional wellbeing and socialising with peers helped to make school a less lonely experience. Alice noted the mentality at her PRU was "if you're not going to get involved then you're not part of the team" (line 879). Being part of a 'team' and developing friendships was equally significant to Dolly who said that she "tried to stay away from it at first but then eventually like if that's the only friends you have, that's the only friends you have and you do what you can to get in" (lines 701-704).

Alice, Dolly and Kitty all mentioned how their behaviour was altered by this desire to feel accepted by their classmates. Kitty stated that "I think I kind-of I guess adapted. I started smoking because that was what everyone else would do before school and after school. Like that was kind-of how you talked to people because everyone would just be outside smoking." (lines 1290-1295). This notion of becoming involved in activities not necessarily for personal enjoyment but to feel accepted is echoed by Dolly who said "It was very much like "right let's copy them, let's do what they do, that's how they act". Just so you can get on, like if you don't they're going to be like no I'm not speaking to you anymore…" (lines 1257-1267). It appears that the negative influence of peers on pupil behaviour was outweighed by the perceived positives of feeling included and developing friendships.

The importance of friendship was salient across the three participants but interestingly, Alice spoke at length about how the desire to be socially included was not only

for a sense of belonging and relatedness to others but also for safety. She described how if everyone is misbehaving, the expectation is that you join in and subsequently everyone would share in taking the punishment as "otherwise you are seen as the misfit and I think that can be quite dangerous as well" (lines 893-894). The implication here is that if you are not seen to be involved with your fellow pupils, you may be treated unfavourably or targeted by others.

4.2.2. Influence of peers

This superordinate theme highlights the role peers played in the women's lives during their PRU attendance. It was apparent that peer influence was primarily negative with an over-exposure to mental health difficulties, substance abuse and feelings of competition amongst classmates. See Table 5 for the related subordinate themes and the prevalence of these across participants.

Subordinate theme	Alice	Dolly	Kitty
Exposure to mental health needs	x	x	x
Substance use		x	x
Competition	x	x	x

Table 5: Pattern of sub-ordinate themes across participants.

4.2.2.1. Exposure to mental health needs

All participants mentioned mental health and the prevalence of difficulties such as anxiety and depression amongst the PRU pupil population. They expressed concern about the impact of others' mental health on their own mental wellbeing and reflected that at times they had found the PRU a difficult environment to be in. Dolly stated:

> everyone at [PRU name] had these like deep, dark backgrounds, all these things going on… and it was very much like dragged me down a bit… A lot of the girls they were all

depressed and then you'd sit there sometimes and they're there being all like depressed and you'd sort-of mirror that then and you'd feel a bit shit… (lines 1293-1300)

Dolly implies that being surrounded by other pupils with significant mental health needs had a negative impact on her own mental health. Similarly, Kitty says she felt her PRU was "definitely negative in terms of my exposure to things like eating disorders, um, and self-harm and stuff like that." (lines 140-143). She continued to explain how her eating disorder behaviours had been triggered as "a lot of pupils had eating disorders" (line 1336) and it was commonplace amongst her peers.

Alice reflected on the impact of others' mental health needs on the school culture and her access to quality education. She highlighted that several pupils at her PRU, including herself "did have ADHD" (line 234) which limited their ability to focus and concentrate on lessons. In turn, Alice felt their mental health needs subsequently impacted staff's motivation to provide structured learning tasks. Alice suggested that staff felt demoralised by student behaviour: "what's the point of getting these kids to do any learning because they're not going to do it" (lines 167-168). Alice expressed disappointment at not being able to stay in mainstream as she believed she would have continued to access 'normal' lessons.

4.2.2.2. Substance use

In addition to an exposure to significant mental health needs, two of the women (Kitty and Dolly) highlighted the prevalence of substance use amongst their peers. They indicated that many pupils used drugs and alcohol as a form of escapism. Dolly described how many of the female pupils would be "constantly drunk and/or on drugs" (lines 814-815) as a form of self-medication. Dolly stated

I don't remember the last time I saw any of them sober. Like one of the girls every morning used to… run into the Co-op, steal a bottle of wine, run out and drink it and then go into school, or do that at the end of school… (lines 819-825).

Dolly said that the pupils lacked positive role models when it came to coping with their mental health needs and therefore used accessible means e.g. drugs and alcohol, to numb emotional pain. Dolly suggested her PRU did not sufficiently support pupils in this regard. On the contrary, Kitty describes how her PRU were acutely aware of the prevalence of drugs among their pupil population and ensured their PSHE curriculum was centred around information on drugs. An explanation for this difference may be because Kitty highlighted that "drugs and alcohol were definitely genderless" (lines 627-628) and therefore a universal problem whereas Dolly suggests it was the girls who "were very much into the drugs and things like that" (lines 769-770).

There were also multiple references to participating in substance use as an important aspect of socialising. Kitty reflected that when she began meeting up with her peers outside of school, it "wasn't good things like it was let's go out get drunk, let's… come on, try drugs, come do drugs…" (lines 688-691). Similarly, Dolly explained that she participated in substance use because that was her only form of connection to her peers: "it was all sort-of come join us and get drunk and stoned or… sit by yourself and do nothing." (lines 829-832). When talking about some of her behaviour during her PRU attendance, Dolly continually shook her head and laughed sheepishly. The implication was that Dolly views herself as very separate from her school experiences now and feels disappointed in the behaviour she was part of.

4.2.2.3. Competition

Comparison between the women and their peers was a common theme across the interviews. Primarily, competition was portrayed as a negative influence on participants' sense of self and contributed to feelings of insecurity, although one participant did describe how competition could be an important motivator in achieving more. Alice suggested that when she had "a good group of friends, like, in mainstream who were academic, were on the netball team… I found it a good challenge. Personal challenge. I wanna keep up with them... like that encouraged me to do well" (lines 581-588). Her reflections suggest that a healthy level of competition can provide inspiration to work hard and put in your full effort.

She went on to say that when she no longer had a group of friends to compete with, she was less motivated to work hard at school and her behaviour subsequently declined.

Kitty and Dolly, however, both implied that competition between pupils was a negative aspect of their PRU experience and there was a high level of "bitchiness" amongst the female pupils which they found difficult to manage. Competition often came in the form of appearance comparison. Kitty highlighted that when she first began attending the PRU she was happy with her appearance but over time she felt a significant pressure to change her appearance to fit in. Kitty said she felt she "needed to wear makeup and stuff like that" (lines 1331-1332) because the other girls in their PRU did. In addition, Kitty began "thinking more and more that I was fat" (line 1326-1327) as she compared herself to slimmer peers. This was an issue because Kitty described how everyone was beginning to date and the competition to be viewed as attractive and desirable was high amongst the female pupils. Likewise, when Dolly was asked if she felt there was much competition between the girls in her PRU, she replied "definitely. At all times. Like who can speak to the boys most, who can get on with the boys most, who can text the most boys…" (lines 1449-1451). The emphasis placed on being admired or desired by males added significant pressure on Dolly and Kitty, ultimately leading to insecurities about their appearance.

The competition felt between girls was also found to have potentially negative impacts on friendships. Dolly explained that she gets on well with boys "but then [girls] would be like oh you're flirting with them, you're being like this with me" (lines 1415-1418). For Dolly, being a female in a PRU meant navigating a fine balancing act between being attractive to males but prioritising female friendship above all.

4.2.3. Feeling safe

This superordinate theme identifies the lack of safety the women felt at school. They spoke about the school environment feeling unsafe due to the nature of other pupils' behaviour as well as the school ethos in each of their settings. There was frequent reference to imagery around violence, criminality and prisons. See Table 6 for the related subordinate themes and the prevalence of these across participants.

Subordinate theme	Alice	Dolly	Kitty
Violent boys	x	x	x
Vulnerable girls	x		x
PRU as prison	x	x	

Table 6: Pattern of sub-ordinate themes across participants.

4.2.3.1. Violent boys and vulnerable girls

Male pupils were described by all participants as violent or aggressive. Their behaviour was portrayed as being threatening involving actions such as throwing tables and chairs, fighting, and swearing at each other. Alice described her PRU (which was all male apart from her) as "people throwing books everywhere, people swearing, the teachers trying to restrain one student" (lines 210-212). Dolly similarly described the boys in her PRU as "a lot more violent and loud and aggressive" (lines 570-571) when compared with the female students. She indicated that the boys dominated the setting and even staff were sometimes wary of reprimanding male students due to "the violent tendencies" (line 621) so they would typically ignore low level disruption.

The impact of boys' violence was that the women often felt frightened of their male peers and ultimately unsafe in their learning environment. Alice highlighted this by saying "I was actually like intimidated by the boys because they were so loud and like, just… they were everywhere, they were just running riot of the whole place" (lines 393-395). Additionally, Kitty described how attending her PRU was "quite scary at times" (line 280) and she had never witnessed violence like it before.

The vulnerability of female pupils was emphasised by Alice who felt that young women are "so easily led" (line 181) and implied that it is problematic for young women to attend educational settings where there is an overly high percentage of male pupils. She explained that she found it incredibly intimidating to be "a female on your own and not even having some girls to like back you up" (lines 428-429). Alice felt she did not have a voice and needed to remain quiet to survive her Pupil Referral Unit. She reflects that having

more females would have increased her feelings of safety and security. She went on to say that she felt "there should definitely be a girls unit and boys unit. Definitely. Gender has to come into it, more than it has" (lines 901-904) because she believed different support was needed to meet the needs of girls in comparison to boys.

In addition, Kitty spoke about female vulnerability in relation to teen pregnancy and safe sex. She stated that "by the time I was 15 two of the girls in my class were pregnant" (lines 874-875). Kitty went on to explain that the girls who had become pregnant had "much older boyfriends" (line 967) and were "already quite vulnerable" (line 961). She described how in Year 10, all the girls were encouraged to start using contraception and staff offered to accompany girls to the doctors to get the implant. Kitty laughed several times when telling this story emphasising how bizarre and ridiculous she felt this practice was. Kitty highlighted that the emphasis on practising safe sex was primarily targeted towards the female pupils implying it is their responsibility to protect themselves which she felt was outdated and sexist.

4.2.3.2. PRU as prison

Imagery comparing Pupil Referral Units to prisons was common in the interviews. The environment was typically described as full of violence and frightening to be in. Alice talked about how she "felt like I was in a prison" (line 402) because she wasn't allowed to leave the building without permission and her belongings were checked when she entered. In addition, she believed the staff played a significant role in how she viewed the PRU "It was almost like these people that worked there were like prison officers. They were there for a job and that was it. They didn't… the welfare wasn't there." (lines 479-482)

Alice found some staff members particularly difficult to cope with and felt that they purposefully treated the pupils negatively because pupils were deserving of that. She describes one member of staff as having the mentality of "You're in here for punishment so you're going to get punished" (lines 668-670). Alice spoke about how she internalised this message and began to think of herself as a delinquent.

Dolly also highlighted that "it sort-of is like a prison there…" *(*lines 147-148). Anything could be used as a weapon, so pupils were banned from bringing in any personal belongings to school. Dolly said this even went as far as no notebooks or stationery. She described in detail how all pupils were metal detected upon arrival. She reflected that this was a very dehumanising and humiliating start to each day as "you have to like pull your bra out and shake to show you don't have nothing there…" (lines 152-154). Dolly felt this routine was an invasion of her privacy and emphasised the lack of respect she felt from staff. "They sometimes pat you down and that was a very like… it's not a nice thing" (lines 158-159). This extract from Dolly's interview illuminates how much she disliked being searched because it suggested staff did not trust her.

4.2.4. Support from staff

This superordinate theme captures the way in which the women reflected on the support they received from staff members. See Table 7 for the related subordinate themes and the prevalence of these across participants.

Subordinate theme	Alice	Dolly	Kitty
Relational approach	x	x	x
Levels of SEMH knowledge	x	x	x
Quality of teaching	x	x	x

Table 7: Pattern of sub-ordinate themes across participants.

4.2.4.1. Relational approach

Across the three interviews, Kitty, Alice and Dolly all spoke extensively about the importance of feeling listened to and understood by staff working at their PRUs. Staff who adopted a relational approach made the women feel safe and secure enough to open up about their feelings. In turn, the women highlighted how a culture of respectful and trusting relationships between staff and pupils positively impacted their emotional wellbeing.

Dolly highlighted that the ethos of her PRU was "I want to help you, not tell you off" (line 930) which was significantly different from her experience of mainstream education:

> other schools I've been to it was very much like your education matters and that's all that matters. Whereas I feel like they were very much you could see that they cared about you… like I want to look after you and education comes second. So that was probably like the best part and like the staff there were great. (lines 124-135)

Dolly felt there was significant importance placed on emotional wellbeing at her PRU and staff understood that her emotional needs had to be met before she could access academic work. Dolly spoke fondly of the staff she had been supported by and explained how she felt they genuinely cared about understanding the reasons behind her behaviour. Throughout Dolly's interview it was clear how much importance she placed on feeling respected by staff and forming genuine relationships. She suggested that there is "a big difference between someone trying to be there but showing you they're really there" (lines 910-911) and she felt closest to staff who made her feel heard and seen.

Kitty detailed how the staff she connected to most were young and relatable. She highlighted that "a lot of people liked all of the inclusion team" (line 1149) as they "were all, um, sort-of out of university, in their 20s, and they were all really cool, easy to talk to, um, and stuff like that which was good" (lines 215-218). Kitty implied that she found it easier to talk openly with the inclusion team because she felt they could relate to the difficulties she was facing to a greater extent than someone much older and in a different phase of life. In some ways the inclusion workers could act as positive peer mentors.

For Alice, the most important factor for forming positive relationships with staff was feeling nurtured. Alice spoke about how she felt female staff members were able to provide the nurturing and caring support she needed better than their male counterparts:

> I did like um… the female mentors. I have to admit having a male mentor there didn't work great for me. I felt kind-of intimidated quite a lot. Um, but having… I had two females and… they were emotionally involved whereas I found… I mean I'm not being

sexist… but males, I sometimes feel like they don't have the connection, like, emotionally (lines 135-145)

Alice went on to describe how her female mentors "knew I needed nurturing" (line 604) and provided her with the emotional support that she felt had been lacking in her mainstream school. Alice highlighted that before she was supported by her female mentors, she wished she could return to mainstream and felt no real sense of belonging to her PRU but "when I got those two female mentors… I only had them for about six months so that was like not very long, quite a while after I started. So once I had those two females, it was almost like I would rather be here all the time with you" (lines 766-771) emphasising how pivotal the relationships with staff were for Alice. They ensured she felt heard and understood on a level she had not experienced in education before.

To further emphasise the power of nurturing and caring relationships, Dolly and Alice both mentioned that they are still in contact with some of the staff from their PRUs and continue to feel supported by them, years after leaving.

4.2.4.2. Levels of SEMH knowledge

Alice and Kitty expressed concern about the perceived variation in levels of staff understanding regarding social, emotional and mental health needs. They felt that PRU staff should be more well-versed in SEMH needs than mainstream staff and should be aware of potential gender differences in the presentation of those needs. Alice and Kitty both mentioned how difficult it was to receive support for their difficulties when other pupils had more externalising behaviour:

I kind-of had to rely on people noticing that something was wrong and obviously when you're just sort-of quietly in a corner but there's someone kicking off in the classroom, getting really angry, it's like you know…
Interviewer: Harder to get noticed?
Kitty: Yeah (Kitty, lines 1191-1199)

> if you weren't displaying kind-of aggressive behaviour then you weren't getting any… not attention… you weren't getting any help… some people needed emotional help, not to be restrained (Alice, lines 99-107)

Alice mentioned the use of physical restraint in her PRU and explained how she felt this was an inappropriate behaviour management technique as she believed the pupils needed nurture and emotional support. Alice further suggested that staff should receive training on how females with conditions such as Autism Spectrum Condition or Attention Deficit Hyperactive Disorder (two diagnoses she has) may present as she believed the staff in her PRU did not understand her needs or how to support her. She highlighted that:

> even though I might come across as aggressive I don't need restrained if you just spoke to me, came down to my level. And fair enough some boys, restraining them might have been the only option but there's two different… even though I know genders are equal… but I don't think that means they need the same treatment (lines 494-509)

Similarly, Kitty recalled an occasion in which she was struggling to enter a lesson due to anxiety and she was "physically kind-of pushed over the threshold" (line 991). She reflected how invalidated that experience and the apparent lack of respect shown had made her feel. She did not believe her anxiety or the impact it had on her ability to enter lessons was understood by staff. In addition, Kitty voiced concern that in the 4 years she attended her Pupil Referral Unit "no one realised that I had ADHD" (line 149). Kitty only received her diagnosis after leaving school and being assessed privately. She described how it was difficult to understand and manage her own needs when the adults around her did not understand either.

On the other hand, Dolly spoke about how understanding mental health and supporting needs associated with SEMH was prioritised in her PRU: "school like in general they were very supportive of you emotionally and like your mental health" (line 118-120). Dolly reflected that staff in her PRU validated her previous mainstream experiences by helping her to understand how her mental health needs presented in behaviour. She said that staff told her "you can see that you are just a child who is… was struggling and needed support

from someone and you didn't have the support so you communicated in behaviour because that's all you could do to be heard" (lines 510-515) which allowed her to understand herself better and make sense of why mainstream education had not worked out.

4.2.4.2. Quality of teaching

Despite praising the staff for their relational practice and focus on increasing emotional wellbeing, the women did discuss how they felt the teaching they received in their PRU was lower quality than mainstream education. All participants spoke about being unable to take certain subjects at GCSE because of either a lack of appropriate resources or teachers being unqualified to teach subjects at higher levels. The implication is that PRU pupils do not require the same level of quality teaching or higher education, perhaps due to stereotypes about pupil capabilities and motivation. Kitty suggested "a lot of the teachers were odd in their own respect or just not very good at teaching." (lines 317-319) and explained how she has subsequently completed GCSEs with the support of private tutoring as she left her PRU with few qualifications. She told me that "I didn't really learn anything, I left most of my… When I sat my GCSEs when I was 15/16, I left most of the exams, like, blank so they weren't marked at all" (lines 133-136). She felt she had not been pushed to work hard and was not given the appropriate support to do well in formal examinations.

Similarly, Dolly described a lack of GCSE options with only the basic subjects being covered in her PRU: "education-wise it was literally English, Maths, Science and I think once a week we did a PE class like healthy body and stuff like that" (lines 211-214). However, she reflected that it may have been difficult for staff to provide quality teaching when they were having to support significant behavioural issues. Due to the many conflicting demands on teachers' attention, Dolly completed most of her work independently with minimal adult support. Dolly recalled that she would be encouraged to find a suitable space to work in outside of the main classroom so that she could concentrate and focus on the tasks provided: "some of the teachers would just say to me like "here's the work for today, just go out into the corridor to do it… get some quiet, if you need anything come back and grab me" (lines 1474-1478). Throughout her interview, Dolly spoke positively about the staff and empathised with the difficulties they faced in providing quality education to pupils with

complex needs. Dolly indicated that she felt academically supported enough to succeed in her subjects and go on to begin a career she feels passionate about.

Unlike Dolly, Alice did not feel positively about the quality of teaching she received at her PRU. She reflected "that's what I found very difficult. I didn't feel like… I was almost just there with a dinner lady. It wasn't like… there wasn't like any teachers or mentors. It was like I'm just sat here being monitored" (lines 111-115). Alice suggested that the teachers did not push the pupils to achieve. Her belief was that the staff did not have "the drive or the passion to want to help people get back up" (lines 854-857) and therefore they did not see the importance in providing quality teaching. Alice felt that if she had stayed in mainstream education she "could have had so much more help and been able to get all my GCSEs I was in line to get" (lines 756-758).

4.2.5. General perception

This superordinate theme captures how the women feel the staff and wider public viewed them. See Table 8 for the related subordinate themes and the prevalence of these across participants.

Subordinate theme	Alice	Dolly	Kitty
Troubled and reckless girls	x	x	x
Lack of expectation	x	x	x

Table 8: Pattern of sub-ordinate themes across participants.

4.2.5.1. Troubled and reckless girls

All participants spoke about their interpretation of how females who attend PRUs are viewed by society. They suggested perceptions were based on stereotypes and did not accurately reflect the diversity of the female PRU population. Alice explained that she felt "they would just put you like the boys' behaviour and automatically assume you're going to be like that." (lines 463-465). She suggested that people view girls in PRUs as "masculine and a bit like aggressive" (line 462) which she felt was very different to the reality. Alice

spoke extensively in her interview about how she felt girls in PRUs are often over-looked because of their lack of aggression and externalising behaviour.

Kitty echoed Alice's view that the public perception of girls in PRUs was not accurate or truly representative. She said: "you think of boys being kicked out of school. You think more of that. When you think of girls being kicked out of school, I think people assume it's like just skipping school and smoking. That's why they got kicked out." (lines 744-749). She highlighted the lack of nuanced understanding around the complex and varied reasons in which girls are excluded from mainstream. The implication is that girls are active participants in the breakdown of their mainstream placement through deliberate actions such as truanting or smoking. Kitty suggests that girls in PRUs are viewed in a similar way to 'looked after' girls:

> I think it's the same kind-of way as they view girls who are in care or are like… like troubled teens. They're just off doing drugs and having sex and doing stuff like that and they're not… they're just reckless and they don't care about anyone else. (lines 714-719)

The emphasis once again is placed on the individual and does not appear to consider the role of environment. Like Kitty, Dolly also spoke about girls' behaviour being viewed as reckless or wild:

> Like there was a lot of things I heard. Like if I would speak to like meet someone and they'd talk about schools and things, they'd be like "you must be crazy". That's so crazy, like girls being there is not normal, like in that school… like in saying sort-of thing for a boy to go there is normal but for a girl to be there is unexpected (lines 637-643)

She emphasised the fact that girls are viewed as abnormal if they cannot cope in mainstream school and their attendance at alternative provision is much less accepted for females than males which implies a significant gender bias.

