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EBSA: A Conflict in Time and Between Systems – Practitioners’ Understanding of Emotionally Based School Avoidance

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**Declaration**

I, the author, confirm that this thesis is my own work. I am aware of the University’s Guidance on the Use of Unfair Means (www.sheffield.ac.uk/ssid/unfair-means). This work has not previously been presented for an award at this, or any other, university.

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**Abstract**

In recent years, the number of pupils consistently missing school has risen sharply and is associated with lower academic achievement as well as having long-term implications for factors including employability, alcohol dependence and crime. One of the key forms of school non-attendance is often referred to as emotionally based school avoidance (EBSA), although a wide variety of terminology is used by practitioners.

There has been a large amount of research conducted into EBSA, including the causes of EBSA, which are generally acknowledged as being heterogenous. Research has also been conducted into the views and experiences of a range of stakeholders, including the views of children and young people (CYP) who have been impacted, the parents of impacted CYP and the views of teachers. However, very little research has been done into the conceptualisation of the phenomena amongst multi-disciplinary practitioners who are involved in supporting CYP experiencing EBSA, despite there being a wide range of these stakeholders potentially involved on a regular basis. This study seeks to address this gap in the research.

The current research is an exploratory study which uses four focus groups to gather data from seven different practitioner groups. The data was analysed through the use of discursive psychology, with a particular focus on interpretive repertoires as per the Discursive Action Model (Edwards & Potter, 1992). Bronfenbrenner’s Ecosystemic modelwas also used to aid the conceptualisation of the resulting data.

The results of this study highlight the conflicts within and between the systems which surround CYP who experience EBSA and the practitioners tasked with supporting them. The results emphasise the importance of using agreed language across practitioner groups to construct the experiences of EBSA as well as the importance of multisystemic, unified responses. The implications for practitioners generally, and EPs specifically, are discussed.

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**Chapter 1:**

**Introduction**

**1.1 Chapter overview**

The current study is an exploratory examination of the discourse amongst a range of practitioners regarding children and young people (CYP) who are unable to attend school due to anxiety provoked by school attendance. This study takes a social constructionist epistemological stance towards the analysis of the data gathered (see chapter 2) and as a result, recognises the importance of the language being used to discuss this phenomenon.

This introduction is structured to initially explain some of the reasons for my interest in this subject. The following sections are then intended to give a broad overview of the subject, starting with a brief description of the role of education in modern society and outlining the many and various ways in which school non-attendance has been researched. The chapter then goes on to outline the current statistical trends relating to school attendance in the U.K. thereby highlighting the scale of current issues relating to school non-attendance. There is also an acknowledgement of the impact of recent historical events, particularly the global COVID-19 pandemic which occurred between 2020 - 2021, before a discussion of the impact upon children of not attending school. This chapter also contains a brief outline of U.K. Governmental responses to school non-attendance.

**1.2 Variations in terminology relating to school non-attendance**

It should be acknowledged that there is still a proliferation of terms being used to refer to this phenomenon. For example, the term EBSA is used whilst discussing the design of an online psychological intervention for families implemented in Sussex by McDonald, Michelson, and Lester (2024). However, Heyne, Gren-Landell, Melvin, and Gentle-Genitty (2019) use the more generic term ‘school attendance problems’ (SAPs) which are then broken down into sub-categories, thereby acknowledging the heterogenous causes of SAPs. Heyne et.al. go on to label these heterogenous causes to include ‘school refusal’, ‘truancy’ and ‘school withdrawal’. However, more recently, Heyne, Gentle-Genitty, Melvin, Keppens, O’Toole, and McKay-Brown (2024) have shifted and reframed their terminology and instead discuss the concept of ‘school attendance’ and call for a change in mindset and attitudes towards the whole area of school attendance.

Recently, some local authorities in England have also made changes to the terminology they use, including using the term ‘barriers to school attendance’ as they also acknowledge the heterogenous nature of the issues which CYP face in relation to attending school. Such approaches emphasise the importance of multi-agency working, as highlighted by Heyne (2024). Importantly, these approaches also acknowledge the desire of CYP to be successful in school and the importance of altering the environments and attitudes they encounter, rather than using terminology which can place the problem within the child themselves.

As the understanding of the results of non-attendance has grown, so too has the study of the phenomenon itself and the language used to describe it. Historically, words and phrases used to discuss school non-attendance were ill defined, as explained by Roque et al. (2017). Initially, the term ‘school phobia’ was used, which originated from the research of Johnson, Falstein, Szurek and Svendson (1941). They hypothesised that the anxiety that a CYP felt at the prospect of attending school was due to an over-dependence on the mother which resulted in extreme separation anxiety. Berg, Nichols and Pritchard (1969) drew out features that were pertinent to ‘school phobia’, as well as problematising the term itself. These features included acknowledging the severe emotional distress at the prospect of going to school, staying at home with the full knowledge of the parents and the lack of any social disorders or anti-social behaviour from this group of CYP. In Berg’s et al.’s description of this phenomena there is a recognition of the distress that going to school causes the CYP and a move away from the notion that the non-attendance is voluntary.

Previous research into school non-attendance often breaks it down into two different types, ‘truancy’ and ‘school refusal’. United Kingdom based researchers, Elliot (1999) and Elliot & Place (2019) discuss these distinctions at length. They posit the idea that truancy involves the pupil(s) absenting themselves from school without the knowledge of parents or guardians. Elliot (1999) suggests that CYP who fall into this category often do so with peers who are also truanting themselves from school and that this is often associated with disinterest in schoolwork and the absence of desire to conform to the school’s norms, expectations and standards of behaviour. These CYP often engage in pastimes that they consider to be more appealing than attending school which are often associated with acts of antisocial behaviour. By contrast, the parents of CYP who are ‘school refusers’ know of their child’s non-attendance. Kearney (1995) uses the term to refer to all children who do not attend school, other than those who are truanting themselves. However, this broad-brush stroke approach has been criticised for not acknowledging the multifaceted nature of the problems leading to non-attendance.

Elliot (1999, 2019) conceptualises the phenomena of school non-attendance in medicalised terms, referring to general anxiety, separation anxiety and depression. Furthermore, Elliot goes on to acknowledge the heterogenous nature of the causes of school non-attendance, suggesting that the contributory factors make it difficult to apply a single approach to individual cases and concluding that a multisystemic approach to the problem would be challenging.

Elliot’s medicalised conceptualisation places the problems ‘within the child’. Elliott (1999) discusses the absence of School avoidance from the Diagnostic Statistical Manuel of Mental Disorders (DSM-V). Despite acknowledgment of family and school contexts, this mode of conceptualisation runs the danger of maintaining the focus, and therefore the solutions, on the child themselves, rather than on the systems within which they are expected to operate if they are to reintegrate themselves into an educational setting. However, this picture is further confused by ‘school refusal’ being included in the DSM-V as a symptom of other anxiety-based disorders, such as social anxiety disorder (Karthika & Devi, 2020).

In their article, Kearney and Silverman (1990) discuss cognitive behavioural therapeutic approaches (alongside functional behavioural assessments) to helping seven children who were experiencing difficulties attending school. Kearney and Silverman suggest that it is best to consider the function of the school non-attendance behaviour, rather than try to tackle the root cause(s) and present their results accordingly. They break down these functions into four different categories, the first of which relates to the avoidance of anxious feelings or of a low mood. Kearney and Silverman’s second category relates to the avoidance of social situations within the school environment, whilst the third category relates to gaining attention and exhibiting behaviours which are linked to separation anxiety. The final category discussed by Kearney and Silverman relates to being able to engage in a preferred activity, whether that be watching television or engaging with friends / peers. It is worth noting that Kearney and Silverman acknowledge that this final category may overlap with the functions of behaviour related to truancy. Kearney and Silverman used a pre and post intervention questionnaire with both CYP and their parents to identify which of the four highlighted areas were provoking anxiety and put in place tailored interventions for the CYP. This approach resulted in six of the seven CYP returning to full time education, still being at school after a six month period had elapsed. It is interesting to note that despite being more than thirty years old, this study also calls for greater co-operation between services in order to facilitate greater multi-agency support for CYP with attendance difficulties. This issue is still being addressed today by researchers such as Heyne (2024).

A potential criticism of the approach taken by Kearney and Silverman is their reliance on cognitive behavioural techniques which may not be suitable for CYP with autism, as discussed by Onwumere & Patten (2024). In their article, Onwumere & Patten emphasise the importance of neurodiverse affirming practices and the importance of family involvement when working with autistic CYP.

The term Emotionally Based School Avoidance (EBSA) is the term chosen for this thesis as it *was* the term used within the English local authority in which the current study is primarily based. It is acknowledged that by using the term EBSA there is a possibility of suggesting that the reason for non-attendance is an intentional avoidance of school by the CYP, as outlined above. However, at the time when the current research was being conducted, EBSA was the term recognised and used by the practitioners who participated in the focus groups used to collect data for this study. Furthermore, it is worth noting that since this study was initiated (2022) the terminology used within the local authority has evolved to reflect impact of research into this phenomenon, and the greater understanding which has resulted.

**1.3 Why I chose to research emotionally based school avoidance (EBSA)**

My interest in the area of EBSA is the result of a number of factors which became apparent during my first year as a trainee educational psychologist (TEP). During this time, I came across a number of CYP who were not attending school as they felt emotionally unable to do so. Colleagues within the service where I was working and fellow TEPs also had anecdotes of a rise in EBSA cases. My interest was provoked further by my involvement in a small-scale research project in which a local authority was rolling out EBSA guidance to all schools within the local authority and wanted to gain feedback from schools regarding the initiative.

During the conversations that I had with fellow practitioners, I noticed a number of features relating to the cases. One feature that struck me was the complexity of the issues involved and that the cases often involved children who were difficult to gain physical access to – I encountered anecdotes of CYP who wouldn’t leave their house, others rarely left their bedrooms. Another feature that I noticed was the huge variation in understanding and approaches towards these cases. These approaches ranged from school representatives going round to the child’s house to try to deliver work and bring a sense of connection to the school, to teachers refusing to consider this approach as it would mean that the child, ‘had won’.

The phrase regarding children having ‘won’ stood out as it highlighted the way that language was used to position both the child, the teacher and the school or organisation that they represented. In this exchange, the child was positioned as making a voluntary choice to stay away from school, provoking a conflict that they were trying to win. The teachers and the school were positioned as opposing this choice, engaging in the conflict and not allowing the child to win. This use of the language of conflict and opposition provoked an interest in the use of language and it’s impact, this in turn developed into an interest in discourse analysis and discursive psychology which is used in this study. The notion of conflict in relation to EBSA is something that I will refer to throughout this research and provoked questions regarding the understanding of practitioner groups relating to EBSA and as an area that needed to be addressed through research.

* 1. **The historical context of the research**

In the United Kingdom, the 1880 Education Act made school attendance compulsory for children between the ages of 5 – 10. Since then, the legal age for required attendance has increased, to 16 by the Education Act (1944) and then to 18 by the Education Act (2008). It can be argued that the role of schools in modern society is multi-faceted and that they play an important role in more than just a child’s academic development. For example, in a review of the US educational system, Roeser, Eccles and Sameroff (2000) conceptualise modern schools as hubs through which a variety of services are delivered and discuss the role that middle schools in the USA play in the academic, moral and the social and emotional development of CYP. This article is pertinent as it proposes that in order to thrive in education, CYP need to be offered a rich range of experiences, in an environment in which they feel emotionally secure. Roeser et al. recognise that there are a range of social factors, including poverty, exposure to violence and the funding of schools themselves, which can impact upon the basic psychological needs of CYP (such as safety) and express the belief that it is the, “organisational, instructional and interpersonal experiences” CYP gain at school that in part determine whether they are able to flourish academically, socially and emotionally. They also conclude that student – teacher relationships play a central role in the behaviour choices made by CYP and suggest that pupils thrive in non-competitive environments. It is therefore important for CYP to attend school for a wide variety of reasons, including their education, their social and emotional well-being and access to this hub of wider services.

There is a long history of research into the impact of school non-attendance on the lives of CYP, including longitudinal studies which consider factors such as the relationship between school non-attendance and crime, alcohol dependence and employability (Rocque et al., 2017). There is also a large body of research into the factors which impact upon school non-attendance, including those which could be considered as being ‘within child’, for example, mental health (Knollmann et al., 2010). and physical health (Centeio, Cance, Barcelona & Castelli, 2018). The effects of systemic factors have also been widely investigated, these factors include socio-economic status (Klein, Sosu & Dare, 2020); the school environment (Van Eck, Johnson, Bettencourt & Johnson, 2017); and the attitudes of teachers and adults who work within the schools (Devine, 2021).

**1.5 Current trends in the United Kingdom**

Until recently, it was difficult to get an accurate statistical picture of the number of CYP in England who were not attending school for reasons that do not relate to the COVID–19 pandemic as the data was impacted by lockdowns. However, recently released figures expose the scale of the current problem. According to the UK Government website (Gov.UK, 2024) the rates of pupil absence have been increasing at an alarming rate in recent years. In 2015 – 2016, 10.5% of pupils in England were persistently absent, meaning that they missed 10% or more of possible school sessions. The figure for the same statistic increased to 21.2% for 2022 - 2023. This equates to approximately 1.57 million children, although it is worth noting that this figure has fallen slightly from 1.64 million children in the period 2021 - 2022. In state-funded primary schools, the number of children missing 10% or more of their schooling has increased from 8.3% in 2015 – 16, to 16.2% in 2022 - 2023. In state-funded secondary schools for the same period, the number of CYP missing 10% of school or more increased from 13.5% to 26.5%. There has also been an increase in the number of CYP who are ‘severely absent’ with the figure currently standing at 2%, equating to approximately 150,000 CYP. The number of pupils deemed to be persistently absent and attending special education settings has also increased from 28.5% (2015 – 2016) to 38.2% (2022 – 2023).

The GOV.UK website used to gather the above information discusses the changes in attendance as marked between pre and post COVID-19 pandemic levels. Previous data has included a category linking school absence to COVID-19, however, this category was abolished in April 2022, as the UK and the world transitioned into being post-pandemic.

**1.6 The Impact of COVID-19 on school attendance**

A number of studies have investigated the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on school attendance, which may be considered relevant to this study. It is also worth noting the complex array of pandemic related factors are implicated in the reasons for school non-attendance. For example, McDonald, Lester, & Michelson, (2023) highlight the problems of reintegration into school for CYP with special educational needs and for those with pre-exiting problems with anxiety. Other factors cited by McDonald et al. include problematic communication between home and school, and issues relating to the need for pupils to ‘catch up’ academically. Tomaszewski et al. (2023) investigated the impact of lockdowns in relation to the socioeconomic status of the CYP involved and found that the impact of lockdowns had been greatest on CYP from lower socioeconomic status. Hamiliton (2024) carried out a narrative review of literature relating to EBSA, including the conceptualisations of EBSA, and emphasises the importance of psychological constructs including ‘belongingness’ and ‘agency’. Hamilton goes on to emphasise the importance of collaborative working to help CYP experiencing EBSA post COVID-19. Furthermore, research by The Royal Society (2021) into parental attitudes towards the impact of COVID-19 on education suggests that parents would prefer a broader curriculum be offered to CYP than is currently available in the U.K. Parents in this study perceived the narrow curriculum available as a barrier to school attendance.

**1.7 Implications of school non-attendance**

Internationally, there have been multiple studies outlining the implications of school non-attendance for CYP which include poor academic qualifications. Credé, Roch, and Kieszczynka (2010) carried out a meta-analytic review of the relationship between student college attendance and college grades in the US. Credé et al.’s final data set consisted of 16 dissertations and 52 articles covering 82 years, representing 28,034 students. Credé et al. found that attendance was the most accurate predictor of final grades, compared with any other available means of predicting grades. Carrol (2010) carried out a longitudinal study on primary aged children based on a sample of 7,513 pupils taken from the UK’s National Child Development Study. These children were all born in the same week of March 1958. Carrol found that absenteeism of six months during Key Stage two (pupils aged 7 – 11 years) can result in a reduction in attainment of 0.7 of a year for reading and 1 year for maths. Further evidence was provided by Smith (1990) who carried out a multi-dimensional analysis of absenteeism in 116 secondary schools in Ireland, its links to academic results and dropping out of education. Like Roeser, Eccles & Sameroff (2000), Smith makes the link between positive pupil teacher relationships and positive academic outcomes. There is also evidence that school non-attendance is a habit that is formed over time (Schoeneberge, 2020) and that early identification of non-attendance patterns can help students to avoid dropping out of school later in their school career.

Non-attendance has also been linked to problems with unemployment and alcohol misuse and non-violent crime in later life. Rocque, Jennings, Piquero, Ozkan and Farrington, (2017) undertook a longitudinal study into the effects of ‘truancy’ which they define as, “the unexcused or illegitimate missing of school sessions.” They found that ‘truancy’ has an association with non-violent crime and problem drinking throughout the lifetime of the people involved (up to the age of 50). However, the data used for the study was gained from the Cambridge Study of Delinquent Development (CSDD) which was initiated in 1961 and it seems possible that some of the cases that were assigned as ‘truancy’ would today be given a different label, such as EBSA. This raises the possibility that conditions such as EBSA have, in the past, resulted in negative long-term consequences for the people involved. However, these consequences may not have been detected due to the lack of fine delineation between the types of school avoidance in the research.

**1.8 UK governmental responses to school non-attendance**

A recent report from The House of Commons Education Committee (2023) recognised the link between children’s mental health and school attendance. The U.K. Government had already introduced the ‘Mental Health Champions’ scheme (Burt & Gyimah, 2015), which was designed to raise awareness regarding children’s mental health. Currently, the Department for Education offers a grant of £1200 for state schools to train a mental health lead, in order to promote mental health and wellbeing within schools and colleges. As of October 2023, fourteen thousand schools and colleges had applied to train Mental Health Leads (educationhub.blog, 2023).

The U.K. Government website also contains a press release outlining measures to increase school attendance. Walker and Zahawi (2022) suggest that new advice for local authorities would end what they refer to as a “postcode lottery” (a euphemism which suggests that the services available alter according to where a person lives) when it comes to dealing with persistent absence from schools. The press release highlights the government’s commitment to ‘face-to-face’ education and outlines measures designed to tackle the problem. These measures include an expectation that schools and academy trusts will have plans which detail their offer of targeted support for CYP. They will also be expected to be able to share good practice.

A report from The House of Commons Education Committee (2023) questioned whether the education system is sufficiently resourced to meet the increasing demand for services relating to Special Educational Needs issues. The Education Committee report makes a clear link between the current situation of “unmet needs” and the impact on school attendance rates. The Education Committee also suggested a need for legislation relating to a national register for children not in school as well as clear guidance on the use of fines for families of children who do not attend school and who do not engage in processes which encourage attendance.

**1.9 Personal Experience**

In order for the reader of this thesis to have full insight into the processes which have led to its creation, it is important to acknowledge my personal experiences as a father of children with EBSA, a trainee educational psychologist (TEP) and as a teacher. These personal experiences ensured that I was aware of the phenomenon of EBSA from multiple roles and perspectives. My role as a father ensured that I was acutely aware of the difficulties faced by children with EBSA before this research began – I have seen it in my own home. As a first year TEP, I was part of a team that undertook a small-scale research project into EBSA. Furthermore, my previous role as a teacher and member of a senior management team, meant that I was aware of, and have been subjected to, the same pressures relating to pupil attendance that school practitioners encounter to this day. It should be acknowledged that all of these roles and experiences played a part in promoting my interest in this topic.

Fogg (2017) suggests that “narratives are formed in relation to other narratives which invoke past present and future.” Through an awareness of the ways in which my own narratives may be socially constructed by others I hope to bring an awareness to the processes involved in writing this thesis and any part that I may have in the shaping of the initial data or in the analysis of this data. Through reading and engaging with this research, the reader is effectively invited to participate in, and critically consider, the methods used to gather the data and the processes involved in reaching the research findings. The reader is also invited to assess whether these are a valid interpretation of the data.

**Chapter 2:**

**Literature Review**

**2.1 Chapter overview**

This chapter contains a literature review relating to Emotionally Based School Avoidance (EBSA). Despite the current research being based within the United Kingdom (UK), the literature that is referred to stems from international research, including the UK, Europe and the United States of America. This is done to ensure that reference is made to all available, relevant literature and also to avoid international silo-isation (Heyne, 2024).

The chapter begins with an overview of the search terms used whilst carrying out the literature review. This is followed by a discussion of the views of different practitioner groups and parents into the causes of school non-attendance. After this there is a discussion of the research into factors which can influence school non-attendance, including pupils’ relationships with adults, which is a key factor in the formation of the ‘school climate’ (Anderson, 1982). The chapter moves onto a discussion of recent research which has suggested that multi-agency working is important in helping CYP who are struggling with EBSA, which relates directly to, the aims of the current research. These aims are discussed at the end of the chapter.

The chapter is organised in such a way as to give the reader an understanding of the views of various groups who come into contact with EBSA and also to give an insight into the groups whose views have been gathered. This is important as it draws attention to gaps in the literature relating to the groups whose views are yet to be gathered – a gap which this research takes initial steps towards filling.

**2.2 Discussion of the search terms used to complete the literature review**

This is a narrative literature review which was undertaken using two main search engines, the first of which was Google Scholar and the second was The University of Sheffield’s StarPlus. The search terms used included ‘emotionally based school avoidance’; ‘EBSA’; ‘emotionally based school non-attendance’; ‘school avoidance’; ‘school attendance’ and ‘barriers to school attendance’. These search terms were applied in turn to categories including the history of EBSA, the impact of school climate, the views of impacted groups and the impact of multi-agency working. A list of the search terms used can be found in Appendix A.

It should be noted that as well as the use of the search terms above, use was also made of the ‘Cited by’ feature available on the Google Scholar search engine. This feature allows the researcher to access articles which have cited an original article and often reveals other articles which relate to a topic close to that of the original.

StarPlus was used to gain access to specific journal articles which were not available directly through the Google Scholar search engine, such as those by Boaler and Bond (2023); Lissack & Boyle (2022). StarPlus also facilitated the requesting of access to articles from journals which The University of Sheffield did not already subscribe to.

**2.3 The views of teachers and other school-based practitioners regarding school non-attendance**

It is important to consider the views of the adults who work in schools towards pupils with attendance issues. Reid (2006) carried out a series of semi structured interviews with 160 secondary school staff from two different Local Authorities of England regarding this issue. Participants were grouped into one of four groups, according to their role in the school. These groups were: (a) headteachers; (b) deputy headteachers; (c) middle managers and (d) form teachers. These various groups agreed on many points about the problems of dealing with school attendance in general. For example, it was felt that there was a lack of training for staff who deal with attendance issues and that there was a lack of funding for people specific to this role. This also led to an observation that neither of the two Local Authorities had implemented successful guidance on how to reintegrate pupils on their return to school. All the groups also acknowledged that the issue of non-attendance was extremely time consuming, with both deputy headteachers and heads of year suggesting that it was the single issue that they spent the most time dealing with. Reid also identified that many secondary school staff believed that the curriculum was too focussed on academic subjects which were not suited to, “low ability pupils.”

Other themes that came out of Reid’s research included the knowledge that Ofsted would make judgments on the school according to attendance data but without taking into account the socioeconomic and cultural context of the school, with headteachers in particular displaying frustration that inclusion statistics should include data relating to pupils who had been taken away on holidays during term time. There was a consensus between the different groups that harsher penalties and fines should be enforced in order to encourage parents to ensure school attendance. Furthermore, deputy headteachers also suggested that the lack of outcomes following court action was having a negative impact on the morale of the school staff. They also suggested that parenting courses could play a role in ensuring parents were supportive of school attendance, with deputies expressing their belief that the causes of non-attendance lay within the homes of the non-attenders.

There was also an interesting difference between the different groups’ conceptualisation of teacher attitudes towards pupils with school attendance difficulties. For example, headteachers suggested that although they were sympathetic towards such children, it was difficult to convince teaching staff that inclusion was the correct approach when the pupil may have been abusive towards that teacher previously. By contrast, deputy headteachers suggested that school staff were generally sympathetic to CYP who missed school for ‘genuine’ reasons such as ill health but had little sympathy for children who were truanting themselves. Teachers themselves displayed very little sympathy towards CYP with attendance difficulties explaining that it was the job of parents to get children to school.

The scale of the research outlined above is impressive as it takes into account the views of 160 teachers across two local authorities. With this in mind, it is interesting that the themes drawn out are mirrored across two different locations. However, Reid’s study is now eighteen years old and can no longer be said to represent the views of similar practitioners. It should also be noted that the study was conducted many years before the COVID-19 pandemic and before the steep rise in EBSA that is outlined in the Introduction of this research. A further aspect of the study that should be highlighted is that it focuses on the views of teaching staff and school managers. The study does not reach out further to take into account the views of pastoral staff and other practitioners who work with children and the families of children experiencing EBSA, such as social workers, education welfare officers or educational psychologists.

Literature and research highlight the understanding that EBSA is frequently the result of heterogenous factors combining. These factors differ for each individual, resulting in the need for bespoke interventions on each case. For example, Gren-Landell et al. (2015) undertook an online survey of 158 Swedish teachers to gain their views regarding the causes of, “problematic school absenteeism”. The results revealed that the teachers recognised the heterogeneous nature of the problem and rated home / family factors as the most influential and likely to cause absenteeism. The teachers also recognised the importance of individual problems including mental health issues such as depression. Gren-Landell et al. also highlighted an interesting division between the views of teachers in the mainstream and those of Special Educational Needs (SEN) teachers regarding the role of the school, with SEN teachers viewing the role of the school as more influential than teachers in the mainstream. There are a variety of possible explanations regarding the reason for teachers not highlighting school factors highly. One possibility is that teachers see family factors as beyond their ability to influence and are therefore exonerated from having to influence this. The factors impacting on non-attendance can be further broken down into causal factors and maintaining factors. For example, Malcolm, Wilson, Davidson and Kirk (2003) identify embarrassment and fear upon return from a long-term absence as an example of a factor which maintains the absence of a CYP.

The views of school teachers regarding, ‘risk factors for school attendance’ were also gathered by Finning, Waite, Harvey, Moore, Davis, and Ford, (2020) who carried out three focus groups with a total of sixteen secondary school practitioners from the South of the U.K. Thematic analysis was then used to draw out four over-arching themes: individual factors, family factors, peer factors and school factors. The results of this study echo those of Gren-Landell et al., with teachers focusing much more on the first three factors and placing little emphasis on the school-based factors which can result in problems with attendance. Indeed, Finning et al. point out that the teachers within the focus group seemed unable to give any sense of being able to have any positive impact upon attendance. They were also unaware of their own potential impact regarding increasing pupil stress in the build up to key points in their education, such as GCSEs, or of their potential role in preventing bullying. One criticism of this study is that all of the school settings represented were mainstream schools, rather than specialist settings, however, the consistent themes found across the settings suggest that teachers are currently unaware of some of the school factors impacting upon attendance, or else feel unable to address them.

**2.4 The views of parents and carers regarding school non-attendance**

The views of teachers, which identify home factors as having the greatest influence, is in contrast to the views of parents and children with experience of EBSA. Havik, Bru & Ertesvåg (2014) explored the views of 17 Norwegian parents with children (aged 10 – 18) experiencing difficulties attending school and found that they identified a variety of school factors as having the greatest influence on non-attendance including bullying and the need to adapt academic work for the pupil’s ability. Parents also emphasised the need for greater predictability in schools and for greater teacher support during unstructured times.

One criticism of this study is the use of the term ‘school refusal’, which conceptualises the difficulties of CYP relating to attendance as a choice and places the problem (and therefore any potential solutions) within the child themselves. This is at odds with the findings of the article which highlights the school-based factors responsible for attendance difficulties. It is also interesting that within the article the school experiences of the CYP are articulated by their parents and therefore, the experiences of the CYP are not relayed first-hand. A further, related criticism of this article is that it does not express the experiences of the parents themselves, which can be powerful testimonies of the impact upon the family of children being unable to attend school and is an area investigated by Gregory and Purcell (2014) and Dannow, Esbjørn and Risom (2020), as discussed below.

Gregory & Purcell (2014) focussed on gathering the views of five families and children using semi-structured interviews. They noted that no family or CYP mentioned any positive results of persistent absenteeism. Furthermore, the themes that emerged from their semi-structured interviews included social isolation and an acknowledgment of in-school factors such as extended periods of teacher absence, and absence resulting from moving settings. The CYP and families also reported feeling afraid of certain teachers and of being bullied and made to feel different in some way. This paper also discusses the importance of the views of CYP and the potential role that educational psychologists can play in ensuring that their voices are heard.

A qualitative study of the experiences of three Danish families whose children had experienced ‘absenteeism’ was carried out by Dannow, Esbjørn and Risom (2020), through semi-structured interviews. This study used descriptive phenomenology, focusing on the description of people’s experiences (Matua & Van Der Wal, 2015). Dannow et al. noticed three main themes within the data (individual factors, school-related factors and parental factors) which were in turn broken down into sub-themes. The views of parents regarding their child’s difficulties attending school were highlighted, including their own confusion and constant hypothesising about the possible causes of their child’s attendance difficulties and the onus which was placed upon the parents to try to find solutions. Other sub-themes included a sense of parental helplessness and frustration, and a lack of knowledge relating to the reasons for the absenteeism. This study gives an important voice to parents who have children experiencing ‘absenteeism’, despite the limited number of participants involved (three families).

More recently, Lissack and Boyle (2022) used an online questionnaire to gather the views of 289 parents / carers in the U.K. regarding the support received by pupils who experience difficulties attending school. This research also discussed the practice of fining the parents of pupils who do not attend school and the link between this and parents deregistering their children from school. The results of the online survey emphasised the lack of support that parents reported receiving, with 18 percent expressing that they had not received any support from school representatives and seven percent reporting that their child was no longer in school as a result of concerns regarding attendance, and so they had been fined. Parents also emphasised the need for compassion and understanding from members of school staff relating to the issue of attendance, with many reporting a feeling of being blamed for their child’s non-attendance.

These studies into the views of parents form a powerful and rich set of evidence relating to the views of parents of children who experience EBSA and suggest a need for working together with schools and other associated practitioners in a compassionate way, to best help the CYP involved.

**2.5 The views of further practitioners relating to school non-attendance**

There has been little research into the views of a range of practitioners regarding the causes of school non-attendance, however, Reid (2007) carried out a survey into the views of 88 U.K. based learning mentors. The findings of this research included highlighting the lack of training that the participants had received into managing school attendance and that the learning mentors felt that parental condoning of absence was a major contributing factor. Other contributory factors highlighted by this research included the need for a broader curriculum for CYP and for school-based practitioners to be available to help CYP experiencing difficulties with their attendance. These latter suggestions link to the concept of ‘school climate’ discussed below.

It should be noted that Reid’s study is now seventeen years old and an up-to-date understanding of the views of practitioners needs to be established. Furthermore, the study only takes into account the views of one practitioner group (learning mentors) relating to school non-attendance. It feels important to establish the views of a wider range of people in order to gain an understanding of a range of views and conceptualisations.

**2.6 The role of school climate in absenteeism**

The term ‘school climate’ relates to how engaged the pupils are with school activities, how safe they perceive the school to be and how connected they feel to the school. Van Eck, Johnson, Bettencourt and Johnson (2017) undertook a large-scale study of 25,776 middle and high school students who completed a school climate survey. Van Eck et al. suggest that pupil’s perceptions of their school climate is linked to the socio-emotional well-being of the CYP and to their academic achievement. They found that schools with a poor climate were more likely to have high rates of chronic absence.

[Ingul](https://acamh.onlinelibrary.wiley.com/action/doSearch?ContribAuthorRaw=Ingul%2C+Jo+Magne), [Klöckner](https://acamh.onlinelibrary.wiley.com/action/doSearch?ContribAuthorRaw=Kl%C3%B6ckner%2C+Christian+A), [Silverman](https://acamh.onlinelibrary.wiley.com/action/doSearch?ContribAuthorRaw=Silverman%2C+Wendy+K) and [Nordahl](https://acamh.onlinelibrary.wiley.com/action/doSearch?ContribAuthorRaw=Nordahl%2C+Hans+M) (2012) also investigated the effects of school climate by carrying out an exploratory study of 865 secondary school students in Norway, into a range of risk factors affecting ‘school absenteeism’. These risk factors included the traits of individuals (including mental health), socio-economic conditions, the school environment and family structure. They found that all of these factors influenced school absenteeism and that there was frequently a combination of these factors involved. Finning et al. (2020) conceptualises this through the use of Bronfenbrenner’s Ecosystemic Theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979,1986, 1999, 2005) which places the individual child at the centre of a series of concentric circles, each representing a layer of society which surrounds the child. In this study, Finning et al. emphasise the importance of ensuring that all practitioners involved with CYP have an understanding of all the factors which can influence their attendance.

**2.7 The importance of school-based relationships**

Roeser, Eccles & Sameroff, (2000) carried out a longitudinal study of 1480 middle school students in the USA, collecting their views on the opportunities provided for them in middle schools. The study found that the student’s perceptions of academic competence, their emotional health and the extent to which they valued the school were all important predictors of not only grades but of behaviour. Roesser et al. suggest that building a caring and compassionate environment encourages CYP to build a positive emotional connection with their school and to be less likely to identify with peers who reject the school. Pianta, Hamre & Allen (2012) consider relationships between pupils and teachers to be central to the education of CYP. They argue that there is a link between pupil/ teacher interactions and pupil engagement with tasks, which in turn impacts upon pupil learning. Wentzel (2022) explores the concept that bidirectional, caring relationships are fundamental to learning. Wentzel goes onto conceptualise care as being directly linked to the interactions between pupils and teachers as containing emotional warmth and responsiveness. Wentzel argues that feelings of being socially accepted facilitate pupils’ ability to interact with tasks and fellow pupils. Wentzel’s findings link to those of Van Eck et al. (2017) and the importance that they place on relationships in ensuring a positive school climate, as discussed above (see section 2.6).

Halligan and Cryer (2022) undertook a study of pupils attending a specialist GCSE setting in the UK who had previously had issues with EBSA. Pupils attending this setting were celebrated as 85% achieved above their predicted grade for GCSEs and 95% of pupils remained in education post – 16. Halligan and Cryer conducted 12 structured interviews with individual CYP and one group interview with a further 7 CYP in order to investigate pupil views about the aspects of the setting that they considered important to their success. The study revealed two overarching themes that pupils considered to be important in their success, ‘Interconnectivity’ and ‘Psychological Safety’. Interconnectivity is conceptualised as the pupil’s relationship with the school and again mirrors the concept of school climate, as discussed by Van Ech et al. (2017) and by Libby (2004). Libby outlines the importance of relationships with both peers and adults which engender feelings of safety and belonging for the CYP within the school context. A key feature of this interconnectivity was the pupils’ relationship with teachers who pupils felt were available to them to discuss concerns which related to their learning and were also on hand to promote positive relationships between peers. Pupils reported that the staff’s understanding of them was both academic, emotional and personal which the authors hypothesise led to the building of a sense of psychological safety and to the formation of strong and effective relationships for learning. The pupil’s interconnectivity was further enhanced by features of the school ethos such as, an emphasis on anti-bullying and the CYP being able to access safe spaces when they needed time out.

It is unsurprising that pupils seem more able to learn when they are at ease in their environment and that strong relationships with teachers and with peers should be a part of this. Greenhalgh (1994) argues that the creation of strong relationships is key to facilitating learning and that pupils use humanistic frames of reference to make sense of their relationships with the adults in the school and emphasises the importance of the child over the curriculum being taught during the teaching / learning process.

Sobba (2019) completed a narrative literature review into the impact of social capital (as defined by Coleman, 1988) on school avoidance. Coleman conceptualises the idea of social capital as being created through social networks which build trusting relationships and promote the efficient functioning of the communities. Sobba looks at the potential effects of social capital on school avoidant activities, with particular focus on bullying and the fear of victimisation and considers how social capital can be generated in three areas: participation in activities, closeness to peers and closeness to adults at school. Sobba highlights evidence suggesting that CYP who had high levels of support from adults at school were less likely to have problems relating to behaviour and also had higher levels of attendance. These findings again emphasise the importance of student – adult relationships in school in order to create an attachment and sense of belonging with the school in the CYP. In this article, Sobba calls for teachers, school administrators and parents to work together so that a sense of social capital is generated in order to help children attend school.

These findings echo those of Wilkins (2008) who looked at the views of four children in the USA who had previously not attended a school setting but who felt able to attend a specialist setting. Wilkins’ data revealed four main themes which promoted school attendance amongst these CYP: (a) school climate, (b)academic environment, (c) discipline and (d) relationships with teachers. This study centred on CYP in a school in which children were admitted on the basis of them having a disability or special need, with problems attending school falling into the latter category. The pupils interviewed suggested that the relationships that they were able to build with adults differed from those they had experienced in a number of ways. The adults in their new setting were less authoritarian and gave the pupils an opportunity to voice their opinions even in the event of disciplinary matters. Leniency was shown towards students regarding the deadlines for homework and pupils were dealt with on an individual basis rather than punished as a group for the transgressions of individuals. A further appreciated feature of the school was the way in which teachers took time to explain work to students, ensuring that they had a good grasp of the lessons being taught. The school’s small class sizes were also found to contribute towards positive relationships as they enabled teachers to have the time to have conversations regarding non-academic matters.

In Wilkins’ research, the small number of students within the school could also be seen to contribute to other aspects of the school which were reported on positively by the students, including the way that they were able to get to know each other and the calm atmosphere in the classrooms. However, it is also possible to conceptualise these features as ripple effects of the relational approach shown by staff towards the students facilitating a calm and sociable classroom and school environment, the teachers and adults within the school are effectively ensuring that factors which may produce emotional distress are minimised.

Corcoran and Kelly (2023) undertook a systemic literature review of 10 papers, based on qualitative research which focused on the views of CYP who identified as having experienced ‘Extended School Non-Attendance’. This research emphasised the importance of gathering the views of CYP and acknowledging their experiences. Corcoran and Kelly’s research resulted in a number of over-arching themes being identified which included: negative experiences of school learning; adult support being inconsistent; a lack of support relating to their emotional needs and mental health; negative perceptions of the needs of the individual. This research problematises the concept of non-attendance being ‘anxiety based’ and instead posits the idea that non-attendance is a logical response to their circumstances. Much of the ‘anxiety’ which is used in the conceptualisation of these CYP was seen as a consequence of their non-attendance.

**2.8 The importance of multi-agency work**

Corcoran (2023) explored the benefits of a multi-agency approach to dealing with EBSA through a year long action research project with an authority in the North West of England. Corcoran found that changes to working practice occurred when there was a shared ownership of the products and processes involved. The same research also found that barriers to effective changes in working practices included misconceptions around roles and responsibilities. This is echoed by Heyne (2024) who discusses the importance of multi-agency working and the negative impact of silo-isation, which effectively ensures that different practitioners are prevented from sharing knowledge by adhering to artificially constructed boundaries around working practices and around knowledge.

To date, much of the research into EBSA focuses on the views and understanding of groups including school-based practitioners, such as teachers and senior teachers (Reid, 2006; Gren-Landell et al., 2015). Research has also been carried out into the views of CYP themselves (Roeser et al., 2000; Corcoran and Kelly, 2023; Halligan and Cryer, 2022) and into the views of parents and the impact of EBSA on them (Havik, Bru & Ertesvåg, 2014; Gregory & Purcell, 2014). However, there are a wide range of practitioner groups that come into contact with CYP experiencing EBSA through their work and who are actively involved in helping to reintegrate them into schools. These groups include, but are not limited to, educational psychologists, education welfare officers, youth workers, social workers and child and adolescent mental health (CAMHS) practitioners. However, few studies have sought the views of these practitioners.

This chapter has sought to draw attention to the wide range of studies looking into the causes of school non-attendance, including the consideration of within-child factors such as poor physical health, poor mental health and anxiety (Reid, 2007). There have also been studies based in the field of psychiatry, particularly those of Elliot (1999, 2019). Other research has sought to establish systemic factors which impact upon school non-attendance which include factors relating to home as well as those linked to school. Recent studies into school non-attendance have also researched the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and the problems relating to reintegrating CYP into educational settings (McDonald, Lester, & Michelson, 2023). Studies such as those of Van Eck et al. (2017) have examined the impact of school climate on absenteeism and drawn attention to the positive impact of pupil engagement with school activities and values.

**2.9 The aims of the research**

This research therefore aims to gain an appreciation of how practitioners from a variety of roles use discourse to construct their views and understanding of EBSA. These practitioners must come into contact with CYP experiencing EBSA through their work. The views of practitioners will be gathered using focus groups. During the focus groups, practitioners will be prompted to discuss EBSA in relation to three main areas: the factors which cause EBSA, an awareness of appropriate responses to deal with EBSA and finally, whether all practitioners have a unified understanding of EBSA. Through the use of focus groups, practitioners will be afforded the opportunity to discuss EBSA with people from other practitioner groups and potentially build a shared understanding regarding this topic. The data gathered will be analysed using discursive psychology, a form of discourse analysis which focuses on the language used and considers writing and talk (discourse) to be a social action, rather than a means to analyse the inner mind (Edwards and Potter, 1992).

This leads to the posing of several questions relating to teachers / adults working both inside schools and outside of schools. It is important to assess their role not only in teaching children displaying difficulties attending school but also to question whether they have had sufficient training in dealing with this issue. Furthermore, it is also of interest to explore the understanding and training of both teachers and a wider range of practitioners who are involved in assisting CYP displaying EBSA tendencies and to consider the impact of this upon the CYP themselves.

This leads to the positing of the following over-arching question of this research:

How do practitioners with differing roles perceive the problem of EBSA?

In order to investigate this question, the following questions were formulated in order to promote discussion between participants within the focus groups:

* Do you think that there is a good awareness across practitioner groups of the factors which contribute to EBSA?
* Do you find that there is a good awareness across practitioner groups of appropriate responses to EBSA?
* Do you find that different practitioners have a unified understanding of EBSA?

**Chapter 3:**

**Method and Methodology**

**3.1 Chapter overview**

This chapter discusses the methodological underpinnings of the current research. This includes a review of the ontological and epistemological positioning of the study which is followed by a critical discussion of my own researcher positionality. There is also a discussion relating to the theoretical underpinnings of the methods used in this research, including the use of focus groups, discourse analysis generally and discursive psychology. This is followed by outlining further theoretical frameworks which relate to this research, including Bakhtin’s theory of heteroglossia and Bronfenbrenner’s Ecological Systems theory.

Following this, there is a description of the method followed whilst undertaking this research, which outlines the means by which participants were recruited for the focus groups used to gather data. There is also an explanation relating to how the data was recorded and transcribed as well as of the process of formulating this study’s interpretive repertoires (Potter and Wetherell, 1987).

**3.2 Research paradigms**

This research was undertaken using a qualitative approach to data collection, as opposed to a quantitative approach. Alharahsheh and Pius (2020) point out that each approach is equally valid, depending upon the research being undertaken. Quantitative techniques lend themselves to a positivist epistemological standpoint, in which the researcher is seeking to uncover pre-existing truths or confirm (or reject) the null hypothesis. These methods measure how much there is of the phenomena and use statistical analysis to help decide whether the results are significant. Alharahsheh and Pius point out that one of the advantages of quantitative methods is that the results are generalisable. By contrast, qualitative methodologies are used to gain a greater, in depth understanding of a phenomena. They can be used to effectively gain a deep understanding of people’s views and experiences which are not quantifiable. Data gathered through qualitative methods is frequently described as being ’rich’ and gives insight into the experiences of particular people in specific situations or roles.

**3.3 Ontology**

Holmes (2020) emphasises the importance for researchers to acknowledge their own ‘positionality’, a term which encompasses the researcher’s view of the world as well as their position in relation to the research task at hand and the social and political context in which the research is situated. This should include an acknowledgement of their stance in relation to ontology, which Levers (2013) conceptualises as a debate which centres around whether there is a reality which is external to the human experience and conscious or whether reality only exists within the human conscious through experiences. Moon and Blackman (2017) add to this definition by describing ontology as the study of things that exist and which people can gain knowledge of.

The current study adopts the Interpretivist paradigm because it discusses practitioner’s perception of EBSA, rather than attempting to discover a single ‘truth’ about this topic. Interpretivism is intertwined with the concept of relativism and embraces the idea that reality is constructed differently by each individual as a result of their independent interactions with that world which are mediated by their senses (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). The interpretivist paradigm eschews the idea of there being a single discoverable truth and instead focuses on the ways in which individuals construct the world around them and emphasises that as a result there are multiple truths which are equally valid (see section 2.3, Social Constructionism and its relationship to psychology). These multiple constructions are dependent upon factors including social norms (Crotty, 1998, p42) and are historically situated (Creswell, 2009, p.8).

Scotland (2012) draws attention to criticism of the interpretivist paradigm, pointing out that because of its emphasis on understanding the experiences and constructions of individuals, the findings are not generalisable. A further criticism relates to the social and historical foundations of the constructions as these can lead to ideological bias that people may be unaware of. Rahman (2020) also points out disadvantages of this approach, including its time-consuming nature and the limited sample sizes that are usually associated with it.

Clarke and Braun (2013) emphasise the importance of acknowledging the context of qualitative research, acknowledging the situations of the participants, and making these clear to the reader in order to invite an informed, critical reading of the data gathered. Furthermore, Arnould, Price and Moisio (2006) suggest that an understanding of the context of the research and data can stimulate emotions and senses and aid discovery.

**3.4 Epistemology**

Denzin and Lincoln (2011) describe epistemology as the relationship that evolves between the knower and the knowledge whilst Moon and Blackman (2017) point out that epistemology impacts upon how knowledge can be acquired as well as impacting upon its’ transferability.

Researchers should also acknowledge their stance in relation to epistemology, which is the study of knowledge itself. Holmes (2020) also highlights the importance of acknowledging our own interactions with our social environment. This is reminiscent of Schegloff (1997) who suggests that ‘speakers’ (within research) have a range of social identities available at any given moment. Schegloff emphasises the importance of recognising these identities. The same could be said of researchers and the need for acknowledgment of their own social identities throughout the process of the research.

**3.5 Social constructionism and its relationship to psychology**

As previously stated, this research aims to gain an appreciation of how practitioners from a variety of roles use discourse to construct their views and understanding of EBSA, as well as their understanding of issues including the causes of EBSA, ways of approaching children displaying signs of EBSA and the implications for the CYP involved. Because EBSA is a very current issue facing educationalists, the understanding of the term is still evolving and its meaning is still being constructed. As a result, this topic lends itself to a social constructionist epistemological perspective. Burr (2015) offers a conceptualisation of social constructionism not as a single united approach, but instead as a group of philosophical ideas which bear a resemblance to each other. Burr goes onto suggest that these resemblances are likely to include having a critical stance towards knowledge that is often taken for granted, and that our knowledge and understanding are based in specific cultures at specific times. As a result, a search for universal or eternal truths about people is futile. It is also important to note that Burr draws attention to the theory that people create their social reality through their conversation and through their social interactions.

Gergen (1985) highlights the ways in which constructions of seemingly unalterable states, such as childhood, change over time as a result of the social, economic and political interchanges that take place within a society. Gergen argues that such changes are mediated through language and through interactions between people who are themselves bound within societal beliefs and constructs. This line of reasoning suggests that it is not possible for psychologists to step outside of these societal norms and still be able to make sense. Gergen argues that any suggestions of discovering the *truth* are likely to be the result of using language to give credit to a certain position whilst also discrediting the claims of other competing narratives.

This epistemological standpoint contrasts with a positivist position, which aims to discover and uncover pre-existing truths which occur independently of time or of culture. Danziger (1994) outlines the history of modern psychology, dating it to the founding of a laboratory in Leipzig,1879. At this point, the field of psychology was aligned with more traditional sciences and the methods used to investigate phenomena and collect data reflected this as they were based on a positivist approach. Quantifiable data was gathered, which sought to reject or accept a null hypothesis.

In contrast to the positivist approach outlined above, this research aims to explore practitioner’s constructions of EBSA and the issues that surround it. As Clarke and Braun (2013) point out, there is no claim to uncover a single truth, but instead it is hoped that this research will offer a way of understanding practitioner’s experiences. The exploratory nature of this research has led to the adoption of a qualitative approach. Clarke and Braun (2013) suggest that qualitative methods deal with the real world and its’ inherent messiness. It shies away from testing hypothesis and acknowledges the possibility of multiple meanings that can crystallise from the same evidence base.

**3.6 Terminology used in the current study**

In this study use is made of the term ‘practitioners’ to refer to people who interact with CYP through their jobs. This is in place of the term ‘professionals’ as this could be perceived as a hierarchical label, creating a construct professional ‘experts’ and setting them apart from non-experts such as parents or CYP themselves. This issue is discussed by Clavering and McLaughlin (2007), who acknowledge the advantages of gaining heterogeneous viewpoints whilst conducting research in order to generate dialogue between interested parties. Clavering and McLaughlin also endorse the use of focus groups to promote this dialogue.

**3.7 Naturally occurring data versus contrived data**

Researchers including Wetherell (2015) and Potter (2004) suggest that it is best to analyse naturally occurring discourse whilst using discourse analysis, rather than data collected through means such as interviews. However, there has been debate regarding what constitutes naturally occurring discourse and the naturalisation of discourse which is created through interviews. Goodman and Speer (2015) suggest that the distinction between naturally occurring data and contrived data is not one which is sustainable. Instead, they argue that all data may be considered either natural or contrived, depending upon the aims of the researcher and upon the interactional setting in which the data is gathered. Whilst Griffin (2007) suggests that all discourse is mediated by the context in which it occurs.

Wiggins and Potter (2017) add to the debate regarding the importance of using naturalistic materials for discourse analysis, by discussing the gathering of data in situation, rather than from interviews. Their use of the term *naturalistic* (rather than natural) is important as they stress that researchers can only hope to make the data gathered as natural as possible. Wiggins and Potter also draw attention to issues relating to ‘reactivity’ when people are being recorded, suggesting that there is always the possibility that people may behave slightly differently when they are being recorded.

**3.8 The use of focus groups in research**

The evidence gathered for this study took place through the use of focus groups. The use of focus groups has several advantages over other methods of data collection which include allowing for the gathering of more naturalistic data, in line with the suggestions of Schegloff (1994), Potter (2004), Goodman and Speer (2015). Wellings, Branigan and Mitchell (2000) suggest that the data gathered is more naturalistic when compared to data gathered through individual interviews as focus groups promote natural conversation rather than responses to questions and can be used to discuss sensitive topics, such as health issues. This suggestion is reflected by Clarke and Braun (2013) who hold that participants are encouraged to use more natural vocabulary as they are interacting with each other, rather than with a researcher.

The data produced through the use of focus groups creates ‘emic data’ (Cyr, 2017) in which the thoughts and opinions of the researcher are kept out of the data set, thereby minimising their influence. However, it should be acknowledged that any prompts used to guide the group’s conversations were developed by the researcher (See Appendix B). A further advantage of this approach is that it allows conversations to flow more freely, bringing forward themes which may have been occluded if there had been a reliance upon question and answer style interactions which would result from the use of an interview technique. As Richardson, Goodwin and Vine (2011, p. 114) point out, focus groups allow people to, “spark ideas off one another.”

The use of focus groups also facilitates the removal of the researcher’s voice, thoughts and opinions from the data that is gathered, or as Wilkinson (1999) describes it, power is moved away from the researcher and is placed with the participants. Clarke and Braun (2013) also suggest that the use of focus groups allows for analysis of how meanings related to a topic are negotiated, discussed and agreed upon between practitioners. This negotiated creation of meaning between practitioners was an area which was explored during the course of analysing this research. Furthermore, Wilkinson (1999) points out that focus groups have the potential to generate social change within participants, empowering them through the process of sharing their views and reaching agreed understanding. It was also hoped that the use of focus groups may result in a raising of consciousness regarding EBSA amongst the participants, as suggested by Morgan (1999).

Because of their interactive nature, focus groups can be seen as mimicking real life, encouraging participants to use their real vocabulary or vocabularies whilst discussing a given topic (Wilkinson, 1998b). Wilkinson goes on to point out other advantages of the focus group format, including participants offering more detailed accounts than might otherwise be gained. It was hoped that this interactive method of collecting data would lend itself to an open sharing of participants’ views in non-hierarchical environments in which the researchers voice was significantly reduced. The naturalistic data generated by focus groups would lend itself to discourse analysis.

A potential draw back of the use of focus groups is the possibility of ‘social loafing’ (Williams and Karau,1991) which refers to a tendency for individuals to reduce their individual effort when working within a group and can be associated with focus groups which contain too many participants. However, Belzile and Öberg (2012) suggest that the purpose of the research is of greater importance than stipulating an ideal number of participants when trying to ensure that everyone is able to express their views. Through carrying out a meta-analysis, Belzile and Öberg found that interaction between focus group participants was greater when the purpose of the group was to generate a shared understanding of a researched topic, than when participants were considered to be individuals who held or accessed truths about a subject. During the current research, participants were encouraged to debate and discuss their understanding of the phenomena of EBSA thereby generating a shared understanding.

A further consideration when carrying out focus group research relates to potential issues with power and status differentials within the groups and between group members. Stewart and Shamdasani (2014) note that the perceived status of a participant can impact upon discussions due to other members of a group showing deference to the views of a person perceived as having a higher social status. Stewart and Shamdasani highlight the importance of avoiding power inequalities within focus groups whenever possible by being sensitive to the status of volunteers during the recruitment and organisational phase. A distinction is also made between self-appointed experts and legitimate experts with Stewart and Shamdasani suggesting that legitimate experts could be co-opted to aid the running of the focus group through making use of their expertise when needed and through asking them to withhold their thoughts until an appropriate moment in the conversation. By contrast self-appointed experts are viewed as potentially problematic members of focus groups as they have the potential to overwhelm other members of the group by offering their opinions as facts. Stewart and Shamdasani offer a number of potential solutions to this scenario, including the use of verbal and non-verbal cues by the group facilitator. These cues are designed to encourage other members of the group to speak and for the self-appointed expert to allow the opinions of others to be heard.

One final factor to consider when gathering data through the use of focus groups is highlighted by Goodman and Speer (2015) who point out that the moment people know that their discourse is being monitored, it may no longer be seen as completely ‘natural’. However, there would also be a clear breech of ethical guidelines should an attempt to gather ‘natural’ data be made without gaining consent from participants. Hence, codes of conduct, as set out by the Health Care Professions Council (2024) and British Psychological Society (2021), were considered paramount.

**3.9 Discourse analysis - applications of discursive psychology**

Discourse analysis (DA) is an umbrella term used to refer to analytical approaches which focus on discourse. It has gained popularity in a range of disciplines including psychology, linguistics and sociology (Wiggins, Reis and Sprecher, 2009). All forms of discourse analysis stem from previous work on conversation analysis (CA) and these two approaches share an epistemological foundation in constructionism. It is also worth noting that similarly to DA, CA focuses on talk as a form of social action (Wilkinson and Kitzinger, 2017).

[Harré](https://scholar.google.com/citations?user=stDFY-MAAAAJ&hl=en&oi=sra) and Sterns refer to the use of DA in psychology as, “the new cognitivism” ([Harré](https://scholar.google.com/citations?user=stDFY-MAAAAJ&hl=en&oi=sra) and Sterns, 1995, p.2) and contrast it with traditional cognitive psychology which focuses on the inner workings of the mind and which conceptualises discourse as a representation of these inner workings. Instead, [Harré](https://scholar.google.com/citations?user=stDFY-MAAAAJ&hl=en&oi=sra) and Stern suggest that it is better to examine the discourse through the range of discourse analysis techniques available and for discourse to be considered a social act, rather than a reflection of the inner mind.

Wiggins et al. (2009) go on to explain that discourse analysis is based upon the work of post-structuralist thinkers included Jacque Derrida and Michel Foucault and emphasises that the focus of this approach is upon discourse between people. Wiggins et al. suggest that discourse might refer to talking or writing, however, Van Dijk (1997) problematises the word ‘discourse’ itself, suggesting that there is no succinct definition for the term as it extends away from spoken and written words to include the ideas and philosophies behind concepts such as neo-liberal discourse. This acknowledgement of the imprecision associated with the word ‘discourse’ is echoed by Jorgenson and Phillips (2002) who give examples of common references to ‘medical discourse’ and ‘political discourse’. Indeed, during the course of this research, participants made reference to psychological discourses (particularly defence mechanisms) which have come into common usage. Jorgenson and Phillips conceptualise discourses as plural and which range across a variety of domains.

The topic of ‘discourse’ is explored further by Gee (2005) who discusses the concepts of ‘little d’ discourse, which refers to language being used in conversations and which is the discourse being examined in this research. Gee contrasts this with ‘Big D’ discourse which relates to the cultural discourse(s) of our history, our media, for example. These Big D discourses can be related to the theoretical concept of heteroglossia (discussed in section 2.11.1) and are drawn upon during little d discourse.

**3.10 Methods of discursive psychology**

It should be acknowledged that there are a wide range of theories, as well as tools and techniques available to researchers, which have been drawn upon for the current research. McNamee (2018) rebuts criticisms of constructionism from a group she refers to as ‘rampant relativists’ who suggest that, ‘anything goes’ when it comes to constructionism and research which rely upon techniques based upon this ontological stance.

**3.11 The selection of a discursive psychology approach**

The data for the current study has been analysed through the use of discursive psychology (Potter and Wetherell, 1987) which is one of the methodologies associated with discourse analysis. Wiggins and Potter (2017) cite Potter and Wetherell’s book, *Discourse and Social Psychology* (1987) as a pioneering work that facilitated the inclusion of discursive research into empirical journals. In this book, Potter and Wetherell emphasise that discourse is the main site for the co-production of meaning, whilst Wetherell (2001) conceptualises discourse as the building blocks used to create social life, and through which all experiences are understood. Wetherell also emphasises that discourse is a form of social action. Edwards (2005) also draws attention to discursive psychology’s association with social constructionism which makes it a suitable research paradigm for this investigation into how practitioners with differing roles perceive and construct issues relating to EBSA. This research considers the process of social construction in action as it looks at the creation of meaning and understanding between groups of practitioners as they negotiate an understanding of EBSA and their experiences of it.

Other methods of analysis were considered for this study, particularly the use of narrative analysis. Esin (2011) explains that narrative analysis focuses on the creation of meaning through the ordered stories that people create about their experiences and may analyse the ways that they are structured to create meanings. Like discursive psychology, this approach generally adopts a social constructionist epistemology. However, narrative approaches usually focus on the experiences of individuals whose views are gathered through an interview or a series of interviews and this would potentially have reduced the number of practitioner views that were sought in this research. Furthermore, although a narrative approach would have facilitated participants telling their stories, it would also have prevented practitioners gaining a potentially shared understanding of EBSA, which I felt was one of the advantages gained from the use of focus groups (Clarke and Braun, 2013).

As previously mentioned, discourse analysis is an umbrella term which takes several approaches including Foucauldian discourse analysis (FDA). FDA is a powerful approach to use when research focuses on the ways in which certain narratives gain social legitimacy at the expense of other narratives and examines how this process is related to power imbalances inherent within the sociopolitical context of society (Khan & MacEachen, 2021). However, this approach could have been problematic within the context of the current study which focuses on the construction and conceptualisation of EBSA amongst practitioners, rather than evaluating potential power differentials relating to preferred or marginalised narratives. It should also be noted that during focus groups, participants would often offer seemingly contradicting views at different points in the conversation, as acknowledged through Bakhtin’s theory of heteroglossia (Bakhtin, 1994) as discussed below. This may have caused further complications during the analysis as it could potentially require the researcher to judge which of the contrasting narratives discussed was the more preferred in relation to sociopolitical power imbalances.

It was felt that discursive psychology (Potter and Wetherell, 1987) has several advantages over these techniques in relation to this study as it focuses on language as social action and as a result facilitates consideration of what actions are being carried out by the words spoken during the discourse. Discursive psychology also makes use of interpretive repertoires (Edwards & Potter, 1992) which facilitate an acknowledgment of the social narratives which participants draw upon to perform these actions. This is similar to aspects of FDA discussed above but does not necessitate a judgement of which is the preferred narrative. Whilst analysing the constructions relating to EBSA, it was also important to select a method which facilitated access to analytical tools such as the discursive action model (Edwards & Potter, 1992) and the use of rhetorical constructions (Brueggemann, 1999) which could be used to demonstrate how actions were being performed by a speaker.