4.2.5.2. Lack of expectation

Alice, Kitty and Dolly all spoke at length about the low aspirations and lack of expectation they felt from adults around them. They felt both school staff and the wider public did not expect PRU pupils to succeed or do well in life. This was most commonly in reference to gaining qualifications and holding down a stable job. When talking about her experiences of mainstream, Alice recalled:

> Well one teacher said to me 'you're going to end up in prison because you're a delinquent'. So yeah, that's what they saw me as… and when you hear people say that you automatically assume that's what you are so you don't even try to change. So my behaviour just got worse (line 287-292)

Alice emphasised how influential others' opinions can be on one's motivation to change. She further highlighted that the most common public perception of PRU pupils revolves around drugs and ending up in prison. Alice felt that she was "just tarred with the same brush" (line 822) which negatively impacted her self-esteem and made her question whether she was "going to be able to come back from this" (line 825). Furthermore, Alice worried that she would have to change her career aspirations of becoming a policewoman because she was told that her attendance at a PRU would be on her school record "so when people look at you now, they're just going to see you as delinquent" (lines 834-836). Alice's repetition of 'delinquent' throughout the interview further emphasised how she began to internalise the words of adults around her. Additionally, Alice commented:

> when you're there, it's very much like you're seen as no-hopers… like what's the point of getting these kids to do any learning because they're not going to do it… there wasn't like any push, there was no like encouragement. It was almost like you've failed because you're here anyway… (lines 166-171)

While Alice felt that her PRU provided little encouragement, Kitty described how her PRU actively discouraged her. She reflected "I was discouraged from applying for the college courses that I actually wanted to do" (line 1104-1105) as staff did not feel she would be

accepted onto the course or manage its demands if she did. Kitty implied that a lack of expectation can limit your self-belief and make you question your goals. Similarly, Dolly expressed that there "wasn't much of an attitude that we got from them of like you'll go to university. It didn't feel like anyone really expected us to be able to do that" (lines 1421-1424). All three women spoke about the importance of protective factors such as having supportive families who continued to believe in them and encourage them to have high life aspirations.

Despite the low expectations the women felt, they have all worked hard to reach their respective dreams and goals. Dolly is soon to finish an apprenticeship as a teaching assistant in a special educational needs school and would like to become a qualified teacher; Kitty has completed GCSEs with the help of private tutoring and hopes to continue with further education; and Alice has written a book about her experiences of ADHD and works as a YouTuber.

Reflective commentary:

After my literature review, I believed that gender identity was going to be a significant topic discussed by my participants. However, through the analysis process, it became apparent that sense of self, belonging and identity (more broadly) were more pertinent and important topics for the young women interviewed. Alice, who was the only girl in her PRU, spoke most about her gender identity and how PRU attendance made her question her femininity. It is interesting to consider the impact of having one other female peer to connect and identify with on gender-identity.

4.3. Discussion

In this section, key findings will be presented for each RQ followed by a critical discussion of those findings in relation to relevant literature and psychological theory. It is important to note that after undertaking a systemic review of the literature, I expected gender identity to be a strong theme amongst my participants' reflections. As such, I had anticipated that my discussion would be framed around Bussey's gender identity framework, mirroring the way in which my literature review was written. However, gender identity was not as prominent as I supposed it might be. As an IPA researcher, I was striving to be open and driven by the data, not bound by pre-conceptions, therefore in light of the findings, I bracketed off my previous assumptions and decided to structure my discussion around the research questions, rather than Bussey's framework.

4.3.1. RQ1 - What are young women's reflections on their school experiences leading up to and including their attendance at a Pupil Referral Unit?

Key findings:

- All participants reported feeling rejected and unwanted by mainstream which negatively impacted their self-esteem
- Child and young person (CYP) voice was distinctly lacking in the decision-making process and participants felt powerless over their education which led to further disengagement and loss of trust
- Whilst attending their PRUs, participants reflected that there was a culture of low expectations for pupils' futures. They felt they did not receive quality-first teaching and missed opportunities for meaningful education

4.3.1.1. Lack of belonging

Feeling rejected by mainstream school was a significant topic discussed by all participants in the current research and had negative implications on how the participants felt about themselves as well as towards the education system. Participants felt blamed for their behaviour and wholly misunderstood. One participant, Alice, highlighted that when

mainstream continually rejected her, she began to internally question what was wrong with her. Her behaviour subsequently declined as she felt she had already been cast as a 'delinquent'. These reflections are concurrent with Caslin (2019) who found that young people feel they are defined by the labels that have been attached to them in school and these labels subsequently inform how they are responded to in the classroom. We can view these findings through the lens of social labelling theory (Gove, 1980) which suggested that people labelled as 'different' or 'deviant' may be more vulnerable to discrimination and prejudice which in turn may have a negative impact on how an individual views themselves. Labels which 'other' CYP are often internalised and negatively impact self-esteem (Schäfer et al., 2004), especially if there is a lack of clarity surrounding the use of the label. Bradley (2017) found that excluded girls want to understand why they are positioned as 'other' in their mainstream settings as this knowledge can help them to make sense of their experiences.

Participants highlighted a lack of inclusion in the decision to transition into a PRU which consequently led to distrust of the school system and feeling that their voice was not valued. This is in line with previous findings by the House of Commons Education Committee (2018) which highlighted that neither parents nor young people felt they had a choice about where they would attend school, following a permanent exclusion or managed move. Jalili and Morgan (2018) highlighted that the act of exclusion and subsequent transfer to alternative provision was viewed by PRU pupils as a form of social, emotional and physical rejection from mainstream education. It has been documented throughout literature that 'school belonging' which is characterised as a pupil's sense of being accepted, valued, included and encouraged by others is strongly associated with emotional and psychological well-being (Craggs & Kelly, 2017). An implication from my findings is that my participants lacked school belonging due to their perceived rejection from mainstream and it took time for them to build positive and reciprocal social relationships within their PRUs to develop school belonging to their new setting. Jalili and Morgan (2018) argued that there needs to be an increase in collaboration between mainstream education and alternative provision in developing a sense of shared responsibility for pupil wellbeing.

Ideally, PRUs should be viewed as a continuum of education, not a rejection or punishment (White, 2014). Caslin (2021) concluded that both pupils and parents felt the education system worked to punish rather than support those struggling. Previous research highlights that being part of the process and person-centred planning increased school belonging (Cockerill, 2019; Hamilton & Morgan, 2018) and positively contributes towards re-engaging permanently excluded young people into education (Farouk, 2017). As relationships (between staff and pupils as well as between peers) are seen to be a strong determinant of school belonging (Craggs & Kelly, 2017; Sancho & Cline, 2012), it could be useful for pupils to engage in an enhanced transition into a PRU which allows them time to begin getting to know staff and pupils to build connections.

4.3.1.3. Support from staff

Many excluded pupils are identified as having either diagnosed or undiagnosed mental health needs (Gill et al., 2017). The Institute for Public Policy Research (2017) estimates that 1 in 50 children in the general population have social, emotional and mental health needs compared to 1 in 2 pupils in alternative provision. Participants in the current research highlighted the difficulty of attending educational settings whereby many pupils were struggling emotionally. They indicated that an over-exposure to mental health needs had the potential to emphasise and exacerbate their own difficulties. A potential explanation for this concerns access to support. Pupils exhibiting external behaviour as a means of communicating their needs may require more attention from staff (Russell & Thomson, 2011). Unfortunately, those pupils facing quieter, more internal struggles (typically female) are consequently less likely to be viewed as priorities for support and therefore there is a pattern of female pupils not receiving equitable access to resources which are designed to meet the needs of students in difficulties (Crozier & Anstiss, 1995). Participants in the current research emphasised that their PRU experience would have been better if their PRU had a greater focus on understanding and supporting mental health needs, regardless of diagnosis. These views do not appear exclusive to alternative provision as findings from a Young Minds (2017) survey showed 90% of the CYP surveyed said that they would like mental health to be more important to their school or college.

All participants in the current research reflected on the curriculum offered to them and criticised their Pupil Referral Units for not being able to offer a wider range of GCSE options. Ofsted (2016) argued that to maximise the chances of PRU leavers' success, the pupils need to gain the best possible qualifications that they can in English, Mathematics and a range of other relevant subjects, as well as developing their personal, social and employability skills. This is especially important when considering the long-term statistics regarding those who are excluded from school; namely, they tend to have poor academic outcomes which result in lower status occupations, less stable career patterns, greater unemployment and are more likely to go to prison in comparison with their peers (The Taylor Report, 2012; McCluskey et al., 2016; Timpson Review of School Exclusion, 2019). Mainwaring and Hallam (2010) discussed meaningful education regarding opportunities to explore future possible selves and attainment, alongside the teaching of specific skills and strategies to actualise these future selves. Malcolm (2019) reported alternative provision pupils believed the learning which took place in their settings was not comparable to the academic learning found in mainstream schools. Much like my participants, pupils interviewed by Malcolm (2019) described being told they would be able to take GCSEs and then not receiving the support to do so. The lack of support to achieve academically could be interpreted by PRU pupils as teachers expecting less of them and may contribute to a decrease in motivation. Indeed, pupils' motivation for school drives their thoughts and actions to obtain academic success and plays an important role in their efforts to learn, perform, and behave (e.g., Anderman & Wolters, 2006). Urhahne (2015) suggested that through their behaviours, teachers communicate their expectations to pupils, which in turn affects pupils' motivation and thereby their achievement outcomes. School motivation can be understood through the expectancy-value model of motivation (Eccles et al., 1983) which proposed that pupils' perceived academic competence (i.e. ability belief) and students' interest in learning (i.e. intrinsic value) play important roles in shaping their expectations regarding how they will perform in school tasks and influence their achievement-related choices and behaviours. If PRU pupils do not feel teachers expect them to do well or support them to achieve academically then it is less likely they will have positive ability belief.

4.3.2. RQ2 - How do young women perceive differences (if any) between their experience of attending a Pupil Referral Unit in comparison to young men?

Key findings:

- All participants commented that they felt unsafe and frightened in their PRU due to the prevalence of male violence
- They reported a significant difference in the behaviour of male and female pupils which contributed to a need for different approaches in staff support
- In their accounts, participants implied that female pupils were more vulnerable than their male counterparts and stigmatised more heavily by the general public

4.3.2.1. Feeling safe

Participants spoke extensively about the differences between male and female behaviour in the PRU. The most frequently cited differences revolved around the aggressive and external behaviour of the male pupils versus the more isolating, internal behaviour of the females. Externalising behaviour means that emotional responses are directed away from the self e.g. aggression, rule-breaking while internalising behaviour means that emotional responses are directed inward e.g. mental health problems, self-harm (Bask, 2015). Previous research shows that externalising behaviour is more common among boys and internalising behaviour more common among girls (Aneshensel et al., 1991; Hagan & Foster, 2003). This difference may be because societal expectation is that boys should value the self over others while girls are expected to value others over the self (Bask, 2015). Due to the aggressive, violent nature of some of the PRU boys' external behaviour, participants in the current study described often feeling frightened and unsafe in their learning environment. Indeed, Lavy & Schlosser (2011) found that having a higher proportion of females in a class leads to a better classroom and learning environment as there is less classroom violence and disruption.

One of the potential consequences of feeling unsafe in your school environment is non-attendance. Figures from National Statistics (2022) show that 31% of PRU pupils had

persistent non-attendance (i.e. missed 50% or more) in the 2021/22 autumn term which was up 5% from the previous academic year. Literature on school non-attendance suggests that teachers have a role to play in trying to reduce unpleasant or threatening experiences through effective classroom management. In turn, an increased level of predictability within the learning environment could reduce pupil stress (Lazarus, 2006) and therefore contribute to increased motivation for attending school. Havik et al. (2013) interviewed parents of pupils experiencing non-attendance and found that predictability was perceived as a crucial factor in promoting school attendance.

4.3.2.3. General perception

A consistent theme across the interviews was women believing they were more stigmatised and ridiculed for attending a Pupil Referral Unit than their male peers. A potential explanation for the harsher lens in which females are viewed may be linked to socially accepted norms of gendered behaviour. Lloyd (2005) suggested that disaffected girls who experience exclusions and 'act out' are viewed more negatively as they offend the unwritten rules of femininity e.g. women are good, caring, accommodating and passive (Ringrose, 2008). Participants in the current research highlighted that society had a narrow and constrained view of girls in PRUs that was contrary to those feminine qualities described. Participants believed they are generally viewed as crazy, reckless and masculine. Currie et al. (2009) additionally highlighted that there is considerable social pressure on teenage girls during adolescence to follow societal norms about 'normative womanhood'. Indeed, one participant in the current research (Alice) did articulate a worry that people viewed her as more masculine and unlike a 'typical' girl because of her attendance at a PRU. This contributed towards feeling rejected by mainstream society as she struggled to find a place to fit in. Most research on differing manifestations of femininity within school has focused on the limiting and regulatory role that stereotypical gender constructs place on the behaviour of girls in pursuit of following the status quo (Haywood & Mac An Ghaill, 2012). However, Bhana's (2008) study with primary aged children found that some female pupils were adopting more stereotypical masculine traits which allowed them a higher degree of power, demonstrating that females are not always positioned as submissive, passive victims of gender constructs. Findings presented by Russell and Thomson (2011) in their exploration

of girls' identities in alternative provision settings similarly described female pupils "adopting boyish behaviours" (p. 301) however this was negatively perceived by peers and viewed as "alien, frightening and ridiculous" (p. 303). Additionally, Ringrose (2013) posited that some girls use normative gender constructs of femininity as a means of empowerment, self-esteem and liberation. The inconsistency across research means it is unclear whether following or rejecting stereotypical notions of femininity are more successful for gaining respect from peers and wider society.

4.3.3. RQ3 - Do young women think Pupil Referral Unit attendance had any impact on their identity and sense of self?

Key findings:

- Participants' desire for social inclusion often led to a shift in behaviour (e.g. becoming involved in activities such as substance use to fit in) and challenged participants' previous identity
- Female friendships were described as both a source of acceptance and competition which impacted their sense of self and feelings of belonging

4.3.3.2. Influence of peers

Riviere (2016) argued that for pupils to be successfully included in an educational provision they need to experience acceptance amongst staff and peers. The importance of gaining acceptance by peers was commonly mentioned by the participants in the current study. Participants detailed how their behaviour changed over time to be more aligned with PRU peers as they worried about being socially excluded. For example, Dolly and Kitty both spoke about not wanting to participate in substance use when they initially joined the PRU but found, over time, this was one of the few ways they would be accepted by their peers. This is in line with previous research which highlighted that new social knowledge is gained through spending time in a new environment (Zittoun, 2006). With the acquisition of new social knowledge, social comparison may take place. To fit in with the majority, young people may adapt their behaviour accordingly (Holdsworth, 2006). Research relating to the recollections of permanently excluded pupils in alternative provision highlighted impressing

classmates as an incentive for misbehaviour with mostly girls using defiance and arguing with staff in order to impress their friends (Farouk, 2017). Girls have been found to place a great deal of emphasis upon 'reputation' and being liked by others (Osler & Vincent, 2003) which was apparent in reflections from Kitty and Dolly who both described wanting to be accepted by girls in their PRUs. Similarly, Thacker (2017) explored the stories told by three young women attending PRUs relating to their past and future selves. Her findings suggested that her participants noted that their PRU friendships were not true friendships that offered support but those who pressured engagement in negative behaviours via direct and indirect peer pressure to feel accepted and belonging. The author highlighted that participants reflected on their low self-esteem and a weak sense of self; they felt a strong need for membership within a popular group as they feared judgement if membership was not maintained. Thacker (2017) suggested "instead of gaining esteem from academic achievements or recognition of teachers or parents, the participants appeared to gain their sense of self-worth through belonging to an anti-establishment social group" (p. 123).

Furthermore, participants in the current study mentioned a high level of comparison and competition amongst the female PRU pupils especially regarding appearance and desirability. They expressed those judgemental comments and 'bitchy' attitudes were much more common among the female pupils than the males. Previous research has shown that girls' self-evaluations are more dependent upon peers' feedback than boys' self-evaluations (Cole, Martin, & Powers, 1997). Dominant gender constructs influence how girls dress, who they form relationships with and how much they contribute in class (Ringrose et al. 2013). It is interesting to consider that peer acceptance was described by my participants as engaging in stereotypically congruent behaviour e.g. spending time with other girls, being desirable to men and wearing the 'right' clothes. Both Kitty and Dolly highlighted that they felt they needed to wear make-up and be thin, to be included by their female peers. This is in line with Powell (2020) who suggested that girls can be complicit in reproducing gender stereotypes and feeling pressured to look or act in a specific way to win the approval of peers. In addition, Archer et al. (2007) described how working-class white girls are "frequently chastised for not having the 'correct' appearance and were regularly punished for wearing 'too much' or the 'wrong sort' of jewellery, dis-allowed items of clothing, and for a raft of other issues concerning their hair and make-up" (p. 169). Archer implied that

the ‘right’ appearance could bring peer status and approval which served “as a means for generating capital and exercising agency in their everyday lives” (p. 168). This explanation may be particularly pertinent regarding female PRU pupils who have typically lacked agency and social capital in their educational lives. My participants’ senses of self and identity appeared to be heavily influenced by their desire for social inclusion and peer acceptance.

4.3.4. Summary of discussion

The young women I interviewed provided detailed accounts of their reflections on attending a Pupil Referral Unit and highlighted the ways in which their educational experiences were both positive and negative. Most of the findings concur with previous literature however the participants in the current study primarily spoke negatively about their PRU experiences which contrasts with other research which suggests pupils generally talk positively about their alternative provision (Ofsted, 2016; O’Connor et al., 2011). This may be because other research has primarily used male participants who may find alternative provision settings are designed well to fit their needs.

Chapter 5 – Phase 2

In this chapter, I will begin by explaining the methodology used for the second phase of the research which endeavoured to hear the views of PRU staff currently supporting girls in their settings. I will then present the findings generated from the thematic analysis. There will subsequently be a critical discussion of those findings in relation to previous literature and theory.

5.1. Methodology

This section aims to outline the methodology used in Phase 2 of my research. It begins by presenting the purpose of this phase and a description of the research design process. Following this, I will explain the data collection methods used (vignettes and semi-structured group interviews) and give a description of the participant sample. There will then be a critical discussion regarding the choice to use thematic analysis to explore the data. This section of the chapter will conclude with ethical considerations made when designing and carrying out the research.

5.1.1. Purpose of research

The purpose of the second phase of my research was to gain insight into how Pupil Referral Unit staff view their role in supporting female PRU pupils and explore some of the facilitators and barriers they face when trying to support this marginalised group. As PRUs have typically been populated by male pupils, I was curious to understand whether staff felt there were differences in how they designed or implemented support for female pupils. As a qualitative researcher, I hoped my analysis would transform the implicit material of raw data into something more explicit, generalisable and psychological (Giorgi & Giorgi, 2003).

5.1.2. Research questions

The research questions were developed following a review of the literature as shown in Chapter 2 and based on the aims of this phase (to hear the views of PRU staff supporting female pupils). For Phase 2, the research questions were as follows:

1. What do school staff think are the facilitators of and barriers to supporting the individual needs of girls attending Pupil Referral Units?

2. How do school staff make decisions about the support they provide for girls attending Pupil Referral Units?

3. What training, skills and resources do school staff feel they need to meet the needs of girls attending Pupil Referral Units?

5.1.3. Research Design

Vignettes are short stories about a hypothetical person, presented to participants during qualitative research to glean information about their own set of beliefs. Participants are typically asked to comment on how they think the character in the story would feel or act in the given situation, or what they would do themselves (Gourlay et al., 2014). Vignettes in qualitative focus group research can be administered as an ice breaker or to help elicit respondents' attitudes and beliefs about a specific situation, as a complementary technique alongside other data collection methods (Finch, 1987; Barter & Renold, 1999), in exploring potentially sensitive topics (Schoenberg & Ravdal, 2000). One of the key advantages of using vignettes is to stimulate group discussion about a topic however there is some criticism that discussions based on vignettes may be more accurately understood as how people would like to react to a situation, as opposed to their actual actions and behaviour (Renold, 2002).

For this research, I designed two vignettes based on the information and stories told by the women interviewed during the first phase of my research (see Appendix G). One vignette was based on a more stereotypical female PRU pupil (e.g. internalising behaviour including self-isolation and truanting) whilst the other was less stereotypical (e.g.

externalising behaviour including aggression and violence). I designed the vignettes this way to try and limit participant responses being based on stereotypical notions of gendered behaviour and highlight that female PRU pupils can be varied in their presentation. I used the vignettes as an ice breaker/elicitation device to get participants thinking about female PRU pupils and what support their setting could offer to girls like the ones described. It allowed my participants to begin thinking and reflecting on girls' needs before I facilitated the discussion around what barriers and facilitators PRU staff believe are in place for meeting the individual needs of the young women, such as the ones I described. As the vignettes were primarily used as an elicitation tool, they will not feature heavily in the findings or discussion.

Prior to the data collection stage of this phase, the vignettes and focus group interview schedule were piloted, in order to evaluate and refine both the questions and process. The schedules were piloted on a group of teachers known to the researcher. The aim of the pilot was to ensure that the interview questions were clear and easy to understand as well as sufficiently open-ended to allow for flexible answers. Feedback from the pilot suggested the questions were appropriate and accessible (see Appendix H for focus group interview schedule).

5.1.4. Data collection

Focus groups were chosen as the primary method of data collection for this phase of the research and can be broadly defined as "a type of group discussion about a topic under the guidance of a trained group moderator" (Stewart, 2018, p. 687). The conversations within a focus group have a degree of spontaneity wherein individuals take cues and inspiration from others' contributions, which was one of the primary reasons they were deemed appropriate for this research. A focus group was considered appropriate to gather a range of PRU staffs' views simultaneously. One of the many advantages of focus groups are that participants can make individuals comments whilst also being inspired by others' thoughts and remarks. Focus group researchers encourage participants to talk to one another: asking questions, exchanging anecdotes, and commenting on each other's experiences and points of view (Acocella, 2012). The interview schedule (Appendix H)

consisted of 8 open-ended questions, designed to explore: what factors staff consider when designing support for girls in PRUs; what challenges they face in their practice; how support may differ based on the gender of pupils; and how staff believe barriers could be overcome to reduce the challenges and improve positive outcomes for female pupils.