**3.12 Previous uses of discursive psychology**

Discursive psychology (DP) has been used widely by researchers to investigate various topics. For example, Wetherell and Potter (1988) used this approach in seminal research into the attitudes of white New Zealanders (Pakeha) towards indigenous Maori people. Previous research into attitudes had focussed on attempting to collect qualitative data through the using of scaling techniques. Dixon and Taylor (2015) point out that such attitudes were considered to be intrinsic, held within the individual(s) and analysed out of context. Through the use of DP, Potter and Wetherell were able to analyse the discourse of Pakeha in situ, focussing on the ways in which they used language to ensure their attitudes seemed reasonable and justifiable. By focusing on language that is ‘out-there’ in society, Potter and Wetherell were able to highlight the ways in which research participants were able to avoid blame for their attitudes. Moreover, Dixon and Taylor (2015) point out that using DP facilitated an examination of societal ideologies rather than mere expressions of personal points of view.

Edwards and Potter (1992) also demonstrated the usefulness of DP to challenge cognitive psychologists’ conceptualisation of memory as something which occurs inside of people’s minds and which can be studied and measured within an experimental laboratory. In this study, Edward’s and Potter focussed on the reporting of Chancellor Nigel Lawson’s comments to, and interactions with, the press in events leading to his resignation. However, Brown and Reavey (2015) criticise Edwards and Potter’s conceptualisation of memory as being solely negotiated through discourse and suggest that the article may have served to promote a plural conception of memory as either being solely a cognitive or solely a discursive issue which serves to alienate members of the psychological community. Instead, Brown and Reavey point towards a conceptualisation of memory as occurring in both the discursive and cognitive realms, impacted by a wide range of societal factors.

DP has also been used in studies relating to CYP, for example, Wilkinson (2014) used DP to investigate the identity constructions of a 14-year-old girl in a pupil referral unit in the UK. In this case study,Wilkinson analysed the discourse of the girl, Hannah and of two adults who work closely with Hannah, identifying five interpretive repertoires (Potter and Wetherell, 1987) used to construct Hannah’s identity. This research is novel as it not only analysed the discourse of people working with Hannah, considering their constructions of her identity, it also analysed Hannah’s own discourse and her own construction(s) of her identity which Wilkinson argues gave Hannah agency over the construction of her own identity. More recently, Babington (2023) used DP to investigate the experiences of four female students who had experienced EBSA. In this study, Babington used a variety of means to collect data, including two interviews and the creation of life charts in order to explore the narratives of the CYP relating to their attendance journey.

In each of these pieces of research, there is no claim to have discovered a single, pre-existing truth, but instead the analysis offers interpretations of texts and a range of possible meanings contained within. When using DP, these meanings are grouped into ‘interpretive repertoires’ which Wetherell (2015, pg.18) describes as, “practical resources, like building blocks, for fashioning meaning fitted to interactional concerns such as accountability and personal stake and interest.”

Wetherell suggests that these building blocks can be used by speakers to shape various interactional goals and create seemingly factual accounts. Wetherell acknowledges that these interpretive repertoires are not only culturally present but that they may also be inconsistent leading them to be used at different points within accounts in order to avoid immediate problems for the speaker. By using a DP approach to the analysis of data, researchers seek to identify the interpretive repertoires being used during the speech acts and the discussions that are occurring. By doing this, DP allows for not only an analysis of the discourse presented, but also an examination of the wider societal discourses available to research participants.

**3.12.1 Bakhtin’s theory of heteroglossia**

Bakhtin’s theory of heteroglossia (Bakhtin, 1994) posits the idea that disagreements and conflicts are inevitable in discourse as a result of the assimilation of discourses from a variety of sources within a culture or society. These various discourses are then used in order to express thoughts, concepts and ideas. When these various discourses are not fully aligned, there can appear to be disagreement within the discourse of a single person. A key feature of Bakhtin’s theories lies in highlighting the stresses and interactions between social and individual discourses. These interactions are complex, as they relate to multiple discourses and constructs which are assimilated intersubjectively but experienced by the individual.

Lemke (1988) discusses the ways in which the theories of Bakhtin lend themselves to studies with a social constructionist epistemology as they relate to the ways in which language is used to construct meaning based upon the social narratives of a particular time and culture. For example, Ryan and Johnson (2009) undertook a study using critical discourse analysis, informed by the theories of Bakhtin order to investigate the relationship between the social justice curriculum in Australian schools. In this study, a corpus of data generated through interviews with three 16 – 17-year-olds were analysed to consider how these young people negotiate their identities in relation to the social justice curriculum when compared to their identities outside of school. However, it could be argued that any study which acknowledges the multiplicity of narratives embedded within society can be understood through the lens of the theories of Bakhtin.

**3.12.2 The discursive action model**

Edwards and Potter (1993) discuss the ways in which people explain events through the theory of ‘attribution’ (referred to as causal attribution) in their conceptualisation of the Discursive Action Model (DAM). Through the DAM, Edwards and Potter put forward a set of nine principles which draw attention to features of speech including the ways in which people use discursive devices to present their narratives as facts. They also suggest that reports use rhetoric to undermine alternative constructions of events. The DAM’s nine principles are split into three overarching principles: Action; Fact and Interest and Accountability. The first of these highlights the importance of language as the primary means of social action, whilst ‘Fact and Interest’ refers to the means by which people manage their own interest within a narrative in order to present it as factual. This process includes ways in which accounts are organised to undermine possible alternatives, whilst ‘Accountability’ refers to the individual’s accountability for the constructions that they are creating.

Whilst introducing the DAM, Edwards and Potter highlight some of the devices and techniques used to construct ’facts’ during discourse. These include:

* The use of *vivid description* which gives the listener a sense of perceptual re-experience.
* The use of *narrative* – this links to the use of vivid description and makes the account more believable through contextual embedding.
* *Systematic vagueness*, which avoids giving enough detail for a listener to formulate a denial or repost.
* *Extreme case formulations,* Pomerantz (1986). This device makes the claim that a phenomena is extremely common or pervasive. For example, a claim that “everybody does it!” would be considered as extreme when applied to behaviours other than basic human necessities (such as breathing or eating).
* The *rhetoric of argument* is used when claims are constructed as a logical argument and are particularly used when attributing blame.
* *Consensus and corroboration* – this device makes accounts seem more factual as they give the impression that the version of events being constructed is agreed by a number of parties.

Edwards and Potter’s theory was later used and modified by Lamerichs and Molder (2011) to create a further iteration of the ‘Discursive Action Model’ which is designed to make practitioners aware of their own language whilst involved in the education and training of CYP in relation to their health and wellbeing. Lamerichs and Molder emphasise that their model is transferable to other areas of interest, whilst Te Molder (2015) emphasises the flexibility of the Discursive Action Method in the analysis of areas such as institutional talk and online talk.

**3.12.3 Rhetorical constructions in discourse**

In an article relating to jokes and their potential embodiment of racism, Weaver (2011) describes the use of rhetoric as, “the art of convincing”. Weaver argues that it is used to attempt to steer conversations in a particular direction and ultimately avoid ambivalence, whilst Brueggemann (1999) uses ‘Rhetorical Theory’ to study the rhetorical devices used to generate widely acceptable social constructions. During the course of the focus groups, various practitioners used rhetorical devices thereby creating socially acceptable constructions to share their experiences and generate understanding of EBSA. The devices used include rhetorical questions. Caponigro & Sprouse (2007) suggest that the power of rhetorical questions results from the answer being known to both the speaker and the addressee and therefore acts a means of establishing mutual understanding.

**3.13 Bronfenbrenner’s Ecological Systems Theory**

In order to help conceptualise and analyse the data gathered through the focus groups during this research, Bronfenbrenner’s Ecological Systems Theory of Human Development (1979,1986, 1999, 2005) was used. The model of this theory is often depicted as a diagram showing concentric circles with the child placed at the centre (see Appendix C). The layer closest to the child represents the microsystem, which refers to the child’s immediate environment, such as their family and school. The next layer is referred to as the mesosystem which is a representation of the communications between the settings within the microsystems, for example, conversations and discussions between family members and representatives of a school. The third layer of Bronfenbrenner’s model is referred to as the exosystem which consists of both informal and formal social entities which do not directly impact upon the child but which instead impact upon the microsystems. Exosystemic influences may include mass media, social media and local government. The fourth circle in Bronfenbrenner’s model represents the macrosystem, which represents the attitudes and ideologies within the society which the child is a part of. The final layer of Bronfenbrenner’s model, the chronosystem, was added in 1986. This system refers to changes which happen over time and may include ‘normative’ changes, such as starting school or leaving school, getting a job or getting married. These are in contrast to ‘non-normative’ changes such as a chronic illness or a pandemic. Although the relationships and interactions between these systems change over time, Bronfenbrenner suggests that a child’s development is optimised by compatible and co-operative interactions.

Bronfenbrenner’s theoretical model analyses the complex relationships which exist between a child and their physical and social environment. It also conceptualises the interactions that take place between environmental factors and the child as being of fundamental importance to the development of the child. Following the initial iteration of the theory (1979), Bronfenbrenner continued to update and amend the model until it achieved a “mature” form (Tudge, Mokrova, Hatfield &Karnik, 2009) which took into account proximal processes and prompted Bronfenbrenner to introduce the ‘Process-Person-Context-Time’ model to the theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1995, 2005). Through this model, Bronfenbrenner not only outlined the types of processes and interactions that would impact on a child’s development, he also emphasised the importance of the frequency of interaction.

The use of Bronfenbrenner’s theory has come under criticism from a number of quarters. For example, Tudge, Mokrova, Hatfield, & Karnik (2009) examined 25 papers which explicitly centralised the use of the Ecological Systems theory and found that 21 of them used outdated iterations of the model. Further criticism has come from Elliot and Davis (2020) who argue that Bronfenbrenner focuses too much on anthropomorphic factors and human systems at the expense of children’s relationships with the natural world which, they argue, is particularly important in the education of young children.

However, Bronfenbrenner’s model has been used in research relating to CYP in a number of fields. For example, in the field of health research, Hosek et al. (2008) used it to conceptualise the impact of systemic pressures on CYP who had recently been diagnosed with human immunodeficiency virus. Whilst in the field of education, Leonard (2011) used the model to conceptualise the impact of harmonious (and non-harmonious) systemic working practices on education whilst carrying out a historical survey / case study of an urban High school in Boston, USA. Leonard charts the historic ebb and flow of student development and uses Bronfenbrenner’s model to demonstrate the impact of wider social systems upon the school. More recently, O'Hagan, S., Bond, C., & Hebron, J. (2022) used Bronfenbrenner’s model to draw up the interview schedule whilst researching the experiences of three autistic girls who were reintegrated into school following experiences of EBSA. In another study, Neilson and Bond (2023) carried out a participatory enquiry with two autistic adolescent girls and identified themes which were then applied to Bronfenbrenner’s ecosystemic model, thereby highlighting systemic influences.

The decision to use Bronfenbrenner’s ecological systems theory to analyse the data is a result of several factors. Firstly, as outlined above, it has been used in recent research into areas linked to EBSA (Neilson and Bond, 2023) and therefore has a track record of being a useful tool for the conceptualisation and discussion of the data collected. Furthermore, whilst analysing the data and considering the most appropriate interpretive repertoires, it became evident that the use of such a theory would facilitate a clearer conceptualisation of the findings along with the interpretive repertoires in the present study.

As discussed previously in sections 2.6 and 2.7, research into the importance of school climate and of school-based relationships suggests that building strong relationships between pupils and school practitioners has a positive impact upon attendance (Pianta, Hamre & Allen, 2012; Van Eck et al., 2017; Wentzel, 2022). The data gathered in the current study could potentially have been analysed using a framework based around key aspects of school climate as conceptualised by Anderson (1982). However, the current data differs from any of those discussed in sections 2.6 and 2.7, which are all based on the views of CYP. It would be possible (and interesting) to gather the views of practitioners in relation to the school climate, but the data gathered for this study pointed towards wider social factors, rather than focusing on a particular aspect of either a school environment or even relationships between different practitioner groups. Instead, the use of Bronfenbrenner’s eco-systemic theory offered a more effective framework through which to analyse the evidence gathered.

**3.14 Procedures followed whilst carrying out this research**

**3.14.1 Data Collection – the use of focus groups**

This research has been undertaken using a qualitative approach, in line with the philosophical underpinnings and its focus on the understanding of practitioners in relation to their lived experiences of EBSA. Data was gathered by conducting a series of focus groups with practitioners who had dealings with CYP identified as experiencing EBSA during the last 12 months.

In order to gather the views of a range of practitioners, this research recruited participants from seven practitioner groups, including three teachers, four educational psychologists, a youth worker, two education welfare officers, a representative from alternative provisions and one from Learning Support Services. The participants responded to prompts (see Appendix B) which were designed to facilitate a discussion relating to EBSA and which also generated the possibility of creating a more agreed understanding of issues relating to EBSA across a range of practitioner groups. It is hoped that through the process of this dialogue and through the analysis of the discussions, a greater understanding will be generated of practitioner’s experiences, as well as sharing an understanding of the causes of EBSA and of the possible ways of helping CYP who exhibit EBSA.

**3.14.2 Sampling**

Clarke and Braun raise the issue of “heterogeneity or homogeneity” (Clarke and Braun, 2013). Heterogenous groups are made up of individuals from a variety of backgrounds and sub-groups and have the advantage of offering a wider range of views and experiences. Homogenous groups are made up of people from a shared background or sub-group and Clarke and Braun suggest that these focus groups create a more relaxed environment in which participants may share their views more freely. Clarke and Braun also suggest that it is important for the heterogeneity / homogeneity of a group to be identified through similarities and differences in their role for the purposes of the research.

Whilst undertaking this research, it was possible to undertake a series of four focus groups, two of which were homogenous (teachers and educational psychologists) whilst two groups were heterogenous and included a school attendance officer, a representative from virtual schools, a youth worker representative and a learning support worker. The representatives in each focus group were created opportunistically, according to the availability of the participants. Clarke and Braun (2013) suggest that smaller focus groups are easier to manage and allow all participants the opportunity to share their views. For the purposes of this study, the suggested size of the focus groups was limited to five participants. However, due to uptake, the actual number of participants in each group varied from two (Mixed Focus Group 2) to four (Educational Psychologists and Mixed Focus Group 1). The actual number of participants in each focus group is detailed in Table 3.1 (see below). Each focus group lasted for approximately thirty minutes.

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Title of Focus Group** | **Number of participants** | **Practitioners involved** | **Date and venue** |
| Teacher / Pilot focus group | 3 | Qualified secondary school teachers.  T1: Male  T2: Male  T3: Female | 19/07/2023  Online (Google Meet) |
| Educational Psychologists | 4 | Qualified educational psychologists (all female). They are referred to as: EP1, EP2, EP3, EP4. | 08/11/2023  Local authority building |
| Mixed Focus Group 1 | 4 | P1: Youth worker (male)  P2: Headteacher of alternative provision (female)  P3: Learning Support worker (female)  P4: Local Authority attendance officer (male) | 20/11/2023  Local authority building |
| Mixed Focus Group 2 | 2 | P1: Virtual School representative (female)  P2: Local Authority Attendance Officer (male) | 24/11/2023  Online (Google Meet) |

**Table 1:** The above table reflects the participants for each focus groups. The first group contained teachers, the second contained four educational psychologists, the third group contained four practitioners from a variety of roles and the fourth focus group contained two practitioners from different roles.

The focus group of teachers consisted of practitioners with a minimum of five years of experience. The group of EPs varied in experience with one practitioner having practiced for over twenty years, whilst another was recently qualified. The other two members of the group had a minimum of five years experience. The practitioners in Mixed Focus Groups 1 and 2 both consisted of experienced practitioners with a minimum of five years experience in their current professional role. The gender of the participants is stated in the above table to enable the reader to understand the potential identity continuums that the researcher may have negotiated whilst carrying out this research. This issue is revisited in the discussion of researcher identity (see 5.15).

**3.14.3 Recruiting participants**

Prior to the approaching of potential research participants, ethical approval for the study was sought from The University of Sheffield’s ethical panel. Once this was granted, a convenience sampling approach was adopted in which participants were recruited by emailing schools and members of departments who were potentially interested in engaging with the research, in an authority in the North West of England. There followed a process of ‘snowballing’ (Noy, 2008). During this process some of the contacted parties expressed an interest in participating in the research whilst others either forwarded the information about the research to colleagues or suggested further participants who I might wish to contact. Initially, some of the people contacted in this way were heads of their department who either disseminated the information to other members of their department or expressed an interest in taking part in the study themselves. It is important to note that potential participants received the researcher’s contact details in this way and there was no need to report back to heads of department to accept or decline the offer of participating in the study. In this way any potentially coercive pressures were avoided.

Once potential participants had responded by email, they were provided with a letter which outlined the purpose of the study and the criteria for participation (see Appendix D).

In order to be eligible for inclusion in this research, participants had to self-identify as being:

1. in a role that involves working with children to help aid or facilitate their education.
2. experienced working with at least one person experiencing EBSA within the last 2 years.

The letter sent to participants highlighted their right to withdraw their data, as suggested by the British Psychological Society (PBS) guidelines (2021). In this event, the participant’s data and the data of that focus group would be destroyed. The letter also explained how data would be recorded and stored and informed participants that they would not receive any form of renumeration for participating in the research. A participant consent form (see Appendix E) was also sent at the same time as the letter and was returned by participants prior to them engaging in the focus group discussions.

At the start of each focus group, participants were reminded verbally that their evidence would be given anonymously and reminded that the anonymity of fellow participants should be respected. Finally, participants were also reminded of their right to withdraw their data for up to 48 hours after the focus group was completed and informed that should they choose to withdraw their data, the data would be destroyed.

**3.14.4 Ethical considerations when carrying out research online**

Throughout the process of carrying out the research, consideration was given to the British Psychological Society’s (BPS) four ethical principles: respect, competence, responsibility and integrity (Oates et al. 2021). Consideration was also given to the ethical guidance outlined by the Health and Care Professions Council (Health and Care Professions Council, 2024). Two of the focus groups were held online, using Google Meet, and therefore it was important to consider any ethical implications of this format. Roberts (2015) highlights the importance of ensuring that full consent is given by participants, regardless of whether it is an online environment or not. Roberts also discusses issues including questions relating to adopting a pseudo identity. However, the subject of EBSA was not considered sensitive enough to warrant the use of pseudonyms and participants were already familiar with each other in a practitioner capacity.

**3.14.5 Forming the focus groups**

In order to ensure that the BPS ethical principle of respect (Oates et al. 2021) was kept to the fore during this process the participants who eventually formed the mixed focus groups were offered a choice of dates and times and were allocated places according to their preference. At this point it should be acknowledged that there was a possibility of participants with significant differences in their status being allocated to the same focus group, as described by Stewart and Shamdasani (2014). Fortunately, this did not become an issue as the participants in each group were of a similar status within their individual practitioner group and this occurred naturally as a result of the preference that they expressed regarding the dates and times of their focus groups. For example, the participants in each of the mixed focus groups had equitable status with each other, in both groups. The teachers who participated in the pilot group were all of an equitable status (experienced subject teachers). There was potential within the EP focus group for a power inequality to emerge as three of the EPs were experienced whilst the fourth member of the group was recently qualified. However, this fourth member of the group had recently had articles published regarding EBSA which potentially ensured that her views were treated with equity by other, more experienced members of the group.

In the event of power imbalances being evident whilst planning the focus groups, it may have been necessary to offer alternative dates and times to participants to avoid such inequalities impacting upon the data. In the event, each focus group was preceded by a reminder that participants should take any steps necessary to look after their own well-being, including taking a break from the focus group, or leaving the group if they felt the need. Participants were also reminded of the importance of listening respectfully to all of the views shared, in line with the BPS’s ethical principal of respect (Oates et al. 2021).

It should also be acknowledged that the second mixed focus group only contained two participants, which could be considered as a less than adequate number of participants to form a focus group. The reason for this was that one participant did not attend the focus group at the date and time arranged. However, although literature warns against having too large a focus group to avoid social loafing (Williams and Karau,1991), to the best of the researcher’s knowledge, there are no guidelines stipulating a minimum number of participants for a focus group. A review of focus group procedures was undertaken by O. Nyumba, Wilson, Derrick & Mukherjee, (2018). This study reviewed 170 articles which used focus groups as a means of gathering data and found that the mean number of participants in each focus group was 7. However, this study is significant as it calls for greater detail relating to the reporting of methodologies in articles which make use of focus groups, including the reporting of the sample size and of the number of sessions held.

**3.14.6 Recording and transcription of data**

The focus groups were recorded using a data recording device or Google Meet software in the case of online focus groups. Each focus group lasted for approximately 30 minutes. The recordings were then transcribed line by line (Appendix F).

Arksey and Knight (1999) suggest that it takes approximately one hour to transcribe five minutes of focus group discussion, whilst Braun and Clarke (2013) suggest that it actually takes much longer, depending on variables such as the quality of the recording, the clarity and speed of the speech and the speed of the typist. Although Jefferson notation was not used, lines were numbered and are referred to by number in the analysis. In line with Clarke and Braun’s suggestions of what make a good transcript, all utterances were recorded, including non-semantic sounds (the erms and umms). It was important to ensure that there was clarity regarding who was speaking and also to ensure that there were no corrections made to the discourse to reflect what a participant may have meant. These transcriptions were then analysed using discursive psychology (Potter & Wetherell, 1987).

**3.14.7 Data collection and research procedure**

A pilot focus group was held with a group of three teachers on the understanding that their data may be included in the final research. The pilot study was carried out in order that I could familiarise myself with focus group methodologies and gain practical experience of running a focus group. It was also an opportunity to evaluate whether the three questions designed as prompts for the focus groups elicited discussions which related to the research question: How do practitioners with differing roles perceive the problem of EBSA?

As a result of carrying out the pilot study I gained confidence using this methodology. It also underscored the importance of ensuring that all participants had an opportunity to voice their opinions equitably, as the participants in this group adopted a practice of taking extended turns which could potentially take the conversation away from a salient point that another member of the group wished to make. However, because the data gathered from this focus group was rich and informative, and because the data gathered did not inform significant changes to the design, it was decided to include it in the final analysis.

Each focus group began with an introduction regarding the theme of the discussion (a discussion regarding EBSA). Participants were informed that the researcher would not be part of the discussion and were asked to consider the following three questions which were placed upon a computer screen for the participants to refer to during the course of their discussion:

* *Do you think that there is a good awareness across practitioner groups of the factors which cause EBSA?*
* *Do you find that there is a good awareness across practitioner groups of appropriate responses to EBSA?*
* *Do you find that different practitioners have a unified understanding of EBSA?*

It should be noted that the same prompts were used for all focus groups, including the pilot group.

Before the discussions began, there was a reminder of ethical considerations, including the participant’s right to withdraw their data for up to 48 hours after the focus group had taken place, in line with the participant information letter that was sent to participants before they participated in the research (see Appendix D). It was also important to inform participants of the selected method of analysis (discursive psychology) and for the participants to be aware that the researcher would not be joining in with the discussion. Participants were then shown the discussion prompts above and their understanding of the prompts was verbally checked.

**3.14.8 Analysis of the data gathered from focus groups**

Following transcription, the data was analysed using discursive psychology (Potter and Wetherell, 1987). As outlined in section 2.12 above, discursive psychology is a form of discourse analysis which takes discourse as the building blocks of social life (Wetherell, 2001). During this analysis, discourse is viewed as performing social actions such as creating narratives around events or positioning groups of people in specific ways. Whilst carrying out the analysis process, attention was given to the interpretive repertoires created during the focus group conversations and to finding interpretive repertoires which occur consistently in each of the four focus groups. Recall that Wetherell (2015) describes interpretive repertoires as building blocks which fashion meaning to take account of interactional concerns.

In order to identify the interpretive repertoires in this current study, the methodology outlined by Potter and Wetherell (1987) was followed to analyse the gathered data. This methodology is referred to in Appendix G. Initially, the data was subjected to open coding, defined by Strauss and Corbin (2004) as a process of breaking down data and subjecting it to close examination to identify phenomenon which are then categorised. Examples of the coding tables used can be found in Appendix H. During this process, potentially salient points were highlighted and sorted into relevant categories, as outlined by Potter and Wetherell (1987), Potter (2004a), Pack, Tuffin & Lyons (2016). Potter and Wetherell emphsise that the process of coding is separate from the process of analysis and is used to reduce the amount of data gathered into smaller, parcels of information. To do this, each focus group transcription was analysed with regard to references made to the study’s question:

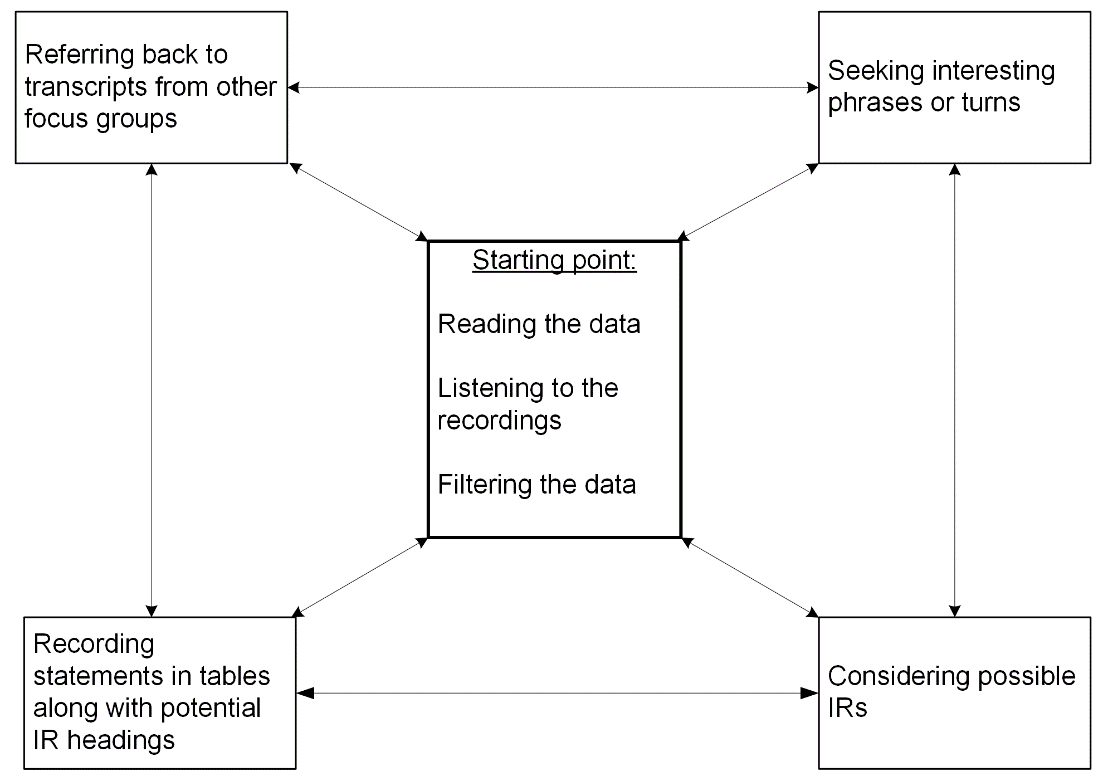
How practitioners with differing roles perceive the problem of EBSA?

In line with the suggestion of Potter and Wetherell (1987), there was a process going back and forth between coding and analysis until the most salient data was recognised as the analysis was refined. The coding process was repeated with categories being added, removed, merged and redefined.

Potter and Wetherell (1987) emphasise that there is no single way to carry out discourse analysis and contrast the process with those quantitative methodologies which they conceptualise as recipes that can be followed to produce results (pg. 167). Potter and Wetherell also explain that the phenomenon which is to be the focus of the study may not be obvious at the start of the process but instead materialises as a result of interacting with the data and attempting interpretations (pg. 167). They also emphasise that there is a cyclical process that takes place, moving between analysis, coding and recoding. Figure 1 below was developed by the researcher to represent this cyclical process.

Figure 1: *The Cycle of Coding and Analysis*

**Reflections on an iterative and reflective research process**



Through this process, four separate but interconnected interpretive repertoires (Wetherell, 2015) were identified. These are introduced below:

1. Schools as sites of conflict
2. Conflicting responses from practitioners
3. Conflict between systems
4. Time as a concept which provoked conflict

An example of how an interpretive repertoire was formed stems from dialogue regarding the pressures on school. This was a central organising concept which was expressed in a variety of forms including *conflict between school and pupil, confusion regarding where to allocate resources* and *conflict between schools and parents* These interpretive repertoires were then supported with quotations from across the four focus groups which were revisited repeatedly.

Further analysis of the data was undertaken using the Discursive Action Model (DAM) (Potter and Edwards, 1993) and the techniques used by participants to construct their accounts were highlighted.

For the purposes of this analysis, each group is discussed and analysed in turn and the overarching interpretive repertoires are discussed. These intra group interpretive repertories are then compared in the Discussion.

**Chapter 4 Data Analysis**

**4.1 Chapter overview**

In this chapter, the data collected from each of the four focus groups is examined. As outlined in the previous chapter, a coding process took place in order to reduce the volume of data collected, in line with the suggestions of Potter and Wetherell (1987). As can be seen from these interpretive repertoires, the discourse of practitioners relating to EBSA was used to create conceptualisations of conflict relating to EBSA. These conflicts were either descriptions of conflicts which they saw as arising during their practice or, on occasion, disagreements between practitioners during the course of the conversations.

This initial coding led to the identification of four main interpretive repertoires:

* Schools as sites of conflict
* Conflicting responses from practitioners
* Conflict between systems
* Time as a concept which provoked conflict

These interpretive repertoires are used as headings to further analyse the discourse of each focus group.

The data gathered from focus groups are discussed in the following order:

* Teachers Focus Group consisting of three experienced teachers (more than five years experience). Two teachers were male and one was female.
* Educational Psychologists Focus Group consisting of four female EPs with a range of experience. One EP was recently qualified, two had more than 10 years experience and one had more than 20 years experience.
* Mixed Focus Group 1 consisted of four practitioners: asenior youth worker (male); a headteacher of alternative provision (female); a Learning Support worker (female) and a Local Authority Attendance Officer (male).
* Mixed Focus Group 2 consisted of two participants: a Virtual School representative (female) and a Local Authority Attendance Officer (male).

Further information regarding the participants in each focus group is given in Table 3.1

Throughout this analysis, the discourse from the focus groups will be presented in the form of tables. Passages are **emboldened** to draw the reader’s attention to particular points which will be discussed further. During the process of the analysis, the focus is placed upon speech as an action and is not intended as an analysis of any participants’ inner thoughts or attitudes.

Literature relating to EBSA, discussed in the literature review, emphasises the importance of relationships and relational approaches to promote school attendance and minimise the potential impact of anxiety on CYP. However, whilst analysing the data, the theme of positive relationships within schools did not emerge as a significant topic for discussion across the four focus groups and was therefore not brought forward as an interpretive repertoire.

**4.2 Discussion of identified Interpretive Repertoires**

**4.2.1 Schools as sites of conflict**

Throughout the focus groups, participants spoke of schools as pressurised environments where conflict between systems (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, 1986, 1999, 2005) and people were common. The pressures on schools were recognised by each of the focus groups and the phraseology and metaphors used to discuss schools were interlaced with images of conflict. These conflicts included interpersonal conflicts, such as those between teachers and pupils or teachers and parents, and systemic conflicts, resulting from potentially opposing pressures placed upon schools, such as the need to have high attendance figures and the need to look after pupils’ mental health. Through their discourse, participants suggested that these pressures are placed in schools and educational systems by bodies such as the Department for Education (DfE) and the Office for Standards in Education, Children’s Services and Skills (OFSTED), which can be conceptualised as being part of Bronfenbrenner’s exosystem. Examples of potentially opposing pressures include the introduction of Mental Health Champions (2015) and school OFSTED inspections, which were introduced1992 – 1993. It is worth noting that the pressures placed on school practitioners by OFSTED have recently been highlighted through the death of headteacher Ruth Perry (Sinmaz, 2023).

**4.2.2 Conflicting responses from practitioners**

Researchers including Potter and Wetherell (1987), Rossiter (2005), Ryan & Johnson (2009) acknowledge that respondents can make seemingly conflicting statements regarding a topic during the same speech. Bakhtin (1994) suggests that such conflicting statements can be explained by the theory of heteroglossia as discussed in the previous chapter.

During the four focus groups, individual participants can be seen to assume seemingly conflicting positions in relation to the subject matter at different points in the conversation. There were also examples of times when conflicting views were expressed and a process of attempting to negotiate an agreed understanding was undertaken – an exploration of the possible meanings which the group could potentially agree on.

**4.2.3 Conflict between systems**

As previously discussed, Bronfenbrenner (1979, 1986, 1999, 2005) conceptualised the experiences of CYP through an ecological systems theory which is often depicted as a series of concentric circles and which seeks to explain the multisystemic influences which impact upon children’s lives. Throughout the focus groups, reference was made to pressures and conflicts at multiple systemic levels, including the microsystem, exosystem and the macrosystem.

**4.2.4 Time as a concept which provoked conflict**

Throughout the four focus groups, reference was also made to conflicts which relate to ‘time’, including conflicts which arose because of a lack of time available to help CYP, and changes which have been observed over a period of time, such as pre and post COVID-19 pandemic. In Bronfenbrenner’s model, the chronosystem is the outermost concentric layer and relates to changes which take place during the period of a lifetime. Such changes include significant life events, such as the pandemic, and the impact of these events upon the child.

In each focus group, the interpretive repertoire of time was discussed at multiple points. The amount of time taken for recognition of the needs of CYP was discussed as well as changes the practitioners have noticed over a relatively short period of time, pre and post COVID-19 pandemic. There were also discussions which related to how much time practitioners had to give to anxious and vulnerable CYP. The constraints upon time as a commodity were again marked with the discourse of conflict.

**Analysis of Teacher Focus Group**

**4.3 Teacher Focus Group Overview**

The teacher group consisted of three secondary teachers from the same school who were familiar with each other. The teachers came from two different departments and consisted of two males and one female teacher. All of the teachers were experienced, having at least five years of experience and two of the teachers had more than ten years of experience. The teachers included in the focus group are referred to as T1, T2 and T3. One feature of note relating to this teacher focus group was the length of the turns that each teacher took. Rather than a free-flowing discussion, much of the interaction could be better characterised as a series of long statements from each of the teachers.

**4.3.1 Schools as sites of conflict**

During the course of the teachers’ conversation, attention was drawn to several features of schools and school systems which positioned them as sites of conflict. These conflicts were frequently characterised as being between teachers and pupils and the perceived causes of the conflicts were discussed, including the inflexibility of the education system, the narrow focus on academic subjects and relying on a regimented timetable for the delivery of lessons. Added to this, the teachers were the only group to discuss the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic in any detail. The teachers were also the only group to discuss pupils being in school but not going into lessons as in the example below.

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| 29 | T1: I mean, I would definitely say that I think that in, especially in classrooms as well, |
| 30 | that that **avoidance of going to classrooms** before, before the pandemic it was very |
| 31 | Irregularly. You know, this is your classroom. **This is where you go in**. And it was, like I say, |
| 32 | Irregular for you not to go in, whereas now, there’s more of a well, “who’s taking the |
| 33 | Class? Who’s in there? Well, no I’m not going into the classroom” or, even with things like |
| 34 | Pressures of, of, **“if I’ve been at home, and I can do what I want,** I can go get a snack when |
| 35 | **I want, I can go get lunch when I want, or I can do what I want,”** and then all of a sudden |
| 36 | You’re being then tied into a school building where you’re then very regimented. You |
| 37 | have to be here at this time, your lesson’s at this time, your break and lunch time’s at this |
| 38 | time. I suppose that inside of pupil’s heads, especially if they’ve got erm **potentially some** |
| 39 | **Anxiety** **issues, or mental health issues** that they’re going. At that pressure building up, |
| 40 | they’re going, “Well, I’m used to doing this when I want,” and now you’re saying, “no,” |

**Table 2:** Differences in the construction of pupil behaviour pre and post COVID-19 pandemic. The phrases in bold are discussed below.

In line 29, T1 uses the word “*avoidance”* to describe the behaviour that is being described, placing the source of the problem within the CYP and attributing a choice to the CYP. T1 then uses impersonation (Prior, Hengst, Roozen & Shipka, 2006), taking on the voices of both the teachers and the CYP in order to add weight to the points being made. At this early point in the conversation, T1 describes CYP being requested to go into a classroom pre-pandemic and they would conform to the request. This request is described in non-confrontational language, “*This is where you go in*,” which reduces the amount of conflict that is reported pre-pandemic. To act out this interaction, T1 assumes the voice of a teacher.

T1 contrasts this by impersonating the voice of a CYP post pandemic. The language used emphasises the assertiveness of CYP, who are seen as having become used to choosing their own behaviour during lock-downs, “*I can do what I want, I can get a snack when I want*.” T1 creates a narrative which attributes a sense of indignation amongst CYP when this freedom of choice is replaced with the return to school which is, “*regimented.*” This indignation is once again described by an impersonation of the child’s voice, “*I’m used to doing this when I want.*” In line 39, T1 acknowledges that anxiety or poor mental health would exacerbate the indignation of the CYP rather than acknowledging that anxiety factors are central when considering EBSA. The language used during T1’s turn is also suggestive of militaristic terms, as the school is described as, “*very regimented.*”

T1’s turn in the conversation is extended and lasts for twenty lines, uninterrupted. In the next part, T1 once again uses impersonation to position the CYP as empowered and making choices about their attendance.

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| 41 | and therefore the easy answer for me is well**, if I just don’t go into that classroom, or** |
| 42 | **erm, I won’t have those issues because then I’m not going to have to ask you to.. can I go** |
| 43 | **the toilet or can I go out, stand outside, or even it’s where they’ve been in a social circle** |
| 44 | at home and they’re not used to meeting new people, all of a sudden to being in a large |
| 45 | school such as us, the pressure of being in the classroom with potentially people that |
| 46 | they don’t like, where they can’t necessarily quickly get away from, if it’s going to say, the |
| 47 | teacher goes then right, you’re going to go down as truancy and then puts an extra |
| 48 | anxietal problems on themselves that they can avoid if they just don’t turn up to class or |
| 49 | Don’t turn up to school. |

**Table 3:** An example of a teacher using impersonation as defined by Prior, Hengst, Roozen & Shipka (2006).

In this extract, T1 completes their narrative explanation of the difference between CYP pre and post pandemic. CYP make the choice to stay away from the highly regimented school because of a number of factors, including meeting new people, being with people that they dislike and avoiding confrontation with authority figures (teachers). This narrative is suggestive of a recognition of heterogenous causes of EBSA and reflects the causes proposed by Elliot (1999, 2019) as T1 suggests that these multiple facets can be initiated both in the home (having the freedom to create their own timetable) and / or in school.

During the course of the teachers’ conversation, there are further examples of schools as sites of conflict with students. In the following excerpt, T2 suggests that working flexibly with CYP could promote better outcomes for them.

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| 214 | that we possibly can do. But if you’ve got a student that actually, he knows he wants to |
| 215 | be a brick layer. He’s gonna do that, that’s where he will thrive. **Yet we’re making him** sit |
| 216 | **through 4, 5 years of, of education, teaching him about World War 2. And he’s not** |
| 217 | Interested, he’s not gonna turn up. Whereas if we can actually get the curriculum that is |
| 218 | More kind of erm, **personalised for that students, then that’s when they do actually, they** |
| 219 | **Probably would want to be there a little bit more. They would, they would thrive in that** |
| 220 | **Role and then they would actually help them, maybe take that next step like you** |
| 221 | Said (T3). Because they do, obviously, if they’re not in school, they’re struggling. But if |
| 222 | Weren’t in school, but were doing something else that would then help them be |
| 223 | Successful in post 16, then that would also be better in the long term for that child as |
| 224 | Well and I don’t think this one size fits all curriculum of academic erm achievement for |
| 225 | All is, is the right way, personally. And think like, as teachers, erm, we all try and make it |
| 226 | As relevant to the students as we can. But, ultimately, pen and paper isn’t for everyone is |
| 227 | It? |
| 228 | PAUSE. T1: I mean, I’ll second that. |

**Table 4:** Teacher 2’s rhetorical construction of a narrative relating to problems with the current National Curriculum.

In this extract, T2 constructs a personalised narrative for CYP making a choice not to attend school – namely that the curriculum is not relevant to them. T2 creates a narrative which attributes blame to the current education system, rather than teachers, as the thing that ensures CYP who are not in school are, “*struggling.*” Reference is made to the academic nature of the curriculum and how this can exclude some CYP, “*ultimately, pen and paper isn’t for everyone is it?*” Instead T2 creates an alternative narrative in which a curriculum which is personalised to the interests of students is available to facilitate success for these CYP. By finishing with a question, T2 invites agreement from the other teachers, a request for affiliation and alignment (Steensig, 2022) which is provided by T1.

T1 then goes on to expand upon the themes raised by T2.

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| 259 | So, so almost like you kinda, wanna have a er erm a moulded approach to the actual |
| 260 | Reason why we’re in education, of erm, what’s best for the actual pupil and erm trying to |
| 261 | Work with their mental state, and work with their outcomes and try to get, not go too far |
| 262 | One way, not go too far the other. We’re trying to work it together with the pupil. You |
| 263 | Know, you’re coming in, you’re doing your English or maths or these set skills, and then |
| 264 | Maybe have a college course, ‘coz if, I think quite a few of them, if you had that approach |
| 265 | Then **some of the reasons behind their refusal to come into school**, they, you know, in |
| 266 | Their head they could reason it. Oh, if I do this, then, you know, I, I, I could do this which |
| 267 | Is beneficial for me. Because I mean, I’ve taught quite a few people who they’re at |

**Table 5:** Showing teachers promoting a flexible approach to working with CYP.

As with the previous excerpt, this information is given during an extended turn, lasting 31 lines. Lewis and Miller (2011) discuss the use of longer / extended turns in their case study of an EP’s interaction with a parent. Lewis and Miller were analysing the use of institutional discourse in meetings and highlighted that the use of extended turns can be viewed as an attempt to exert power or leadership over an interaction.

The extended turn shown in the tables above, initially outlines the positive impact of a mixed placement (with the CYP attending both school and college) on the attendance of a specific pupil. T1 then returns to their earlier attribution in which schools are positioned as inflexible, which is in contrast to their idea of a, “*moulded approach.*” In this way, T1 positions themselves as being constricted by the systemic school environment in which they work.

T1 then goes onto agree with T2 regarding the potential benefits of a more flexible approach, including the removal of some of the barriers to pupils’ attendance by facilitating a clear understanding of the benefits of attending school. In the above extract, T1 also implies that there currently exists an imbalance of power in the relationship between schools and CYP which could be addressed through more collaborative approach to working. T1 uses a list (Edwards and Potter, 1992) to create the features of a more ideal school which has less of a focus on academic achievement. This co-produced model of education would stop things from going, “*too far one way or the other.*” By implication, currently ‘things’ are too far one way. This is a contrast to their earlier characterisation of pupils being too empowered (see above) and making the choice to not attend lessons which reminds us again of the potential for participants to contradict themselves during the course of a conversation (Potter and Wetherell, 1982; Rossiter,2005; Ryan & Johnson, 2009).

**4.3.2 Conflicting responses from practitioners**

As previously noted, the participants in this focus group took extended turns which made analysing the data for agreements and disagreements challenging. This can be construed as an attempt to assert control over a conversation (Lewis and Miller, 2011). However, one area in which there was disagreement was regarding the effectiveness of the interventions currently in place in the school to help CYP who are having difficulties with attendance, including EBSA.

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| 59 | T3: Yeah, no, maybe so also there is some risk factors that might increase the risk of EBSA |
| 60 | but actually when just looking at the info, **there’s a lot of things that school can support** |
| 61 | **in overcoming those factors that erm, that might lead to EBSA**. So, I know that our cohort |
| 62 | is really huge , **we have a wonder SEN team**, erm, with people, student leaders who are |
| 63 | about like, well-being of students. **We have designated anti-bullying co-ordinators**, so |
| 64 | Actually overcoming them, there’s… I think that there’s more.. opportunities in school to |
| 65 | Overcome those factors than they would have should they refuse to go into school in the |
| 66 | first place. |
| 67 | T2: Yeah. |
| 68 | T3: So… |

**Table 6:** Showing teacher creating a positive rhetorical construction of in school support.

In this extract, T3 introduces the topic of in school support for CYP exhibiting signs of EBSA. T3 makes a positive attribution of power to schools saying that there is a lot in place at their current school to help with this issue. T3 then goes on to use a list (Edwards and Potter, 1992) to create a strong case for this attribution. T3 also praises the “*wonder SEN team*” who are positioned as able to focus on the well-being of students and therefore help them. T3 finishes this with an explanation of her view – that CYP will do better coming into school because there is support available to them there.

Initially T2 appears to agree with this narrative, however, T2 then interrupts T3 before she can add to her views and changes the direction of the conversation.

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| 69 | T2: The only thing that I’d say though erm, I think as a school there’s only so much that |
| 70 | We can do because looking at some of these risk factors, and **the things like the traumas** |
| 71 | **and the ACEs** that the students have gone through, I don’t think, er, I know that I don’t |
| 72 | feel qualified to kind of like, coach a student through something that’s been a past |
| 73 | trauma. And then just **hearing stories about students who are on CAMHS** waiting lists for |
| 74 | ridiculous amounts of time. That’s not gonna help. There isn’t the, for me there isn’t the |
| 75 | funding in the back end of stuff. That’s not happening outside of school that will help |
| 76 | them to get them back into school. So, we can say as much as we want, though I can |
| 77 | **understand that, obviously the pandemic didn’t help as well with like domestic violence** |
| 78 | and all the things that they might have seen with them not being in school – it’s just that |
| 79 | I think their traumas and their ACES and all that kind of stuff, erm, but, I’m not sure what, |
| 80 | obviously as a school, **we can try and help them as best we can, but I personally don’t** |
| 81 | **feel qualified to be able to coach somebody through that**. Whereas, somebody who’s |
| 82 | psychologist and… would be able to but there just isn’t the funding out there even that |
| 83 | needs to drastically change, otherwise we’re gonna be in this never-ending loop of a |
| 84 | student that’s been missing school for so long or been avoiding everything for so long |
| 85 | that then becomes a normal and it’s gonna become even harder to flip on its way, er, flip |
| 86 | on its’ head and go back to how it would have been. |
| 87 | T1: Yeah, I agree with that. I think as well, it’s the other two issues, the time and the |

**Table 7:** Showing rhetorical devices used by teachers to alter the course of a narrative and emphasise the scale of problems encountered.

In this excerpt, T2 initially suggests that they have a small correction to add to the narrative of capability that T3 initiates, “*the only thing I’d say though.*” However, they use a range of rhetorical devices to change the direction of the narrative. In line 71, T2 refers to ACEs a technical term used to refer to adverse childhood experiences (e.g. Brockie et al., 2015; Bellis et al., 2018). The use of this technical phrase adds weight to the alternative social narrative that T2 is creating. T2 then goes on to present an alternative list (Edwards and Potter, 1992) of several exosystemic problem areas, including CAMHS waiting lists, a lack of funding, the COVID-19 pandemic and domestic violence which are used to attribute helplessness to schools and teachers in helping CYP with EBSA, “*I personally don’t feel qualified.*” During this passage, T2 also uses extreme case formulation (Pomerantz, 1986) to emphasise the extreme nature of the problems - funding needs to change “*drastically*” in order to avoid, *“a never-ending loop.*” The sign that T2 has successfully moved the narrative away from one of positivity and empowerment to one of helplessness is signalled by T1’s response, “*Yeah, I agree with that.*”

**4.3.3 Conflict between systems**

During the course of their conversations, the teachers discussed wider systemic pressures and made attributions suggesting that these pressures have a direct impact on their roles as teachers, and on the CYP that they teach. Many of the pressures have been discussed when examining schools as sites of conflict and whilst examining the conflicting responses from the school practitioners. However, it is of interest to highlight the exosystemic pressures that the teachers refer to during their discussions.

**4.3.4 Funding**

During the discussion, the teachers mention the current lack of funding for schools. For example, in the extract discussed previously in the section (Conflicting Responses from Practitioners) T2 refers to funding on two separate occasions (lines 69 – 86). In response, T1 continues to discuss funding issues, suggesting that increased funding could be used to pay for extra help to get CYP to the classroom.

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| 93 | going, it could be quite difficult to… you can’t just go outside the class and try and coach |
| 94 | Them in because then you’ve then got all your other pupils in the class. So it’s almost like |
| 95 | **You need that extra funding, extra support of somebody who’s maybe their caseworker** |
| 96 | in schools saying, I’ll bring you down, I’ll go with you to the classroom. I’ll… say they feel |

**Table 8:** Showing teachers constructing a narrative relating to additional support for CYP in schools.

In this excerpt, T1 attributes their own inability to *“coach”* children into class to time pressures and explains that extra staff are needed to meet this need – effectively conceding that they are not currently able to meet this need and attributing this to a lack of funding.

**4.3.5 The impact of COVID-19**

As mentioned previously, the teachers were the only focus group to discuss the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on EBSA. Referring to Bronfenbrenner’s ecosystemic model (1986) we can conceptualise this as belonging to the chronosystem – events that take place during a lifetime. Interestingly, COVID-19 ‘book-ends’ the teachers discussion as it is mentioned in line 5 by T1 and again in lines 275- 288 by T3 and T2.

As we have seen, initially T1 uses COVID-19 to attribute a change in attitudes to CYP, contrasting their pre and post COVID-19 attitudes towards school and attending lessons (see Schools as Sites of Conflict above). Later, T3 returns to the impact of COVID-19 and uses it to (re)introduce the concept of the need for greater flexibility within the education system to meet the needs of CYP.

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| 277 | Might be wishful thinking, if in the future. Actually, if we’re like admitting or |
| 278 | **Acknowledging the fact** that actually some people’s productivity and flexibility was met |
| 279 | During COVID, to still enable the jobs to happen, why can’t there be flexibility for some |
| 280 | students? So I know that some countries, you have different pathways, erm. I was talking |

**Table 9:** Showing the use of economic discourse to construct an argument for greater flexibility

In this extract, T3 makes reference to economic discourse, “*productivity and flexibility*” in order to add weight to the assertion that more flexibility is possible in relation to education as it was made possible for workers during the pandemic. This suggestion can be linked to that which was expressed earlier in the discussion about the need for greater flexibility in relation to the curriculum for CYP and of the benefits of co-producing a more bespoke curriculum for CYP who find difficulty achieving success in more academic subject areas (see Schools as Sites of Conflict). This approach would also help to avoid the conceptualisation of schools as, “*regimented*”.

**4.3.6 Time as a concept which provokes conflict**

The interpretive repertoire of time as a concept which provokes conflict was also present during the Teacher Focus Group’s discussion. As we have already seen, the events relating to the COVID-19 pandemic can be related to Bronfenbrenner’s chronosystem (Bronfenbrenner, 1986). However, throughout the conversation, the concept of time is cited as one which provokes conflict.

**4.3.7 Time as a limited resource**

In the following extract, we can see the teachers discussing the limited amount of time that they have available to help CYP with the attendance issues being discussed.

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| 112 | T2: Yeah. (pause). Yeah, I do think there’s **definitely** that time and.. what’s it for as a |
| 113 | Teacher, as an everyday teacher, has **definitely** has that time issue of doing that and we |
| 114 | Should have that factored in really, where we can use extra time to help and support |
| 115 | Students because we don’t feel that we do get that time. But I think that as a school is |

**Table 10:** Showing teachers constructing conflicts relating to time.

In this extract, T2 discusses the need for extra time to be allocated to support students. T2 uses the word “*we”* to show that it is a reasonable requirement needed by all teachers. In lines 112 and 113, the word “*definitely*” is repeated to emphasise the unbiased nature of this assertion. T2 makes an attribution which makes the request for time reasonable and justifiable by explaining that the time would be used to support students. The need for more time is positioned as unquestionable and in contrast to the current situation.

**4.3.8 Potential problems being addressed earlier**

During the course of the discussion, T1 also recognises the issue of identifying attendance issues in primary school, enabling potential problems to be addressed at an early point. This is in line with the findings of [Schoeneberger](https://scholar.google.co.uk/citations?user=RIRA8UkAAAAJ&hl=en&oi=sra) (2012); Ingul, Havik & Heyne, (2019).

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| 169 | T1: I mean, I’d also mirror that with the work between secondary and primary. I think, it |
| 170 | Could quite often be the case that if some of these er behaviours are embedded at |
| 171 | Primary, by the time they go from a a a context where you’re with a familiar teacher all |
| 172 | Year, you’re with the same group all year, it’s all of a sudden, you’re in a big building and |
| 173 | You’re moving around classrooms, you’ve got, you know, 10… it could be 50 times as |
| 174 | **Many pupils.** Then, if you’ve got reasons embedded about why you’re not going into |
| 175 | School or why you’re not going into certain classes in a smaller context like a primary |
| 176 | School, and as soon as you do step up to secondary, then those issues are gonna ramp |
| 177 | themselves up and it’s going to be easier for you to justify to yourself and say to yourself, |
| 178 | Well no I’m not going in. So, that work as well, I mean it probably already does but erm |
| 179 | Highlights with the pupils and, from what T2 said, at primary, are they showing exhibiting |
| 180 | Signs of refusing, either to attend school itself or, within school, the context of not going |
| 181 | Into classrooms, err, attacking it then as it were. Erm, so that processes can be put into |
| 182 | Place, that can then transition up to secondary school, so that we can try and not start |
| 183 | The fight there, but you know, already get the ball rolling before. And I mean, T3 said |

**Table 11:** Showing the use of second person internalised monologues to create attributions.

In the example, primary schools are here identified as being more caring environments than secondary schools. T1 points out that primary schools offer a consistent, “*familiar*” teacher and consistent peer groups throughout the academic year which is then contrasted with secondary schools. T1 then emphasises some of the potentially anxiety provoking features of secondary schools, including the size of the buildings and a huge increase in the number of pupils. At this point T1 again uses a first-person impression to characterise the voice and thoughts of the CYP, suggesting a pre-existing internal monologue, originating in primary school, justifying the reasons for non-attendance. Through the use of these devices, T1 again characterises EBSA as a choice that is reasoned and justified by the CYP, placing the reasons for the EBSA within the child themselves. Interestingly, T1 goes on to slightly modify the impact of this statement, in order to avoid attributing blame to primary schools, *“it probably already does*”. T1 then proceeds to use figurative language relating to conflict, suggesting “*attacking*” the EBSA and emphasising the need to, *“start the fight there”*. This use of the language of conflict is a feature that runs throughout all of the focus groups and highlights the conceptualisation of school attendance and EBSA as being a battle.

**4.3.9 The impact of time and money**

The teachers also discuss the relationship between time and money and how this impacts upon the services offered to CYP both in schools and outside of schools. In the following passage, T2 raises the issue of CAMHS waiting lists.

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| 73 | trauma. And then just hearing stories about students who are on CAMHS waiting lists for |
| 74 | ridiculous amounts of time. That’s not gonna help. There isn’t the, for me there isn’t the |
| 75 | funding in the back end of stuff. That’s not happening outside of school that will help |
| 76 | them to get them back into school. So, we can say as much as we want, though I can |

**Table 12:** Showing the teachers attributing problems to exosystemic issues in their discourse.

In the extract T2 uses extreme case formulation (Potter and Edwards, 1992) and refers to CAMHS waiting list times as, “*ridiculous*”. Initially, this can be viewed as a recognition of the impact of austerity measure which were initiated following the financial crash of 2008. However, T2 also uses this reference whilst creating a narrative of helplessness, attributing a lack of power and influence to teachers in their ability to have an impact on EBSA.

**4.3.10 Summary**

As discussed, the teachers are the only group to mention what they perceive as a slightly different behaviour from CYP which they align with EBSA – which is pupils being in school but not going into lessons. The teachers attribute this to an expression of pupil power, however, it is difficult to discern whether this behaviour is linked to EBSA or whether it relates to something else entirely.

During the teacher focus group there is also a discussion relating to the impact of COVID-19 on the behaviours of CYP regarding attending school and attending lessons. Potential exosystemic obstacles to helping CYP are identified, including a reduction in funding to organisations such as CAMHS which results in long waiting lists.

Teachers are also positioned as powerless to impact meaningfully upon EBSA through a series of systematic factors including a lack of expertise, a lack of time and through the inflexibility of the education system. It is also interesting to note that the language used to construct CYP frequently places the fault within the child.

**4.4 Focus Group 2 - Educational Psychologists**

The educational psychologist (EP) focus group consisted of four female qualified EPs. The EPs ranged in experience from recently qualified to having more than twenty years of experience. Their discussion developed a different tone from other discussions as they were the only group who made reference to research that had been done (either by themselves or others) into the area of EBSA. The EPs were aware of this and made reference to it. The EPs discussed EBSA in detail and with reference to research and are often careful to avoid potential conflict with other practitioner groups.

**4.4.1 Schools as sites of conflict – School based factors of non-attendance**

During their discussion, the EPs attribute some of the reasons why CYP do not attend school due to factors relating to the school environment, in line with previous research including Tamlyn (2022), Higgins (2022), Wilkins (2008).

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| 29 | EP1: It’s not a unitary cause. |
| 30 | EP4: Yeah, yeah. And it might be that there’s other, other. So for example **if the child’s** |
| 31 | **Struggling with their learning and then that leads to being more of an emotionally** |
| 32 | **based school issues** |
| 33 | EP3: Mmmm |
| 34 | EP4: You know, but actually there can be a different cause to start with, which then leads |
| 35 | To anxiety. |
| 36 | EP3: I think there’s the mis-match isn’t there, between the child’s needs around learning |
| 37 | Around social needs, around their social interaction or sensory preferences, that being a |
| 38 | Mis-match with the school environment and that being an underlying cause. Erm, but |

**Table 13:** Showing EPs co-constructing a narrative of schools as potentially anxiety provoking environments.

In the extract above, EP3 and EP4 co-produce a narrative which attributes potential school-based problems to eventual non-attendance. Initially EP4 mentions “*struggling with learning*” as a factor, which is then built upon by EP3 who extends the list of factors to include, “*social needs… social interactions or sensory preferences*.” This reflects an awareness of the heterogenous causes of EBSA, in line with the findings of Elliot (1999, 2019). EP3 explains that these factors may cause, “*a mis-match with the school environment*.” The co-production of this understanding is in line with Clarke and Braun (2013) who suggest that an advantage of focus groups is that they facilitate a meaning making process to take place between participants. It also suggests a harmony of understanding between the practitioners which is at odds with some of the dis-harmony seen particularly in MFG1.

**4.4.2 Conflicting responses from practitioners as constructed by EPs**

During the course of the discussion, references are made to varied and conflicting responses from different practitioners and from different practitioner groups. In this example, EP3 reports conflicting responses from practitioners within the same school.

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| 206 | EP3: Yeah, and I guess that’s because they’re wanting to target the people who take |
| 207 | Holidays in term time and we’re just thinking about the people with EBSA. But even |
| 208 | **Within schools I’ve worked in, I’ve worked with one member of staff who completely got** |
| 209 | **It, really understood and had good success and another member of staff who did not get** |
| 210 | **it at all and kept calling it refusal, kept calling at a choice.** |
| 211 | EP1: Mmm |
| 212 | EP3: Wouldn’t put any adjustments in place. |
| 213 | EP1: (At the same time) That consistency across members of staff in a single school and |
| 214 | Also across members of staff in a service, like say the EWO service. (Pause). But definitely |
| 215 | There’s been an improvement that we’re noticing in individuals that we’re working with |
| 216 | either in schools or also the EWOs. |
| 217 | EP2: Absolutely, |
| 218 | EP 3 & 4: Yeah, yeah. |

**Table 14:** Showing attribution of conflicts between practitioners constructed by EPs.

The extract above starts with EP3 making a distinction between different kinds of absence. On the one hand there is the targeting of CYP and families who take holidays in term time which is contrasted with CYP who exhibit EBSA. EP3 then goes onto contrast the approaches of school staff. One member of staff is praised using extreme case formulation (Pomerantz, 1986) as they, *“completely got it”* and were rewarded with, “*good success*”. This staff member is opposed to one that, “*did not get it at all*”. Again, extreme case formulation is used to emphasise the totality of the lack of understanding. Attention is drawn to the language used by the second staff member who refers to EBSA as, *“a choice”.* This passage underlines the importance of the language used by staff and practitioners who work with CYP exhibiting EBSA. If we accept a social constructionist stance, that our reality is shaped by the language we use to converse about it, in line with the theories of Gergen (1973), Burr (2015), then it seems reasonable to assume that by refusing to engage with the discourse of EBSA, the member of staff who, “*did not get it at all*,” is positioned as believing that EBSA does not exist. As a result, no adjustments were made to help CYP.