Like all research methods, focus groups are not without disadvantages and these limitations were considered during the research design process. For example, some voices can become dominating within group interviews and subsequently limit the opportunity for others to contribute which requires careful facilitation by an interviewer who feels confident and competent in managing those dynamics (Kidd & Parshall, 2000). In addition, some participants may feel anxious to share their real and honest thoughts especially if they are in opposition to ideas expressed by other participants.

5.1.5. Participants

To recruit participants for Phase 2, I emailed all Pupil Referral Units in local authorities in the South West of England as well posting my recruitment poster online on platforms such as Twitter and EPNET. For some PRUs contacted, I had access to the personal email of either the Headteacher or Special Educational Needs Co-ordinator therefore used this connection. For all other PRUs contacted, I sent an email to the generic admin email address and subsequent follow-up email two weeks later. Many PRUs did not respond at all, while others expressed interest in the research but highlighted that due to staff capacity and the ongoing impact of Covid-19 they would be unable to participate.

Namey et al. (2016) argued that two to three focus groups are sufficient to capture most themes. Therefore, in Phase 2, I hoped to conduct 3 focus groups with somewhere between 4 to 6 participants in each group. However, due to several difficulties with recruitment as outlined above, I conducted 4 focus groups with fewer participants in each; one focus group had 4 participants; one had 3 participants; and two had 2 participants. My justification for including 2-person focus groups follows Morgan's (2012) argument that one of the chief advantages of interaction in focus groups is a process of sharing and comparing. More specifically, sharing allows each participant to extend what the other has said, and

comparing involves a process of differentiation that moves the discussion in alternative directions. This process of sharing and comparing also occurs in dyadic interviews, as the participants respond to each other. Morgan suggested that dyadic interviews and focus groups allow for similar interaction and therefore data generated should not theoretically be significantly different than if more people had participated. I also reasoned that if I had conducted 3 focus groups with 4 people in each, that would be 12 participants total and in the current research, I gathered the views of 11 participants. All focus group interviews took place virtually (on Microsoft Teams) between January and March 2022. The staff I interviewed had varying roles within their PRUs which allowed for multiple perspectives ranging from teaching assistant to senior leadership. Each focus group included staff that worked at the same PRU. See Table 9 for a description of the participants.

Focus Group	Participant and Job Role
1	Participant 1 – Mental Health advisory teacher Participant 2 – Teaching assistant Participant 3 – Pastoral Lead and Designated Safeguarding Lead Participant 4 - Headteacher
2	Participant 5 – Head of English Participant 6 – Induction and Engagement Worker Participant 7 – Family and Student Liaison Officer
3	Participant 8 – Special Educational Needs Co-ordinator Participant 9 – Assistant Vice Principal
4	Participant 10 – Pastoral Lead Participant 11 – English teacher/Careers Lead

Table 9: Composition of each focus group including number of participants and job roles.

5.1.6. Role of the researcher

For this research, I endeavoured to gain insight into the views and experiences of PRU staff members supporting female pupils. It is important to remember that access to 'experience' is both partial and complex (Smith, 1996). The process of analysing such

personal data about specific experiences cannot be done without some impact from the researcher. Indeed, the meaning is constructed by both participant and researcher. During the data collection process, I endeavoured to allow participants to drive the conversation as much as possible and offered few prompts outside of the set interview questions.

5.1.7. Data analysis

For this phase of the research, I chose to analyse the data through thematic analysis (see Figure 5 for the six-phase thematic analysis process used). Thematic analysis is a pattern based analytic methods (Braun & Clarke, 2013). The primary advantage of using thematic analysis was the ability to use the method flexibly, by approaching the data inductively or deductively (i.e. working 'bottom up' or 'top down' from the data) and coding semantically or latently (i.e. on a surface level or capturing more implicit meaning). As the research is exploratory in nature, I wanted my analysis to be driven by the data and I wanted to go into the analytical process with an open mind, prepared to find both expected and unexpected themes. Adopting this stance allowed me to explore interesting themes which may have naturally arisen without my consideration in advance. As such, I approached the data inductively. In the early stages of coding, my analysis was more semantic/surface, however, through immersing myself in the data my analysis developed towards a more latent orientation (Terry et al., 2017).

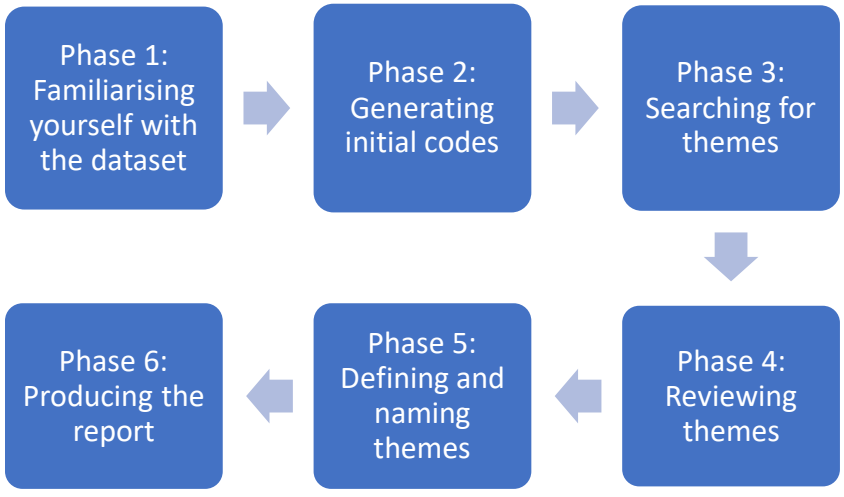

Figure 5: The six-phase process for thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006)

Thematic analysis involved developing patterns of meaning and reporting them in a thematic form. The analytical process began by transcribing the focus group interviews verbatim and familiarising myself with the dataset by re-reading them several times. Following this I began coding each interview in turn. Coding entailed making notes on points of interest within each transcript (see Figure 6 for an example of coded transcript). Codes can be understood as "the most basic segment, or element, of the raw data or information that can be assessed in a meaningful way regarding the phenomenon" (Boyatzis, 1998, p. 63). Once all interviews had been coded, I made a master list of all initial codes and began organising them into initial themes (see Appendix I). To clarify the grouping of the codes into sub- and main themes, the codes were printed out and these pieces of paper were physically moved around. There were several iterations of potential themes as I refined and reviewed which codes made most sense together and were most pertinent to the research questions asked. The final themes will be described in the following results section (5.2) with extracts selected from the interview data to illustrate and elaborate on each theme.

Data extract	**Codes**
PRU Staff 7: Again, it's like that initially when they first come here, the biggest barrier is that not trusting teachers or staff… feeling that we can't be trusted because we're just going to let them down like everyone else has let them down or given up on them. And it takes kind-of a lot of battling away to say look, you know, no matter what you do, we are here for you and it's going to be a fresh day each day. And you know what's gone yesterday is gone and today's a new day. And to get it right.	PRU pupils lack trust Mainstream gave up Negative impact on self-esteem Unconditional positive regard Fresh start

Figure 6: Data extract with codes applied

5.1.8. Ethical considerations

Ethical approval was received from the University of Exeter Ethics Committee on February 19th 2021 (see Appendix F for ethical approval certificate). Participants were informed of the nature of the research via the information sheet and recruitment poster which included information regarding participants' rights to not take part or withdraw at any time until data was analysed (see Appendix J). Consent was gathered through an e-signature on the consent form (see Appendix K) and further verbal consent was gathered at the beginning of each focus group.

5.1.8.1. Risk of harm

Although in some respects focus groups offer a supportive environment to participants, the group context may also create a sense of public vulnerability. Ransome (2013) stated that "in individual interviews respondents are protected by the relative intimacy and privacy of the interview situation. In a focus group session, in contrast, respondents are under pressure to perform (and possibly to conform) under the scrutiny of fellow participants" (p. 41). This was a key ethical consideration during the planning phase. To overcome challenges associated with ensuring the comfort and safety of all participants, I chose to conduct focus groups wherein all participants worked at the same PRU and knew each other prior to the group interview. I hypothesised that this would make participants feel more comfortable and at ease. However, it could also be argued that a focus group comprising of unknown individuals may have allowed participants more anonymity and therefore safety to share honest opinions.

5.1.8.2. Confidentiality and anonymity

It was made clear to participants in the current study that during the focus group their views would not be confidential as they were discussing and conversing with colleagues, however, it was made explicit that participants' contributions would be anonymised within the transcription process. All participants were notified that extracts from the transcript would be used in the subsequent writing up of the findings, but quotes

would not be associated with specific staff members as they would be under labels such as "Participant 1" only.

The focus group interviews were recorded using Microsoft Teams as well as my personal phone as a back-up. Recordings were securely stored on University of Exeter OneDrive which was accessed through a password-protected laptop. The transcriptions did not use any names; instead, referring to "Interviewer" and "Participant (number)". Once the transcriptions were complete and checked to ensure accuracy, the audio recordings were permanently deleted.

5.1.8.3. Data sharing

I am planning to share my research findings with each of the Pupil Referral Units that participated as a thank you for their contribution and time. Furthermore, I also hope to disseminate the research with the Educational Psychology Service I work within as part of their service-level Continued Professional Development time. Participants were made aware of these hopes as well as the fact that once the thesis is complete, it will be a public document.

5.1.8.3. Trustworthiness

It is argued that the trustworthiness of a research project can be increased through a process of auditing (Smith et al, 2009). Auditing was done through the research process by regular guidance from my research supervisors as well as peers piloting the interview schedule.

5.1.9. Summary of methodology

In this section of Chapter 5, I aimed to provide information regarding the research design. I have discussed the methods used for data collection and analysis (focus groups and thematic analysis); the participant sample (11 members of PRU staff with various roles); as

well as the ethical considerations made. In the following section, I will present the findings from Phase 2.

5.2 Findings

In this section, I will present findings generated by thematic analysis of the group interviews. Main themes were shared by all groups. Each main theme had several related sub themes which are presented in Table 10. Sub themes will be explored in greater depth with supporting quotes as appropriate (line numbers will be given so that it is possible to return to the transcript and check the extract in context).

Main Themes	Sub Themes
Ways of working	Reflection
	Behaviour approaches
	Collaboration
	Accessible education
Relationships	Being genuine
	Unconditional positive regard
	Respect
	Trust
Response to changing cohorts	Understanding girls' presentation of needs
	Strategies that work
	Training needs
Falling short	Access to external agencies
	Lack of resources
	Nature of work
	Capacity
Influence of wider systems	Peers
	Family
	Community
	Mainstream school

Table 10: Main themes and related sub-themes from Phase 2 thematic analysis.

5.2.1. Ways of working

This main theme captures the ways of working currently favoured by participants' PRUs (see Figure 7 for related sub themes). Reflection and collaboration were viewed as important methods of evaluating the effectiveness of current provision and implementing change if necessary. Staff worked under the ideology that behaviour is communication which helped them focus on uncovering underlying reasons for undesirable behaviour. Additionally, staff were focussed on ensuring their provision was accessible for all pupils and catered to their individual needs.

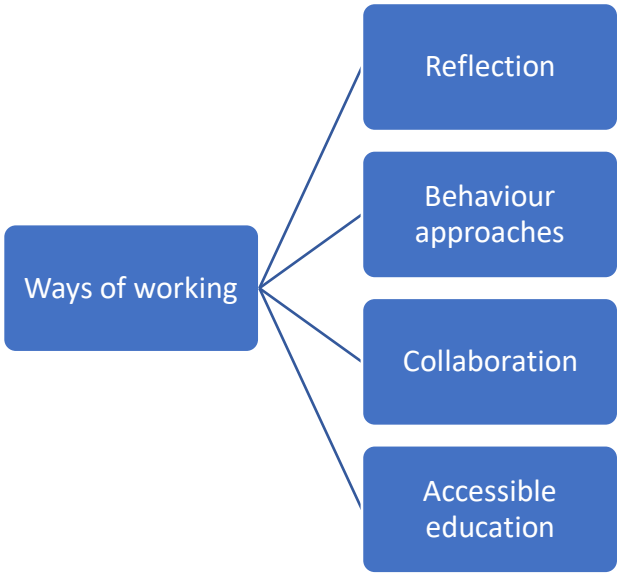

Figure 7: Thematic map of main theme 1 and related sub-themes

5.2.1.1. Reflection

The importance of reflection was a recurring topic in all of the group interviews. It was highlighted as key for assessing what was working well within the PRU and what areas of support needed improvement or change. Participants noted that supervision was particularly valuable for allowing time to reflect and gave staff an opportunity to share ideas with colleagues and senior leadership about new ways forward. Participant 1 highlighted that their PRU was seeking supervision support from external mental health support teams:

> they are going to be providing a once a half term supervision session for PRU staff… the idea is they could bring a student like Becky and they would remain anonymized and they would discuss that student and look at what support is also available (P1, lines 107-111)

This supervision was considered valuable as it provided a space to reflect on the individual needs of a pupil and evaluate the effectiveness of support currently in place. Comments by Participant 4 illustrated that supervision was also important for "giving people opportunity to be able to say that it's not working" (P4, lines 499-500) because the PRU doesn't "want staff to be unhappy as that's quite toxic actually for children and young people" (P1, lines 500-501)

Not all staff felt their PRU was dedicated to protecting time for reflection. Participant 9 felt they would benefit from "an opportunity for supervision and things like that" (P9, line 643) as at the time of interview, Participant 9's PRU was trying to alter school culture by promoting restorative practice above the behaviourist model of rewards and sanctions. She highlighted that it was taking time to bring all staff on board and felt that if they were given time to process and opportunities to reflect with colleagues on how the new school ethos would impact their style of teaching or interactions with pupils, there would be more acceptance of the new school values.

Similarly, Participant 4 spoke about how the emphasis on reflection within their PRU helped staff to challenge biases they may be holding and critically reflect on their own practice: "It's some of those sexual stereotypes that we have in schools. How are we teaching without bias? You know, what do some of these young women think our expectations of them are" (P4, lines 421-423)

5.2.1.2. Behaviour approaches

All groups spoke extensively about how behaviour is viewed within their PRU. Staff highlighted that PRUs emphasise the importance in understanding the underlying reasons

for pupil behaviour and invariably, behaviour is perceived as a product of pupils trying and struggling to communicate their needs: “It's kind-of like a mantra that behaviour is communication and it's making sure that we can see beyond it” (P9, lines 249-251)

Staff believed that their view of behaviour as communication was in contrast to mainstream school. Participant 3 and 5 both expressed concern that pupils had been excluded from mainstream school due to behaviour but did not feel the appropriate investigation had gone into understanding the root of said behaviour:

> just because our students have behaviour issues or have been excluded doesn't mean we haven't don't have those underlying, you know, complexities there as well (P3, line 679-680)

> what happens is that they come out of school because of, say, disruptive behaviour and then we uncover actually there are other reasons (P5, line 293-295)

One of the ways in which staff felt they were able to look beyond behaviour was through the principles of trauma-informed practice. Participant 10 commented that “we’re built around recovery from behaviour” (P10, line 102) and continued on by saying:

> You’ve got to understand that they're here for a reason. They're not here because everyone's been jolly jolly. You know they’ve got adverse child experiences and whatever else (P10, lines 612-614)

Staff cited understanding how a young person’s background may impact their overall wellbeing and ability to access learning was crucial to looking beyond their behaviour and providing appropriate, sensitive support.

5.2.1.3. Collaboration

Another sub-theme which was prominent through the interviews related to collaboration, both between internal staff and multi-agency partners. Participant 9 believed

PRUs are more successful than mainstream regarding information sharing between staff members due to their small pupil population. They highlighted “there would be more information probably shared about the students background” (P9, lines 259-262) which was viewed as important as knowledge about pupils’ backgrounds and the systems in which they operate within can aid understanding of their individual needs.

Information sharing between professionals from different services (e.g. education, health, police and social care) was similarly viewed as an important part of understanding a young person holistically:

> it's very much linking up with those professionals and outside agencies to get a bigger picture in terms of, you know where they live, just to see if those hindering factors are part of that as well. And whatever information we get from the previous schools… we rely on a lot. (P3, lines 163-166)

Participant 3 continued to explain that in their PRU they have a termly multi-disciplinary hub meeting attended by all professionals working with their pupils. It involves:

> all our students up in the spreadsheet and we go through each and every single one to make sure that all the information we have is correct or if we need any updates or whether we need to raise a concern about another service. Everyone is there (P3, lines 328-333)

As well as making sure all professionals have accurate and recent information on pupils, professional collaboration can also help ensure the appropriate professionals are involved with individual pupils. Participant 6 highlighted that their PRU values multi-agency working as other professionals are able to provide specialist support and skills that teaching staff may not possess: “we try and bring in everything we can what’s available to us as well” (P6, line 227).

5.2.1.4. Accessible education

Staff described PRUs as offering bespoke provision which allows for increased flexibility within the curriculum and caters to the individual needs of all pupils. In turn, staff notice pupils re-engaging with learning and accessing meaningful education. Participant 8 described how their PRU endeavours to engage pupils in their education by including pupils' individual interests: "would try to kind-of think of the things that she's interested in and try and look at ways that we could maybe incorporate that into the timetable" (P8, line 83-85). This was echoed by Participant 9 who highlighted that PRUs offer varied, individual curriculums and learning opportunities because pupils "need something a bit more creative, something a bit wider, something to pull them in" (P9, lines 366-367).

Many participants spoke about the size of their setting feeling more comfortable for young people which meant they were able to access their education with less anxiety. Smaller class sizes with similar pupils allowed pupils to feel safe to ask for help and receive support. This idea was captured by Participant 6 who said "they come here and it's smaller groups, they're getting more help and there's lots of other students that are similar ability to them. They then kind of relax a bit more and open up a bit more and be a bit more vulnerable" (P6, lines 359-362).

Additionally, Participant 10 suggested that the smaller environment can be enough of a difference from mainstream to allow pupils to thrive:

> there might only be three kids or less in a group. So you might find that… we've got 2 girls and they haven't needed any input whatsoever. They've already said "I prefer to be here and I don't want to move on anywhere" because of what we offer (P10, lines 145-149)

5.2.2. Relationships

This main theme captured the importance of relationships between pupils and staff (see Figure 8 for the related sub themes). Good relationships were cited as key to re-engaging pupils in their education and allowing them to trust the adults supporting them.

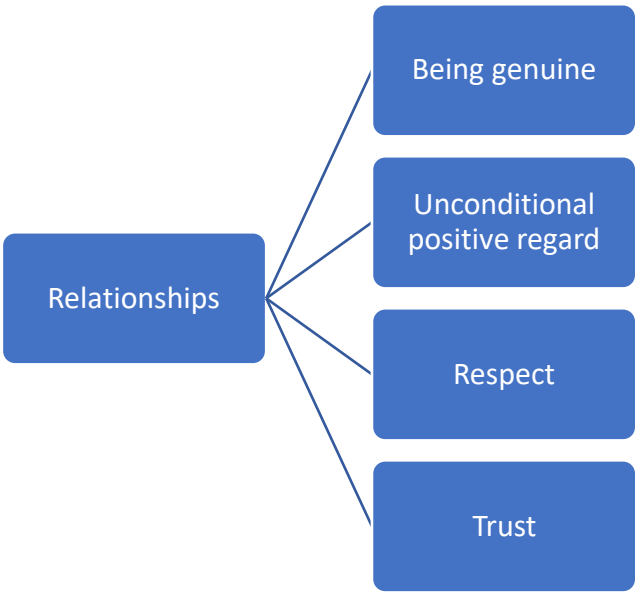

Figure 8: Thematic map of main theme 2 and related sub-themes

5.2.2.1. Being genuine

A prominent sub-theme within relationships concerned pupil perceptions of staff genuineness. Participants commented on the emphasis pupils place on staff interactions with them being sincere and how aware pupils were of perceived authenticity:

> It's all about relationships and actually being genuine because these kids have got generally a lot of life experience and they know whether you're being genuine or not (P1, lines 482-484)

> They're very astute when they're reading sort of body language and stuff like that. So if they feel like you're not being genuine, they would know within a moment (P6, lines 853-855)

> You also need to be genuine as well. I think they can see through if you're not genuine (P10, lines 653-654)

Participant 10 followed this statement with an explanation for why he believed pupils may be focussed on genuine relationships:

> Bizarrely, these kids are experts in psychology. They generally are experts in humans because they've seen the bad side of them (P10, lines 662-664)

The suggestion is that PRU pupils have been let down by others in the past and struggle to believe in the sincerity of adults as they have had negative experiences. Participant 11 said “they [pupils] won't think twice at calling you out either. No, you didn't mean that, did you? Did I not?” (lines 655-657). It was suggested that it could be a barrier to pupil engagement and the ability to form trusting relationships if pupils perceived staff to be ingenuine. The general consensus on how to avoid being perceived as insincere was to have a passion for the job and want to get to know the young people on a personal level:

> opening up and then that kind of makes them start to feel like you do care and that this is a relationship you're building and it's not one-sided (P6, line 109-111)

5.2.2.2. Unconditional positive regard

In all group interviews, unconditional positive regard and the importance of treating each day as a fresh start was discussed. There were several comments from participants about not holding anger from the previous day and allowing young people to come into school each morning free of judgement from previous actions:

> it's a fresh start and I'll meet you as you are (P2, line 278)

> no matter what you do, we are here for you and it's going to be a fresh day each day. And you know what's gone yesterday is gone and today's a new day. And to get it right. (P7, lines 425-427)

Another key factor in showing unconditional positive regard was ensuring that pupils knew staff were not going to give up on them:

> what we do is we never give up. If they're stuck here forever as in for the whole academic… if they come here and they don't ever move on….we're just here constantly. We keep pushing, but we're always going to be here. (line 388-391)

Participants highlighted that the promise of the PRU not giving up created a sense of safety and security for the pupils. This was often cited as something the pupils may have lacked in mainstream school where the threat of exclusion was high.