Between lines 206 – 212, EP3 attributes a lack of understanding to some school-based practitioners and lists the inaccuracies in their practice, “*calling it a refusal, kept calling at a choice, wouldn’t put any adjustments in place*.” This listing of inappropriate responses could be viewed as adversarial, placing the EPs in conflict with these members of school staff. At this point, EP1 interjects, highlighting the importance of consistency across all staff members in a given service and across services, including education welfare officers (EWOs), in line with the findings of Heyne (2024).

**4.4.3 Conflict between systems**

As with all groups, schools were identified as being sites of conflict. In this extract, there is once again, a focus on the mesosystemic conflict, in the reported communication between schools and mental health services.

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| 108 | EP4: from like a school perspective and then perhaps other practitioners where obviously |
| 109 | it’s the mental health, the wellbeing of the young person that’s the priority. And I think… |
| 110 | Historically, there’s probably been quite a lot of conflict between those two goals. Erm, |
| 111 | I think we’re getting to kind of a more shared understanding around that, aren’t we. |
| 112 | In terms of… just wellbeing just has to be priority, you know? Erm, but, yeah. I just, |
| 113 | I know from, I just remember conversations from when I was working in CAMHS around |
| 114 | **Their focus very much being around mental health, because obviously they’re a mental** |
| 115 | **Health service. But that would sometimes then, like, cause quite a lot of conflict with** |
| 116 | **Schools who say, “well we need to get this child in.” Erm…** |
| 117 | EP1: Mmmm |
| 118 | EP4: And it was seen like they weren’t really understanding each other. |
| 119 | EP1: Yeah… Sorry.. And as an example of that, there was a time when a psychiatrist sent |
| 120 | A letter to… I think to a school, possible (?) saying child X is so unwell at the moment |
| 121 | (meaning mental health) that I think it’s better for them not to come into school at the |
| 122 | Moment, and so that was their priority, was mental health, be at home. And I suppose I |
| 123 | I mean I wasn’t involved with that child at that time, that young person, but I did wonder |
| 124 | Whether if that situation had been looked at a bit more holistically, maybe there might |
| 125 | Have been some aspects of school that might actually have been helpful for that young |
| 126 | Person? |

**Table 15:** Showing conflict between schools and other services being constructed by EPs.

In the extract above, EP4 initially draws attention to the conflicts between schools requiring pupil attendance and other practitioners who prioritise, “*mental health, the wellbeing of the young person*.” The priorities attributed to these different organisations suggest value judgements. EP4 says that a child’s wellbeing is a priority and then clearly states her opinion on this matter, “*wellbeing just has to be the priority, you know?*” thereby undermining potential alternative constructions. EP4 invites agreement through the use of a rhetorical question. EP4 then goes onto make a second point which relates to her personal recollections of conflicts between CAMHS and schools, underlining the validity of her recount by stating her category of entitlement (Edwards and Potter, 1992) explaining that she worked for CAMHS and therefore, this is first hand evidence. However, EP4 limits the amount of conflict caused through the use of modifiers, ‘*sometimes*’, ‘*quite a lot’*. These modifiers bring the recount into line with her earlier statement that, *“we’re getting to kind of a more shared understanding around that, aren’t we?*” (line 111).

Throughout the conversation, EPs make reference to conflicting responses from practitioners from different services. In the example above, EP1 recalls an experience in which a psychiatrist wrote a letter to a school, excusing the CYP from attending. This recollection is used to create an opportunity to raise a question – the possibility that continued school attendance may have some benefits for CYP experiencing EBSA. This suggestion (phrased as a question) runs contrary to the narrative that is being created during the course of the conversation – that pupil mental health issues are best prioritised and dealt with over and above school attendance issues. This questioning is done gently and uses modifiers such as, “*maybe*” and “*might”*. Phrasing this as a question heads off potential rejection (Potter and Wetherell, 1987).

EP3 does not respond directly to this question by EP1, and instead recalls an event that seems to be in partial agreement, highlighting a need for the training of GPs and drawing attention to potential conflict and disagreement between schools and GPs.

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| 128 | EP3: One of the school requests that came out of the Attendance conference was some |
| 129 | Training to be done for GPs because some GPs are signing children off too unwell to go to |
| 130 | School for like weeks at a time, without having had any conversation with the school. |
| 131 | And then the school feel quite at odds between the approach being taken. I think some |
| 132 | Of the conflicts that you said around mental health services and education services is |
| 133 | Also within like education and DFE guidance. Like, on one side they’re kind of really |
| 134 | Pushing attendance and on the other side they’re really trying to promote mental health |
| 135 | Support teams and the two don’t always unite do they…. (interrupt) |
| 136 | EP2: They’re not really seeing that they have to go side-by-side. |

**Table 16:** Showing the avoidance of conflict within the homogenous EP group.

EP3 highlights the conflicting responses between other practitioner groups, and away from potential within group conflicts. However, EP3 does not endorse either the approach of “*education services”* or the approach taken by GPs, she simply points out a difference. In this instance a potential disagreement is avoided through the use of seeming agreement and then steering the conversation towards an area that is more generally agreed – namely that approaches have to, “*go side-by-side”.* In doing this, EP3 highlights differences in the approaches of different practitioner groups and between different exosystemic pressures – the drive for high attendance and the promotion of mental health.

**4.4.4 Conflict between CAMHS and EWOs as constructed by EPs**

Whilst being careful to avoid blaming different practitioner groups, the conversation amongst the EPs acknowledged that there was a difference in the approaches used by different groups.

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| 65 | EP4: Do you think that’s a shared understanding? Because we’re talking as EPs. Do you |
| 66 | Think that applies to others? |
| 67 | EP3: I don’t think so, just because I think there’s been a shift in EP’s understanding… |
| 68 | (Murmur of agreement) |
| 69 | EP3: and thinking, very much from this anxiety driven to maybe more of a… something |
| 70 | That’s more trauma driven or a trauma response that needs a different approach than |
| 71 | Overcoming anxiety, CBT, erm laddering type approach which… |
| 72 | (Murmur of agreement) |
| 73 | EP3: will work for some children but not for lots of children I guess, especially |
| 74 | Neurodiverse children or children who have been out of school for a long period of time. |
| 75 | And **I’m not sure every practitioner or CAMHS or mental health service or EWOs have** |
| 76 | **Moved with us in that, because they’re not exposed to the same EP research as us.** |

**Table 17:** Showing potential differences in approach between practitioner groups.

In the above passage, EP3 remarks on a corelation between the changing understanding of the causes of EBSA to a lag in the understanding and approaches taken by different practitioner groups. Indeed, they mark EPs out as being different from all other groups, including CAMHS, mental health services and EWOs. By placing EPs as separate from all other practitioner groups, EP3 could be viewed as attributing a superior understanding of EBSA to EPs. EP3 goes onto suggest a potential reason for this greater level of understanding – namely the research that EPs are exposed to.

**4.4.5 Exosystemic Pressures as constructed by EPs**

EPs also highlighted confusion relating to the messages being communicated to different groups, including practitioners and parents. In line with the results of the study by Credé, Roch, & Kieszczynka, (2010), who found that attendance was the most accurate predictor of grades, there is a lot of systematic messaging relating to the importance of school attendance. This was highlighted by the EPs:

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| 202 | **EP4: I think that it is quite interesting though in that respect that I think (LA) have done a** |
| 203 | **Lot of work around EBSA, and yet within that coms, there wasn’t any mention of it. You** |
| 204 | **Know, it was all quite hard-hitting messages around attendance. But at the same time,** |
| 205 | They were open to changing some of the stuff in there… |

**Table 18:** Showing a discussion of exosystemic pressures constructed by EPs.

Here, on two separate occasions, the EPs identify wider systemic pressures brought to bear on schools and parents. One is in the form of a poster campaign, published by the local authority, highlighting the importance of attendance. The campaign is described as, “*quite hard-hitting*”. Again, a violent metaphor is used to describe the press release. However, the impact of this press release is mitigated in two ways. The first through the use of the modifier, “*quite*” which lessens the blow of the hard-hitting campaign and secondly care is taken to avoid any blame being allocated to the local authority through a brief recount of them being, “*open to changing some stuff*.” This is suggestive of a collaborative approach between EPs and LA representatives.  
Later in the conversation, a second reference is made to wider exosystemic pressures. On this occasion, EP2 raises the issue of press coverage of school attendance and EBSA.

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| 327 | EP2: But I think what’s really interesting, where this is a slight tangent, there is a lot in |
| 328 | The press at the moment about absence from school. |
| 329 | EP?: Mmmm. |
| 330 | **EP2: But the rhetoric you kind of hear in the press is quite blamey.** |
| 331 | EP4: (at same time): It’s truancy. |
| 332 | EP2: And it’s about… Well it’s about truancy, but I, A lot of it is a lot to do with parents |
| 333 | Since the pandemic don’t see the value of sending their kids to school anymore…. |

**Table 19:** Showing a discussion of exosystemic pressuresrelating to the media.

In this extract, EPs draw attention to the role of the exosystemic media in the reporting of attendance issues and the role of parents, which is described as “*blamey*” with the press seen as not simply reporting on a conflict, but also setting up a conflict between parents and schools. It is interesting to note that by setting up this conflict, “*the press*” can be viewed as positioning themselves outside of the potential conflict, as impartial observers, rather than participants within the conflict. It could also be suggested that the EP reporting on this is relaying her impressions, thereby creating a narrative, rather than providing actual examples. As a result, she is positioning herself as a commentator upon a part of the exosystem. Through the use of the word, “*blamey*” there is also an expression of sympathy with parents who are being blamed and are positioned in the press as people who, “*don’t see the value of sending their kids to school anymore*.” As we will see, this is in contrast to the positioning of parents during the mixed focus groups who are seen as having a negative attitude towards school (MFG1) and who need to be kept away from the training given to EWOs (MFG2).

**4.4.6 Time as a concept which provoked conflict**

A further interpretive repertoire discussed at length by EPs was time and particularly the impact of the passage of time upon the advice given to practitioners regarding ways to help CYP exhibiting EBSA.

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| 21 | **EP3: I completely agree and I think that that’s because thinking has changed within this** |
| 22 | **Time period. So a lot of guidance was very within child. It was very school phobia** |
| 23 | **Focused, all the research literature**. And I think, anecdotally, through people’s experience |
| 24 | Through more research, that there’s a shift in thinking and that… and we might |
| 25 | understand that but then**, translating that to everyone else, I think will take time**. And I |
| 26 | Think not all EPs perhaps think like that. |

**Table 20:** Showing EP3’s construction of changes within the chronosystem.

In this passage, we can see an acknowledgement of the historical research relating to the causes of EBSA along with an acknowledgement that this has changed over time. There has been a movement away from an understanding of EBSA as being within-child and a move towards understanding the systemic factors that impact upon CYP. There is also an acknowledgment that this new understanding is not yet shared by all practitioners and that achieving this will take time. The language used by EP3 in explaining these thoughts warrants further examination as there are linguistic attempts to avoid blaming particular groups. Mitigating phrases such as, “*we might understand*” are used, as is a careful listing of possible sources of information, “*anecdotally, through people’s experience, through more research*” (Edwards and Potter, 1992). In using this phrase, EP3 does not prioritise one form of knowledge over another. EP3 is also careful to include EPs in the list of potential practitioners who need to be brought up to date. This distribution of power can be seen as an attempt to avoid the conflicts that are outlined by other practitioner groups.

Further discourse relating to changes in understanding were raised again during the conversation.

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| 67 | EP3: I don’t think so, just because I think there’s been a shift in EP’s understanding… |
| 68 | (Murmur of agreement) |
| 69 | EP3: and thinking, very much from this anxiety driven to maybe more of a… something |
| 70 | That’s more trauma driven or a trauma response that needs a different approach than |
| 71 | Overcoming anxiety, CBT, erm laddering type approach which… |
| 72 | (Murmur of agreement) |
| 73 | EP3: will work for some children but not for lots of children I guess, especially |
| 74 | Neurodiverse children or children who have been out of school for a long period of time. |

**Table 21:** Showing EP3’s construction of changes in understanding over time.

In this excerpt, EP3 draws attention to the changes in understanding relating to the theoretical underpinnings of EBSA and a shift away from an anxiety driven response and towards a more trauma driven one. EP3 goes on to discuss the appropriateness of CBT approaches with EBSA cases. This information is given as a statement, with the expectation that other practitioners will either agree or already share EP3’s knowledge. The language used by EP3 is technical and detailed which creates a sense of authority. However, Zimmermann and Jucks (2018) point out the importance of matching the technical level of the language used to the audience. In this case, the audience is of fellow EPs who are invited to acknowledge a similar level of knowledge and experience by agreeing with the EP3. This expectation is confirmed through the murmurs of agreement given.

**4.4.7 Changes in practice over time**

Changes in practice over a period of time can be related to Bronfenbrenner’s chronosystem and were commented on by EP4 (L. 225 – 231).

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| 225 | EP4: I was just going to say, what I was really impressed with, we recently had that kind |
| 226 | Of strategy meeting from all different services coming together, that (EP3) was leading. |
| 227 | But sat there, I was really impressed by it. I remember it’s only a few years ago when it |
| 228 | Wasn’t even a thing. And yet, in that room there was lots of different service leads, |
| 229 | Coming together, so it might be that we don’t have a unified understanding in that each |
| 230 | Of us has the same thought, but at least there’s that commitment to working together, |
| 231 | Which we know is what is needed. |

**Table 22:** Showing EP4’s construction of changes in practice over time.

In the above extract, there is again an acknowledgment of changing approaches to dealing with cases of EBSA, with an emphasis placed on multiagency working and that this practice is still developing in relation to EBSA. There is also an acknowledgment of the achievements of EP3 in helping to accomplish this (L226) and a contrasting of the current situation to the understanding of EBSA previously, “*only a few years ago, when it (EBSA) wasn’t even a thing*”. EP4 draws attention to the speed of the changes with the use of mitigating phrases such as ‘only’ and ‘even’. In this passage, EP4 also emphasises their desire for joint working (L 228 – 230) and emphasises this by assimilating the right to speak for all practitioner groups through the use of the word ’we’ (L. 231).

This commitment to joint working is potentially at odds with the view expressed earlier by EP3 when EPs are effectively separated from other practitioners as a result of the research that EPs are exposed to (see section Conflict between systems).

The idea of change occurring over time is revisited again towards the end of the conversation.

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| 315 | EP2: You know, and that was a massive step forward. It wasn’t about her attending |
| 316 | School or even getting out of the house but she was spending a little bit more time with |
| 317 | us. So it’s… |
| 318 | EP4: Yeah, it’s very. It’s just very, very tricky. I think that also highlights how quickly and |
| 319 | How much things have developed, so that the fact that we’re distinguishing between |
| 320 | Those early, emerging concerns and early identification, and then entrenched EBSA, |
| 321 | Because entrenched EBSA is a term that we bat around a lot now. But it wasn’t |
| 322 | Something... We didn’t make that distinction early on did we? |
| 323 | EP?: No. |
| 324 | EP4: And I think we’re now at a point where we can identify that entrenched EBSA needs |
| 325 | A different approach to perhaps those early, earlier difficulties. Again, we’ve come a long |
| 326 | Way with that thinking haven’t we? |

**Table 23:** Showing changes to EP’s approach to EBSA over time.

Here we see EP4 responding to EP2. EP2 is discussing an EBSA case that they were involved in. This prompts EP4 to reflect on the changes in approach that have taken place in recent years and also prompts a reflection on the changes to language used regarding EBSA, “*entrenched EBSA is a term that we bat around a lot now*” (L. 321). This suggests that EP4 is aware of a fine-grained approach that can be taken to dealing with EBSA and acknowledges that swift intervention is important. EP4 uses the pronoun *“we*” to gain agreement from the other EPs present and to strengthen their claim about the use of this language. EP4 expects that all EPs present will understand this phrase and that they are a group who use this terminology. However, it is worth noting that other practitioner groups suggested that they find the changes to vocabulary confusing. In order to discuss the changes to language, EP4 uses a mixture of technical vocabulary, (*entrenched EBSA*) and figurative language in which the changes to approaches are likened to a journey, “*we’ve come a long way with that thinking*.” The use of figurative language and the use of the pronoun ‘we’ strengthens the claims to progress made by EPs as a group.

This confusion over terminology is acknowledged by EP3 at the start of the discussion as they list the different terms that are or have been used to describe EBSA.

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| 4 | EP3: I think there’s more awareness of EBSA generally. I think there probably is a better |
| 5 | Understanding. I guess, what’s made it extra complicated is that EBSA is being defined |
| 6 | differently, in different ways across different areas. So there’s Different terms for |
| 7 | Defining EBSA. There’s double b’s, there’s school distress, there’s non-attendance. |
| 8 | There’s barriers to education, And there’s also yeah, well school refusal I think. |
| 9 | Truancy, erm. I think yeah, there’s more awareness around EBSA and understanding that |
| 10 | It’s anxiety driven. I think that it’s emotionally driven… |
| 11 | EP2: And I suppose that’s been a massive shift. Is seeing it as something to be supported |
| 12 | Rather than just seeing it as, you know, the sort of thing that needs to be punished and |
| 13 | A refusal… |
| 14 | EP 4: A refusal… |
| 15 | EP2: I think it’s still a big, I would say though, I agree with what you said about it being |
| 16 | Recognised as emotionally driven, I think there is still quite a difference where some |
| 17 | Practitioners would see it as a within child emotional distress |

**Table 24:** Showing EPs acknowledgment of the confusion relating to terminology.

In the extract above, EP2, EP3 and EP4 can be seen as generating a shared understanding of various features of the discussion, in line with the suggestion of Clarke and Braun (2013). Initially, EP3 discusses the confusion regarding language and EBSA and then makes the point that it is emotionally driven. EP2 then comments on a perceived shift in perspective on the part of other practitioners who once saw the behaviours as, “*a refusal*” placed “*within child*” that needed to be punished. Now their perspective is more appreciative of the emotional factors involved. If we examine this through the lens of heteroglossia (Bakhtin, 1994) we can conceptualise this as the absorption of meanings from a range of discourses and multiple sources over a period of time.

**4.4.8 Summary**

Despite the interpretive repertoires being the same encountered with other groups, the discussion between EPs regarding EBSA had a number of marked differences. For example, the discussions relating to conflicts of time focused on the changes to practitioner understanding of EBSA over time and an understanding that further changes will take time (Line 25) which is in contrast to the conceptualisation of schools desiring a quick fix, which is seen in Mixed Focus Group 2.

The EPs made a lot of references to research and to their own experiences as well as commenting on the exosystemic factors such as advertising campaigns and the role of the press. There is also discussion relating to the different reactions from practitioners within the same practitioner groups and an understanding of the importance of language and the sharing of constructions of reality. The EPs also acknowledge the school-based factors which can cause EBSA, although they make no mention of home-based factors or economic factors. There is also a recognition of the confusion and conflict caused by both the language used to refer to EBSA and to changes to the understanding of the concept of EBSA amongst the EPs themselves.

**4.5 Mixed Focus Group 1 (MFG1)**

Mixed Focus group 1 was made up of the following participants:

P1: Youth worker (male)

P2: Headteacher of alternative provision (female)

P3: Learning Support worker (female)

P4: Local Authority Attendance Officer (male)

Each participant was experienced in their role, (a minimum of five years of experience) with three of the four participants being senior managers. During the course of this discussion there were moments of considerable disagreement between the participants which stood out.

**4.5.1 Schools as sites of conflict**

During MFG1, the conversation acknowledged the difficulties that schools currently face. There was agreement between participants regarding the number of different pressures currently placed upon schools. In the following extract, P3 discusses the ways in which school-based practitioners try to cope with the pressures of working in a school.

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| 216 | it's about a lack of understanding and I think it's about that lack of motivation because of |
| 217 | **that workload and pressure and their own mental health in dealing with the other issues** |
| 218 | **that they've got going on in school because it's just a ridiculous situation in schools at the** |
| 219 | **Minute.** Erm, that, that, and it does come down to individual people like we said at the |
| 220 | start, doesn't it? That some people are just obviously putting up their own kind of… ways |
| 221 | Of **dealing with these really complex situations, their own defences**, which is a “I can't deal |
| 222 | with this right now**. I can't do this right now**.” It happened they have to do this, this and if |

**Table 25:** An example of extreme case formulations made during Mixed Focus Group 1.

In lines 216 – 222, P3 creates a social, medical and psychological narrative (Edwards and Potter, 1992) of the experiences of school-based practitioners, including teachers, This is used to explain the reasons why school-based practitioners do not react more sympathetically to CYP exhibiting signs of EBSA. The explanation starts by positioning these practitioners as lacking motivation to help and the reason for this is based within their own mental health. This mental health is at risk because of the daily pressures of working in schools where the workload is described as *“ridiculous”.* This statement can be viewed as an expression of sympathy for the practitioners working in schools. However, it is being used to explain why these practitioners do not deal with CYP exhibiting EBSA in a more sympathetic way. Their sense of being overwhelmed by their situation means that they do not have the capacity to offer support to CYP who are struggling with issues impacting on their attendance.

In line 221, P3 suggested that teachers are putting up, “*their own defences”.* This figure of speech is used to strengthen the argument being put forward - that teachers are unsympathetic and are unable to be sympathetic because of the ridiculous workload and stress that they are under. This is in line with theories relating to the use of metaphors in speech, Cameron et al. (2009), Musolff (2012). However, it also relates to the theory of heteroglossia (Bakhtin, 1994) with the ideas and theories from one area (military conflict) being used by P3 to explain their observations relating to school-based practitioners.

The phrase putting up, “*their own defences*” can also be viewed as a reference to the concept of combat and conflict within schools with teachers needing to defend themselves against the attacks from the “*ridiculous situation*”. Within MFG1, there was agreement for the view that the pressures on school practitioners are “*ridiculous”.* The use of extreme case formulation (Pomerantz, 1986) is used in lines 225 – 227, continuing the acknowledgment of the extreme situation in all mainstream schools. In line 225, P3 uses a rhetorical question to draw attention to the serious nature of working in schools. In this case, the rhetorical question is used to state a point of view regarding the pressure on school staff, but also to gain the agreement of other members of the focus group – they are all invited to have an agreed sympathy for practitioners working in schools. However, this sympathetic understanding is once again used as a justification for school-based practitioners to not complete a task, that of emotionally regulating children.

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| 225 | (P3) **the pressure on staff within special in mainstream schools- it's on another level isn't** |
| 226 | i**t?** And so there so they’re coming into school and they're not able to bring those sort of |
| 227 | authentic selves and to be with the children in terms of the emotional regulation. |

**Table 26:** Showing participant 3 acting as a rhetorician to construct a narrative of teachers being unable to support CYP.

These extracts highlight the conflicting narratives that are a feature of the conversation in MFG1. There is sympathy for school staff and an understanding of why they do not have the capacity to support CYP.

Through devices including the use of rhetoric, rhetorical questions and the use of extreme case formulation, school staff are being positioned as unable to help because of the pressures placed upon them from the systems forming the various levels of Bronfenbrenner’s ecosystems. P3 constructs this narrative to build an agreed understanding with other practitioners. Other, potential explanations are undermined through the use of sympathy and empathy which makes the teacher’s accountability for their lack of ability to deal with children more understandable.

The potential for conflict is revisited throughout the conversation during MFG1. For example, in the passage below, P2 discusses parental conflicts with school staff (lines 292 – 296).

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| 292 | adult emotions not just child emotions. And those adults are highly anxious at that point |
| 293 | and stressed and against schools because they don't think schools are doing what they |
| 294 | **should be doing, parents will often tell me what fights they've had they’re in battles. If you** |
| 295 | Go on any sort of parenting groups on social media, you hear them constantly talking |
| 296 | About having to **fight and battle** with schools… |

**Table 27:** Showing an example of parental interactions with schools conceptualised as battles.

In the above passage, the language of conflict is highlighted. One striking feature of this is the way in which these metaphors of combat can initially be viewed as normal, everyday figures of speech, again echoing Jorgenson and Phillips’ (2002) concept of discourses and underlining how common it has become for there to be conflict between schools and different groups such as parents. P2 draws upon personal recollections of conversations with parents, placing herself in an entitled category, (Edwards and Potter, 1992) to strengthen the claim that these battles are regular occurrences.

Interestingly, P1 responds to this suggestion by attributing responsibility to the parents:

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| 298 | P1: That's their experience of school isn’t it? There's a lot of adults in (L. A.) who've had |
| 299 | Really poor historic experiences of school, and all it almost like a sort of celebratory |
| 300 | culture of not disliking it. So then when their children come through they're not gonna |
| 301 | be… they’re gonna be siding with children aren’t they, to a degree. And that, it's quite hard |
| 302 | to get over that or challenge that sometimes. And if there’s parental mental health issues, |
| 303 | you know adult mental health services are really, really limited, so people can be waiting |

**Table 28:** Showing P1 attributing responsibility to parents.

Agreement is again sought through the use of a rhetorical question (line 298). In the above discourse, P1 is seeking a mutual agreement regarding parental experiences of school in the local authority. These experiences are portrayed as being negative and resulting in a “*celebrity culture*”. As a result, P1 suggests that there is already a pre-existing barrier between members of school staff and parents. P1 is effectively steering the conversation away from a blaming of school practitioners (part of the microsystem) as has been seen in previous parts of the conversation, and towards an unavoidable conflict with parents which is based in two of Bronfenbrenner’s systems (Bronfenbrenner, 1979,1986, 1999, 2005). The first of these systems is the chronosystem as the issue has historical roots - parental experiences of school. The second systemic problem is identified as the impact of wider societal influences (the exosystem) such as the limited availability of adult mental health services. In this situation, schools are positioned as simply being the site for this seemingly inevitable conflict with parents.

**4.5.2 Conflict between practitioners**

During the course of MFG1, there were clear signs of conflict between practitioners. Members of MFG1 appear to sympathise with school practitioners, because of the pressures that they are under. However, they are also described by P2 as potentially having, *“a lack of humanity”* (Line 203).

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| 201 | Some of these underlying factors are really, really important and the general |
| 202 | effect young people's Mental Health. |
| 203 | P2**:  I'm not identifying people but there's almost a lack of humanity I would** |
| 204 | **say, in some of the schools that we work…** |
| 205 | P1**: Empathy at least.** |

**Table 29:** Showing an example of conflict between practitioners within heterogenous MFG1.

Despite the preference in conversation for people to agree (Schegloff and Sacks, 1973; Wittgenstein, 1975) there are occasions of pronounced disagreement between practitioners during the course of the conversation. In lines 201 – 205, we can see an ‘adjacency pair’ at work (Schegloff and Sacks, 1973). When P2 suggests that practitioners show, *“a lack of humanity”* there is an immediate modification, with P1 suggesting that it is “empathy” rather than humanity that is lacking. It is striking that this disagreement is immediate and brief (Galley et.al., 2004). The brevity of the correction is striking as there is no attempt at preamble or joint justification of the suggestion. Instead, it works as an immediate rebuttal. The suggestion of a lack of humanity is too strong a phrase and the need for immediate correction is greater than the social need for agreement. In response, P2 offers some mitigations for their views but goes on to reiterate the same views.

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| 206 | P2: We work with all the high schools across (X Local Authority) and it's different people |
| 207 | coming through all the time. And different there's been a lot of change and churn of |
| 208 | leadership in schools and things like that and people come in with sort of new ideas |
| 209 | **wanting to impose things, but there's quite often a real lack of empathy, humanity towards** |
| 210 | these young people and towards the families, and I'm not being soft. I totally get that we |
| 211 | have to give high challenge as well as high support and that's a really important thing. But |
| 212 | yeah, there's just a **complete lack of understanding**, which is strange and maybe it's not in |
| 213 | the teacher training courses that people go on, I don’t know. |

**Table 30:** Showing an example of conflict between practitioners in heterogenous MFG1.

During this reiteration of their views, P2 takes a step towards mutual agreement with P1 by repeating the use of the word *“empathy”* but also repeats the accusation of a lack of “*humanity”*. P2 underscores their views through the use of extreme case formulation, *“complete lack of understanding”* emphasising the disagreement between the different practitioner groups during the course of the focus group.

**4.5.3 Confusion relating to terminology and language**

Bond (2024) highlights the confusion caused by the terminology relating to EBSA and this is referred to by P1 during the course of MFG1.

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| 23 | P1:  I think across our work force the youth workers, and it's probably a very good |
| 24 | understanding of young people and why they don't go to school on a very broad |
| 25 | level, **but whether they understand the terminology of EBSA**. And the causes of it and |
| 26 | specific… **I suppose the that language is probably new**. I mean, I've talked to them about |
| 27 | getting some EBSA training for the youth workers. And they all looked a bit blank at me |
| 28 | when I said do you want to go on it? But they will be working with those young people on |
| 29 | things like anxiety, bullying, you know, all the things that I think cause it, so. **They probably** |
| 30 | **Know it but don't know they know it, if you know what I mean.** |

**Table 31:** The above table shows an example of P1’s confusion caused by terminology.

In this extract we can see P1 attributing knowledge and skills to youth workers who work closely with CYP through the use of lists and contrasts (Edwards and Potter, 1992) on issues such as anxiety and bullying. However, P1 suggests that these same youth workers are not aware of the language of EBSA, which will in turn limit their ability to conceptualise it and follow any guidance relating to CYP and EBSA. Relating this to the theory of heteroglossia (Bakhtin, 1994) we can conceive that without proper exposure to training relating to EBSA, it would be difficult for youth workers to gather in and assimilate the necessary narratives to formulate the experiences of the CYP they are trying to help.