> They all want the same love and care and they all want to feel part of something that hasn't always been there. They want to feel safe. They want to know that someone is, you know, is looking forward to seeing them at 9:00 o'clock in the morning (P3, line 379-382)

5.2.2.3. Respect

When participants spoke about forming relationships with pupils in their settings, they frequently mentioned respect as an integral part of that process. Respect was commonly conceptualised as listening to child voice and ensuring that they felt comfortable with the decisions being made about their education:

> You have to listen to the student. That's so important to know what they feel they would like or what they want. But yeah, it's very much student-centred (P7, line 267-270)

> finding out how you are and what's going to work for you and what do you need to move forward? (P11, line 411-412)

Relationships where the pupil felt respected were viewed a gold-standard for PRU because they built deeper connections and allowed staff to understand how pupils perceive their own needs.

5.2.2.4. Trust

Throughout the group interviews, participants highlighted that the foundations of positive relationships were built on developing trust. Participants stressed that most PRU pupils had completely lost trust in adults as well as the education system as a whole. Previous negative school experiences such as the breakdown of their mainstream placement and the rejection associated with this were viewed as significant contributors to the lack of trust pupils showed when they first began attending a PRU:

> when they first come here, the biggest barrier is that not trusting teachers or staff… feeling that we can't be trusted because we're just going to let them down like everyone else has let them down or given up on them (P7, lines 423-426)

> Why should I trust adults? So they already know… they already think are you going to be here for 2 seconds, are you going to be here forever, are you gonna let me down? (P10, lines 663-666)

Participants agreed that trust takes time and trust was built through predictability, consistency and genuine connection:

> our kids take a lot of time to open up… it takes weeks. Even the couple of terms for them to actually trust you 100% (P3, lines 470-471)

> It's just time. I think they need to learn to trust you… I think that needs to be kind of proved (P5, lines 91-92)

Participant 8 gave an example of pupils in their PRU taking time to build trust with the school nurse. They described how when she first started visiting the school, pupils would not even look at her, let alone talk with her but over time, through weekly visits, the pupils became familiar with her and slowly began to trust her.

5.2.3. Response to changing cohorts

This main theme captures the numerous comments made about how PRUs are responding to the increase of female pupils attending. Girls' needs are viewed as generally different to boys' and identifying them is particularly challenging due to masking and non-attendance. However, participants spoke about strategies that work well for engaging young women including building relationships and cultivating a nurturing environment where girls feel safe opening up. See Figure 9 for the related sub themes and the prevalence of these across participants.

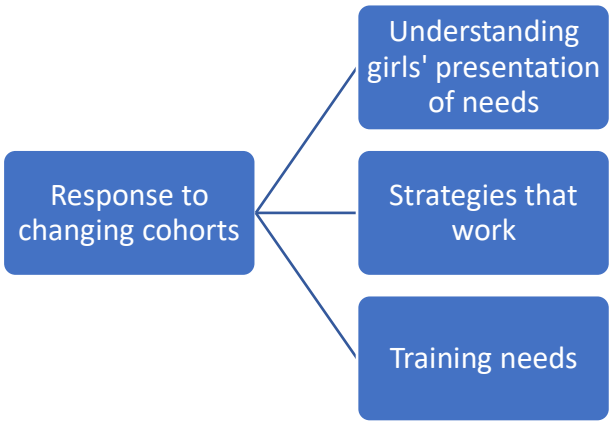

Figure 9: Thematic map of main theme 3 and related sub-themes

5.2.3.1. Understanding girls' presentation of needs

Across the interviews, participants spoke about the difference in presentation of girls' needs versus boys' and how staff were having to adapt their practice as cohorts are becoming increasing populated by girls. Several PRU staff spoke about the challenging nature of identifying girls' needs as they were perceived to be better at masking their difficulties:

> the only issue that I would say is that the girls are kind-of under the radar (P10, line 226)

> you always associate ADHD with boys whereas girls have got ADHD and autism. For some of the girls they will present a little bit differently to what you'd expect. You might not necessarily pick it up (P11, lines 682-685)

Staff felt that they had extensive knowledge about how conditions such as ADHD and autism present in boys but did not feel as confident in their knowledge about how those conditions impact girls. Participant 8 highlighted how schools are generally well-versed in identifying boys with special educational needs due to their external behaviour which in turn leads to exclusion. However, Participant 8 believes girls are much more complex and therefore identifying their needs takes longer:

> Girls can often go under the exclusion radar for quite a while. I do think there's a bit more complexity in general (P8, lines 527-528)

Drugs and alcohol were cited as a significant problem for female PRU pupils: "a lot of our girls are under the influence of both substances and alcohol" (P3, line 97). Participant 5 highlighted that "they [girls] all talk about self-medicating actually" (P5, line 462) and explained that drugs were used as a coping mechanism for poor mental health which was also noted as a key area for concern regarding female pupils. Quotes from Participant 6 and 11 represent worries about mental health shared by all groups:

> that's one of the main things that I've seen with a lot of our girls is mental health and their anxiety (P6, lines 920-921)

> I think girls are more susceptible to poor mental health (P11, line 166)

Girls' mental health presentations were commonly exemplified by eating disorders and self-harm. Eating disorders were perceived as a barrier for girls accessing their education as without sufficient fuel, they were less able to concentrate in lessons and engage with the work: "a lot of them are sort of starve themselves whatever reason… girls won't eat in front of anyone, try not to eat or drink" (P5, lines 686-690).

Additionally, Participant 9 described how girls were less likely to attend due to high levels of anxiety which meant supporting them to achieve grades and find post-16 opportunities was extremely challenging: “a lot of the girls, they’ve not been successful. We haven’t seen them, they’ve just not engaged at all” (P9, line 507-509).

5.2.3.2. Strategies that work

The most frequently mentioned strategy that worked for engaging girls in PRU life and creating a school environment that girls felt motivated to attend was providing girls’ only spaces and having opportunities for girls to spend time without the presence of their male peers:

> I've run a girls only tutor group so that there was sort of opportunities to talk (P5, line 657)

> we've also got the girls only due tutor group which is led by a female member of staff, and they do lots of kind of like girl power stuff (P9, 144-146)

This was viewed as particularly important for discussing sensitive topics such as puberty, domestic violence and emotions. In addition, two groups mentioned having female only PE lessons which allowed girls to feel more comfortable and able to participate.

Another strategy which appeared to be a facilitator for engaging girls was nurturing relationships where girls feel cared for and understood. Participant 7 gave an example of keeping open communication with girls struggling with attendance to ensure they still felt important and missed:

> I have quite often gone around the house, done doorstep visits, you know, pick them up to come in, or you know, chats them on the phone. Just touching base, we're missing you (P7, lines 632-636)

Participant 4 also highlighted nurturing relationships not only included holding girls in mind but involved remembering that excluded pupils are still children and are a product of their environment. This was viewed as important to Participant 4 because they believed it helped staff to connect with 'challenging' pupils:

> it doesn't take me very long to turn a 16-year-old gobby girl into, you know, like the sobbing, frightened 6-year-old that she is inside… that has helped me over the years to understand the wickedness of what's been done to some young girls over time cause I think actually, you know, you were just a little girl. You were just a child. (P4, line 879-885)

5.2.3.3. Training needs

Training was described as extremely valuable for continuing professional development. Participant 3 suggested "Every little thing is valuable in terms of training" (P3, line 693) while Participant 1 echoed this by saying "I've had some really valuable training, some really good training from EP's, actually in the county" (P1, line 677-678)

However, it was apparent that there was significant variety in the training received by PRU staff and it was felt that it could be beneficial for all staff (from teaching assistants to senior leadership) to receive more 'specialist' training as the needs of young people continue to increase and change. Participant 1 said staff had basic training and often learned lots from observing colleagues but "actually we need a whole another layer on and there isn't any specialist training like that" (P1, line 418).

In light of the increase of female pupils, Participant 6 felt that training on "recognising autism in girls because obviously it's very, very different. It manifests itself differently… I feel like a little bit more of that would be good just to kind of refresh how they present" (P6, lines 798-801). Additionally, Participant 10 and 11 spoke about training on self-harm and suicide were particularly important when supporting girls:

P11: I've just done some mental health first aid training and there's the STORM training… I value both of those, they are very helpful.

P10: The STORM training is around suicide.

P11: That's been crucial because we've had so many more girls (lines 531-538)

5.2.4. Falling short

This main theme captures the challenges described by participants in regarding to accessing and providing support (see Figure 10 for the related sub themes). Participants felt they were sometimes falling short as they struggled to with issues relating to capacity and funding. External agencies were described as lacking capacity and difficult to meet threshold for involvement which in turn put pressure on PRUs to upskill staff to meet the needs of their cohorts. The work was described as very demanding and increasing difficult with limited capacity.

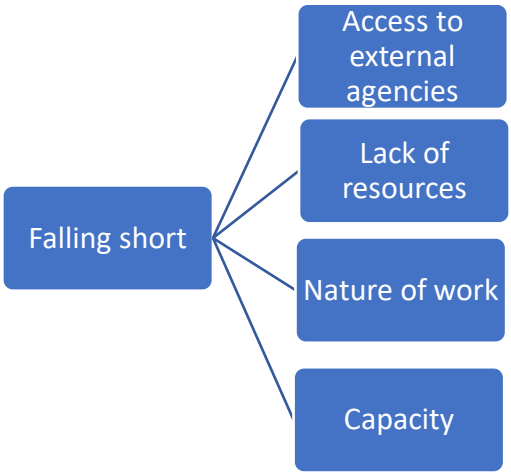

Figure 10: Thematic map of main theme 4 and related sub-themes.

5.2.4.1. Access to external agencies

Staff mentioned the challenges associated with accessing support from external agencies such as mental health teams, social care, and youth workers. The long waiting lists for Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service was mentioned by Participant 8 as worrying because they were having to providing support to pupils who they felt needed more specialist support by appropriately trained professionals:

> I think one of the biggest barriers is that our students cannot access services. So we have students who desperately need access to CAMHS, CBT… we offer some here but they need specialists and you've got to wait 18 months. (P8, line 326)

Participant 10 echoed these worries about trying to support pupils with particularly high levels of need:

> if you think CAMHS has an 18 month, waiting list for youth workers is six months, family support is six months. Unless you're really hitting the top of the threshold of need, that kind of support goes under the radar. With all the will in the world, we can only do so much. It feels pointless if you can't guarantee that you can get the support. (P10, line 563-567)

There was consensus among staff that external agencies were struggling with capacity and funding like many public sectors: “I work quite closely with CAMHS with the mental health unit and there are times where they're not very good… as with all services in terms of capacity and funding” (P3, lines 309-312). Participant 3 suggested that more money and resources would need to be funnelled into services such as CAMHS and social care to allow them to support the growing numbers of people in need.

5.2.4.2. Lack of resources

Access to resources was frequently brought up as a barrier to providing support for pupils. Lack of resources such as transport limited the capacity to take pupils outside of the setting and allow them experiential learning opportunities within the community. For example, Participant 5 said “we used to do a lot more, like we had a girl went horse riding

every week" (P5, line 618). This was viewed as effective for both widening the horizons of pupils, engaging them through capturing their interest and could help to de-escalate behaviour:

> they say everything is like dead or boring. They're just wandering around school and you sort of think, well, isn't that dead and boring? And it's kind of like breaking that cycle is, you know… the governments have got put in a lot of funding (P5, lines 605-608)

> I think there's times when it would be really helpful to say… we're getting the bus and we're going out… go out in the world and experience things. I think as money gets tighter, we're going to potentially struggle to do what we would like to do (P2, lines 573-577)

Lack of funding was the primary reason that staff felt they could not provide the support and resources that they thought would be successful for disengaged and disenfranchised pupils within their PRUs. There was agreement that funding had become tighter in recent years and PRUs were feeling stretched in light of this.

Another resource which was mentioned by several participants was the school building itself. Participant 9 explained that their PRU was situated in an industrial park, next to a council estate. They believed it was not fit for purpose as it was not in good condition and did not provide aspiration for the pupils attending:

> It's like where do you put the most vulnerable, unloved people? Stick him in a shack (P9, line 366)

Participant 4 similarly commented that it was difficult to cater to the individual needs of all PRU pupils within one building and not enough space to separate pupils if they are having disagreements with one another, which they suggested was common: "this one needs this and this one needs this. And this one needs this. No, no, no. We've got one place… I've only got 1 building" (P4, lines 450-452). This was echoed by Participant 10 who

said “we're not a big space. And I think, you know, they're all on top of each other because it is a small base as well” (P10, line 491) and implied a larger space would be desirable.

In addition to the building, there were comments about the lack of resource available within classrooms, namely support staff. Participant 5 highlighted that a lack of funding meant less staff could be hired and current staff had to be spread thinly which could have negative effects on the pupils:

> if a lot of the students need a scribe and you can only scribe for one because you haven’t got an LSA in your room, then again lots of them will down tools (P5, lines 382-384)

However, other participants did not share this view and felt their PRUs were lucky to have higher numbers of staff than mainstreams.

5.2.4.3. Nature of work

The demanding nature of working in a Pupil Referral Unit was commonly cited as one of the major challenges staff face. Staff spoke about the difficulties in switching off from work and leaving their worries behind when going home. Clear boundaries between work life and personal life were viewed as important for maintaining staff wellbeing:

> at the end of the day, you have to pack it all up, leave it all here and go home (P4, line 544)

> The challenge I think is shutting off. Leaving at the door which, you know, we will say we do it, but none of us do it… We know we can never leave our work at the door at 4 o'clock. It's just one of those things. Yeah. And you do worry about them all the time (P3, lines 1202-1206)

Participant 4 highlighted that working in a PRU isn’t for everybody as staff must be able to move on quickly and “grit our teeth and get on with it” (P4, line 385) in light of

challenging behaviour, sometimes aimed towards staff. Similarly, Participant 10 suggested that resilience was a key skill as "you do get that kind of extreme behaviour" (P10, line 595) which could feel personal at times. Participant 6 emphasised the importance of having "the ability to not take everything to heart" (P6, line 289).

However, staff implied that the compensation of such challenging work was that it was also extremely rewarding. This was particularly salient when previous pupils return and describe how well they are doing following their PRU attendance:

> they still want to come and speak to you, and they're still thankful for everything you did for them… that is everything because you've made such an impact on their life (P3, line 1190)

5.2.4.4. Capacity

Throughout the group interviews, staff spoke their limited capacity and struggling to deliver the support they would like to due to being "spread too thinly" (P11, line 588). Participant 4 captured this idea by saying "I think that one of the biggest challenges is capacity… having enough to give for, you know, for everybody" (P4, lines 1160-1162).

One potential explanation for why staff felt they sometimes lacked the capacity to support girls in their setting was due to the demanding nature of boys' needs, especially de-escalating physical behaviour:

> we're meeting their emotional needs, sometimes they miss out because the boys are so heavy and difficult to deal with. A lot of our attention is taken up by that, which then has a negative effect on really what the girls could possibly have (P7, lines 961-965)

Participant 7 continued by questioning whether staff were able to push the girls to their potential as staff time was primarily filled with firefighting external behaviour. Similarly, Participant 10 highlighted that despite the best efforts to provide individual

support for each pupil, this was difficult to guarantee due to the unpredictable nature of pupil behaviour:

> because the nature of Pupil Referral Unit, your time isn't guaranteed to say I'm gonna spend 45 minutes with you to do this when there might be, you know someone having a bit of an argy-bargy outside or something (P10, lines 547-550)

Suggestions for overcoming this barrier included more government funding to allow extra recruitment for pastoral staff in Pupil Referral Units. It was implied that more pastoral staff would ensure teaching staff's time and capacity was reserved for lessons and supporting pupils to achieve academically.

5.2.5. Influence of wider systems

This main theme captures the ways in which staff perceived the impact of the many systems in which young people are within on girls' engagement in education (see Figure 11 for the related sub themes). Family, peers, community and previous school experiences could all act as either a facilitator or barrier to motivating girls to attend school and doing well, both emotionally and academically.

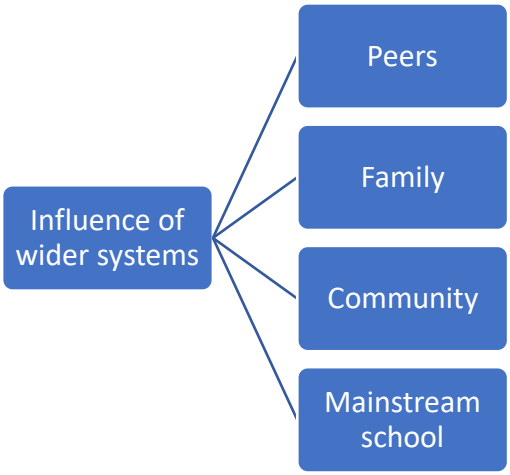

Figure 11: Thematic map of main theme 5 and related sub-themes

5.2.5.1. Peers

There was agreement amongst participants that friendships could be a source of conflict within PRUs and this was particularly salient for the girls. Participant 10 suggested that the girls in their PRU often formed into groups. These groups were viewed as supportive for their members but aggressive and challenging to those in other groups:

> it depends which group you fall into. Sometimes they're friends sometimes they're not. We've got one group of girls that are formed together against another group of girls. So you know, and then it gets all catty and awful and nasty calling each other dogs (P10, lines 466-469)

Participant 11 and Participant 1 similarly suggested that friendship groups could be a negative influence on individual pupils and conflicts between pupils could be fuelled by group mentality:

> In school, you'll have some really supportive sessions with them. One to one, they'll come around them. But then back with their group and it's all firing up, starting again (P11, lines 486-488)

> sometimes it's their friends and the culture that they have with their friends (P1, line 436)

A potential explanation for why pupils felt so influenced by friends came from Participant 6. They said "it's very difficult when they're hanging around in groups of people whereby they're all doing it, and if they were to take themselves away from that, they'd be removing themselves from their friendship groups" (P6, lines 479-483). The implication is that pupils will do anything to feel socially included and accepted by the group as they crave friendships.

On the contrary, a conversation between Participant 5, 6 and 7 suggested that some pupils stay away from friendship groups because they don't want to be included in group mentality or the conflicts that may arise from it:

> P5: They don't know how to be friends. That's one of the big problems.
>
> P6: Maintaining those friendships is difficult. They find that quite difficult, yeah.
>
> P7: And if they've been hurt before with friendship groups, that's where their anxiety comes in and they just want to be left alone to get on with their day. Not get involved with drama or anything like that. (P5, 6 and 7, lines 995-1002)

Social media was criticised as a negative influence on pupils' behaviour and barrier to pupils' emotional wellbeing as they place significance emphasis on their online profiles and status. There were several comments about how disagreements and conflicts were fuelled by continuing dialogue on social media which was difficult for staff to control:

> I'd say social media is having a huge impact… they're obsessed with their story, their Snapchat, all the different things. It's constant (P5, lines 1105-1106)
>
> it's not helped by social media (P8, line 596)
>
> social media… being added to groups and the keyboard warriors within that… that causes the issues (P10, lines 483-484)

5.2.5.2. Family

Parents were a prominent theme discussed in all of the group interviews. It was suggested that their view of education could be pivotal in motivating their children to attend school and see the value in gaining qualifications. Participant 3 described how some parents may have had their own negative school experiences which have coloured their view of education as a whole and these attitudes can be passed down to their children:

> depending on you know the parents' schooling and experiences of education that has a massive impact on as well. So if it was always negative and they didn't attend then that child's going to feel like my parents didn't do it and they've done alright so you know I don't need to be school (P3, lines 364-367)

Participant 5 echoed these views by saying that it can be difficult parents in their child's education when "they don't see school as important" (line 394). Similarly, Participant 6 said that sometimes "you're battling with family to try and get them onside" (line 389). They suggested it was a key priority for PRU staff to connect with families and build relationships to prove that alternative provision is very different to mainstream.

Furthermore, there were comments about how some parents may view Pupil Referral Units as a punishment and feel that it is not the appropriate setting for their child which further aggravates them:

> there's that other layer of the parents view of the PRU as well because that all impacts on that transition (P1, line 246)

> parents have gone "oh, you're in that terrible building on the industrial estate with all of those naughty excluded children". And then they say you don't need to go and mix with those kids so then they don't come and they don't get anything (P9, lines 512-516)

It was noted that some parents may have disengaged from their child's education because they "often feel not listened to" (P5, line 406). Additionally, Participant 8 and 10 both referred to parents wanting their children to do well but being stuck in a cycle where they don't know how to support their children to do better:

> Some parents desperately want their children to do better than what they did. But you know they are in a cycle (P8, lines 477-478)

> parents that need [training] too. Because how else are we going to stop this this cycle? Education is the only thing that will change behaviour and attitudes (P10, lines 322-323)

Participant 11 highlighted that their PRU was working on supporting parents with their own employment and aspirations. The aim of this work is to grow positive role models for pupils and break generational cycles of low education and employment opportunities:

> we support our parents and carers in terms of their own employment opportunities… to look again at perhaps the world of work… that's a huge part of trying to change ideologies. And really changing thinking and behavioural methods that have been used for 2-3 generations potentially (P11, lines 270-274)

5.2.5.3. Community

A potential barrier for pupil engagement was identified as the impact of the local communities. Not all communities were seen to value education or provide aspiration to the young people that lived there. Participant 3 and 10 both implied that anti-social behaviour and youth offending were common in the community:

> A lot of it is external factors that they're explicitly involved with in while in school time and not in school times. They bring it with them (P3, lines 161-163)

> what we're seeing is these girls are now also becoming part of that culture of youth offending, you know, out and about in towns without in social behaviour (P10, lines 224-226)

Close links within the community and gathering information about what is happening in the areas pupils live in were viewed as important for staff. Contextual and background information about the community helped deepen understanding of the issues pupils were facing:

> we've got a very strong student and family liaison officer who is out doing a lot of building up the links with the community (P8, lines 408-409)

> it's very much linking up with those professionals and outside agencies to get a bigger picture in terms of, you know where they live, just to see if those are hindering factors (P3, lines 163-165)

5.2.5.4. Mainstream school

The legacy from mainstream school experiences was frequently mentioned as a barrier for pupils, particularly when they first began attending a PRU. Young people often felt rejected by education and struggled to regain trust in teachers and support staff, unable to believe that they genuinely want to help. Pupils had lost confidence in themselves and felt hesitant to try anything new or challenging:

> Yeah, I've been kicked out of a mainstream school. I can't, you know I can't be good. I can't tow the line. I'm not gonna be able to make it work (P11, lines 353-355)

Several participants spoke about how this barrier could be overcome if young people have more say in their transition to a PRU and understood the reasons behind the decision. Participant 1 described how "often actually the students don't even… aren't even really aware as to why they got kicked out of mainstream. They often don't understand" (P5, lines 302-304) and therefore feel confused and hurt by their exclusion. If they understood the decision, pupils may be more likely to accept their new school.