**4.5.4 Conflict between systems and between agencies**

During the course of this focus group’s conversation, references were made to conflicts between representative bodies from different ecosystems, as conceptualised by Bronfenbrenner (1979,1986, 1999, 2005). In the following extract, P1 gives an example of these conflicts.

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| 182 | P1: When we were looking to find five primary schools to do our resilience building |
| 183 | project in, and it was linked in with the ed psych, who helped us identify the program and |
| 184 | we looked at some of the criteria like need and what else is going on in the school and |
| 185 | things like that? But one big factor was the school sort of cultural understanding of mental |
| 186 | health and whether there could be arsed dealing with it or not. And… |
| 187 | P2: Yeah… |
| 188 | **P1:  how sympathetic they were to dealing with the issue of mental health and that was** |
| 189 | **quite shocking for me, that, they understood primary schools as well. Not high schools.** |
| 190 | **This was primary school sort of leads in the council, saying to me.** |
| 191 | P2: Right. |
| 192 | P1: That Head doesn't really think mental health is an issue, and I'm thinking hang on a |
| 193 | Minute, that's a bit scary in this day and age innit? And then go into High School. Hey how |
| 194 | **Behavioural policies clash with sort of that mental health and Trauma response. So** |
| 195 | **When we were talking about trauma training, I was talking to the lead of secondary** |
| 196 | **schools, and he was saying that trauma is sometimes a dirty word in some high schools.** |
| 197 | **Because maybe it's been see seen by some staff as making excuses for young** |
| 198 | People’s behaviour. And that was quite shocking to hear as well. |

**Table 32:** Showing a construction of conflict between exosystemic groups.

In the above extract we can see P1 outlining a conflict between themselves, as part of a group promoting children’s mental health, which could be placed in Bronfenbrenner’s exosystem, and representatives of the school, which are placed in Bronfenbrenner’s microsystem. P1 outlines an incident where their values and beliefs, based around the importance of mental health at a primary school age, were not echoed by primary school headteachers. This extract contains the use of a colloquialism (*“can’t be arsed”*)which is at odds with the professional tone of the rest of the discussion and suggests a level of frustration directed towards representatives of primary schools at this point. P1 also explains that they found this to be, “*shocking*”, particularly because the reaction was from primary school headteachers. This point is emphasised by the repetition of “*primary schools*” (lines 189 and 190).

In lines 193 – 194, P1 goes on to outline a further conflict occurring when CYP go to high school where behaviour policies clash with mental health support and trauma responses. Again, there is the use of a violent adjective (clash) highlighting the perceived force of the conflict between schools and government initiatives. This conflict is one which is repeated during the course of other focus group conversations (EPs and teachers).

P1 then uses a recount of a conversation with the “*lead of secondary school*” which gives a further example disagreement with school representatives. P1 uses the recollection of a conversation as a means of strengthening their own claims – that children’s mental health is not being taken seriously in some schools and by some staff. To make the point, P1 uses a common metaphor, saying that trauma is thought of as a “*dirty word*” and again highlights that they have a different or contrasting view of mental health issues by describing themselves as “*shocked*”. In this situation, there is again an attribution (Edwards and Potter, 1993) of school staff having unfeeling, unsympathetic attitudes towards CYP which reflects those used by P2 in lines 203 – 213 (See Conflict Between Practitioners above).

**4.5.5 Time as a concept which provoked conflict**

Throughout their conversation, members of MFG1 highlighted the conflicts and pressures relating to time. In the following extract, P4 suggests that schools often do not notice potential problems early enough and as a result, “*the damage is already done*” (line 86). Again, the figurative language strengthens P4’s claim regarding the impact of school staff’s inability to spot and address problems swiftly. And again, the imagery used within the metaphor relates to conflict and violence, as the speaker refers to “damage”. P4 also suggests that schools want, “*quick fixes*”, which are described as ‘tokenistic’. Interestingly, the reason why a quick fix is required is to absolve the school of blame, rather than to help the child.

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| 85 | all on the same statement, but lot of **schools want immediate, quick responses** and most |
| 86 | Of the time **the damage is already been done**. Greater down the line so to speak so |
| 87 | Obviously then playing catch up and then it takes longer to actually bring about that |
| 88 | change. It wants to go to more… **Tokenistic ideas of why that child isn't attending** that kind |
| 89 | of in at times can maybe **absolve them of any blame or responsibility**. |

**Table 33:** Showing time being constructed as a conflict provoking concept.

The theme of identifying potential problems earlier is brought up again by P1 in the following passage:

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| 115 | P1: Sometimes it's that frustration, isn’t it? That a young person might experience |
| 116 | Some of these issues at primary. But the nurturing nature of that school setting |
| 117 | means it's not addressed… |

**Table 34:** Showing contrasting amounts of time available in primary and secondary schools.

Here, primary schools are given positive acknowledgment for the nurture that they provide children which is contrasted with environments encountered at secondary school where, “*immediate, quick responses*” are required. However, there is also a conflicting suggestion that this same nurturing environment may prevent effective early intervention to stave off problems when the child progresses to high school. Again, we are reminded of the assertion that discourse frequently contains conflicting views and reports Wetherell & Potter (1992); Ryan & Johnson (2009). As a result, P1 admits to feeling frustrated and invites other members of MFG1 to share this sense of frustration through the use of a rhetorical question.

MFG1 also conceptualised time as a commodity which is in short supply.

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| 270 | P3: I think it's the same for services as well. In an ideal world, we would all love to be |
| 271 | Able to dedicate more time. **It’s the most precious commodity isn't it**? Like with adults for |
| 272 | The children in these really complex situations. But you can’t, you have to approach the |
| 273 | situation knowing the knock-on effects of, you can’t, you can’t… there’s just too many |
| 274 | unfortunately, young people isn't there with such significant need who are at home. |

**Table 35:** Showing time being conceptualised as a limited commodity.

In this extract, P3 responds to P1 by emphasising their view of the importance of having enough time to dedicate to CYP. P3 expresses regret that they have to ration this commodity despite the acknowledgment that the needs of the CYP are “*significant*”. As we saw earlier, a rhetorical question is used to garner agreement from other members of FG1, as rhetorical questions work because everybody already knows and agrees upon the answer (Caponigro & Sprouse, 2007). In line 270, P3 uses the word “*we*” to discuss this matter, thereby creating a shared understanding amongst the participants that no practitioner has the time that CYP require. Instead, the concept of pressurised time is used to absolve the participants of any blame for not being able to help all CYP adequately.

**4.5.6 Summary of Mixed Focus Group 1**

Under close analysis, we can see that within the discourse of MFG1 there are conflicting narratives being created about schools, school staff and their responses to pupils with EBSA. There is a sympathy shown towards school practitioners and an acknowledgment of the “*ridiculous*” pressures that are placed upon schools and that the pressures are, “*on another level*”. However, there is also the attribution that school practitioners, “*lack humanity*” as a result of these pressures and that they prefer or require tokenistic interventions for CYP exhibiting signs of EBSA in order that they are absolved of blame.

These same pressures are seen as being responsible for ensuring that school-based practitioners are not able give CYP the emotional support and the time that they require. Primary schools are constructed as being able to create more nurturing environments than secondary schools, but this comes at a cost – namely that when this nurture is taken away at secondary school, the CYP will be unable to maintain their attendance.

Conflicts between schools and parents, and schools and CYP are highlighted. Furthermore, exosystemic and chronosystemic pressures are recognised as barriers to school attendance. The participants in the focus group also discuss how limitations of time prevent them from helping CYP more effectively.

**4.6 Mixed Focus Group 2 (MFG2)**

Mixed Focus Group 2 consisted of the following practitioners:

P1: Virtual School representative (female)

P2: Local Authority Attendance Officer (male)

Each participant was experienced in their role, (a minimum of five years of professional experience). In contrast to MFG1, the conversation during MFG2 was characterised by a particularly high degree of agreement between the practitioners.

**4.6.1 Schools as sites of conflict**

During MFG2, schools are once again positioned as sites of conflict. In the passage below, P2 positions all CYP and schools as being predisposed to conflict with each other, which is reminiscent of P1 from Mixed Focus Group 1, when they discussed negative parental attitudes towards school which were based in parents’ own historical experiences.

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| 197 | P2: Yeah, and… it's knowing… where young people are in their journey of being open and |
| 198 | transparent around what their difficulties are. And that’s obviously ultimately it's core about |
| 199 | building relationships**, but a lot of them have been indoctrinated, that schools**... |
| 200 | P1: Yeah… |
| 201 | P2:  That schools are this. **They're not going to** **support you, or be friendly or**… |
| 202 | P1: Yeah… |
| 203 | P2:  try and meet your needs. When obviously that's the ultimate aim that we all get into. But |

**Table 36:** Showing the attribution of negative attitudes towards schools during MFG2.

P2 creates a sociological narrative in which CYP have been indoctrinated to believe that schools are already places where they can expect conflict. On this occasion, more technical vocabulary “*indoctrinate”*’ is used to strengthen their argument that schools are unfriendly, unsupportive and unable to meet the needs of the pupils. The people or systems responsible for this indoctrination are not specified but could be conceptualised as inhabiting the mesosystem (Bronfenbrenner, 1979,1986, 1999, 2005), which is defined as the interactions taking place between different microsystems (Cherry, 2023). P2 uses this stance as a contrast to their specified aim of why they entered their job role. However, in order to provide the support due to CYP, practitioners must overcome indoctrination by unspecified forces which P2 centres within, “*a lot*” of children themselves. Through this phrase, P2 makes use of systematic vagueness (Edwards and Potter, 1992) which ensures that the statement can not be easily rebutted. Affirmation of this stance is offered by P1 with the acknowledgement, “*Yeah*” (lines 200 and 202).

**4.6.2 Conflicting responses from practitioners**

The theme of conflict between practitioner groups and parents was again raised in MFG2:

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| 260 | Tuesday I think it was but if ultimately a similar messaging was shared with the parent. **A lot** |
| 261 | **of parents would feel empowered to keep their child off school**. Erm, and then you get |
| 262 | **conflict, massive conflict,…** |
| 263 | P1: That's very true. Yeah. |
| 264 | P2: then with the professionals because professional groups have another view about the |
| 265 | damage that's potentially happening as a result that again… |
| 266 | P1: Yes… |
| 267 | P2: how do you maintain a positive relationship when there is such conflict? |

**Table 37:** Showing a discussion of non-school practitioners’ conflict with parents.

In the extract above, we can see P2 speculating about potential conflict between parents and “*professionals*”. P2 uses systematic vagueness, “*a lot of parents*”, to make their point regarding these potentials for conflicts. This is then used to emphasise the consequences of parental empowerment, “*conflict, massive conflict*” (L.262). The repetition and the use of extreme case formulation (Edwards and Potter, 1992) emphasises the scale of the problem in the eyes of the speaker. Interestingly, the cause of this potential conflict is parental exposure to the same “*messaging*” (training) that the EWO has received. In this situation, the practitioner projects a response onto the parents explaining that they, “*would feel empowered to keep their child off school*.” It seems that this expression of parental choice or power is something to be avoided and would lead to, “*damage that’s potentially happening*” (L265). This poses the question of how practitioners could work with parents, in line with the findings of Chian (2022); Halligan and Cryer (2022), who emphasise the importance of “*trusting*”relationships between key adults and families to promote reintegration into schools. It is likely that having inequitable access to information would place practitioners in the role of experts who must be trusted rather than creating mutual trust between parties.

A similar concern is again expressed by P2 regarding the empowerment of CYP:

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| 94 | they don't want to. But I will be honest and say that worries me that sort of messaging that |
| 95 | we be accept now that people can't do things because then says that there's an… It suggests |
| 96 | **in that moment that there's not a way around it and I think for lots of young people, although** |
| 97 | **we want to work with them and trust them… Some of their go to messaging, in the first two in** |
| 98 | **the first instance will be that they can't do something.** Erm, and if we're to fully go with that |
| 99 | and believe, and be on board with that, we could end up with quite a **dark outcome** **for many** |
| 100 | **young people**. One of the things that pushback as challenge was that because it was |

**Table 38:** Showing potential conflict between practitioners and CYP.

**4.6.3 The positioning of CYP**

Here the opinions of CYP are seen as needing to be challenged in order to avoid, “*dark outcomes*” for the CYP concerned. P2 attributes a default position to CYP, (that they presume that they can’t attend school) and then uses this attribution as a reason not to trust CYP. The proposal of challenging pupils is again contrary to research findings including, Halligan and Cryer (2022); O'Hagan, Bond and Hebron (2022). Interestingly, P2 is referring to their own judgement when expressing these ideas, using terms such as, “*that worries me*” and “*I think*”, potentially attributing the role of an expert to themselves (Edwards and Potter, 1993). In the Discursive Action Model, Edwards and Potter (1992) suggest that there is often, “a dilemma of stake or interest” and this can be seen in this passage. P2 faces a dilemma when voicing concerns regarding the “*messaging*” about the best ways to deal with school avoidance, messaging which they suggest contradicts their own experiences.

In response, P1 reinforces P2’s expert position:

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| 109 | P1: **Definitely.** So I've **definitely** had children who've been in care, err where they were being |
| 110 | told, “Don't go to school”... Yeah. |

**Table 39:** Showing agreement regarding the need for practitioner experts during discourse.

P1 not only gives a strong affirmation of P2’s personal views, “*definitely*” - they go on to give a corroborating example from their own experiences, in line with Edwards and Potter’s views on attribution (1993).

**4.6.4 Conflict between systems**

During the course of MFG2’s conversation attention is drawn to the conflicting pressures placed upon schools. There is an acknowledgement that schools are overburdened systems which struggle to keep pace with a number of varying priorities, including attendance (L 140 -142). The sheer size of the problem is acknowledged with the phrase, “*Oh it’s massive.*” There is also an acknowledgement of the exosystemic pressures that are placed on schools through the school inspectorate, OFSTED which the practitioners agree gives imperative messages relating to attendance (L.147 – 148). The reporting of these messages as facts strengthens the claims made about them.

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| 140 | P2: Yeah, that's fair and it's difficult because in an ideal world. You would not have so many |
| 141 | priorities at present that are put on education... |
| 142 | P1: **Oh, it’s massive.** |
| 143 | P2: And therefore you would be able to adopt a good approach around it. Obviously like |
| 144 | we've already said at the start there's just conflict all the way through… |
| 145 | P1: Yeah… |
| 146 | P2: Because you've got messaging from organisations such as OFSTED… That say it is |
| 147 | **import… imperative that you have high school attendance.** |
| 148 | P1: Yeah. |
| 149 | P2: And then you verse it this child's led approach. Which I say, if we go back to that and go |
| 150 | with a child led approach at times... Sure, a lot of school population would opt for a |
| 151 | different way. Approaching school at certain points of their academic career and obviously |
| 152 | that's not conducive to the current environment. both financially and resource wise even. |

**Table 40:** Showing a construction of conflict between systems during MFG2.

The exosystemic body, OFSTED is invoked as placing pressures on the microsystems that surround the child, including the school and the family, through economic pressures. These pressures lead P2 to conclude that it is not financially viable to allow CYP to take the lead regarding their school attendance. The exosystemic pressures are effectively used as seemingly insurmountable barriers to this, again underlining P2’s suggestion that the views of CYP need to be challenged.

Referring back to a diagrammatic representation of Bronfenbrenner’s model (See Appendix C) it is easy to create a visual picture of the systemic pressures bearing in upon the child that is at the centre. P2 once again makes use of the language of conflict, using words such as ‘conflict’ and ‘verse’ (verses) to describe the pressures placed on the school and eventually on the child at the centre of the concentric circles.

**4.6.5 Conflict between practitioners**

In contrast to MFG1, the participants in MFG 2 consistently came to a shared and agreed understanding of events. For example, encouragement to speak is frequently given from P1 to P2 in the form of the phrase, “*Yeah*” (e.g. lines 145 and 148 above). There is also a willingness to be corrected as we can see below:

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| 153 | P1: But then we have some schools don't wait. **So I know one they have an EBSA TA don't** |
| 154 | **they?** That's their specialism. That's what they do. And so it's not everywhere… But obviously |
| 155 | I'm just say… |
| 156 | **P2: There’s certainly a buy in, there's certainly a buy in. I wouldn't say in certain schools,** |
| 157 | **I’d say in a lot of schools,** |
| 158 | P1: Yeah. |
| 159 | P2: But the difficulty is their buy in is to name a person rather than to. adopt an approach. I know obviously… |
| 160 | P1: Old school. |

**Table 41:** Showing practitioners correcting each other during discussions during MFG2.

In this extract, both practitioners appear keen to reduce potential conflict with schools, acknowledging that they are “*buying in”.* However, this affirmation of schools is also negated by the suggestion that schools are implementing the wrong sort of strategy. In lines 153 – 154, P1 invites agreement from P2 through the use of a question, “*don’t they?”* (L.153 – 154). In response, P2 initially agrees with the point made by P1 (L.156) but corrects the statement, “*I wouldn’t say in certain schools, I’d say in a lot of schools*,” which is met with an affirmation, “*Yeah*”. P2 then goes on to explain a problem with the implementation of strategies by schools as they, “*name a person, rather than to adopt an approach*.” This suggestion is once again agreed upon by P1 who describes this approach as, “*Old school*”. It is interesting that this shared agreement is arrived at whilst discussing the implementation of systems within schools which they view to be inadequate. As a result, there is once again an attribution made of schools not doing things correctly. Although schools understand that there is a problem, they do not currently have the correct answers. This example of appointing a single person to take charge of (non) attendance is reminiscent of Heyne (2024) and their explanation of the importance of a multisystemic approach to school attendance and an avoidance of ‘silo-working’. In this case, P1 and P2 agree on the importance of a systemic approach to school attendance, rather than simply appointing one expert.

This extract also highlights the use of metaphorical / figurative language by the practitioners. They talk of ‘buy in’ from schools to refer to the cognitive understanding for the need to address attendance issues and also the systemic and financial investment that the schools have made in appointing a person to oversee the attendance. The use of a financial metaphor strengthens the references to finances in the exosystem and to financial constraints.

**4.6.6 Time as a concept which provoked conflict**

The problems relating to time are found again within the discussions of MFG2. In the extract below, P1 acknowledges the “*wonderful”* things that are already going on to help children with EBSA, but initially seems unable to explain how to improve the current situation other than to repeat training. The need for re-exposure to training conflicts with the finite amount of time that can be given to ensuring practitioner’s understanding of EBSA remains up to date.

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| 229 | absolutely wonderful things have been done, but I think… Surely it has to be… repeated. It's |
| 230 | almost over learning in school where you have to over learn children have to overlearn to |
| 231 | Remember things. It has to be repeated. But obviously the issue with that. It's like time and |
| 232 | Capacity and all those things that people talk about but…It would have to be a regular for |
| 233 | Everybody wouldn't it? |
| 234 | P2: It’s yeah. |
| 235 | P1: Revisited all of the time. |

**Table 42:** Showing time being conceptualised as a finite resource in discourse.

In this extract, P1 speculates about how the messages regarding EBSA could be understood consistently by a range of practitioners. P1 introduces her thoughts with the word, “*surely*” which is used as an appeal for agreement. The appeal for agreement from P2 is made again in line 233 through the use of the rhetorical question, “*wouldn’t it?*” (Caponigro & Sprouse (2007).

**4.6.7 The understanding of language used**

Throughout the conversation during MFG2, multiple references are made to the difficulties that various practitioner groups have in understanding messages, training and concepts relating to EBSA. Some examples are given below.

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| 86 | P2: Yeah, it is difficult because you always gonna have these conflicts in messages at |
| 87 | **times. And I think some of the things that are done to try and support positive attendance if** |
| 88 | **we give examples of messaging around having the best attendance leads to the best** |
| 89 | **outcomes for you academically, socially, emotionally and…** |
| 90 | P1: Yeah… |
| 91 | P2: All them sort of things. For some people will be anxiety inducing which will then cause |

**Table 43:** Showing P2’s confusion regarding language and explanations.

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| 208 | P2: What **does anyone have a unified understanding of anything ultimately** that? Like the |
| 209 | other day, I've been to that EBSA training and I'm sure it was probably 30 odd people there |
| 210 | and **we've all comprehended it slightly differently**. I know that people have walked away and |
| 211 | gone, “ooh,  this means we should do this now,” and while others have been in there and |
| 212 | gone, “but if we do it like that, that’s gonna cause this.” |

**Table 44:** Showing P2’s confusion regarding language and explanations.

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| 215 | continue. **I think it's about ensuring people have understood the messaging how we wish it to** |
| 216 | **be understood**. And again, that's from maybe… Not taking tests in the traditional term of |
| 217 | writing, but like trying to get that feedback to see…if it has resonated in the way that's |
| 218 | expected. |

**Table 45:** Showing P2’s confusion regarding language and explanations.

In contrast to earlier in the conversation when P2 felt that parents should not have access to the same training as practitioners, P2 expresses the view that practitioners who receive training also feel confused about the meaning of messages that they receive. P2 uses an extreme formulation (Edwards and Potter, 1992) to emphasise the differing views and opinions that resulted from the training, “*we’ve all comprehended it slightly differently*.” This underlines the sense of confusion that P2 feels surrounds EBSA and also their attribution that other practitioners feel equally confused.

P1 suggests that this is inevitable as practitioners with different roles have different priorities. By contrast, P2 suggests that there is a need for some form of feedback in order to ensure that there is a more unified understanding of the key messages from training. Despite earlier potentially placing practitioners in the role of experts by excluding parents from training and not wishing to be, “*fully on board*” with the initial thoughts and feelings of CYP, P2 is uncertain about who the experts are or who they should be which could be a result of uncertainty regarding whether messages from training courses have been understood correctly. This reflects a general sense of confusion regarding the best ways of helping CYP exhibiting EBSA.

**4.6.8 Summary**

Under close analysis, we can see within the discourse of MFG2 an attribution of CYP having been indoctrinated against the education system which is perceived as a barrier to engaging CYP exhibiting signs of EBSA. P2 also questions whether a child-centered approach is the correct way of helping them as the initial impulses of CYP, “*Some of their go to messaging*” is that they are unable to attend school. P2 also alludes to potential conflicts with parents who could use information to justify keeping their children away from school. Instead, it is suggested that key practitioners maintain the role of experts, filtering the information in order to avoid, “*conflict. Massive conflict*.” Without this filtering of information, practitioners voiced fears that there would be, “*dark outcomes*” for CYP.

Just as with MFG1, there is again an acknowledgment of the pressures and conflicts between schools and exosystemic organisations such as OFSTED, and economic factors which leave school practitioners feeling overwhelmed and unable to provide the emotional understanding and containment needed when responding to EBSA. Schools are positioned as organisations which acknowledge that there are problems with attendance but they are not taking the correct approach to dealing with the problem.

Finally, MFG2 emphasised the confusion that exists regarding the language, terminology and “*messaging*” relating to EBSA. There is a suggestion that when training is delivered, it leaves practitioners confused regarding the best ways to help CYP and that more needs to be done in order to ensure that key messages are uniformly understood.

**Chapter 5 Discussion**

**5.1 Chapter overview**

The following chapter contains a discussion of the research findings presented in the previous chapter, relating to the literature discussed in the Literature Review. There will be an exploration of the ways in which this research has addressed and answered the research question which will be conceptualised in relation to Bronfenbrenner’s Ecosystemic Theory and to discursive psychology techniques which have been used throughout the study. There will also be a discussion of the contribution that this research makes to existing literature and the limitations of the study as well as suggestions for future research. Finally, the chapter will conclude with considerations relating to the practice of EPs and other practitioners.

**5.2 Research rationale**

The aim of this study was to gain an appreciation of how practitioners from a variety of roles use discourse to construct their views and understanding of emotionally based school avoidance. The literature reviewed shows that there has long been a focus on issues relating to non-attendance, including establishing the causes of non-attendance (Johnson, Falstein, Szurek and Svendsen, 1941; Reid, 2007; Gren-Landell et al., 2015). There have also been multiple studies into the implications of non-attendance including those by Credé, Roch, and Kieszczynka (2010) and Rocque et al. (2017). Research into this area often includes the voices of teachers (Gren-Landell et al., 2015; Devine, 2021). However more recent research has also given voice to the experiences of parents of children with EBSA (Havik, Bru & Ertesvåg, 2014; Sawyer, 2022; Lissack and Boyle, 2022) and to the experiences of children (Babington, 2023; Neilson and Bond, 2023). There have also been studies into the impact of COVID-19 on school non-attendance (Nathwani et al., 2021; Jones et al., 2024). However, little literature seeks to capture the voices of other practitioners who work with CYP regarding issues relating to EBSA. This research sought to capture those voices in order to ascertain their understanding.

**5.3 The use of focus groups**

Through the use of focus groups, voices of practitioners from seven different practitioner groups were gathered (teachers, EPs, youth workers, headteachers, learning support workers, attendance officers, virtual school representatives). As a result of the use of a discursive methodology, it is acknowledged that the findings from the focus groups cannot be generalised Clarke and Braun (2013). However, the interpretive repertoires brought forward can be related to themes in previous research, such as conflict between parents and school teachers regarding the causes of EBSA (Gren-Landell et al., 2015; Havik, Bru & Ertesvåg, 2014). This suggests that the findings can be transferred.

The use of focus groups has facilitated the gathering of a rich corpus, reflecting the complex picture regarding the lived experiences of a variety of practitioners. These conversations mimicked real-life discussions, as suggested by Clarke and Braun (2013). Participants were also afforded the opportunity to formulate agreement and meanings relating to EBSA and it is interesting to reflect that the actual process of carrying out research can lead to the formulation of shared meaning outside of the work carried out by the researcher themselves.

**5.4 Homogenous and heterogenous groups**

The current research used a combination of two heterogenous and two homogenous research groups. Clarke and Braun (2013) outline advantages and disadvantages associated with each type of focus group, for example, heterogeneity will give rise to a diverse discussion and this would certainly relate to the discussion of MFG1 during which strong attributions were made regarding other practitioner groups and there was the use of informal language at certain points. However, there was a lot of agreement during the course of MFG2 and there was also a degree of familiarity between the participants. This is likely to be a result of recruiting participants from the same local authority as it is likely that the participants have a pre-existing relationship through their work. However, the high degree of agreement was also interesting as the views expressed were often in contrast with those of other groups, particularly those expressed by the EPs.

The discussions within the homogenous focus groups were also interesting, as the teachers all worked within the same secondary school and again had pre-existing relationships. It is possible that their shared knowledge of each other may have hindered participants from being fully open about their views (Clarke and Braun, 2013) however, it was interesting that when one of the teachers suggested that schools were empowered to help CYP, another teacher quickly corrected that narrative and instead initiated a narrative of disempowerment amongst teachers.

Reflecting upon these incidences, it would seem that the debate around homogeneity / heterogeneity of focus group participants is only a part of the considerations regarding the creation of a focus group. Mercer (2007), suggests that a researcher’s identity should be conceptualised as being navigated across multidimensional continuums, and with this in mind, it may be more beneficial to conceptualise the identity of research participants as navigating similar continuums. The dimensions of these continuums will include a shared interest in the research topic (in this case EBSA) but is distinguished by their own experiences and politics as well as the pre-exiting relationships which will need to be navigated once again, after the completion of the focus group.

**5.5 The creation of agreed meaning during the course of focus groups**

In line with the suggestion of Clarke and Braun (2013), the use of focus groups allowed for an analysis of the ways in which meaning and understanding is negotiated between practitioners, both within and between practitioner groups. One of the interesting features to examine across the four focus groups has been the extent to which a shared understanding of the features of EBSA could be negotiated. This in turn links to the debate regarding homogenous and heterogenous participants within focus groups (Clarke and Braun, 2013).

During the EPs focus group and the teacher’s focus group, a shared understanding was arrived at, which can potentially be explained by their personal familiarity with each other and the pre-existing social constructions that they share as a result of their jobs and their environment. However, it should be noted that during the course of their conversations, the EPs were careful to avoid potential confrontation with each other and with other practitioner groups. This is in contrast to MFG1 in particular, where the participants were less familiar with each other and during which differences in understanding and conceptualisation have been highlighted during the analysis.

**5.6 The research question**

In this section, consideration will be given to the ways in which the following research question was answered:

* How do practitioners with differing roles perceive the problem of EBSA?

This question is intended to be open to interpretation and to facilitate discussion into the broad experiences of the practitioners involved, including their knowledge of potential causes and sustaining factors relating to EBSA, as well as their knowledge regarding methods of reintegrating CYP into educational settings. The interpretive repertoires highlighted in this research relate to practitioners’ experiences of conflict in relation to EBSA.

The discussion of this main research question was facilitated by the following prompts which were displayed throughout the discussions of the focus groups:

* *Do you think that there is a good awareness across practitioner groups of the factors which cause EBSA?*
* *Do you find that there is an awareness of appropriate responses to EBSA?*
* *Do you find that different practitioners have a unified understanding of EBSA?*

**5.7 Confusion regarding the terminology and the language used**

Bond (2024) highlighted the challenges regarding the terminology used when discussing EBSA and these complexities were born out by the discussions of the focus groups. During the course of the four focus groups, there was confusion regarding the language and terminology being used. For example, in MFG1, P1 questioned whether youth workers knew the terminology of EBSA despite having an understanding of the issues that relate to EBSA (L. 23-30). In MFG2, P2 talked about the difficulties of people gaining a unified understanding of training that had been delivered (Line 208 – 212) and suggested that giving participants a test could potentially be useful in this situation. The teachers’ focus group spent a lot of time discussing CYP who were in school but wouldn’t go into specific lessons, a potentially different form of EBSA which may require further future research, whilst the EPs began their discussion with an acknowledgement of the many and various terms that either have been used or are still currently in use regarding this phenomenon.

During the time taken to carry out this research, the terminology used to refer to EBSA has continued to change and vary. For example, some local authorities are keeping the acronym EBSA but using it to refer to ‘emotional barriers to school attendance’. In literature, Heyne (2024) refers to ‘School Refusal Behaviour’ whilst Corcoran et al. (2024) continue to use the phrase ‘emotionally based school non-attendance’. However, agreeing upon more unified terminology could be a beneficial first step to helping wider practitioners gain a more unified understanding of the features of EBSA and a clearer understanding of the ways in which CYP could be helped.