Additionally, Participant 1 and 3 both noted that mainstream schools have a significant role to play in the changing view of what PRUs are and what they can offer. Participant 1 suggests that mainstream schools should start with "not being so negative about going to a PRU" (P3, line 630). This sentiment was reflected in the following comment made by Participant 1 who suggested PRU attendance is used as a threat to deter poor behaviour: "if you don't behave, you gonna have to go to the PRU and if you don't want to go there and... And actually that's not very helpful, is it?" (P1, lines 253-254)

Participant 1 suggested that mainstreams should adopt the mentality that PRUs are "doing school differently" (P4, line 656) and view them as a continuum of educational provision, not a separate entity. Furthermore, Participant 4 said "all you can do is say the PRU's not the punishment, the PRU is what's next" (P4, lines 256-257).

5.3. Discussion

In this section, key findings will be presented for each research question followed by a critical discussion of those findings and reference to the existing literature.

5.3.1. RQ1 - What do school staff think are the facilitators of and barriers to supporting the individual needs of girls attending PRUs?

Key findings:

- Facilitators:
    - Relationships were universally cited as the most important factor in earning the trust of female pupils and supporting them to reach their potential
    - Being genuine and sincere was considered key in developing relationships
    - Another facilitator of meeting girls' needs involved providing girls with female only spaces and allowing girls time to connect without the presence of male peers
- Barriers:
    - Broken trust from previous negative experiences at mainstream school was one explanation for why female pupils felt disengaged from education and reluctant to attend or participate
    - Poor aspirations from the communities that girls lived in were seen as a barrier to motivating them to achieve academically and see the value in gaining qualifications
    - Parents who placed little value on education, often stemming from their own negative experiences of school, were viewed as further barriers
    - Staff expressed concern over multiple barriers they faced when trying to support girls including lack of capacity to deliver interventions; lack of resources to provide experiential and bespoke learning opportunities; difficulties in accessing support from external agencies thus having to provide support that felt more specialist than they were trained for; and meeting the demands of challenging, emotionally draining work

5.3.1.1. Facilitators

Without question relationships were highlighted by staff as the most important factor in engaging girls in their education. As relationships were significant themes in both phases of this research, their importance and link to psychological theory will be discussed in greater detail in the overall discussion (section 6.1).

Participants highlighted providing female only spaces as another facilitator in supporting the social needs of girls in PRUs. They highlighted that these spaces allowed girls to talk about their feelings in an open forum and discuss issues facing women in society (e.g. sexism and violence against women). This is in line with research by Nind et al. (2012) who found that communities formed in alternative provision can allow girls to present a different part of themselves and form a collective identity which in turn can lead to feelings of belonging. Staff in the current study reflected that female PRU pupils were often perceived as vulnerable, especially in relation to sexual exploitation, therefore developing these skills was important for preparing female pupils for adulthood and challenges they may face in further education or employment. Previous research by (Bragg et al., 2018) exploring how young people conceptualise gender and the impact on their school experiences found that one of the schools attended by their participants had established a weekly lunchtime feminist group which "raised awareness of feminist issues, opened up space for debating a position in relation to gender equality and equity, and offered language to express what it means to live in and negotiate a gendered world" (p. 403). Their participants highlighted how attendance at that group had encouraged them to challenge sexism they faced both in and out of school. Participants in the current study argued that girls only spaces led to increased feelings of safety.

5.3.1.2. Barriers

A topic which was frequently discussed as a barrier when trying to meet girls' needs and support them to access their education related to girls' previous school experiences. Staff described how pupils had frequently been 'threatened' with being sent to a Pupil Referral Unit and therefore viewed this as a punishment rather than a fresh start or alternative way

of accessing education. Indeed, staff in the current research suggested that mainstream schools have a key role to play in changing the narrative surrounding PRUs and should work towards viewing PRUs as a continuum of education which can enrichen the educational experiences of disengaged pupils. PRUs have become known as 'dumping grounds' for disruptive pupils and claims are made that high performing schools too quickly exclude pupils who may undermine their status in the rankings (Cassidy, 2012; Menzies & Baars, 2015). It is unsurprising that pupils feel reluctant to engage when PRUs have such negative reputations. The Department for Education (2022) has endeavoured to shift the focus of alternative provision from a 'last resort' towards early intervention and encourage the role of alternative provision providers to be a viewed as getting "young people get back on track quickly and have the skills to reach their full potential" (p. 61).

In addition to mainstream schools working towards changing attitudes towards PRUs, participants in the current study also felt work which needed to be done to support parents in seeing the value of their child attending a PRU. Michael and Frederickson (2013) who found that family relationships were cited as important by the PRU pupils they interviewed, primarily regarding parental encouragement to attend education. The influence of parents on pupil engagement can be understood through family systems theory (Kerr & Bowen, 1988) which posits that beliefs, values and expectations held by the family as a unit have an influence on individuals over time. If PRU pupils' parents do not value education, it may be that these views are transmitted to their child and subsequently impact the thoughts, feelings and behaviours of their child regarding education. Moreover, the influence of wider systems such as extended family members can be positive for pupil engagement in education. For example, when children were asked what helped them to 'succeed against the odds', many referred to help from extended members of their families, friends and informal mentors (Newman, 2004). Participants in the current study suggested that working alongside parents, including them in decisions about their child and supporting them with their own employment and mental health, can be pivotal for breaking down barriers. This is in line with findings from Page (2021) who examined parental engagement with an alternative provision setting and found that parental support and engagement needed to focus on six areas: behavioural, emotional, safeguarding, functional, pedagogic and capacity building. He found that support offered to parents included phone calls and involvement in

family learning days helped reduce feelings of isolation and loneliness for families “who often feel as excluded as their child” (p.65).

Furthermore, the influence of the communities in which pupils live was also cited as a potential barrier to meeting pupil needs and motivating them to attend school. Participants suggested that activities within the community including substance abuse and youth offending could be barriers to supporting pupils to reach their full potential as the emotional toll from involvement in anti-social behaviour resulted in lack of focus and difficulty engaging in schoolwork. Similarly, in doctoral research by Hunter (2015), four PRU pupils described experiences and perceptions of their local area as full of unsafe behaviours, economic impoverishment, and depleted social resources. Carey and Martin (2007) argue that interventions which focus on developing a positive academic self and encouraging pupils to view themselves as competent, able learners are more likely to promote school motivation and increase school performance. They suggest staff need to support pupils to change perceptions of their academic self and ‘hope for’ self. The authors suggest this is particularly important for pupils who lack role models within their community. Smith (2019) outlines recommendations for policy in their ethnographic study of a Welsh PRU and suggest that it would be beneficial to have PRUs situated near to, adjacent or within mainstream school sites as being part of a local community would help PRUs in developing social networks as well as improve communication, training, access to resources, and the curriculum more generally. In turn, this may lessen the chances of PRU pupils becoming further marginalised and feeling disengagement not only with education but also wider society.

Staff described several other barriers they faced when trying to meet the needs of girls including lack of resources to provide support, difficulty accessing external agencies and lack of staff capacity to deliver interventions. The Department for Education (2022) in their SEND Review found that during Covid-19 there was an increase in delays and significant challenge in accessing support which resulted in an escalation of children’s needs. Data from the Mental Health Services Data Set (MHSDS) showed that between April 2019 and June 2021, only 16% of under 18-year-olds received a first appointment following an autism referral within the 13-week deadline recommended by NICE, while 17% of under 18- year-olds

waited over half a year for an appointment following referral (DfE, 2022). Lack of capacity, access to resources and access to external agencies can all be understood through a lack of appropriate funding. Funding for alternative provision providers is unpredictable because it is based on number of places used which fluctuates annually (DfE, 2022) which "makes it hard for alternative provision schools to invest in improving quality, recruit a skilled and stable workforce, or develop a consistent outreach service" (p. 58). The training, resources and skills staff felt would be beneficial to meeting the individual needs of girls will be described in further detail when answering research question 3 (see section 5.3.3.)

5.3.2. RQ2 - How do school staff make decisions about the support they provide for girls attending Pupil Referral Units?

Key findings:

- PRU staff agreed that the increase of females within the PRU pupil population required them to evaluate the effectiveness of support in place
- This process of evaluation (both on an individual and group level) was commonly facilitated through supervision
- Staff viewed collaboration with external agencies who were able to provide advice and guidance from different perspectives (e.g. health and social care) as extremely valuable when making decisions about provision
- All support was rooted in the philosophy that 'behaviour is communication' and PRU staff highlighted that developing relationships with pupils was the most important first step when designing and implementing support strategies
- Actively listening to girls' views and using them to inform person-centred decisions about support and provision was noted as imperative

Supervision and the reflective conversations that take place within supervision were highlighted by participants as valuable for evaluating the effectiveness of current support in place for pupils and deciding new ways of moving forward if things were not going well. Some participants mentioned the usefulness of having an educational psychologist facilitate group supervision to ensure all staff voices are heard. Gibbs and Miller (2014) reviewed

research indicating consultation between school psychologists and individual teachers provided opportunity to build teacher confidence and resilience, leading to more effective teaching. Dialogue regarding disruptive behaviour enabled teachers to reframe thinking, regaining a "sense of professional purpose, resilience and belief" (Gibbs & Miller, 2014, p. 615). In addition, Moore (2018) highlighted the impact of staff stress on the system. Work discussion groups were set up in response to the service manager feeling overwhelmed by teacher concerns. The service manager reported a significant reduction on the levels of staff stress which highlights the impact a containing and reflective space had on the wellbeing of the wider staff team, and the importance of 'holding' the system. A working discussion group, which is similar to supervision wherein reflective models are used, can be "a point of stability in the chaos" (p.106) and provide staff with an opportunity to offload frustrations, gain support, and improve practice through reflection (Moore, 2018).

As the importance of relationships and child voice were important themes in both phases of the research, they will be discussed in Chapter 6 (the overall discussion).

5.3.3. RQ3 - What training, skills and resources do school staff feel they need to meet the needs of girls attending Pupil Referral Units?

Key findings:

- Training
    - Several staff highlighted that they desired more training on trauma-informed practice and attachment needs. This was deemed helpful for supporting all pupils, regardless of gender
    - Staff were keen to understand more about the typical presentation of girls with needs such as Autism Spectrum Condition (ASC) and Attention Deficit Hyperactive Disorder (ADHD) to ensure the school environment felt inclusive and understanding for all
- Skills
    - All groups spoke about the importance of being able to leave work at the end of the day and not let worries take over

    - The ability to show pupils unconditional positive regard was viewed as the key skill for staff members
- Resources
    - Staff felt that they could meet the needs of girls more effectively if there was better and quicker access to external support such as CAMHS
    - More funding to allow PRUs to recruit extra pastoral staff as well as provide experiential learning opportunities was viewed as key to meeting the social, emotional and mental health needs of pupils
    - Appropriate buildings with enough space to accommodate for increasing PRU pupil populations was also desired

5.3.3.1. Training

Participants spoke extensively about the value of training. They suggested that training which focussed on providing staff with a greater understanding of the impact of childhood trauma and how to support pupils with attachment needs was most desired. It should be noted that staff did not feel this training was specifically needed to support the needs of female pupils but instead would be helpful for all pupils, regardless of gender. Greenhalgh et al. (2020) measured staff self-reported knowledge, confidence and worries following attachment- and trauma-informed work training delivered by an Educational Psychology Service to four PRUs and found that there was increase in staffs' self-reported knowledge and confidence and a decrease in self-reported worries about working with trauma from pre- to post-training. This highlights that there is a key role for educational psychologists to provide such training to upskill staff in understanding both the cognitive and emotional impact of trauma. In turn, it is proposed that staff can feel empowered and able to successfully meet the needs of pupils who may have had a difficult start in life (Greenhalgh et al., 2020).

Furthermore, participants expressed an interest in receiving more training about how conditions such as ASC and ADHD present in girls. Autism was the most frequently referenced condition with a member from each focus group highlighting a desire to understand more. Participants noted that the traits exhibited by girls with autism could be

very different from those commonly associated with autistic boys which made it harder to identify girls' needs and subsequently put the right support in place. Girls were perceived to be better at masking their autism and were often misunderstood as purely mental health needs, particularly anxiety. Indeed, there is extensive previous literature which echoes my participants' perceived lack of knowledge concerning girls with autism. Research has found that teachers report considerably fewer concerns with girls' behaviour compared to their male peers (Hiller et al., 2014; Mandy et al., 2012), and that staff believe that external behavioural difficulties are the key indicator for ASC and without outward behaviour, ASC is unlikely to be the correct diagnosis (Jarman & Rayner, 2015). It has also been found that boys with ASC are more likely to display externalising types of behaviour compared to their female peers (Hiller et al., 2014). The lack of external behaviour seen by autistic girls could be explained by their aptitude to mask their difficulties in order to fit in and be socially accepted (Sutherland et al., 2017). A consequence of the more hidden nature of girls' autism is that school staff may be more likely to notice, and report concerns around autistic traits in boys because they recognise the significance of boys' externalising behaviours (Dworzynski et al., 2012; Mandy et al., 2012). Critchley (2019) suggested that the lack of school training on special educational needs generally and in particular ASC means that "expecting teachers to know what to do to support autistic girls … is unrealistic" (p. 168). It is important to note that participants within the current study did suggest that they had greater understanding of autistic traits than mainstream staff but felt strongly that all teaching staff, both in mainstream and alternative provision, should receive more in-depth training on the different presentations of special educational needs.

5.3.3.2. Skills

There were many skills and qualities that participants perceived as important when working in the demanding and challenging environment of a PRU, however, a skill which particularly stood out was the ability to provide unconditional positive regard. Unconditional positive regard is a counselling and therapeutic model by Rogers (1951) which highlights the importance of a therapist accepting both the good and the bad features of their client's character as well as their experience in effecting positive change in person-centred therapy. In the context of education, the teacher takes the role of therapist and

needs to accept all parts of the pupil to effect positive behaviour change. By showing unconditional positive regard, a pupil's behaviour is seen as separate to their value, which allows the pupil to feel safe that the relationship will not end, or the adult will not start to show them disrespect or reject them if they make any mistakes (Landreth, 1993). Unconditional positive regard communicates to a pupil that they are inherently worthy of love and respect. It involves constructive feedback and affirmations, reassurance of worth, approval, praise, and appreciation not based on one's performance and behaviour but based on one's existence (Makri-Botsari, 2015). In turn, pupils who benefit from unconditional positive regard may have higher perceived academic self-belief, motivation, and academic achievement (Makri-Botsari, 2015). Participants in the current study frequently mentioned that the importance of being able to treat each day as a fresh start was not only beneficial for the pupils but for their own wellbeing too. Fredrickson and Joiner (2002) suggested that there is an 'upward spiral' whereby directing kindness and compassion towards others through unconditional positive regard strengthens an individual's capacity to be self-compassionate and gain a deeper sense of fulfilment from relationships.

5.3.3.3. Resources

As previously mentioned in the discussion of barriers staff face when supporting girls' needs (see section 5.3.1.2.), lack of resources and funding were perceived as major challenges for effective practice. Staff felt that they were battling a system which prioritised grades and academic achievement over emotional wellbeing and highlighted that the pupils attending PRUs were unable to engage fully in learning until their emotional needs were met and they had rebuilt trust with the education system. Some suggestions of resources which would help support staff to increase emotional wellbeing included extra pastoral staff and opportunities to take pupils out of the school setting to broaden their experiences of the world. Children from disadvantaged backgrounds are less likely to participate in activities such as after-school clubs, arts and cultural events, volunteering and community-based projects (Southby & South, 2016). Although school may be free, parents with low socio-economic status may still find it difficult to afford sports activities or after-school clubs

(Farthing, 2014) which can reduces their child's opportunity for enrichment activities (Holloway et al., 2014). Participation in activities and experiences outside of school is viewed as extremely beneficial by teachers, parents and CYP, especially in relation to gaining new experiences, increasing confidence and increasing socialisation (Chanfreau et al., 2016). Therefore, providing more varied extra-curricular opportunities should be prioritised for meeting the social, emotional and mental health needs of PRU pupils who are more likely to come from disadvantaged backgrounds than their mainstream peers.

An unexpected resource which was mentioned by several participants was the school building itself. Participants suggested that Pupil Referral Units were often situated within small buildings that were struggling to cater for increasing numbers of pupils and did not provide enough space to separate pupils when necessary. Indeed, the House of Commons Education Committee (2018) argued that due to increases in exclusions, alternative provision settings are becoming over-subscribed and this puts pressure on these settings to provide quality support. Evidence provided by Essex County Council for the committee's review into alternative provision highlighted that recent Ofsted inspections of Essex PRUs expressed concern over the lack of space they had and how this could have a negative impact on pupils' attendance and safety. Additionally, participants highlighted that Pupil Referral Units are often located in undesirable areas such as industrial estates which could be seen as working against the caring and aspirational environments that PRUs strive to be. Locating PRUs in such areas which are often on the outskirts of communities or far from other schools runs the risk of stigmatising or othering the pupils.

5.4. Summary of discussion

The PRU staff I interviewed provided thoughtful and reflective comments about the ways in which they make decisions about appropriate provision for their female pupils and described in detail the challenges they face, on individual as well as systemic levels. Participants described the difficulties in supporting pupils who may be disengaged from education and lacking aspiration or encouragement from the wider systems in which they lie but provided interesting suggestions for ways to re-engage them. PRU staffs' non-

judgemental approach and focus on building positive relationships were some of the perceived successful methods of meeting the needs of their female cohorts.

Chapter 6 – Overall Discussion

In this chapter, I will discuss themes shared by participants in both phases of the research and relate these to psychological literature.

6.1. Relationships

Relationships and the importance of relational practice was the most significant similarity within the narratives told by both participant groups. Both sets of participants highlighted the power of relationships in re-engaging pupils in their education after negative educational experiences in mainstream school including feeling rejected and losing trust in key adults. Michael and Frederickson (2013) highlighted the importance of the emotional support of PRU staff in reducing emotional and behavioural difficulties from the perspective of young people. Positive teacher-pupil relationships were identified by Hart (2013) as important factors in fostering positive social and academic outcomes. Positive relationships with members of staff largely contributed to a more positive schooling experience for many pupils (Nind et al., 2012; Michael & Frederickson, 2013; Jalali & Morgan, 2018). Additionally, Putwain et al. (2016) found that although students may complain about work as boring or too hard but being listened to and having space to articulate difficulties can lead to engagement. There are several explanations for why positive school relationships foster positive outcomes from pupils. One such explanation would be that when pupils feel understood, listened to and receive appropriate support, they feel safe and secure. Attachment theory (Bowlby, 1988) emphasised the importance of secure and trusting relationships with primary caregivers who provide emotional containment and foster feelings of safety in CYP. It has been suggested that effective teachers play a role akin to that of good parents in terms of providing consistent, positive expectations and a disposition towards nurture (Wentzel, 2002). Thus, stable, caring and positive relationships with key members of school staff can provide safety and security within the learning environment (Frederickson & Cline, 2002). Additionally, Popliger et al. (2009) found that even having a feeling of perceived support from teachers has been found to be a protective mechanism for children in times of hardship and that this influences positive adjustment in children with social, emotional and mental health needs.

Moreover, as mentioned by both sets of participants, one of the ways in which relationships could cause tension was through a lack of understanding of girls' presentation of social, emotional and mental health needs. The misunderstandings mentioned by the former pupils demonstrate what Milton (2012) described as the 'double-empathy problem'; the mutual misunderstanding that occurs when two members of different groups try to communicate (in this context, pupils vs teachers). As their presentation of needs was often different to the typically male presentation, staff did not always appear to respond appropriately to them (i.e. in the way the former pupils wanted to be supported). This led to feelings of mis-attunement, lack of validation and being misunderstood. Feeling understood is an important part of creating a sense of safety within both relationships and the educational environment (Craggs & Kelly, 2018). If we feel understood, then we feel more able to be ourselves and act in ways that feel congruent to our sense of self. In attachment theory, the perceived availability and responsiveness of key attachment figures is central to developing attuned relationships where one feels understood in emotionally significant ways (Bowlby, 1988).

Strong relationships between PRU staff and pupils were emphasised as a distinct contrast to pupils' interactions in mainstream. Participants suggested that for some pupils, the respect and care they felt from PRU staff was the first time in their education. This is in line with previous research by Hart (2013) who interviewed six children and four staff members at a single PRU in the UK and found that "staff–pupil and pupil–pupil relationships were the most pertinent topics discussed" (p. 203). The children in Hart's study described PRU staff positively using terms such as 'kind', 'fair' and 'fun' and highlighted that they could trust staff, which contrasted with their previous experiences with mainstream school staff. Additionally, Taylor (2019) who interviewed four pupils, four caregivers and five staff members from a single PRU found that primary caregivers reflected on how positive pupil-staff relationships made the pupils feel supported and trusted, which enhanced feelings of connection to the PRU. Pupils interviewed similarly emphasised the positive impact of trusting relationships with staff on their ability to emotionally regulate and ultimately reduce their behaviour. Many participants in the current study suggested that the focus on relationships was one of the core aspects of what makes PRUs so successful for disengaged

pupils and recommended that mainstream schools should prioritise relational practice to better meet the emotional needs of pupils and in turn reduce exclusions. Indeed, Ball et al. (2012) propose that the values, principles, commitments and experiences that teachers display in an educational setting are central to how policy is interpreted and enacted. PRU staff interviewed in this research all articulated a child-centred commitment towards their work, modelled on relational practice which puts positive relationships at the heart of their work. The implication is that where staff value relationships and prioritise developing them then pupil emotional wellbeing can increase.