**5.8 Schools as a site of conflict**

When we consider the discussions across the four focus groups, there is evidence to suggest that schools are conceptualised by practitioners as places that are pre-disposed to conflict with a variety of groups. These groups include parents (MFG1), CYP (teacher focus group) and with conflicting exosystemic pressures, such as the drive to increase attendance and the drive to improve the mental health of CYP. This feature of the discussions is reminiscent of the conceptualisation of schools as hubs through which a variety of services are delivered Roeser, Eccles and Sameroff (2000).

During the discussions of the focus groups, there was a recognition of the multisystemic pressures placed upon schools which, during focus group discussions, has led to them being attributed the status of highly pressurised environments to work in and to the attribution of teachers as feeling overwhelmed. The impact of teacher mental health and wellbeing on the mental health and wellbeing of students has been investigated by researchers such as Harding et al. (2019) who found that lower rates of teacher depression are associated with positive student mental health. Harding et.al also associated lower teacher absenteeism with better pupil-teacher relationships, one of the key factors in creating a positive school climate as conceptualised by Rudasil et al. (2018).

Interestingly, the teacher focus group recognised that schools were a potential site of conflict with CYP as a result of their highly regimented nature and suggest that using flexible placements and the possibility of flexible timetables would bring the greatest benefits to the CYP. There is also a recognition of the narrow focus on academic attainment in high school and a suggestion that this is demotivating for CYP, in line with the findings of Higgins (2022) and Bond (2024).

The language used included talk of parent’s “battles” with schools and the “damage” being done. Through the discourse used, schools were positioned as places in which such battles were inevitable. However, during MFG1, attributions were also made about school practitioners, “lacking humanity” (L. 203).

**5.9 Conflict between stake holders - the positioning of parents and carers**

Previous research had suggested that there is a difference between the views of parents and the views of teachers relating to the causes of EBSA in CYP. For example, the online survey carried out by Gren-Landell et al. (2015) found that teachers placed a higher emphasis on home and family causes than on school-based issues. By contrast, Havik, Bru & Ertesvåg (2014) focussed on gathering the views of parents who expressed the view that school factors had a larger impact upon non-attendance than domestic or family factors. During the current study, the role of parents and the positioning of parents varied both within and between the focus groups. For example, in MFG1, parents were positioned as warriors battling with the schools, whilst at other points they were positioned as exacerbating factors in creating a ‘celebrity culture’ around non-attendance as a result of their own negative experiences of education. By contrast, EPs positioned parents as potential partners with whom they should work, thereby creating an alliance, in line with the findings of Heyne (2024). However, not all practitioners conveyed the same message. For example, during MFG2, it was suggested that parents should not be given access to equal information and that there are benefits from practitioners retaining the role of experts who are able to guide CYP back into school.

**5.10 Conflict between stake holders - the positioning of teachers**

During the teacher focus group, teachers attributed a sense of powerlessness to themselves regarding helping CYP with EBSA, “Who’s holding all the cards?” Instead, the CYP were placed in a position of power, particularly following the COVID-19 epidemic. During the discussions of MFG1, teachers were attributed the status as locales of disagreement and there was conflict within the focus group itself as P2 suggested that there is a lack of ‘humanity’ and, “a complete lack of understanding” which was rebutted by P1, who suggested it was more likely to be a lack of empathy and by P3 who suggested it was due to a lack of understanding. This discussion brings to mind the research of Gregory & Purcell (2014) who carried out semi structured interviews with parents. This research highlighted feelings of being bullied by teachers and being made to feel ‘different’. These discussions relating to the role of teachers and their ability to form meaningful relationships with CYP again relates to the issue of ‘school climate’ (Van Eck, Johnson, Bettencourt and Johnson, 2017) the sense of connectedness that CYP have towards their school. This also echoes the work of Halligan and Cryer (2022); Boaler and Bond (2023) and Tamlyn (2022) all of whom emphasise the importance of positive relationships between school representatives, CYP and families in aiding pupils with attendance problems.

**5.11 The Maintenance of systemic artificial boundaries**

Heyne (2024b) emphasises that solutions to complex problems, such as EBSA, are not found within the artificial boundaries which fence off areas of interest or specialisation. Instead, Heyne emphasises the importance of multiagency and multidisciplinary approaches to the issues surrounding EBSA. Through the data analysed in this study it is clear that this situation has not yet been achieved amongst practitioners attempting to deal with problems relating to EBSA, with practitioners from all focus groups recognising this situation in current practice.

**5.12 Changes in knowledge over time**

Throughout the focus groups, practitioners noted a variety of issues relating to time, including the lack of time available to spend with CYP. For example, during the course of MFG1 time was conceptualised as a commodity that had to be rationed.

Further problems relating to time included the attribution that practitioners did not take action at the earliest opportunity to prevent attendance issues. During both MFG1 and the teacher focus group, the nurturing environments encountered at primary schools were contrasted with the environments of secondary schools. This is echoed during the course of the teacher’s discussion with T1 wishing that they could, “start the fight” whilst CYP were still attending primary school.

Just as Haste and Abrahams (2008) argue that the moral values of societies change over time due to interactions between societal factors and individuals, it is important to acknowledge that knowledge also changes over time (Levin, 2013). During the focus groups, the conflict and confusion caused by time pressure is highlighted. However, EPs also highlighted the changes in the knowledge base for helping children exhibiting EBSA. For example, EPs showed an awareness of research linking EBSA behaviours to a trauma response rather than as a response to anxiety (Dodds, 2015). EPs also acknowledged changes that have taken place over time, by contrasting a recent strategy meeting to how things were a few years ago when EBSA, “*wasn’t even a thing*.” The EPs also acknowledge that disseminating this information will take time, which is in contrast to the attribution of schools needing, quick fixes in order to absolve the school of responsibility, made during MFG1.

**5.13 The Importance of social constructionism when creating narratives**

During the EP focus group, EP3 contrasts the language used by two separate practitioners from the same school. In doing this, EP3 effectively outlines two separate and contrasting realities which are created through the language being used. When a staff member refused to acknowledge the terminology of EBSA, referring to a choice of behaviour and using phrases such as, “refusal” the reality created resulted in there being no adaptations being made for the CYP. This highlights the importance of language and the relationship of language to the conceptualisation of EBSA. Going forward it will be important to carefully select and agree the language being used in relation to EBSA and use it consistently so that a sympathetic reality is created for the CYP exhibiting EBSA amongst practitioners.

This is underlined by the language used by practitioners during the course of the focus groups as some language used suggested that EBSA is a choice and placed the cause for school ‘refusal’ within the child. For example, there were times during the conversations between teachers and during the course of MFG2 when practitioners suggested that the non-attendance was a choice which the CYP could justify, potentially through the use of internalised monologues, rather than it being an emotional reaction triggered by anxiety or potentially traumatic experiences.

**5.14 Research reflections- researcher reflexivity**

The importance of researcher reflexivity is emphasised in a number of research articles (Holmes, 2020; May & Perry, 2017; Subramani, 2019). Reflexivity is the theory that researchers ought to engage in a process of critical self-assessment, self-awareness and reflection in relation to one’s own perspective. Only through acknowledging this during the research process can one hope to carry out research which informs the reader of existing biases and allows the reader to make informed decisions about the research presented. These biases may impact upon any (and all) areas of the research, including the nature of the research being undertaken, the method and methodology and the conclusions drawn.

The relationship between reflexivity and ethical research is also emphasised, as it is only through clear reflexive acknowledgements of existing experiences and biases that a reader can fully understand the context of the research. Without this reflexivity, Holmes (2020) argues that the research could be considered to be unethical. The acknowledgement of the researcher’s positionality which may impact upon the research is therefore central to the acknowledgement that there is no positivist, singular truth to be drawn from the research process. As Malterud (2002) points out, all researchers in all scientific fields must understand the impact of their positionality and research choices upon the research carried out.

**5.15 Reflections on researcher identity - insiders and outsiders**

Merton (1972) conceptualised researchers as falling into two categories. The first being ‘Insiders’ who are members of specific groups or people with a certain social status. In contrast, ‘Outsiders’ are not members of these social groups and do not have a certain social status. However, rather than distinguish myself through the use of dichotomous terms (‘insider’ or ‘outsider’) whilst carrying out this research, it would be more accurate and appropriate to consider the above terms as poles on a continuum with multiple dimensions which the researcher must continually navigate (Mercer, 2007). Fearson (1999) conceptualises identity as a social category with rules which allow membership and / or characteristics and expected behaviours. My identity as a researcher includes being a white, middle-class, middle -aged male; a teacher and trainee educational psychologist amongst many other constituent parts. During the course of this research data was obtained from focus groups including a group of teachers and a group of EPs, which when considered simplistically would place me as an ‘insider’ within these groups. However, when we consider the groups through a pluralistic lens it is worth considering ways in which I did not fall into the ‘insider category’ whilst carrying out the research. For example, the teachers who formed one focus group were secondary school teachers, whereas I taught in primary schools. The EPs who formed one focus group were all qualified and all female, whilst I am an unqualified male trainee. These are examples of the multiple continuums which have been travelled during the course of this research, as suggested by Mercer (2007). Through highlighting some of the nuances of my identity in relation to the identities of the participants involved in the focus groups, it is hoped that a clear understanding of the research findings will be facilitated.

As mentioned earlier (see section 4.2) It is important to note that the reporting of the gender of the participants directly relates to this point and is included specifically to aid the readers conceptualisation of the continuums relating to my own potential researcher identity.

**5.16 The impact of creating shared meaning**

Issues relating to creating a shared meaning between practitioner groups is well documented. For example, Bechky (2003) researched the understanding of ‘occupational communities’ (specifically engineers, technicians and assemblers) who share common work. Bechky found that problems between these communities (practitioners) were based in the language used and that the key to overcoming problems was through the joint construction of common meaning. The work of Bechky continues to impact research relating to knowledge integration in business to this day, for example, Caccamo, Pittino and Tell (2023) highlight the importance of knowledge integration in business innovation and speak of minimising potential boundaries. Relating this to EBSA, it is important that opportunities to create shared meaning and understanding between practitioners are at the forefront of innovation in this area and that problems relating to language are overcome through joint construction, as suggested by Bechky. Creating opportunities for the creation of shared meaning should be part of the role played by local authorities and by educational psychologists.

The data collected whilst carrying out this study unearthed the narratives and constructions placed around EBSA by practitioners who have encountered it in their working role. The purpose of creating narratives has been discussed and analysed in detail (Gergen and Gergen, 1986; Sarbin, 1986) who suggest that it is a fundamental aspect of human nature to attempt to gain understanding and create meaning through narratives. Through joining the discussions of a focus group during this study, practitioners have had an opportunity to create a construction of EBSA based on a series of experiences which were negotiated and affirmed by a group of fellow practitioners and colleagues thereby potentially creating an agreed construction of EBSA for that fucus group. By comparing the constructions created across focus groups, it was possible to draw out over-arching interpretive repertoires (Edwards and Potter, 1992) that relate to the issue of EBSA and its conceptualisation.

**5.17 The use of discourse analysis**

Richardson, Goodwin and Vine (2011) suggest that using discourse analysis is a time consuming and challenging task and this has proven to be the case. One feature of this approach is that there is no single method that is acknowledged as the ‘correct’ method to follow. In carrying out this research, the ten steps suggested by Potter and Wetherell (1987) (see Appendix G) were followed and provided some guidance. However, this guidance is far from a road map and as Richardson et al. suggest, much has been learned through the actual process of doing the discourse analysis.

**5.18 Limitations of the research**

This research has a number of limitations. Due to its nature (a qualitative study in which participants expressed personal views) the information gathered is not generalisable (Rahman, 2020). However, the analysis of the topics raised reflects those raised in other research, as discussed above and may therefore be considered to have validity.

A potential limitation of the research relates to the number of practitioner groups represented in the study, which total seven, as there are other practitioners who are also frequently involved in EBSA cases, such as social workers. However, through the identification of common interpretive repertoires between the groups, it can be argued that the participants who took part in the study exhibited discourse which displayed representative views and attributions for a wide range of practitioners.

A further limitation of this study relates to the amount of data gathered from the four focus groups. Because the data was so rich and detailed, aspects of the discussions have not been fully analysed and could reveal further insights into practitioners’ conceptualisations of EBSA.

It should also be acknowledged that the research does not seek to gain the voice of all groups who are impacted by EBSA. For example, neither CYP nor the parents of CYP with EBSA are represented in this research.

**5.19 Unique contribution of the research**

Previous research into EBSA has focused on establishing the heterogenous causes and gathering the voices of groups that are impacted by EBSA, including CYP, parents and teachers. However, this research acknowledges the roles of a wide range of practitioners who are involved in children’s services and the role that they play regarding children’s attendance. This research seeks to gather their voices and consider the extent to which a unified understanding and approach is being adopted. Through the process of contributing to the focus groups, this research also afforded participants the opportunity to create a shared understanding of EBSA.

The findings of this research highlight the importance not only of multisystemic working practices in the area of EBSA, but also the importance of having a shared understanding of the issues involved and suggests that currently there is much work to be done in order to facilitate that shared understanding.

The issues highlighted by practitioners during the course of the focus groups have been conceptualised through the use of Bronfenbrenner’s Ecosystemic model which has resulted in attention being drawn to wider systemic issues which are contributing to EBSA, thereby moving the focus of the problems away from being within the child.

**5.20 Implications of the research for local authorities**

The current study highlights the importance of ensuring that there is a shared understanding of research relating to EBSA across all practitioner groups. Local authorities have a clear role in facilitating this shared understanding by providing opportunities for multiagency training, workshops and facilitating discussion. Policies relating to EBSA and school attendance should reflect this shared understanding and should use language which is commonly agreed by practitioners.

**5.21 Systemic Implications for the DfE**

Throughout the focus group discussions, there was a recognition of the pressures that schools are under, relating to an inability to meet the wide ranging and complex needs of the CYP in their care. Teacher participants suggested that some of these pressures may stem from the under-funding of education and that this issue must be addressed in order to give school-based practitioners the time and capacity to create emotionally friendly school climates.

This research indicates that thought should be given at a national level regarding the diverse expectations placed on schools in order to facilitate clear objectives for school-based practitioners. Research such as the meta-analytic review carried out by Credé, Roch, and Kieszczynka (2010) suggests that attendance is the best predicator academic achievement for CYP. However, the growth of school non-attendance, including EBSA, suggests that the macrosystemic conceptualisation of school success being measured by academic achievement may need to be challenged.

This challenge can be linked to consideration relating to the English school curriculum (each U.K. country having their own devolved curriculum). During the course of the teacher focus group, suggestions were made regarding a broadening of the curriculum with more focus given to non-academic subjects. This tallies with debates within educational research, for example, Woolner and Tiplady (2019) argue that a focus on testing and academic achievement has led to a narrowing of the curriculum which is detrimental to the education of a wide range of CYP. The systemic inflexibility of schools was also discussed at length by the teacher focus group in which participants had a variety of suggestions which they felt could improve matters, including the possibility of delivering lessons online, an area of academic research which has flourished since the COVID-19 epidemic, for example see Hofer, Nistor and Scheibenzuber (2021).

**5.22 Implications for educational psychologists**

The current study has clear implications for educational psychologists, which can once again be conceptualised through the use of Bronfenbrenner’s Ecosystemic model. EPs already have a clearly defined role within the mesosystem, having dialogue with members of the microsystem through consultation and training. This role could be used to generate a clear narrative for multiple groups of practitioners, relating to the experiences of CYP with EBSA. Attention should be given to features identified through research as being helpful to facilitate prevention, as well as features identified as aiding reintegration into educational settings. This would help to address silo-working practices and promote a united team approach, underpinned by training which uses consistent language. During this process it will also be important for practitioners to have the opportunity to openly discuss the issues relating to EBSA in order to facilitate the shared understanding that is required and avoid instances of practitioners harbouring misgivings regarding the need for expert led, non-collaborative approaches.

It is also important for EPs to play a leading role in shaping and agreeing consistent terminology. The agreed terminology should ensure that blame is not placed within the CYP for being unable to attend school but should also be recognisable and usable by fellow practitioners. Groups such as the Association of Educational Psychologists (AEP) and the National Association of Principal Educational Psychologists (NAPEP) could help to facilitate this process.

EPs also have an important role to play in disseminating information and the findings of research regarding EBSA. During the EP focus group, EPs were very aware that their exposure to research in this field was potentially a unique feature of their role, along with their ability to bring different practitioner groups together. These two features could be combined to ensure that various practitioner groups have access to up-to-date research. These features of the role of EPs will also be important as they allow EPs to bridge the gap between different practitioner groups during individual case work thus promoting multi-agency practice.

It is also important to consider the role of the EP in helping CYP and the families who are impacted by EBSA. Recently, Carey, Lombard-Vance, Rogers, & Cowley-Cunningham (2024) have emphasised the importance of centralising the voice and needs of the child in the actions taken by a variety of practitioner groups and it is essential that EPs use their position to amplify each individual child’s voice and ensure that their needs are understood across practitioner groups. This is important because the heterogenous causes of EBSA mean that each case requires a bespoke approach, rather than a pre-designed approach to all cases being applied.

One further practical step that can be taken by EPs would be to facilitate the setting up and running of groups for parents and carers in order to promote a sense of camaraderie and to avoid the constant hypothesising about their children, as outlined by Dannow, Esbjørn and Risom (2020).

**5.22.1 Potential barriers for educational psychologists**

There are many potential barriers that should be acknowledged which could impede EPs from implementing some of the strategies outlined above. The first relates to the interpretive repertoire of time as a concept, which provoked conflict. EP time is highly pressurised as a result of phenomena such as the increase in requests for Education, Health and Care plans (EHCPs). In 2023, there were 138,242 requests for EHC plans, an increase of 20.8 percent on the previous year (Department for Education, 2024). There is also a challenge for EPs in keeping up to date with research in this fast-moving area of study.

A further potential barrier relates to Bakhtin’s theory of heteroglossia (Bakhtin, 1994) and the willingness of all practitioners to be open to alternative narratives relating to both the education and the health and wellbeing of CYP who are not able to attend school. The current narrative relating to the imperative nature of school attendance is reflected in policies such as the issuing of fines to the parents of children who do not attend school and the monitoring of attendance statistics by OFSTED. The inability of CYP with EBSA to attend school is conceptualised negatively and a swift return to school is often promoted regardless of the CYP’s readiness to attend. However, recent studies suggest that a child’s readiness to return to school should be a key determiner of the time it takes for a child to return to education (Fricker, 2023; Hamilton, 2024).

Previous research in this field has highlighted the importance of the ‘school climate’ and its’ impact upon CYP. For example, Rudasil et al. (2018) created the Systems View of School Climate (SVSC) framework which can be used to conceptualise the features of the school climate, including staff and peer interactions as well as the values and beliefs of all stakeholders. The school climate can be impacted on by using strategies such as the Emotionally Friendly Schools programme, used in the North West of England.

EPs also have a potential role in challenging the conceptualisation of in-school success being measured solely by academic achievement, through their mesosystemic interactions with schools and with local authority representatives.

**5.23 Suggestions for future research into EBSA**

One area of future research that is worthy of exploration is the phenomenon described during the teacher focus group, in which CYP go into school but do not go into lessons. All teachers within the teacher focus group work in the same secondary school and it is possible that this behaviour is localised to that school. More research should be done to ascertain whether this is a significant occurrence. A further potential area of research would be into gathering the voices of pupils who exhibit such behaviours. This would allow an assessment of the links between this in-school avoidance and the concept of EBSA in which pupils feel unable to come into school.

A further area for possible future research would be into the views and experiences of single practitioner groups, such as youth workers and social workers, possibly through homogenous focus groups or interviews. This could potentially focus on narratives relating to cases of successful school reintegration, following on from the work of Babington (2023) which focused on the successful reintegration of post 16 girls. The experiences of groups such as education welfare officers (EWOs) would be interesting in this situation as the EWOs within the current study constructed a narrative in which the voices of children and parents should be challenged and the role of potential experts should be retained by practitioners.

It would also be important to capture the experiences of social workers as they are not represented in the current study and yet are tasked with a key role in keeping vulnerable CYP safe.

**5.24 Research dissemination**

The findings of the current research will be shared with all participants in the form of an executive summary and the opportunity to discuss and reflect upon the findings will be provided in the form of an online meeting. A similar summary will be provided to team leaders within my LA, including the Principal Educational Psychologist. It is also important that the current research is published in the form of an article in order to reach a wide audience. It would also be relevant to share the findings of this research with principal educational psychologists and children’s service leaders nationally.

Heyne (2024) emphasises the importance of multidisciplinary working to help CYP with EBSA. In order to acknowledge this, it is important to share the findings of this research with multidisciplinary teams who work with CYP. This can be readily facilitated within the authority within which I am employed as multidisciplinary training days are already being implemented around a range of issues including EBSA.

A further means of sharing the findings of this research is through conference presentations, including Trainee Educational Psychologist conferences and potentially conferences such as those staged by the Association of Educational Psychologists.

**5.25 Reflections on the experience of writing a thesis**

Whilst reflecting on the process of writing a thesis I am drawn back to my initial starting point and my personal experiences. As outlined in section 1.3 (Why I chose to research EBSA) my interest was provoked by my experiences as an EP through the casework that I encountered and through the wide variety of responses that I encountered from practitioners. Some of these responses used the language of conflict to conceptualise the problem, suggesting that if a teacher went round to a child’s house with work, the child had “*won*.” This comment still resonates with me today as it foreshadowed the interpretive repertoires of conflict which pervaded the discussions of the focus groups.

In order to gain an understanding of practitioners’ conceptualisations of EBSA, it was important to use a methodology that facilitated direct access to the voices of practitioners and so I was keen to use a qualitative method. This choice has led to its own challenges whilst progressing with this thesis – not least the time-consuming nature of the analysis. As noted previously, Arksey and Knight (1999) suggest that it takes one hour to transcribe 5 minutes of focus group conversation. I would also add that familiarising myself with the methodology of discursive psychology was also time consuming and at times frustrating as there was no single consensus regarding the steps that should be followed. However, I believe discursive psychology also has advantages as it encourages the researcher to consider the impact of what is being said by participants and how that links to discourses that are present in wider society.

I have also been pleased with the data gathered through the use of focus groups. Braun and Clarke (2013) outline the advantages of homogenous and heterogenous focus groups and through good fortune, I was able to gather data from each. I found analysing the data gathered in Mixed Focus Group 1 particularly interesting as the participants were prepared to share their thoughts to the point of disagreeing with each other, which I found unusual. However, I was very grateful to the participants for their candour and it has made me consider the importance of protecting their identity whilst giving the reader of the thesis enough information to be satisfied with the validity of the research.

As a final reflection point, I would add that I feel that this is a worthy piece of research as, to the best of my knowledge, this research breaks new ground in relation to gathering the voices of some of the wide variety of practitioners who are involved with helping CYP struggling with EBSA. During the course of the teacher focus group, there was also mention of a phenomena which I have not encountered in literature, with pupils coming into school but not able to attend lessons. This appears to be an important area for research in the future.

**5.26 Conclusion**

This research sought to gain an understanding of the conceptualisation of EBSA by different groups of practitioners. The starting point for this research was the recognition that there are a wide range of practitioners involved in the education of CYP and that existing research does not capture all voices. However, research by Heyne et al. (2024) suggests that a multisystemic, multiagency approach optimises the chances of reintegrating CYP into an educational setting following EBSA. In order to achieve this aim, a unified understanding of the term and its implications are required.

The range of practitioners who participated in the focus groups for this study make it unique and through their thoughtful contributions, this study has highlighted current areas of potential and actual conflict between practitioners and systems in relation to their understanding and conceptualisation of EBSA. Attention has been drawn to pressures stemming from all levels of Bronfenbrenner’s Ecosystemic model, including the chronosystem, which are brought to bear at a microsystemic level, particularly in schools, on the practitioners working in schools and on the CYP attending the schools.

This study calls for greater collaboration between practitioner groups in order to generate a shared understanding and approach to helping CYP exhibiting signs of EBSA, which should be informed by existing research. Such collaboration should be facilitated on multisystemic levels with EPs taking a central role in this venture.

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**Appendices**

Appendix A: Search terms used

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **Aspect of research** | **Search terms used** |
| The historical perspective on EBSA | * History of emotionally based school avoidance / school avoidance / emotionally based school non-attendance * History of EBSA + schools / education * History of ESNA + schools / education |
| Causes of EBSA | * Causes of emotionally based school avoidance / school avoidance / emotionally based school non-attendance / EBSA / ESNA / * Barriers to school attendance * Barriers to attendance |
| The impact of the school climate | * School climate * School climate + school non-attendance * Impact of school climate * Impact of school climate on attendance |
| Views of impacted groups | * EBSA / school avoidance / school non-attendance + parent views * EBSA / school avoidance / school non-attendance + child / children / child views / children’s views * EBSA / school avoidance / school non-attendance + teachers / teacher views |
| The impact of multi-agency approaches | * Multi-agency approaches + EBSA / emotionally based school avoidance / school non-attendance / school attendance / * Practitioner approaches + EBSA / emotionally based school avoidance / school non-attendance / school attendance / emotionally based school non-attendance |

It should be noted that as well as the use of the search terms above, use was also made of the ‘Cited by’ feature available on the Google Scholar search engine. This feature gives access to further research papers which cite the original.

**Appendix B: Focus group prompts**

* Do you think that there is a good awareness across practitioner groups of the factors which contribute to EBSA?
* Do you find that there is a good awareness across practitioner groups of appropriate responses to EBSA?
* Do you find that different practitioners have a unified understanding of EBSA?

**Appendix C: Diagram of Bronfenbrenner’s Ecosystemic model**

A diagram of the development of the development of the child

Description automatically generated

(Guy-Evans, 2024)

**Appendix D: Letter to potential participants**

A close-up of a logo

Description automatically generated

Dear potential participant,

You are being invited to participate in research regarding the subject of emotional based school avoidance (EBSA). In order to participate in this research you should:

1. be in a role that involves working with children to help aid or facilitate their education.
2. have experience of working with children who have exhibited EBSA within the last 2 years.

The research will take the form of focus groups, with each group consisting of approximately 5 participants and lasting no longer than 30 minutes. During this time you will be invited to discuss your experiences of working with children experiencing EBSA. The research will use a discourse analysis methodology and will be used to help gain a unified understanding of EBSA between a variety of professions.

The findings of this research are intended for publication in the form of a PhD dissertation and possibly in the form of journal articles. Future research into the subject of EBSA may also depend upon evidence and you are asked if you will give permission for your anonymised data to be used in future research. The findings of the research will also be shared with educational psychologists from a variety of services.

By agreeing to be part of this research, you agree and give permission to:

Have the data you provide recorded using a Dictaphone or using Google Meet (which will include audio and visual recording)

Store the data you provide anonymously on a password protected Google database

Results of the research being published in the form of a thesis and possible journal articles

your data being used in possible future research

If, following the focus group, you no longer wish to participate in the research, you may ask to withdraw your evidence up to 48 hours following the focus group, without explanation or consequence. After 48 hours, the data will be stored anonymously and used for the stated research purposes.

Should you have any questions regarding this research, please contact me by email: [pwoodrow1@sheffield.ac.uk](mailto:pwoodrow1@sheffield.ac.uk)

Yours faithfully,

Paul Woodrow

(Trainee Educational Psychologist, University of Sheffield)

Under the supervision of Dr Victoria Lewis

**A blue and white logo

Description automatically generatedAppendix E: Participant Consent Form**

**A Discursive Study into the views of practitioners working with children exhibiting Emotional Based School Avoidance (EBSA)**

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| ***Please tick the appropriate boxes*** | **Yes** | **No** |
| **Taking Part in the Project** |  |  |
| I agree that I will take part in the research. |  |  |
| I have read and understood the project information sheet, and I have been given the opportunity to ask questions about the project. |  |  |
| I understand that taking part in the project will include the following:   * I will participate in one focus group with other staff members who support EBSA cases. These will last approximately 30 minutes. This will involve a focus group discussion on the topic of EBSA. The data provided will then be analysed using discourse analysis and the findings of the research will be used to help create a more unified understanding between interested practitioners regarding the topic of EBSA. |  |  |
| I understand that the focus group will be audio-recorded if carried out face to face or recorded using Google Meet Software if carried out online. I agree that the focus group should be recorded and used for transcript purposes in the research. |  |  |
| I understand that participating as a volunteer in this research does not create a legally binding agreement, nor is it intended to create an employment relationship with the University of Sheffield. |  |  |
| I understand that my participation in the study is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw consent without giving a reason up to 48 hours after the focus group has taken place. There will be no adverse consequences if I or they choose to withdraw. |  |  |
| **How will my information be used during and after the project?** |  |  |
| I understand that personal details such as my name, the name of the organisation I work for or the local authority I work for will not be revealed to people outside the project. |  |  |
| I understand the research findings will be shared with other researchers, psychologists, local authority employees and University of Sheffield staff. |  |  |
| I agree that any data collected may be published anonymously in academic books or journals. |  |  |
| I understand and agree that my words may be quoted in publications, reports, web pages, and other research outputs. Your name will not be used. |  |  |
| I understand and agree that other authorised researchers will have access to this data only if they agree to preserve the confidentiality of the information as requested in this form. |  |  |
| I understand that the data collected will be stored on the University’s Secure Network, and the recordings will be destroyed by 02.08.2024 |  |  |
| **So that the information you provide can be used legally by the researcher** |  |  |
| I agree to assign the copyright I hold in any materials generated as part of this project to The University of Sheffield. |  |  |
| **So that the anonymity of all participants is respected by everyone present** |  |  |
| I agree to maintain the anonymity of all participants involved in the research project |  |  |

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| --- | --- | --- |
|  |  |  |
| Name of participant [printed] | Signature | Date |
|  |  |  |
| Name of Researcher [printed] | Signature | Date |
| Paul Woodrow |  |  |

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***When completed*:**

*One copy for the staff member*

*One copy for the researcher*

**Appendix F Transcription of Focus Groups**

**Transcript of Teacher Focus Group**

T1: Male

T2: Male

T3: Female

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| 1 | T1: With the erm, er emotional based school avoidance, with us, I think we’ve got about |
| 2 | erm 1400. So we’ll have about 1500 kids next year. So we’ll, we have quite a large |
| 3 | population in school. : And I think there’s been a big difference in the proportion of |
| 4 | pupils being er, persistently absent. Or just that higher absentee in school, and I think the |
| 5 | elephant in the room there was Covid. I think that has put school back er a massive |
| 6 | amount and the challenges that we’re facing, erm both with families and pupils |
| 7 | themselves with, and they’ve had 2… approximately about 2 years off school erm to |
| 8 | getting comfortable with not being in or the families being used to them not being in and |
| 9 | the anxietal issues of going back in, or the pressures… Maybe they’ve been accustomed |
| 10 | to them being at home and helping out with siblings. And then saying that reluctance, I |
| 11 | mean, I’ve had a few people in my form that have very, very low erm attendance to |
| 12 | school. And a lot of these factors come into why they don’t go back into school. XXXX |
| 13 | What do you think? |
| 14 | T3: Yeah, no, I agree that, I think that with our context, you know that we have a load of |
| 15 | Attendance issues for various reasons and I know that absence isn’t just absence in |
| 16 | School but actually not going into lessons as well, (name) please correct me if I’m wrong. |
| 17 | But actually, not just because, suppose our kids really struggle and got used to not being |
| 18 | In school. Actually, let’s also consider the mental health issues involved with the |
| 19 | Pandemic. Not just getting used to not being in school. Actually, there’s mental health |
| 20 | that’s all changed or negatively affected because of the pandemic that they carried on |
| 21 | going to school or not going to school. |
| 22 | T2: Yeah, I kind of agree as well. Erm, however, I also do think that there’s been a… |
| 23 | because it’s been going on for so long, it’s almost become the norm now, to not need to |
| 24 | and they have an excuse erm, to want to avoid, rather than actually trying to get to the |
| 25 | root of the problem. I think there’s lots of, erm explanations why pupils don’t want to go |
| 26 | in there but I don’t feel like we’re addressing the main cause of it and I think sometimes |
| 27 | we’re not helping with how it’s addressed as well. I don’t think people… I think it could |
| 28 | be addressed better. |
| 29 | T1: I mean, I would definitely say that I think that in, especially in classrooms as well, |
| 30 | that that avoidance of going to classrooms before, before the pandemic it was very |
| 31 | Irregularly. You know, this is your classroom. This is where you go in. And it was, like I say, |
| 32 | Irregular for you not to go in, whereas now, there’s more of a well, who’s taking the |
| 33 | Class? Who’s in there? Well, no I’m not going into the classroom or, even with things like |
| 34 | Pressures of, of, if I’ve been at home, and I can do what I want, I can go get a snack when |
| 35 | I want, I can go get lunch when I want, or I can do what I want and then all of a sudden |
| 36 | You’re being then tied into a school building where you’re then very regimented. You |
| 37 | have to be here at this time, your lesson’s at this time, your break and lunch time’s at this |
| 38 | time. I suppose that inside of pupil’s heads, especially if they’ve got erm potentially some |
| 39 | Anxiety issues, or mental health issues that they’re going. At that pressure building up, |
| 40 | they’re going, “Well, I’m used to doing this when I want,” and now you’re saying, “no,” |
| 41 | and therefore the easy answer for me is well, if I just don’t go into that classroom, or |
| 42 | erm, I won’t have those issues because then I’m not going to have to ask you to.. can I go |
| 43 | the toilet or can I go out, stand outside, or even it’s where they’ve been in a social circle |
| 44 | at home and they’re not used to meeting new people, all of a sudden to being in a large |
| 45 | school such as us, the pressure of being in the classroom with potentially people that |
| 46 | they don’t like, where they can’t necessarily quickly get away from, if it’s going to say, the |
| 47 | teacher goes then right, you’re going to go down as truancy and then puts an extra |
| 48 | anxietal problems on themselves that they can avoid if they just don’t turn up to class or |
| 49 | Don’t turn up to school. |
| 50 | T2: Well I… |
| 51 | T3: Right. |
| 52 | T2: I was just gonna say that I think that, for me, although there might be this, these risk |
| 53 | factors and things like that, I don’t think that just making them avoid actually helps the |
| 54 | problems. If you just let the students keep on avoiding and avoiding and avoiding, in the |
| 55 | future it’s not helping them in later life because you can’t avoid things forever. You can’t |
| 56 | avoid going to places because you don’t like the look of something and you’re not in |
| 57 | there. We’re not really helping them long term if we don’t knuckle down and get to the |
| 58 | cause of it and stop it happening soon as, really. |
| 59 | T3: Yeah, no, maybe so also there is some risk factors that might increase the risk of EBSA |
| 60 | but actually when just looking at the info, there’s a lot of things that school can support |
| 61 | in overcoming those factors that erm, that might lead to EBSA. So, I know that our cohort |
| 62 | is really huge , we have a wonder SEN team, erm, with people, student leaders who are |
| 63 | about like, well-being of students. We have designated anti-bullying co-ordinators, so |
| 64 | Actually overcoming them, there’s… I think that there’s more.. opportunities in school to |
| 65 | Overcome those factors than they would have should they refuse to go into school in the |
| 66 | first place. |
| 67 | T2: Yeah. |
| 68 | T3: So… |
| 69 | T2: The only thing that I’d say though erm, I think as a school there’s only so much that |
| 70 | We can do because looking at some of these risk factors, and the things like the traumas |
| 71 | and the ACES that the students have gone through, I don’t think, er, I know that I don’t |
| 72 | feel qualified to kind of like, coach a student through something that’s been a past |
| 73 | trauma. And then just hearing stories about students who are on CAMHS waiting lists for |
| 74 | ridiculous amounts of time. That’s not gonna help. There isn’t the, for me there isn’t the |
| 75 | funding in the back end of stuff. That’s not happening outside of school that will help |
| 76 | them to get them back into school. So, we can say as much as we want, though I can |
| 77 | understand that, obviously the pandemic didn’t help as well with like domestic violence |
| 78 | and all the things that they might have seen with them not being in school – it’s just that |
| 79 | I think their traumas and their ACES and all that kind of stuff, erm, but, I’m not sure what, |
| 80 | obviously as a school, we can try and help them as best we can, but I personally don’t |
| 81 | feel qualified to be able to coach somebody through that. Whereas, somebody who’s |
| 82 | psychologist and… would be able to but there just isn’t the funding out there even that |
| 83 | needs to drastically change, otherwise we’re gonna be in this never ending loop of a |
| 84 | student that’s been missing school for so long or been avoiding everything for so long |
| 85 | that then becomes a normal and it’s gonna become even harder to flip on its way, er, flip |
| 86 | on its’ head and go back to how it would have been. |
| 87 | T1: Yeah, I agree with that. I think as well, it’s the other two issues, the time and the |
| 88 | money. If you’ve got a staff member on a full timetable and then you’re getting told |
| 89 | We’ve got a certain amount of students that are school avoiding, that they’re maybe |
| 90 | inside of school, but they’re refusing to come to the lesson, you physically don’t as a |
| 91 | Teacher, have the time to be able to try and incorp... I mean, obviously if someone brings |
| 92 | them down to the classroom then they’re most welcome, but if they just go, no, I’m |
| 93 | going, it could be quite difficult to… you can’t just go outside the class and try and coach |
| 94 | Them in because then you’ve then got all your other pupils in the class. So it’s almost like |
| 95 | You need that extra funding, extra support of somebody who’s maybe their caseworker |
| 96 | in schools saying, I’ll bring you down, I’ll go with you to the classroom. I’ll… say they feel |
| 97 | That emotional support there because obviously, if you’ve got someone who’s now with |
| 98 | trauma or any sort of issues and just go, here’s a class of thirty, in you go, in you pop, it’s |
| 99 | gonna just build up a massive pressure. But then, it can’t solve the us as the teacher |
| 100 | who’s then got to be the person responsible for sorting that out. There’s got to be some |
| 101 | Leeway and some give. It’s a transition, that person from home, bringing them to school |
| 102 | and then support them in school, trying to get them into to class. And I think our time |
| 103 | With what (name, teacher 2) says, you do try and accommodate them where you can, |
| 104 | but it’s also that aspect of who’s making all the choices? Who’s holding all the cards? |
| 105 | Because the student’s going right, I’m not doing this, I’m not doing this. Where, where |
| 106 | does the power or the responsibility of the teachers lie? Because when they leave |
| 107 | school, and we’re here to try to build them up for the future, career wise, are we just |
| 108 | training them that when you go for a job – Oh no, I’m not doing X, Y, Z. I’m not working |
| 109 | with A,B or C because at school, if I had all that power to say, I’m not doing that, are we |
| 110 | then necessarily setting them up for a fall later on because we’re just trying to |
| 111 | accommodate too much of that. If that makes sense with you guys? |
| 112 | T2: Yeah. (pause). Yeah, I do think there’s definitely that time and.. what’s it for as a |
| 113 | Teacher, as an everyday teacher, has definitely has that time issue of doing that and we |
| 114 | Should have that factored in really, where we can use extra time to help and support |
| 115 | Students because we don’t feel that we do get that time. But I think that as a school is |
| 116 | where we are, I think we’ve actually got some people in there that do help. But it’s like |
| 117 | everything, especially in the current situation where there’s even more students that are |
| 118 | doing this… |
| 119 | T1: I mean, I’ll say with us, we do have, we set up (a) scheme with an inclusion champion |
| 120 | Where we’ve highlighted erm, a certain number of vulnerable pupils. And then staff |
| 121 | members have volunteered to kind of mentor them in school. And I’m one of those |
| 122 | Mentors. But the allocation on my time is quite large. So if I was doing a full timetable |
| 123 | That that would definitely not be an option for me. So, I can, I can see the benefits |
| 124 | For myself, personally with those students, but also, erm it’s got to go cap in hand with |
| 125 | The realisation that if we’re going to do this, you, you, got to give staff… The heads of |
| 126 | Year, they they they cannot do this. Because if they’ve got a year group of 300, it’s not |
| 127 | Gonna be physically possible for them to do the job. But likewise, if you’ve then got staff |
| 128 | Doing it, you can’t just say that, oh, you just do it in your own time because that’s a |
| 129 | struggle, so it’s got to be… it’s got to come from above, saying right, okay, we understand |
| 130 | That this is an issue, here’s your fund and here’s your time for the stuff to do it. And I’ll |
| 131 | also mirror what T2 said before about the er, the training as well. Getting adequate |
| 132 | Training for staff involved in this which again costs time and money, but to give people |
| 133 | The expertise they need of how best to treat and deal with these, with these pupils. Pause) |
| 134 | Researcher: Can I ask a quick question there, about that training you mentioned? Would |
| 135 | That link back to what you were say earlier T2, about getting to the root of the problem? |
| 136 |  |
| 137 | T2: Yeah, yeah I kind of… It’s just not getting to the cause of it I think is part of the |
| 138 | Problem. I think it takes too long sometimes to get to the cause and the root of the |
| 139 | Problem before we can actually do anything about it. And I think that erm, again I’m |
| 140 | Gonna keep on going on about the state of education and the wider society and social |
| 141 | Care that we’ve got. And we haven’t got the, as much resources as we need or the kids |
| 142 | Deserve as well. Especially off the back of quite a traumatic couple of years which I think |
| 143 | Has been a massive contributing factor to this. Erm, but yeah. I just on going back to the |
| 144 | Students being put onto CAMHS services and it’s taking, kind of like nine months before |
| 145 | They’re gonna get properly seen and referred. Well, nine months is ridiculous for |
| 146 | Somebody who’s got mental health issues, that… A year in a, let’s see. It’s a year isn’t it? |
| 147 | In education. So having a full year where you’re refusing and you’re not gonna do. You |
| 148 | Putting them at a disadvantage straight away and that’s just gonna have an even bigger |
| 149 | Effect moving forward. |
| 150 | T3: Yeah, erm, I’m just adding on to that. I do think that teacher expertise, and |
| 151 | expectations of teachers in tackling EBSA, and the factors that might effect it, erm, needs |
| 152 | To be really clarified in our rules and responsibilities to just like, what (T1 and T2) said. I |
| 153 | Feel like we’re just not trained enough to be able to tackle some of the mental health |
| 154 | Issues for example, the students have but then have such a huge impact on their |
| 155 | learning, and that, which we are responsible for as a staff member. So actually what |
| 156 | Really, ways that we’re held accountable for their education, but at the same time we |
| 157 | Need to be supported in supporting them where mental health and other factors might |
| 158 | Effect their learning, so… Like (T1) said, I think there’s really a lack. We know that with |
| 159 | Recruitment and retention crisis with staff, so we’re more pushed for time. But also in |
| 160 | Terms of like resources as well and capacity. It’s not just a… You know, you kinda say |
| 161 | teachers are solely responsible for the student’s learning when there’s loads of built in |
| 162 | Factors. So we need to consider how best to help erm students. So like what (T1) said, in |
| 163 | Our school we have a temporary provision with inclusion champions. And we’ve seen |
| 164 | some really nice, like positive erm, positive effects on some students from that. But yet, |
| 165 | Even in a case load of maybe like five, one or two would still refuse, despite being offered |
| 166 | That additional support. So what else can we like, so as a whole, what else can we do to |
| 167 | Help support them, when they’re refusing the support that is being provided which often |
| 168 | Isn’t enough. (Pause). |
| 169 | T1: I mean, I’d also mirror that with the work between secondary and primary. I think, it |
| 170 | Could quite often be the case that if some of these er behaviours are embedded at |
| 171 | Primary, by the time they go from a a a context where you’re with a familiar teacher all |
| 172 | Year, you’re with the same group all year, it’s all of a sudden, you’re in a big building and |
| 173 | You’re moving around classrooms, you’ve got, you know, 10… it could be 50 times as |
| 174 | Many pupils. Then, if you’ve got reasons embedded about why you’re not going into |
| 175 | School or why you’re not going into certain classes in a smaller context like a primary |
| 176 | School, and as soon as you do step up to secondary, then those issues are gonna ramp |
| 177 | themselves up and it’s going to be easier for you to justify to yourself and say to yourself, |
| 178 | Well no I’m not going in. So, that work as well, I mean it probably already does but erm |
| 179 | Highlights with the pupils and, from what T2 said, at primary, are they showing exhibiting |
| 180 | Signs of refusing, either to attend school itself or, within school, the context of not going |
| 181 | Into classrooms, err, attacking it then as it were. Erm, so that processes can be put into |
| 182 | Place, that can then transition up to secondary school, so that we can try and not start |
| 183 | The fight there, but you know, already get the ball rolling before. And I mean, T3 said |
| 184 | Before, you might not be able to get all of them in one catch-all activity, but if you are |
| 185 | Forewarned and forearmed about the best way to approach these kids, before it |
| 186 | Becomes embedded because if you’re 8, 9, 10 years old, and you’ve seen your older |
| 187 | Brother or sister who has potentially, maybe seen this trauma that you’ve seen and |
| 188 | They’ve then, then been avoiding school, you’re going to say well, if they did it, then I’m |
| 189 | Going to do it. So it’s about trying to highlight that importance for yourself. Trying to get |
| 190 | The younger siblings into school, but tackling them early, rather than waiting until it’s |
| 191 | Later down the line and having someone else deal with it. |
| 192 | T3: Adding on to that, I think it is important to tackle and to see indicators at a really |
| 193 | Early age to say what we’ve discussed before. There’s, often the provision is… takes a |
| 194 | Long time for it to happen. I mean, I know like a lot of things, say someone has been |
| 195 | Exhibiting erm, some behaviours for abs.. already early on but yet they don’t come to |
| 196 | Light until you’re 10. And if the waiting list is a whole like 9 months for example, they’ll |
| 197 | Be in the middle of their GCSEs and that will directly impact their learning opportunities |
| 198 | After. Or even if it was only like erm, noticed in Year 11, is a factor at home, then how are |
| 199 | they going to get the support, is it through communication through primary and |
| 200 | Secondary schools, or secondary schools with erm like, colleges or 6th form? Actually, |
| 201 | When they transition to being young adults or outside school, is that support still |
| 202 | Available? Because I think like if you do, if you do have emotional based school |
| 203 | Avoidance and you’ve been doing it for sustained duration, like at work it’s going to be |
| 204 | really, really difficult for someone maybe to be able to do that and erm, work and meet |
| 205 | The expectations already but then actually, well obviously will have an effect, not just in |
| 206 | School, but after as well. |
| 207 | T2: Yeah, on the same, on that though, I think, I think that we’ve all taught kids, haven’t |
| 208 | We, that have been absolutely terrible in the classroom but as soon as they get in the |
| 209 | Workplace, they thrive. And I also do think, I mean I’m just looking at the thing, and he |
| 210 | Says about the demanding of student subjects oppressive academic environments. I |
| 211 | Think that sometimes that’s a contributing factor because, not all kids are cut out for |
| 212 | School, enjoy school,… so I do feel that the curriculum is actually… I mean obviously as |
| 213 | Teachers, we try and make it as broad and balanced and as engaging and all the things |
| 214 | that we possibly can do. But if you’ve got a student that actually, he knows he wants to |
| 215 | be a brick layer. He’s gonna do that, that’s where he will thrive. Yet we’re making him sit |
| 216 | through 4, 5 years of, of education, teaching him about World War 2. And he’s not |
| 217 | Interested, he’s not gonna turn up. Whereas if we can actually get the curriculum that is |
| 218 | More kind of erm, personalised for that students, then that’s when they do actually, they |
| 219 | Probably would want to be there a little bit more. They would, they would thrive in that |
| 220 | Role and then they would actually help them, maybe take that next step like you |
| 221 | Said (T3). Because they do, obviously, if they’re not in school, they’re struggling. But if |
| 222 | Weren’t in school, but were doing something else that would then help them be |
| 223 | Successful in post 16, then that would also be better in the long term for that child as |
| 224 | Well and I don’t think this one size fits all curriculum of academic erm achievement for |
| 225 | All is, is the right way, personally. And think like, as teachers, erm, we all try and make it |
| 226 | As relevant to the students as we can. But, ultimately, pen and paper isn’t for everyone is |
| 227 | It? |
| 228 | PAUSE. T1: I mean, I’ll second that. |
| 229 | Researcher: You were touching there on pupil’s avoiding schools for reasons other then |
| 230 | EBSA. I wondered if you thought there were different ways of approaching different |
| 231 | Types of school avoidance? Or if there are different types of school avoidance? |
| 232 | T2: Yeah, I think it’s like that has a link in. So it might be that students don’t like the |
| 233 | School, the academic approach. So then they start messing around. So then they start |
| 234 | Getting into trouble. Then they start having difficult relationships with the actual |
| 235 | Teachers and the staff in there and they see it as a negative environment for them to be |
| 236 | In. So then it kind of, it may have started off as a erm, oh I don’t like it. But then it has |
| 237 | Emotional because they started having these negative experiences whilst they’re at |
| 238 | School. Bu then results in… while there’s no point in going to that lesson because I’m |
| 239 | Only going to get in trouble, because I know that I’m not going to do the right thing |
| 240 | Because I don’t like that member of staff, I don’t like that lesson. And then it just kind of |
| 241 | Like, it snowballs into something bigger than it could be. |
| 242 | PAUSE. T1: I think erm, I was speaking to another teacher and they had erm a person |
| 243 | Who they had a, a, I can’t remember if they were in Year 10 or 11, a college placement |
| 244 | In… they wanted to work with animals. So they got a erm, like one day a week they were |
| 245 | Working with a vet, and then erm… they did this because their attendance was really, |
| 246 | Really poor. And they said, they used it as a carrot, well if you come in and do x, you |
| 247 | Know, come in and do these work, then we’ll give you this time at a college placement. |
| 248 | Almost like a trade off. It was like, okay. When they did that, his attendance shot up. Says |
| 249 | He’s in class, attending class, then goes to the college. I think then, I don’t know if they |
| 250 | Had an inspector in and they say what’s this kid doing here? And it’s like no,no,no, it |
| 251 | Stops. And as soon as they said right you stopping you doing that day, his attendance |
| 252 | drops down to to zero. Said well, the, for me there’s no get out, there’s no, there’s no |
| 253 | Reason why I need to come to school now. So, I’m just gonna stop doing it entirely. So, |
| 254 | It’s that rigidity the (T2) said was. You’re in from 8 til erm 4, You gotta do your GCSEs, |
| 255 | Which I think is a huge thing. If like, you’ve missed a certain amount of work, and you got |
| 256 | Teachers, then go says, you’ve missed a lot of work, and you need to catch up on the |
| 257 | Work, and then do more work that we’re gonna have to do to then pass an exam, then… |
| 258 | that will then to start to feed into their erm, their issues and go well, I don’t wanna go in |
| 259 | So, so almost like you kinda wanna have a er erm a moulded approach to the actual |
| 260 | Reason why we’re in education, of erm, what’s best for the actual pupil and erm trying to |
| 261 | Work with their mental state, and work with their outcomes and try to get, not go too far |
| 262 | One way, not go too far the other. We’re trying to work it together with the pupil. You |
| 263 | Know, you’re coming in, you’re doing your English or maths or these set skills, and then |
| 264 | Maybe have a college course, ‘coz if, I think quite a few of them, if you had that approach |
| 265 | Then some of the reasons behind their refusal to come into school, they, you know, in |
| 266 | Their head they could reason it. Oh, if I do this, then, you know, I, I, I could do this which |
| 267 | Is beneficial for me. Because I mean, I’ve taught quite a few people who they’re at |
| 268 | School, they’re maybe not working hard, don’t want to go into certain classes, but |
| 269 | They’re working on a Saturday and a Sunday from 6 till God knows whenever. And, as |
| 270 | Soon as they leave school, that’s what they’re doing, that’s their job. That’s their role. |
| 271 | But, when they were here, it’s… you’re fighting with them to get them into something |
| 272 | That they cannot necessarily see the benefit of. PAUSE (Which I hope makes sense for |
| 273 | people). PAUSE |
| 274 | Researcher: Is their anything that anyone wants to add around any of this? |
| 275 | T3: Am I supposed to like, just, I know it’s a thing that, since COVID, there’s been a |
| 276 | Greater emphasis on flexibility of roles and jobs for adults, as although it might be, and I |
| 277 | Might be wishful thinking, if in the future. Actually, if we’re like admitting or |
| 278 | Acknowledging the fact that actually some people’s productivity and flexibility was met |
| 279 | During COVID, to still enable the jobs to happen, why can’t there be flexibility for some |
| 280 | students? So I know that some countries, you have different pathways, erm. I was talking |
| 281 | To a Singapore maths teacher, from Singapore. And there, they had like a different |
| 282 | Pathway for more practical subjects. Engineering work instead of academic routes. And |
| 283 | There’s just more flexibility, based, tailored to what the students want to do and what |
| 284 | they will be successful in. Erm, so if we’re acknowledging that there should be flexibility |
| 285 | in the work place, like can we also acknowledge that there should be flexibility within |
| 286 | Schooling. |
| 287 | T2: Yeah, I agree with that. I think that erm. I was getting back to when we were doing |
| 288 | Covid, I got some kids, in lessons they weren’t great but then as soon as they were doing |
| 289 | It at home you, they loved it. They got on with everything. And I think erm especially |
| 290 | with the way that technology’s changing as well, you’ll laugh because I talk about AI. I |
| 291 | Love AI and how that can actually help you positively and all things like that. There isn’t |
| 292 | Any reason why there’s certain pupils with certain personalities that will actually do |
| 293 | better in that kind of situation, learning from distance, with the support of a teacher |
| 294 | Maybe online or with erm, with AI and with things like that where they’re actually, |
| 295 | There’s no reason why that wouldn’t be a suitable route for them as well as the normal, |
| 296 | formal education route. |
| 297 |  |
| 298 |  |
| 299 |  |
| 300 |  |

**Transcript of EP Focus Group**

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| --- | --- |
| 1 | EP1: So, I suppose looking at that first, I mean looking at whether practitioners have an |
| 2 | Understanding across practitioner groups of the factors which cause EBSA? what do people think about that? |
| 3 | EP2: I think there’s been a shift. |
| 4 | EP3: I think there’s more awareness of EBSA generally. I think there probably is a better |
| 5 | Understanding. I guess, what’s made it extra complicated is that EBSA is being defined |
| 6 | differently, in different ways across different areas. So there’s Different terms for |
| 7 | Defining EBSA. There’s double b’s, there’s school distress, there’s non-attendance. |
| 8 | There’s barriers to education, And there’s also yeah, well school refusal I think. |
| 9 | Truancy, erm. I think yeah, there’s more awareness around EBSA and understanding that |
| 10 | It’s anxiety driven. I think that it’s emotionally driven… |
| 11 | EP2: And I suppose that’s been a massive shift. Is seeing it as something to be supported |
| 12 | Rather than just seeing it as, you know, the sort of thing that needs to be punished and |
| 13 | A refusal… |
| 14 | EP 4: A refusal… |
| 15 | EP2: I think it’s still a big, I would say though, I agree with what you said about it being |
| 16 | Recognised as emotionally driven, I think there is still quite a difference where some |
| 17 | Practitioners would see it as a within child emotional distress |
| 18 | EP3: Mmmm |
| 19 | EP2: And other people might see it more as familial |
| 20 | EP 4: Impacts. |
| 21 | EP3: I completely agree and I think that that’s because thinking has changed within this |
| 22 | Time period. So a lot of guidance was very within child. It was very school phobia |
| 23 | Focused, all the research literature. And I think, anecdotally, through people’s experience |
| 24 | Through more research, that there’s a shift in thinking and that… and we might |
| 25 | understand that but then, translating that to everyone else, I think will take time. And I |
| 26 | Think not all EPs perhaps think like that. |
| 27 | EP4: we know, don’t we, that with EBSA there’s so many different reasons that can lead a |
| 28 | Young person to have challenges with attendance. So, the causal… |
| 29 | EP1: It’s not a unitary cause. |
| 30 | EP4: Yeah, yeah. And it might be that there’s other, other. So for example if the child’s |
| 31 | Struggling with their learning and then that leads to being more of an Emotionally |
| 32 | Based school issues |
| 33 | EP3: Mmmm |
| 34 | EP4:You know, but actually there can be a different cause to start with, which then leads |
| 35 | To anxiety. |
| 36 | EP3: I think there’s the mis-match isn’t there, between the child’s needs around learning |
| 37 | Around social needs, around their social interaction or sensory preferences, that being a |
| 38 | Mis-match with the school environment and that being an underlying cause. Erm, but |
| 39 | Then I suppose there are other children who, for example, might be out because they’ve |
| 40 | Been ill for a period of time and then they’re very anxious of going back into the school |
| 41 | Environment, and so, I think, yeah. It’s always been multiple reasons. |
| 42 | EP1: But do you think that we, that EP practice, I know it’s another question in a way, |
| 43 | But has helped with raising that awareness, around those multiple factors. I think it has, |
| 44 | And you’re nodding (EP 2). I mean, I think that one of the things that’s helped raise |
| 45 | Awareness is the tools in the EBSA kind of, arsenal, for want of a better word (laugh) |
| 46 | That we sort of send out to schools. For instance, there’s an EWO recently who had used |
| 47 | Quite a few of the questionnaires and was able to sort of feed back, “so it looks as if it’s |
| 48 | This and this” and sort of multiple reasons, you know? And showing that awareness. |
| 49 | EP3: Mmmm |
| 50 | EP1: And actually, I don’t know, I felt that was quite refreshing really. That he had |
| 51 | Reflected on the case and was aware that, you know, it wasn’t just one thing and it was |
| 52 | Worth bringing those to a meeting to discuss. |
| 53 | EP3: Mmm. |
| 54 | EP2: I suppose a massive shift has been that people see emotional based school |
| 55 | Avoidance as something to unpick and to explore, rather than assuming that it’s a certain |
| 56 | Thing. I’d say that that’s been a massive shift over quite a short space of time. |
| 57 | EP3: Yeah |
| 58 | EP2: And in terms of good awareness, I suppose there has been… obviously, I trained at |
| 59 | (University) and there’s been a lot of research done at (University) and obviously at other |
| 60 | Universities as well. So I think that the awareness is coming from different places. I think |
| 61 | It’s come… |
| 62 | EP3: Mmmm |
| 63 | Ep2: From sort of evidence based practice and practice based evidence and I think that, |
| 64 | That really has increased awareness. |
| 65 | EP4: Do you think that’s a shared understanding? Because we’re talking as EPs. Do you |
| 66 | Think that applies to others? |
| 67 | EP3:I don’t think so, just because I think there’s been a shift in EP’s understanding… |
| 68 | Murmur of agreement |
| 69 | EP3: and thinking, very much from this anxiety driven to maybe more of a… something |
| 70 | That’s more trauma driven or a trauma response that needs a different approach than |
| 71 | Overcoming anxiety, CBT, erm laddering type approach which… |
| 72 | Murmur of agreement |
| 73 | EP3: will work for some children but not for lots of children I guess, especially |
| 74 | Neurodiverse children or children who have been out of school for a long period of time. |
| 75 | And I’m not sure every practitioner or CAMHS or mental health service or EWOs have |
| 76 | Moved with us in that, because they’re not exposed to the same EP research as us. |
| 77 | EP 4: I think some of it as well, so coming from a CBT perspective, I think some of it is the |
| 78 | Fact that a lot of CBT models, until recently have been built on adult anxiety. And I think |
| 79 | EP3: Yeah. |
| 80 | EP4: And I think, you know with the laddering and things like that, as EPs we know that |
| 81 | Gradual exposure can only be done in partnership with young people. I think that’s the |
| 82 | Bit that’s often been missed, that whole kind of, “well they just need to kind of get in.” |
| 83 | EP3: Mmmm |
| 84 | EP4: Well actually, a CBT approach can be effective but only should be done in |
| 85 | Partnership with the person you’re working with anyway, so. But I just think that bit has |
| 86 | Been missed sometimes in terms of you know, like… So you shouldn’t be forcing the |
| 87 | Young person into anything. |
| 88 | EP3: No. |
| 89 | EP4: You should be seeing well, do they understand why, you know, what we’re trying |
| 90 | To do, and are they ready to do that. |
| 91 | EP3: I think it’s the readiness bit. Are they emotionally well enough? Mentally well |
| 92 | Enough? |
| 93 | EP4: Yeah, absolutely. |
| 94 | EP3: To be challenging themselves around something that they’re very scared of, is very |
| 95 | Anxiety provoking. And also, I guess, what I definitely feel was missing in my |
| 96 | Understanding, from using some of the very early guidance, is what needs to change in