6.2. Child voice

Staff and former pupils alike noted that there is a lack of child voice included in decision-making processes about transitioning to a PRU which typically leads to pupils feeling devalued and contributed to their disengagement. Active listening to young people's voices recognises their agency which in turns allows young people to feel empowered and respected by the adults around them (Smyth, 2006). Morgan et al. (2015) suggest that social, emotional and academic learning are intertwined. They argue that pupils need to be shown mutual respect and care from staff members (often a hallmark of alternative provision settings) as this is a key factor in successful re-engagement with education. Staff in Phase 2 highlighted that pupils should feel like active participants in the decisions about their education as this can increase motivation to attend and engage in learning. Previous research suggests that education needs to be perceived as meaningful for pupil engagement and should focus on giving pupils the skills and knowledge to pursue their aspirations and goals (Mainwaring & Hallam, 2010). In addition, Nind et al. (2012) found that adults in their study placed importance on a personalised approach to students, based on thorough assessment and responsiveness to their interests and voice when educating girls identified as having social, emotional, behavioural difficulties.

6.3. Peers

Another theme shared by both sets of participants was centred on the influence of peers. The women in Phase 1 reflected on how their behaviour and identity was influenced

by the desire for peer approval while staff in Phase 2 highlighted that the negative influence of peers could be a significant barrier to supporting girls in PRUs. Staff agreed that pupils' friendships could often lead to conflicts and contribute towards pupils disengaging from work, sometimes leading to periods of non-attendance. This is in line with literature which has highlighted that girls' friendships can be as a source of tension and conflict that may hinder learning and school attendance with psychological bullying also impacting negatively upon social, emotional and mental health (Osler et al., 2002).

Facey et al. (2020) explored educational experiences of pupils in alternative provision with social, emotional or mental health (SEMH) needs and suggested that young people in AP found it increasingly difficult to find peers and maintain friendships as they progressed into secondary school. They described how they lacked the care and love felt in genuine friendships which in turn had a negative effect on their educational experience. Furthermore, "as a result of the breakdown of past friendships, and the consequent loneliness and isolation that ensued, participants described this as a barrier to forming new, meaningful friendships" (p. 101) which emphasises the importance of peers in maintaining wellbeing and how negative experiences can have significant long-term impacts. It was apparent that participants in Phase 1 sought to develop friendships within their PRU. A likely explanation for this desire is the protective effect of friendship on wellbeing. Laursen et al. (2007) highlight that children without friends are reported to go through heightened levels of sadness or even depression. Additionally, pupils themselves identify peer acceptance and friendships as key factors in school belonging (Sancho & Cline, 2012).

One of the most prominent themes in the stories told by the women in Phase 1 involved the violence of male peers and feeling unsafe in their PRUs. It was therefore interesting and surprising that violence was not mentioned once in the focus group interviews with PRU staff. The externalising nature of boys' behaviour was vaguely mentioned in reference to the different presentation of needs between girls and boys but there was no mention of how the violence may impact the female pupils' sense of safety or power in their environment. Violence may have been more salient to the Phase 1 participants as the aggressive behaviour of their male peers contrasted with their own behaviour and gender identity. As previously mentioned in the literature review, Bussey (2011) proposed that gender identity

is produced through individual, environmental and societal factors. Stereotypical societal associations of normative girlhood include being nurturing and supportive while normative boyhood is linked to independence, assertion and aggression (Dean & Tate, 2016). Media discourses can impact how girls feel about their gender identity and can perpetuate gendered narratives. Stories reported in the media about male violence often portray the female victims as helpless, vulnerable and much less powerful than the male perpetrator (Easteal et al., 2015). Considering this, Phase 1 participants may have identified with the dominant gendered narrative of victimhood (i.e. helpless girls, violent men) and subsequently felt frightened of aggressive behaviour exhibited in their PRUs due to their perceived increased vulnerability. A potential explanation for why staff did not appear to find male violence a significant topic for discussion may be that they have become somewhat desensitised to some of the behaviour exhibited by pupils in the PRU.

6.4. Summary

The overarching aim of this research was to listen to the reflections and experiences of both former female pupils and staff from Pupil Referral Units. The purpose of the research was to increase awareness, knowledge and understanding surrounding their unique perspectives and gain insight into an under-research area. The research was deemed valuable and important as Pupil Referral Units continue to experience increasing numbers of female pupils and there was relatively little literature exploring what it is like for females to attend PRUs, considering they were designed and set up in response to typically meeting the needs of boys with 'challenging behaviour'. The message from both former pupils and current staff was that PRUs are going through a period of change and much evaluation is needed to ensure the support and provision offered is suitable and relevant to meeting the needs of girls. Common themes between the two phases of this research included the importance of relationships and how feeling safe and secure can lead to positive re-engagement with education; the benefits of including child-voice and adopting person-centred practice; as well as the potentially positive or negative influence of peers.

Chapter 7 – Conclusion

In this chapter, I will outline the strengths and limitations of the current research before discussing implications for both EP practice and further research. Final thoughts and conclusions will close this chapter.

7.1. Strengths

I would argue that the primary strength of my research is its qualitative nature. Participants were able to provide a rich and detailed picture of the research topic and add interesting insights into an under-researched area. By letting the participants in both stages of the research speak for themselves and using open-ended questions which allowed for unexpected topics to emerge, I was able to provide an insight into the experiences of both pupils and staff from Pupil Referral Units which was led by their voice, not driven by existing theory.

Findings from the current research have many commonalities and highlighted some shared views between participants, however, the findings also reflected important differences in the way former female pupils and staff perceive the support and provision of a Pupil Referral Unit. Some of the difficulties young women reflected on were not mentioned by staff therefore a strength of this research could be for PRUs to use these findings to help them better understand females' experiences of attending a PRU. Developing their understanding of pupil perspectives may help staff to reflect on what is working well and what is not working so well. Additionally, I hope that this research encourages those in educational policy making to see the value in listening to young people about their experiences and including their voice in decisions about provision.

Yardley (2000) highlighted that good research should be transparent and coherent. I hope that through detailed information included methodology (such as how the participants were selected, how the interviews were conducted and how the resulting data was analysed), the reader can see how the research questions and the methodology selected linked to the aims of this research. I also included many transcript extracts in the findings sections to allow the reader to reflect on my interpretations and consider possible alternatives.

7.2. Limitations

There were several limitations with the current research which will be addressed in turn. Despite my belief that the qualitative nature of this research should be viewed as a strength, I acknowledge that criticism could be levelled against the inability to produce measurable, significant results that are generalisable to wider populations such as all-female PRU pupils and PRU staff members. However, this was not the aim of the research as the ontological and epistemological stance I took highlights the subjective nature of experience and encourages the inclusion of individual voices. The findings represent the views shared by participants in the current study but may be indicative of others' views and are still valuable by adding to the limited literature already published in this area. Furthermore, Carminati (2018) argued that generalisations from qualitative research can be valuable when the purpose of a study is "to bridge a gap in literature" (p. 2096).

Another limitation of the current research was the lack of parent voice. The women interviewed in Phase 1 all mentioned the lack of participation their parents had during the decision-making processes and transition from mainstream. Meanwhile the staff in Phase 2 mentioned the challenges associated with supporting parents to encourage their child's engagement in education. Unfortunately, I felt it was beyond the scope of this research to include the voices of parents considering the timeframe available and the difficulties I had with all stages of recruitment. It would be interesting for future research to listen to the views of parents of female PRU pupils and explore their perceptions of Pupil Referral Units.

There were several methodological limitations in the research which will now be considered. Firstly, Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) has been criticised for being mostly descriptive and not lacking sufficient interpretation (Larkin et al., 2006; Gil-Rodriguez & Hefferon, 2011). Indeed, some critics question whether IPA can accurately capture the experiences and meanings of experiences rather than simply record opinions of it (Tuffour, 2017). Furthermore, there is concern about how able participants are to articulate the nuances of their experiences. To overcome this limitation, I designed an interview schedule with more questions than typically found in semi-structured IPA interviews and several prompts to encourage my participants to reflect on their experiences and provide rich, detailed answers.

In Phase 2, a limitation of the focus groups involved the participant sample. As mentioned previously, I had hoped for more participants in each focus group but due to difficulties with recruitment this was not possible. In addition, all staff members interviewed except one were female. It would have been interesting to have a more even ratio of male to female participants. However, I believe a strength of this phase is the inclusion of participants with various job roles across the school hierarchy to ensure many perspectives were considered.

Another limitation of both phases of the research involved the participant sample. In Phase 1, I had endeavoured to recruit between 4-6 young women to interview however due to significant issues with recruitment, I was unable to recruit more than 3 women who were willing to participate despite a thorough recruitment strategy. However, literature suggests that 3 participants are enough when conducting Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis research. It is important to note, however, that the sample consisted of all White participants. The rate of exclusion across ethnic groups is highest for Black and Mixed ethnicity pupils (DfE, 2018). Compared with the pupil population in mainstream secondary schools, pupils from black Caribbean, mixed white and Black Caribbean, Mixed White and Black African backgrounds are over-represented in alternative provision. Therefore, the current research may have been more representative if women from the aforementioned backgrounds had participated.

In addition, I used opportunity and purposive sampling of women who were willing to speak with me and share their reflections. Two participants were recruited through social media and one participant's contact details were given to me through their former PRU. Although this method of sampling ensured that the experiences investigated were of significance to the participants (as is most appropriate when adopting IPA (Smith et al., 2009), it is possible that these women are more open, reflective and articulate than other PRU leavers. Similarly, in Phase 2 participants were recruited from the dissemination of the recruitment poster which had been emailed to either the admin team or the Special Educational Needs Co-ordinator. Subsequently participants were self-selected. As such, it could be argued that the staff who participated are particularly interested in professional dialogue and recognise the importance of research exploring support for female pupils in PRUs which may not reflect the views of all staff working within Pupil Referral Units.

It is important to note, however, that generalisability in research is often associated with a positivist paradigm, quantitative methodology and statistical generalisation (Kerlinger & Lee, 2000). As this does not match my research and epistemological position, instead we might consider the transferability of my findings. Transferability is underpinned by the epistemological assumption that knowledge is constructed and subjective; that reality is experienced by individuals. Transferability occurs whenever a person or group in one setting considers adopting something from another that the research has identified i.e. to what extent are my findings transferable to other settings? When readers feel as though this can be the case – when they believe that research overlaps with their own situation and/or they can intuitively transfer the findings to their own action, then the research can be said to generalise through transferability. To facilitate that type of generalizability, according to Tracy (2010) researchers "create reports that invite transferability by gathering direct testimony, providing rich description and writing accessibly and invitationally" (p. 845). For this research, I believe my findings are transferable as PRU staff may be able to read this thesis and alter their practice considering reflections shared by my participants.

7.3. Implications for EP practice

In light of the findings of this research, there are some noteworthy implications for EP practice that will now be addressed. Supervision was highly valued by PRU staff as a way of reflecting on current practice and exploring new ways of working as well as providing a safe space to debrief and receive emotional support in light of the demanding nature of their work. Weare (2015) highlights the importance of promoting well-being of staff and tackling staff stress through measures such as staff development, counselling and approaches such as mindfulness. Furthermore, Rae (2011) suggests that it is important for school staff to have adequate opportunities to examine their own beliefs, pre-conceptions, attitudes and preferences if they are to develop an awareness of their own emotional literacy skills in order to affect change in the young people in their care (Rae, 2011). There is a key role for educational psychologists here as they are well-positioned to provide supervision and act as a 'critical friend' to PRU staff to facilitate those reflections on one's own practice.

PRU staff felt that training would be beneficial to support them in effectively responding to the change in cohorts, namely the significant rise of female pupils. They specifically highlighted a desire for training in topics such as autism in girls and ADHD in girls. EPs could be well positioned to deliver this training due to their psychological knowledge about theories of autism and the symptomology of girls with autism. As part of their research exploring understanding of girls with ASC, Gray et al. (2021) asked 53 SENCOs from one local authority to complete questionnaires about their understanding of girls with autism. Results indicated that SENCOs have a strong understanding of male presentations of autism but lack confidence in both identifying and supporting girls with autism. 70% of respondents felt that specific training on identifying autism in girls would be beneficial and 83% of respondents agreed that training on strategies and intervention specific to girls would be helpful. Gray et al. conclude that EPs have a key role in upskilling school staff to increase their knowledge of the female presentation of autism and subsequently improve the support provided for those pupils, as part of their systemic work.

In both phases of the research, participants highlighted the lack of child voice in the decision-making processes regarding exclusion and movement to a Pupil Referral Unit. This was hurtful to the young women who felt insignificant and powerless, and creating a

significant barrier for staff trying to engage pupils and rebuild trust in the education system when they began attending a PRU. As educational psychologists endeavour to advocate for children and feel a sense of control over their learning (Todd et al., 2000), EPs could have a key role in supporting PRU staff to consider the ways in which child voice can be meaningfully elicited and subsequently included in the design and implementation of support. Smillie & Newton (2020) explored how EPs gather child voice and highlighted that obtaining authentic voice comes with several challenges including supporting those with complex needs to communicate their views; the potential power imbalance between CYP and adults; and encouraging disaffected pupils to give their views. One EP said "it's about empowering young people to feel part of the process and not feel that something is being done to them, you know that's outside of their control, it's about giving them the opportunity to be part of the process if they wish to be" (p. 338). Furthermore, Harding & Atkinson (2009) report that listening and including child voice in EP work can be extremely useful as young people can provide appropriate information about their skills and abilities and offer their views about possible interventions, enhancing the likelihood of successful outcomes. Moreover, if young people feel heard, they are more likely to have increased motivation; more perception of personal control; a greater sense of responsibility for future progress and change. EP contribution could support with emphasising the importance of a person-centred approach wherein young people are always invited to participate in their education meetings. The involvement of EPs in transition meetings appears relevant due to their in-depth knowledge of school systems, multi-agency working, child development and the challenges associated with transitions for young people with special educational needs.

The findings from Phase 1 of the current research highlighted that attending a PRU was not necessarily a positive experience and often came after a lengthy period of negative school experiences within mainstream settings. All three young women spoke about not feeling understood by their mainstream and believed that they were not given sufficient or appropriate support for their needs which further increased their risk of exclusion. Due to several factors including lack of funding and resources, it is common that EPs are not introduced until a crisis situation and therefore have to work reactively in order to help support positive outcomes for CYP (Waite, 2013). In an ideal situation, mainstream schools would value the importance of early intervention and preventative work for girls at risk of

exclusion. EPs are well-placed to deliver this work on either an individual or systemic level. On an individual level, EPs are able to provide consultation and assessment based on a functional analysis of behaviour (Hartnell, 2010). Through consultation and careful questioning, the EP can support others to use their own problem-solving skills and find ways to move forward with difficult situations (Wagner, 2000). On a systemic level, EPs could be involved in the monitoring and reviewing of their link schools' provision for those at risk of exclusion and help to promote inclusion at a whole-school level. Indeed, Clarke and Jenner (2006) reported positive outcomes from EPs' involvement at systems level interventions to support schools' inclusive practice for CYP with social, emotional and mental health needs, specifically with their behaviour management policies and strategies.

7.4. Implications for policy

In this section, I will present two implications for educational policy that appear significant in light of the findings. The first is the importance of developing transition structures which allow the young person to feel safe and in control of their school move. Benner et al. (2017) suggested that school transitions are usually predictable, however, CYP who attend PRUs often experience forced and sudden transitions from their mainstream school into a PRU. The impact of this can be that young people feel unsettled and struggle to integrate successfully into their new educational setting, a phenomenon seen in my findings. To counteract the unpredictability and instability experienced by young people moving into PRUs, there should be an increased emphasis on providing enhanced transition support including visits to the PRU and a chance to become acquainted with key members of staff. Indeed, previous literature has shown the effectiveness of employing a mediational strategy to transition, in which CYP have 'move up days' to spend time at their future secondary school to have a 'taster' of what the actual experience will be like (Evangelou et al., 2008). There is a clear role for EPs to support the sharing of key information during mainstream to PRU transitions, as they are frequently involved in communicating the complex needs of CYP to a receiving school and helping to specify appropriate support (Craig, 2009).

Additionally, throughout the narrative accounts from Phase 1, it was clear that transitioning into a PRU as part of the minority gender population was difficult. To minimise these difficulties, PRUs should consider the ways in which they specifically welcome their female pupils. Keay et al. (2015) commented that most schools are very skilled at providing organisational and administrative support for transitioning pupils (e.g. information sharing, timetable sorting etc.) but often provide insufficient emotional support. The authors argued that schools should endeavour to provide more interventions to support peer relationships following transition, as they can be successful in supporting children in adjusting to, and making progress in, their new school. Indeed, relationships (both with staff and peers) were cited by participants in the current research as intrinsic to developing a positive sense of school belonging to their PRU. One suggestion for supporting girls to develop friendships upon transitioning to a PRU may be to assign a 'mentor' or 'buddy' to help show them around and support them in settling into their new school.

The second implication for educational policy focusses on changing the narrative of Pupil Referral Units as a punishment and promoting collaboration between PRUs and mainstream schools. Participants in both phases highlighted that moving from mainstream into a PRU was typically viewed by mainstream schools as a punishment for poor behaviour and used as a deterrent for further behaviour. This narrative can be damaging as pupils moving into PRUs may hold negative pre-conceptions about their new school, which can in turn make the transition less successful. PRUs should be viewed as a continuum of education and valued as an alternative way of educating young people with complex needs. Mainstream schools may need support to develop their understanding of the role and function of PRUs, to ensure they see the value in these settings. It may also be helpful for pupils to remain dual-registered with their mainstream school, as opposed to single-registered with their PRU, to ensure more open communication between mainstream and alternative provision in regard to support in place and potential re-integration. Indeed, Hart (2013) reported that many schools have a polarised "them and us" attitude which can result in negative, blaming and confrontational outlooks from both mainstream schools and PRUs. Hart argued that there is often tension between mainstream schools and PRUs about who has responsibility for re-integration. Ideally, both schools should take responsibility for the academic and emotional progress of the young people attending PRUs and engage in

professional collaboration to effectively meet the needs of such pupils. Moreover, I agree with Hart's recommendation that "PRU and mainstream schools [should have] shared staff (particularly mentors or link officers), joint training, joint projects and joint celebrations" (2013, p. 223) to ensure a more realistic and positive narrative of PRUs.

7.5. Recommendations for future research

As there is a distinct lack of female PRU pupil voice within the current literature base, I believe there is merit in conducting further research including women's stories as more accounts will provide further understanding about their experiences and may contribute to bettering the provision offered.

This research was underpinned by an assumption that the ways in which girls experience attendance at a PRU is unique and may be quite different to how boys experience attendance at a PRU. This research aimed to listen to the voices of women without the inclusion of male voices for comparison as I wanted to provide a space in which women's voices were valued and considered important by themselves, not only in relation to men. However, further research including the reflections and views of young men who have attended PRUs may help answer whether the original assumption is correct and allow for cross-gender comparison. In the current study, I was only able to describe self-reported differences perceived by the women interviewed. Additionally, future research could do comparisons between staff in PRUs with higher ratios of female pupils, and PRUs with low ratios of female pupils to see if the presence of more female pupils changes staff perceptions of the support they need to provide or if there are additional/different challenges to the role. This may allow for a more holistic understanding of gender differences in support provided and support desired.

To explore further the ways in which attendance at a PRU may impact participants' sense of self, it would be interesting for future research to be longitudinal in nature and begin gathering the views of females whilst they are attending a PRU. The researcher could follow participants' journeys as they leave education and transition into adulthood to

explore how their attitudes and reflections about their school experiences may change over time. Additionally, comparative studies looking at different forms of alternative provision providers, not just Pupil Referral Units, could provide interesting insights into the potential differences in approaches used and pupil experiences based on setting.

As this research was conducted in the Southwest of England, it would be interesting for similar research to be conducted in other areas of the United Kingdom, particularly urban areas such as London, Manchester and Birmingham where there are high numbers of exclusions and pupils attending Pupil Referral Units. Further, it would be beneficial for a broader range of voices to be gathered, including those from different ethnic and racial backgrounds, to provide more diversity. This is especially important when considering the over-representation of BAME pupils in Pupil Referral Units.

There were some topics discussed by the focus groups which either went beyond the scope of the research questions or were only mentioned by one group therefore not representative of the sample as a whole. A topic which was mentioned by group 4 concerned the role of pornography and how pupils' viewing of explicit content was a key worry for PRU staff regarding ensuring the safety and intimate wellbeing of female pupils. Group 3 also referenced the inappropriate nature of interactions initiated by some male pupils within their PRU and the importance of teaching consent as well as supporting girls to enact boundaries. Future research could explore this in more detail and endeavour to gain understanding into how staff can support female pupils in managing challenges associated with unwanted or inappropriate behaviour from peers.

7.6. Impact statement

In this section, I would like to reflect on how this research journey has impacted my positionality, my view on PRUs, and how I believe the research is going to contribute towards my practice as a qualified Educational Psychologist.

7.6.1. Positionality

Yates (2005) reflected that it is important for psychologists to remember "that even when laypeople appear to be aware that variables will relate to each other, it still takes research to expose the magnitude of relationships, or to map the complexities and interactions that exist" (p. 682). I began my research journey hoping to shed some light on the complexities and realities of being a female attending a PRU and I feel extremely proud to be adding a unique contribution to the literature base, featuring an under-researched, marginalised group. One of my core values is feminism and I strongly believe in the importance of conducting research with women to ensure their voices are heard. Reflecting on the implications from my findings, this belief has been further amplified.

Furthermore, in light of my findings, my positionality and view on PRUs has been somewhat altered. At the beginning of the research process, I held the belief that PRUs were important and necessary for educating young people that cannot attend mainstream. I believed that these alternative settings were able to provide quality education whilst simultaneously championing the emotional wellbeing of their pupils, preparing them for onward journeys into further education or employment. Whilst I still believe there are many wonderful PRUs providing exceptional, quality provision, I am less sure of how I feel towards PRUs generally. Through reflections from both sets of participants, it was clear that PRUs are struggling to balance the ever-increasing demands placed on them. Former pupils felt they did not receive quality-first teaching whilst staff felt their time was being taken away from teaching to act as mental health experts, counsellors and social workers. As services and external support are increasingly cut back due to funding and capacity issues, the less PRUs are able to perform their function and improve the outcomes for their pupils. My view is that there needs to be significant reform within PRUs to allow them to successfully and effectively meet the needs of their complex pupils. One suggestion for change is the introduction of more inter-disciplinary staffing within PRUs. PRUs may benefit from having in-house counsellors, youth workers, psychologists and social workers as well as teaching staff to ensure that both the academic and emotional needs of the pupils are met.

7.6.2. Development as a psychologist

In the process of completing this thesis, I have regularly reflected on how the stories shared with me have impacted and contributed towards my development as an educational psychologist. Hearing the very detailed, personal accounts from the participants in Phase 1 has fuelled my passion for ensuring that young people are shown respect from the adults surrounding them and are given the opportunity to express how they feel about their education. In my career, I hope to continually be an advocate for the meaningful inclusion of child voice and encourage educational settings to actively listen to their pupils. I feel especially drawn to participating in transition meetings and working directly with young people moving between educational settings to hear what they think would help them succeed.

Secondly, I have reflected on the girls' and women's voices which are still hidden and unheard. In my research I was only able to talk with three young women who had attended PRUs, all of whom were articulate, skilled communicators. Unfortunately, due to the focus on spoken language as part of my research methods, I was unable to recruit and hear the stories of young women with communication difficulties. As I move into my qualified career, I would like to hold this limitation in mind and endeavour to think and work creatively to ensure that I provide the tools and means to support all young people to communicate their thoughts and feelings, in whatever way is accessible to them. O'Kane (2008) reported that 'active' forms of communication which are kinaesthetic in nature and require activities such as sorting are more effective and engaging for children compared to typical interviews. Bloom et al. (2020) gives a comprehensive list of suggestions for meaningfully eliciting the voice of young people with speech, language and communication needs. They suggest using

- 'Diamond Rank Sorting Task' which involves asking young people to sort cards or activities into a diamond shape of what they feel is important to them
- 'Talking Mats' which is a physical visual tool that involves asking open-ended questions and providing symbols for young people to place on the mat as a record of their response
- 'The Mosaic Approach' which combines a variety of methods including photos, map-making, craft activities and observations

- ‘The Ideal School Drawing’ which draws on principles from personal construct psychology and involves a young person drawing a picture of the most important features of school for them
- ‘In My Shoes’ which is a computer-based tool that uses emotion faces and symbols to identify views

In summary, I believe my practice as an educational psychologist has been positively shaped by my research journey. The perseverance I showed throughout the difficult moments has highlighted the power of believing in yourself, which I think is an important skill to take forward into my practice.

7.7. Concluding remarks

In conclusion, this research has addressed the aim of gaining insight into the reflections of young women who have previously attended a Pupil Referral Unit as well as the views of staff supporting such pupils. I listened to the stories shared by three young women who articulately and openly told me about:

- the difficulties of feeling unwanted and let down by mainstream school
- the desire to feel socially included and how attendance at a Pupil Referral Unit can make you feel like an outsider
- the challenges of managing peer relationships and the negative influence they could have including increasing mental health needs and participating in substance use
- the fear of attending a school environment characterised by male violence
- the importance of positive, trusting staff-pupil relationships where you feel heard and understood
- the overly negative perception of female PRU pupils as crazy or reckless, with little compassion from the general public
- the challenges associated with succeeding in system that lacks expectation and aspiration

Additionally, I listened to the views of eleven members of staff from Pupil Referral Units in the South West of England who commented on:

- the importance of reflective practice and collaborating with other professionals to provide quality provision
- promoting accessible education for individual needs
- keeping relationships and relational practice at the heart of their work
- the difficulties in responding to a rise in female pupils and needing support in understanding their presentation of needs
- the negative influence that pupils' wider systems including family, peers and the community can have on pupil engagement and motivation
- the lack of funding, resources and capacity to be able to deliver the support they wish to

These key points encapsulate the views from both sets of participants in the current research and hopefully contribute interesting insights to the limited literature already published on girls and Pupil Referral Units. I hope that some of the recommendations and implications for practice outlined can be used to ensure that girls in Pupil Referral Units are receiving quality support and provision, as well as support the staff who are working tireless to meet the individual needs of girls in their settings and help them reach their full potential.

Reflective commentary:

During the research process, there were many times where the enormity of the task felt overwhelming and it became difficult to remember the value and importance of this research. When I was struggling to recruit participants and fretting about what to do if not enough former pupils wanted to talk with me, I wished I had picked an 'easier' to reach group. However, the strong sense of reward and affirmation I have felt upon writing my overall discussion, implications and recommendations has been extremely powerful. It has reminded me how important it is to reach out to marginalised groups and show genuine interest in their voices because they have such insightful reflections which should be shared and contribute to practice. The importance of listening to all voices is a core value which I will endeavour to continue embedding within my practice as a qualified educational psychologist.

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Appendices

Appendix A: Phase 1 semi-structured interview schedule

Introduction:

- Introduce myself and start with general chit-chat to make participant feel at ease
- Revisit information contained within the Participant Information Sheet
- Give participants time to ask any questions and provide verbal consent
- Remind participant again that they can leave or stop the interview at any given point or can skip a question if they don't feel comfortable answering

Topic/Themes	Questions
Background Information	Q1. How long were you at a Pupil Referral Unit for? Q2. What age were you when you were in the PRU? Q3. Where did you go after you left your setting? Prompt: Post 16 setting? College? Into work? Back into mainstream secondary? Q4. What do you do now?
General	Q1. Can you describe your experience of being at a PRU, in terms of being generally good or bad? Q2. What did you like about your setting? Q3. What did you not like about your setting? Q4. Can you tell me about which subjects or courses you most enjoyed doing? Q5. Were there any extra-curricular activities (e.g. after school clubs, lunch clubs) you could take part in? Did you?
Life experiences	Q1. Can you describe the reasons you began attending a PRU? Q2. How did you find the move from mainstream to alternative provision? Was it positive/negative?

Gender	Q1. Do you remember if there was an even mix of boys and girls in your PRU, or were there more of one gender? Q2. Did you feel the boys at your PRU had the same difficulties as you? Q3. Did you notice any differences between how girls were treated and how boys were treated in the setting? Prompts: for example, were the same behaviours given the same consequences/outcomes? Q4. Was there lots of different subjects and courses you could do? Were some more popular with girls? Q6. How do you think people generally view girls who attend alternative provision? Follow on: Do you think they think the same things about boys? Q7. Do you think your PRU experience would have been different if there had been more girls?
Friendships	Q1. What were your friendships with other pupils like in the PRU? Q2. How much time did you get to spend time with other people at your PRU? Q3. Can you tell me about your female friendships during your time in your PRU? Q4. Can you tell me about whether you find female friendships important? Prompts: Why? Why not? Do you typically have more male or female friends?
Key staff relationships	Q1. Could you tell me about whether you felt supported by staff at your PRU? Prompt: If you got on particularly well with some staff, what was good about them?

	Q2. Do you feel staff treated boys and girls the same in your setting? Q3. If you remember, can you tell me about what other professionals helped you during your time at your PRU? Prompt: Psychologists? Mental health workers? Speech and language therapists?
Identity	Q1. How did you feel about being at a Pupil Referral Unit? Q2. Can you tell me about whether you felt you fitted it or not? Q3. Did you feel better at your PRU or your mainstream school? Can you explain why? Q4. Did going to a PRU change how you thought about yourself? Q5. Did you ever feel pressure to act or be a certain way, because you are a girl? Follow on: Why? What things made you feel that way/what influenced you?

Debrief:

- Thank the participant for talking with me and reflecting on their school experience
- Highlight information from the Participant Information Sheet about what will happen to the results and who to contact for further information
- Ask participant what they would like their pseudonym to be
- Emphasise to contact me if they want to discuss anything further
- Time to process and reflect on the interview. How did they find it? Do they have any additional questions?
- Ask about whether they would like to receive information about the findings through email

Appendix B: Recruitment Poster

GIRLS AND PUPIL REFERRAL UNITS

Are you a woman **over 18** who has attended a **Pupil Referral Unit in the last 5 years?**
Would you be interested in sharing your experiences and talking to me?

Taking Part

I am looking for women who are **over 18** who previously attended a Pupil Referral Unit. I would like women who were there for **3 or more months.**

Taking part would involve a **one-on-one virtual interview** with me as the researcher talking about the topics listed to the right. The interview would last about **45 minutes – 1 hour and we will go at your pace**, taking as many breaks as you like.

If you choose to take part, you can **stop at any point.** You do not need to give me a reason for this.

All your information will be kept confidential and anonymous (which means **I won't put your real name in my work**).

The Research

My name is Amelia King and I'm a Trainee Educational Psychologist at the University of Exeter. I'm interested in giving young women a platform to voice their opinion on their alternative education.

My research aims to explore what young women think about their experiences of attending a Pupil Referral Unit, with the hope of helping people understand what it's like to be a girl in alternative education.

Interview Themes

- Identity
- Life experiences
- Background information
- Staff relationships
- Gender
- Friendship

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If you are interested in taking part in this research or know any women who might be, please contact me **as soon as possible** at ajk222@exeter.ac.uk for more information.

Appendix C: Sample of Dolly interview (Phase 1) – initial exploratory comments and emergent themes

Emergent theme	Line number	Transcript	Initial comments (Descriptive, Linguistic, Conceptual)
Lack of transition support Loss	444 445 446 447 448 449 450 451 452 453 454 455 456 457 458 459 460 461 462 463	Dolly: Yeah. So it was like straight-away like you're here tomorrow and they were like… I was like I've not been given any warning, I would at least like another day to be able to like say goodbye to my friends… Interviewer: Yeah. Dolly: Things like that. And they were just… I think they gave me one more day. I think I sort-of pushed and was like I just need one day… Interviewer: Yeah. Dolly: I don't know if I did or not? Actually thinking about it, I don't think I did… Interviewer: No? Dolly: No that was it. I had to start tomorrow.	Dolly asked for another day at her mainstream school to say goodbye. Importance of endings Dolly having to fight her corner and ask for a day to say goodbye. 'pushed' suggests that this was very important for her and she had to be forceful in making it happen Struggling to remember the details of starting at the PRU
Disregard of child voice	464 465 466 467 468 469	Interviewer: Oh my goodness. Dolly: So that was like the end of it then. So I was there but I was quite lucky because my first day I	Dolly often refers to something positive about her experience after she has expressed something negative. Does she feel some sense of loyalty to the

	470 471 472 473 474	was only there for an hour so I had to go in and do two exams… Interviewer: Ok. 	PRU because she is employed by them and she feels the experience was generally good for her? Describing how she was able to complete the entrance exams to assess her academic abilities and staff were surprised by Lack of expectation and aspiration from staff about PRU pupils?
Lack of expectations from staff	475 476 477 478 479 480 481 482 483 484	Dolly: Not proper exams. They're like little tests to see where you're at. So I like went in, put… they gave me a uniform so put the uniform on, went upstairs, um, did my exams. She was like you have an hour and half for this one and two hours for the next one. Within half an hour I was like I'm done. She was like multiple pages back and forth, you need to do both and I was like yeah I'm done. (Laughs) 	
	485 486	Interviewer: (Laughs) It's done. 	English teacher was surprised that Dolly was at a PRU. Assumption that PRU students are not academically able.
PRU pupil stereotypes (viewed as not academic)	487 488 489 490 491 492 492	Dolly: And she looked at it and she was like I am an English teacher so that's all right, how have you done that? Why are you at this school? Interviewer: Oh wow so they thought that you were going to be academically not where you were?	
Failed by mainstream	493 494 495 496 497 498	Dolly: Yeah, I had multiple teachers at school say to me multiple times 'you have been failed by the education system, you should not be here, you are too bright'	'failed by the education system' – very emotive and powerful language 'too bright' Continues the assumption that PRU students are not academically able. Do staff assume behaviour stems from lack of engagement with learning?

Lack of SEMH support in mainstream	499 500 501 502 503 504 505 506 507 508 509 510 511 512 513 514 515 516 517 518 519 520 521 522 523 524 525 526 527 528	Interviewer: Really? Dolly: Yeah… Interviewer: Gosh that's so interesting isn't it? And interesting the fact that you're someone that there weren't those outside agencies and there weren't other professionals who might have then had the chance to say she doesn't need that… Dolly: Yeah. That's what they said, they were like you can see that you are just a child who is… was struggling and needed support from someone and you didn't have the support so you communicated in behaviour because that's all you could do to be heard sort-of thing… Interviewer: Yeah. Absolutely. Um wow that's really interesting. Um so the next sort-of little bit of the interview is going to be more kind-of on gender. Um so at Bretonside, was there a sort-of even mix of boys and girls or would you say there was more boys, more girls? Dolly: It was more boys than girls. I think in the whole school, when I was there, there was about 10 girls and at least 20 boys. Interviewer: Wow, yeah.	Dolly is explaining that staff could see she needed extra support and she was trying to communicate her needs through behaviour. Did Dolly understand this at the time or has time to reflect changed her perceptions? Double the amount of boys attending the PRU compared to girls.

Feeling different Negative perception of peers	529 530 531 532 533 534 535 536 537 538 539 540 541 542 543 544 545 546 547 548 549 550 551 552 553 554 555 556 557 558	Dolly: It was definitely… Interviewer: And in your individual class? Dolly: In my class… I was… I got moved groups once but in the first group I was in I think it was me and one or two other girls. Actually no I think it was the same, it was me and two other girls in each class so there was about 3 girls and 5 boys? Interviewer: Right. Dolly: 4 or 5 boys, yeah. Interviewer: Um and then, did you feel that the boys that were at your PRU… do you feel like they had the same difficulties as the girls? Dolly: In what way? Interviewer: As in, do you think that they were struggling with the same things or do you think… Dolly: It's hard. I don't know. I feel like I was very different to all of them. Like when I… obviously I don't know what they were like the first time they went there… but like the first time I went there I sat down, I asked what the work was, I was ready to do work and the rest of them were like bouncing off the walls…	Stopping and starting sentences trying to remember. Does this suggest it wasn't an important factor in the way she remembers her experience? Dolly wanted to complete work whereas other pupils were not able/willing to engage in work. Dolly feels a strong sense of difference to the other pupils in her PRU. Does this indicate she did not feel she belonged?

	559		
	560	Interviewer: Yeah.	Repetition of "I don't know" – difficult to compare her difficulties with the boys attending.
	561		
	562	Dolly: So it was like… I don't know.	
	563		
	564	Interviewer: Yeah so maybe… so you felt quite	
	565	different but that maybe wasn't because of being a	
	566	girl or being a boy, it was just…	Difference in behaviour between genders. Boys = loud and aggressive. Was this a frightening environment to be in?
	567		
	568	Dolly: No. The boys were a lot more violent and	
	569	loud and aggressive.	
Boys as violent and	570		
aggressive	571	Interviewer: Yeah.	Question around whether there was a gender difference or did it appear that way simply because there were more boys?
	572		
	573	Dolly: Whereas the girls… don't get me wrong like a	
	574	few of the girls would still like have their say and	
Girls' needs overshadowed	575	shout and things but it was… but then I don't know	
by boys	576	if that's just more seen because there were so	
	577	many more boys than girls.	
	578		
	579	Interviewer: Yeah.	Emphasising that boys were the majority.
	580		
	581	Dolly: You notice the main group.	
	582		
	583	Interviewer: Yeah definitely. Um and did you notice	
	584	any differences between how boys and girls were	
	585	treated in the PRU? So for example were the same	
	586	behaviours given the same consequences?	
	587		Individual differences between teachers and the way they treated pupils.
	588	Dolly: I think… it depended on the teacher.	

Difference in staff behaviour towards girls and boys Staff concerns about pupil allegations	589 590 591 592 592 593 594 595 596 597 598 599 600 601 602 603 604 605 606 607 608 609 610 611 612 613 614 615 616 617	Interviewer: Ok. Dolly: If you had a male teacher the girls would either get away it or just be asked to leave. Interviewer: Right. Dolly: Whereas if it was a male teacher speaking to a boy they'd fight them on it sort-of thing… Interviewer: Ok. Dolly: It was sort-of like they didn't want to start an argument with a girl… and I think it's like they didn't want to start this argument with a girl because then if there was a violent thing you then… like because we would do… they would do like restraints and things and if they were holding you or touching you there's a lot more things a girl can say than a boy could. Interviewer: Yeah… Dolly: Things like that. Interviewer: Yeah so it was almost for their own protection against any… anything that could be said against them?	Dolly describes differences between the way male teachers respond to girls. Staff perceptions of gender stereotypes? Boys can be challenged but girls should not/cannot? Dolly describes how male staff were more cautious about telling female pupils off as they were worried that they could say something inappropriate happened. This could allow female pupils to feel they have power and control over staff – what's the impact of this on behaviour? Repetition of calling the male pupils 'violent'

Boys as violent and aggressive	618 619 620 621 622 623 624 625 626	Dolly: Yeah and I think they sort-of knew to just like ignore the boys because the violent tendencies were a lot higher with them. Interviewer: Yeah. Yeah definitely. Um… and then, do you… how do you think… this is slightly broader. But how do you think people in general view girls who attend PRUs? What do you think they think of them?	Emphasises the significance of this trait
Public perception of girls as crazy, boys as violent	627 628 629 630 631 632 633 634	Dolly: I don't know… I think's like… I think it's more typical for a boy to be in that sort-of thing so when you see a girl in stuff like that it's like "oh she must be fucking crazy". Interviewer: Yeah.	Dolly believes people have a harsher view on girls who attend PRUs as it is less common. Do girls internalise this feeling? Can it become a self-fulfilling prophecy/Pygmalion effect? Multiple repetitions of 'crazy'
Viewed as crazy or different, othering	635 636 637 638 639 640 641 642 643 644 645 646 647	Dolly: Like there was a lot of things I heard. Like if I would speak to like meet someone and they'd talk about schools and things, they'd be like "you must be crazy". That's so crazy, like girls being there is not normal, like in that school… like in saying sort-of thing for a boy to go there is normal but for a girl to be there is unexpected. Interviewer: Yeah absolutely. Um, and do you think that your PRU experience would have been different if there were more girls there, if there had been a more even mix of boys and girls?	Use of 'not normal' and 'unexpected'

	648 649 650 651 652 653 654 655 656 657 658 659 660 661 662 663 664 665 666 667 668 669 670 671 672 673 674 675 676	Dolly: Def… yeah, I think so. It would have been different but then I guess it depends on how those people would have acted so it's like more girls they get then that's obviously more people you're going to speak to sort-of thing… like if you walk into a room you're more likely to go over to the girl than the boy. Interviewer: Yeah. Dolly: So yeah you would speak to them more but then again it depends on how they are… Interviewer: And what their behaviours and yeah… Dolly: Yeah, yeah. Interviewer: Yeah totally. Um… what would you say your friendships were like with other people in the PRU? Did you have friends in the PRU? Dolly: Yeah so I did sort-of, the first sort-of day or two… so I knew no one there, knew absolutely no one. And I was there for like a couple of days and then… I think they didn't really know… like the children there didn't really know what to do with me because I was so different.	Begins to say 'definitely' then stops, reconsiders and uses less enthusiastic term 'yeah I think so' Dolly suggests she would talk to a girl first, is this because people naturally feel a pull towards same-gender peers? Initial connection? Dolly is clear on she chooses friends based on their behaviour and how they act as opposed to their gender Repetition of 'knew no one, knew absolutely no one' emphasises that this was significant for Dolly – likely frightening/anxiety producing? Dolly talks again about feeling different to her peers. Lacked a sense of belonging/connection
Feeling like an outsider Lack of belonging			

Appendix D: Superordinate themes and related subordinate themes across Phase 1 participants

Superordinate theme – Lack of belonging		
Subordinate theme	**Emergent themes**	**Sample of quotes**
Rejection by mainstream	Rejection from school Failed by mainstream Feeling unwanted Lack of control over education Lack of transition support PRU as only option Trying and failing at several schools Off-rolling	*"I just wasn't given the chance"* (Alice, line 758) *"It was very much like I got told 'as from next Tuesday, you're having Tuesdays and Fridays not in school, you're going to a Pupil Referral Unit'. I was thinking I don't even know what that word meant… I thought I was being sectioned or something."* (Alice, lines 309-314) "*I got put to panel and no one accepted me, like, all the other schools were there and no one else said yes so I don't think it was an option then*" (Dolly, lines 1506-1509) "*Head of Care or something like that at school that she didn't think I'd last in mainstream education as far as Christmas*." (Kitty, lines 43-46)
Feeling like an outsider	Feeling different Negative perception from peers Feeling lost Lack of belonging	"*just kind-of frustration that I couldn't be like normal*" (Kitty, line 1262)

	Feeling judged	"*I didn't really feel like I fitted in at school*" (Kitty, lines 1299-1300) *"It's kind-of like you're having to explain something to some… like people don't know what it is but they'll still judge you on it once you explain it so why bother?"* (Kitty, lines 730-733) "*we were all kind-of looked at as if we were bad students*" (Alice, lines 439-440) "*the children there didn't really know what to do with me because I was so different*" (Dolly, lines 675-677)
Desire to be socially included	Wanting to fit in Not wanting to be different Behaviour change Peer pressure Becoming someone different	*"But I tried to stay away from it at first but then eventually like if that's the only friends you have, that's the only friends you have and you do what you can to get in"* (Dolly, lines 701-704) "*if you're not going to get involved then you're not part of the team"* (Alice, line 879) "*"I think I kind-of I guess adapted. I started smoking because that was what everyone else would do"* (Kitty, lines 1290-1295)

Superordinate theme – Influence of peers		
Subordinate theme	**Emergent themes**	**Sample of quotes**
Exposure to mental health needs	Mental health needs Challenging behaviour Impact of others' needs Exposure to self-harm Prevalence of eating disorders Anxiety and depression	"*I think definitely negative in terms of my exposure to things like eating disorders, um, and self-harm and stuff like that*." (Kitty, lines 140-143) "*had these like deep, dark backgrounds, all these things going on… and it was very much like dragged me down a bit" (*Dolly, lines 1293-1295)
Substance use	Substance use as coping mechanism Misuse of alcohol and drugs Underage drinking	"*I don't remember the last time I saw any of them sober. Like one of the girls every morning used to… run into the Co-op, steal a bottle of wine, run out and drink it and then go into school, or do that at the end of school…"* (Dolly, lines 819-825) "*wasn't good things like it was let's go out get drunk, let's… come on, try drugs, come do drugs…"* (Kitty, lines 688-691)
Competition	Negative peer influence Competing for boys' attention Bitchiness	"*there was a lot of… yeah competition and bitchiness and arguing*" (Kitty, lines 794-795) "*There was no positive role models sort-of thing with the girls… it was all sort-of come join us and get drunk and stoned or… sit by*

		yourself and do nothing." (Dolly, lines 829-832)

Superordinate theme – Feeling safe		
Subordinate theme	**Emergent themes**	**Sample of quotes**
Violent boys	Boys as violent and aggressive Physical violence Fear of boys' behaviour	"*I think it was more sort-of like violent or threatening behaviour in the boys"* (Kitty, lines 616-617) "*they were like volatile. They weren't even… to me they were like monsters. I would never behave like that because you wouldn't treat anyone like that*." (Alice, lines 425-427) "*The boys were a lot more violent and loud and aggressive*" (Dolly, lines 570-571)
Vulnerable girls	Girls' needs overshadowed Teenage pregnancy Girls as vulnerable Lack of safety	"*I think to be honest a lot of the girls… the girls who got pregnant were already quite vulnerable*" (Kitty, lines 959-961) "*when you step in there it's volatile. You've got tables and chairs with three legs, walls with punch holes in it… it's not a setting I think for females anyway*" (Alice, lines 791-793)

		"*I was actually like intimidated by the boys because they were so loud and like, just… they were everywhere, they were just running riot of the whole place*" (Alice, lines 393-395)
PRU as prison	PRU as punishment Prison imagery Pupils treated like criminals	*"they would say 'we're going to have to send you back to the Pupil Referral Unit' so it would be full-time rather than part-time. That's what, you know, it was a punishment*." (Alice, lines 329-333) *"It's like a warehouse with just like partings and honestly it looked like a detention centre. It was weird*." (Alice, lines 414-416) "*Like when you enter you're metal detected, you have to like pull your bra out and shake to show you don't have nothing there…"* (Dolly, lines 152-154) "*it sort-of is like a prison there…"* (Dolly, lines 147-148)

Superordinate theme – Support from staff		
Subordinate theme	**Emergent themes**	**Sample of quotes**
Relational approach	Understanding and caring staff Mutual respect Positive relationships	"*I think she just showed that she was there a lot."* (Dolly, lines 867-868)

	Feeling heard Active listening	*"It was very self-centred like I want to look after you and education comes second. So that was probably like the best part and like the staff there were great."* (Dolly, lines 124-135) *"They knew I needed nurturing*" (Alice, line 604) *"they were all really cool, easy to talk to, um, and stuff like that which was good*" (Kitty, lines 215-218)
Levels of SEMH knowledge	Importance of understanding mental health Mental health as priority Variable in mental health understanding Different presentation of girls' needs	"*I was in that specialist environment and no one realised that I had ADHD*" (Kitty, lines 147-149) *"You know if you're not aggressive, you're not getting any help*" (Alice, lines 160-161) *"school like in general they were very supportive of you emotionally and like your mental health*" (Dolly, lines 118-120)
Quality of teaching	Limited academic choice Lack of appropriate resources Lack of encouragement for formal qualifications	"*there were a couple of things we couldn't do at GCSE because they didn't have the resources to*" (Kitty, lines 337-338) "*if you want to do well in your GCSEs you're not encouraged to do that*" (Alice, lines 560-561)

		"*So a lot of the teachers were odd in their own respect or just not very good at teaching*." (Kitty, lines 317-319) "*that's what I found very difficult. I didn't feel like… I was almost just there with a dinner lady. It wasn't like… there wasn't like any teachers or mentors. It was like I'm just sat here being monitored*" (Alice, lines 111-115) "*some of the teachers would just say to me like 'here's the work for today, just go out into the corridor to do it'*" (Dolly, lines 1474-1476)

Superordinate theme – General perception		
Subordinate theme	**Emergent themes**	**Sample of quotes**
Troubled and reckless girls	Public perception of crazy girls Feeling othered Reckless girls Troubled teens	*"I think it's the same kind-of way as they view girls who are in care or are like… like troubled teens. They're just off doing drugs and having sex and doing stuff like that and they're not… they're just reckless and they don't care about anyone else*." (Kitty, lines 714-719) ""*I think for girls it's definitely a different outlook. I think it's… I don't know whether they would see them as kind-of like manly?*

		Um I don't know how you'd say it but a but kind-of like masculine and a bit like aggressive. Yeah I think they would just put you like the boys' behaviour and automatically assume you're going to be like that." (Alice, lines 458-465) "*Like there was a lot of things I heard. Like if I would speak to like meet someone and they'd talk about schools and things, they'd be like "you must be crazy". That's so crazy, like girls being there is not normal, like in that school… like in saying sort-of thing for a boy to go there is normal but for a girl to be there is unexpected*" (Dolly, lines 637-643)
Lack of expectation	Lack of support for post-16 education Low aspirations about further education	"*yeah there wasn't much of an attitude that we got from them of like you'll go to university. It didn't feel like anyone really expected us to be able to do that*" (Dolly, lines 1421-1424) "*You're in a Pupil Referral Unit and that's on your school record so when people look at you now, they're just going to see you as delinquent so you need to change your career*" (Alice, lines 833-837)

		"*I was discouraged from applying for the college courses that I actually wanted to do*" (Kitty, lines 1104-1105)

Appendix E: 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:
Young women's reflections on their experience of Pupil Referral Units and the views of professionals supporting them.

Researcher(s) name: Amelia King

Co-Investigators:

Supervisor(s): Will Shield, Shirley Larkin, Lorraine O'Callaghan

This project has been approved for the period

From: 22/02/2021
To: 30/06/2022

Ethics Committee approval reference: D2021-107

Signature:  Date: 19/02/2021

(Professor Justin Dillon, Professor of Science and Environmental Education, Ethics Officer)

Appendix F: Phase 1 participant information sheet

Thank you for showing an interest in taking part in this research which is taking place at the University of Exeter.

Research title: Young women's reflections on their experience of Pupil Referral Units and the views of professionals supporting them.

Research aims: To explore how young women understand their experience leading up to and attending a Pupil Referral Unit, with the hope of helping inform good practice and shed light on any gender differences in alternative provision support.

About the researcher

My name is Amelia King, and I am a postgraduate student training to become an Educational Psychologist at the University of Exeter.

My project is being supported and supervised by Dr Shirley Larkin from the University of Exeter Graduate School of Education and Dr Will Shield, academic tutor on the Doctorate in Educational Psychology Course.

What does this research involve?

A virtual interview on Microsoft Teams which will last roughly an hour. We will go at your pace and take as many breaks as you like. I want to explore your experiences leading up to your attendance at a Pupil Referral Unit and how you are currently finding your time there.

Interview themes

- Transition and settling in
- Friendships
- Your identity
- Gender
- Social and emotional wellbeing
- School support

I want to talk to you and gain your insight on your experiences because there is not much other research on girls and Pupil Referral Units. I want to provide a platform for young women to discuss their experiences and if they believe Pupil Referral Units are different for them in comparison to boys.

Why have I been approached?

You have been asked to take part because you currently attend a Pupil Referral Unit and may be willing to share your knowledge and experience with me.

If you know of any other young women (16 and over) who you think could contribute to the study and who might be interested in participating, please forward me their names and if possible, an email address and I will contact them to invite them to participate in this study.

How will this information be used?
The interviews will be recorded before being transcribed. I will ask you to pick your own pseudonym but if you don't want to do that, I can choose one for you. When I transcribe your interview and write up in my final report, I will use your pseudonym, not your real name. My write up from this study will form my doctoral thesis and will be available via on the University of Exeter's Open Research Repository: https://ore.exeter.ac.uk/repository/. I might also publish my research in an academic journal or talk about it at a conference. I am more than happy to share my findings with you either by email or a telephone call.

What if I change my mind?
Your participation in this study is voluntary and you each have the right to withdraw from the study at any time simply by leaving the interview or asking to stop. You do not have to give a reason for doing this.

Safeguarding
During the interview, you may disclose information which makes me worry about your safety or risk of harm. If this were to happen then it may be necessary for me to share this information with an appropriate person such as the Safeguarding Lead at your educational setting; a health professional; or the police. Please note, I will tell you if I am going to do this and will only do so if there is real cause for concern.

How will my information be kept confidential?
All interview transcripts collected by the researcher will be anonymised (by using pseudonyms) and stored in a password protected electronic format for a maximum of 5 years until being deleted/destroyed. If you would like to withdraw your data at any time then you can do this up until the data has been analysed by contacting the researcher using the below details.

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

Key contacts
If you have any concerns or questions about this study then you can contact me using the following contact details:

Role	Name	Email
Post-Graduate Researcher	Amelia King	ajk222@exeter.ac.uk
Research Supervisor	Dr Shirley Larkin	s.larkin@exeter.ac.uk
Research Supervisor	Dr Will Shield	w.e.shield@exeter.ac.uk

You may also contact the College of Social Sciences and International Studies Research Ethics Committee (ssis-ethics@exeter.ac.uk)

Ethical approval
This project has been reviewed by the Graduate School of Education Research Ethics Committee at the University of Exeter (D2021-107).

Thank you for your interest in this project. Please now take some time to consider whether you would like you to participate and share your knowledge with me.

If you are happy to take part then please read, consider and tick the consent boxes in the Consent Form I provide you with.

With many thanks for your support,

Amelia King
ajk222@exeter.ac.uk

Appendix G: Phase 2 vignettes

Becky

- Becky is a Year 11 girl who enjoys playing on the Xbox, kicking a football around with her friends and spending time online.

- Becky has been described as an able student and has consistently been working at age related expectations since primary school.

- The subjects that Becky is most interested in are Food Technology and PE. Indeed, throughout primary and secondary school, Becky's PE teachers have commented on how talented she is for sports.

- Becky played football at the weekend for her local club although gave this up in Year 9.

- Becky went to a small primary school with children she had known since nursery and had the same class teacher for several years.

- Becky transitioned into a large secondary school with lots of new people she didn't know, which she found difficult to adjust to. She missed being in a smaller environment with only familiar classmates.

- In class, Becky spent the majority of her time trying to get out of work. She would distract other pupils by throwing objects at them; use inappropriate language against teachers; and truant from lessons she didn't like, usually Maths and Science.

- At break and lunchtimes, Becky became involved in fights with other pupils and received several fixed term exclusions for her behaviour through Year 8 and 9. Becky was given a weekly 1-1 session with a key person to talk through strategies on how to manage your emotions and a space to reflect on any difficulties from the week.

- Becky did not like engaging with this intervention and frequently skipped the session. She felt that teachers were targeting her and other pupils were not receiving the same consequences for their actions as her.

- During Year 8 and 9, Becky's parents expressed that at home Becky spent the majority of time in her room alone or staying out late at night, becoming involved in alcohol and drugs.

- As Becky's behaviour continued to escalate, she was transferred to a Pupil Referral Unit at the end of Year 9.

- Becky has made several friends in the PRU but can become emotionally heightened when she perceives another pupil to have 'disrespected' her. She has had several

disagreements with peers since joining.

- Becky does not like talking with PRU staff about how she is feeling. Staff report that Becky does not have positive relationships with the adults around her as she believes they don't care.

- Becky is currently accessing some academic work for short periods of time but says she cannot wait to finish school.

- She has no plans to enter into post-16 education or an apprenticeship although staff are encouraging Becky to engage in work experience in a field she may be interested in by helping her research different options.

Ellie

- Ellie is a Year 11 girl who enjoys making Tik Tok videos, playing with her dog and going out with friends.

- In her Year 7 and 8 reports, Ellie was described as an able student and consistently worked at age related expectations. She particularly enjoyed subjects such as ICT and Design and Technology.

- Teachers have commented on how skilled Ellie is at developing unique designs and creating them using varying materials.

- Ellie had a close group of friends that she regularly saw outside of school.

- Ellie moved to a new house in the summer before Year 9 and subsequently transitioned into a secondary school that she knew no one at. Ellie began to feel anxious about coming to school and would ask her mum several times a week if she could stay at home.

- At school, Ellie was often found in the school bathroom truanting lessons. At home, Ellie was spending all of her time in her room, by herself. She stopped seeing her old friends after school or on the weekend. Ellie's mother was very worried about her daughter's wellbeing and mental health so contacted the school to ask for help.

- Ellie was given a weekly 1-1 session with her key person to talk about any difficulties and had access to a time-out card to allow her to visit the SEND department if she felt overwhelmed in class. Ellie did not want to engage in these interventions and continued to truant from lessons.

- Ellie was subsequently referred to the Child & Adolescent Mental Health Service where she was put on a waiting list for low intensity Cognitive Behavioural Therapy.

- Ellie explained to her mum that she did not feel anyone understood her and there was no point talking to people who don't care.

- While truanting, Ellie befriended other students out of class, and she started to spend time smoking cigarettes and drinking alcohol with her new friends. Ellie stopped wearing school uniform and refused to participate in class lessons. She had several altercations with other pupils during lunch and break times.

- After several fixed term exclusions for smoking on site and inappropriate language use against teachers, Ellie transitioned into a Pupil Referral Unit at the beginning of Year 10 as staff believed her needs could best be met there.

- In the Pupil Referral Unit, Ellie formed friendships with other students at the PRU, although there are regular arguments between them. Ellie is in a relationship with one of the boys in the PRU.

- Ellie does not feel comfortable talking to PRU staff about her feelings as she still believes no one understands her properly and says her life is her 'private business'.

- Ellie engages in some academic work but has told staff at the PRU that she does not want to complete any GCSEs. She does not know what she wants to do when she is older and refuses to talk about post-16 options as this makes her too anxious. Despite this, staff are actively trying to help Ellie find work experience opportunities.

Appendix H: Phase 2 focus group interview schedule

Introduction:

- Introduce myself and ask the names and job roles of all participants
- Revisit information contained within the Participant Information Sheet
- Give participants time to ask any questions and provide verbal consent
- Remind participant again that they can leave or stop the interview at any given point or can skip a question if they don't feel comfortable answering
- Present vignettes (Ellie & Becky) one after the other

Discussion questions

1. What would support for pupils like Ellie and Becky look like?
2. Can you describe what factors play an important part when planning and implementing support for a young people such as Ellie and Becky?
3. What impact, if any, does gender have on the support provided for pupils?
4. Can you describe any examples of barriers school staff face when trying to implement support?
5. How do you think these barriers could be overcome?
6. What training have you received for your role?
7. What additional training do you believe would be helpful for supporting girls in your setting?
8. What skills do you think are needed to meet the needs of pupils like Ellie and Becky?

Debrief:

- Thank the participants for giving up their time to talk
- Highlight information from the Participant Information Sheet about what will happen to the results and who to contact for further information
- Emphasise to contact me if they want to discuss anything further
- Time to process and reflect on the interview. How did they find it? Do they have any additional questions?
- Offer to share findings from both phases of research as part of whole-school CPD time

Appendix I: Phase 2 initial codes, sub themes and main themes

Main themes	Sub themes	Initial codes
Ways of working	Reflection	Supervision
		Reflective practice
		Challenging gender stereotypes
	Behaviour approaches	Restorative practice
		Behaviour is communication
		Trauma-informed practice
		Looking beyond behaviour
	Collaboration	Emphasis on multi-agency working
		Information sharing
	Accessible education	Bespoke provision
		Small environment
		High staff: pupil ratio
		Building on strengths
		Prioritises mental health
		Variety of vocational opportunities
		Focusses on pupils' interests
The power of relationships	Being genuine	Pupils can sense if staff are genuine
		Pupils value genuine-ness
		Active listening
		Getting to know pupils on a personal level
		Feeling love
	Unconditional positive regard	PRU can be transformative
		Each day is fresh start
		PRUs don't give up
		Multiple chances
		Pupils know staff are always there
		Staff able to forgive and move on

	Respect	Non-judgemental approach
		Reciprocity
		Showing respect
		Listening to child voice
		Including child voice in decision-making
	Trust	Broken trust takes time to rebuild
		Staff try to break down walls
		Trust built through connection
		Fear in showing vulnerability
		Holding young people in mind
Response to changing cohorts	Understanding girls' presentation of needs	Substance abuse
		Low self-esteem
		Body image
		Self-harm
		Complex mental health needs
	Strategies that work	Allowing girls' time with other girls
		Providing non-stereotypical opportunities
		Girls only spaces
		Maternal figures and role models
Challenges to accessing support	External agencies	Long waiting lists
		Inconsistent support
		Difficult to access/high thresholds
		More support wanted
	Resources	Lack of specific training
		Little funding
		Lack of experiential learning opportunities
		Unfit buildings
		Difficulty recruiting and maintaining staff

Influence of wider systems	Peers	Negative impact of social media
		Friendships as source of conflict
		Inappropriate interactions
		Trouble forming and maintaining friendships
	Family	Parental view on education
		Parental view of PRU
		Parental negative school experiences
		Generational cycles
	Community	Lack of opportunities within community
		Engagement with community
		Value of education
	Mainstream school	Breakdown of mainstream placement
		Rejection by previous school
		Lack of understanding regarding exclusion
		De-valued voice
		PRU viewed as punishment
		Emotional damage
Challenges staff face	Nature of work	Demanding work
		Difficulties switching off
		Need for resilience
	Training needs	Learning from colleagues
		Learning on the job
		Variation in training received
		High value placed on training
	Capacity	Time to provide individual support
		Balancing multiple roles
		Capacity to embed knowledge from training

Appendix J: Phase 2 participant information sheet

Thank you for showing an interest in taking part in this research which is taking place at the University of Exeter.

Research title: Young women's reflections on their experience of Pupil Referral Units and the views of professionals supporting them.

Research aims: To explore how professionals reflect on the support they give to young women attending a Pupil Referral Unit, with the hope of helping inform good practice and shed light on any gender differences in alternative provision support.

About the researcher

My name is Amelia King, and I am a postgraduate student training to become an Educational Psychologist at the University of Exeter.

My project is being supported and supervised by Dr Shirley Larkin from the University of Exeter Graduate School of Education, Dr Will Shield and Dr Lorraine O'Callaghan, academic tutors on the Doctorate in Educational Psychology Course.

What does this research involve?
A virtual focus group with a mix of professionals (e.g. advisory teachers, educational psychologists, school staff, Special Educational Needs Coordinators) on Microsoft Teams which will last roughly an hour.

I will provide a vignette describing a girl attending a Pupil Referral Unit with some background information and outlining strengths and needs. I want the group to discuss what support they might put in place for the pupil described, reflect on similar pupils you may have supported and consider the facilitators to and barriers of meeting the individual's needs. I also want the group to consider how their approaches may be different for young women in comparison to young men.

How will this information be used?
The interviews will be recorded before being transcribed. I will ask you to pick your own pseudonym but if you don't want to do that, I can choose one for you. When I transcribe your interview and write up in my final report, I will use your pseudonym, not your real name. My write up from this study will form my doctoral thesis and will be available via on the University of Exeter's Open Research Repository: https://ore.exeter.ac.uk/repository/. I might also publish my research in an academic journal or talk about it at a conference. I am more than happy to share my findings with you either by email or a telephone call.

What if I change my mind?
Your participation in this study is voluntary and you each have the right to withdraw from the study at any time simply by leaving the interview or asking to stop. You do not have to give a reason for doing this.

How will my information be kept confidential?
All interview transcripts collected by the researcher will be anonymised (by using pseudonyms) and stored in a password protected electronic format for a maximum of 5 years until being deleted/destroyed. If you would like to withdraw your data at any time then you can do this up until the data has been analysed by contacting the researcher using the below details.

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

Key contacts
If you have any concerns or questions about this study then you can contact me using the following contact details:

Role	Name	Email
Post-Graduate Researcher	Amelia King	ajk222@exeter.ac.uk
Research Supervisor	Dr Shirley Larkin	s.larkin@exeter.ac.uk
Research Supervisor	Dr Will Shield	w.e.shield@exeter.ac.uk

Ethical approval
This project has been reviewed by the Graduate School of Education Research Ethics Committee at the University of Exeter (Reference Number D2021-107).

Thank you for your interest in this project. Please now take some time to consider whether you would like you to participate and share your knowledge with me.

If you know of any other professionals who you think could contribute to the study and who might be interested in participating, please forward me their names and if possible, an email address and I will contact them to invite them to participate in this study.

If you are happy to take part then please read, consider and tick the consent boxes in the Consent Form I provide you with.

With many thanks for your support,

Amelia King
ajk222@exeter.ac.uk

Appendix K: Phase 1 and Phase 2 participant consent form

Ethics approval code: D2021-107

Please read and consider the statements below. Put a 'x' in the 'Yes' column to give consent:

	YES	NO
I confirm I have read the 'Information Sheet/Recruitment Poster' for this study. I have had the opportunity to consider the information and ask questions.		
I understand that I am free to withdraw from the study at any point and I do not need to give any reason.		
I understand that I can withdraw my data from this study up until it is analysed.		
I understand that I will choose my own or be given a pseudonym to anonymise my data.		
I understand my anonymised interview responses will be analysed for the study.		
I understand that my data will be held securely as described in the 'Information Sheet'.		
I understand that relevant sections of the data collected during the study may be looked at by members of the research team or individuals from the University of Exeter, where it is relevant to my taking part in this research.		
I understand that taking part involves interview responses to be used for possible publication in research journals and possible presentation at professional conferences.		
I consent to my participation in this study.		

Signature:
Date: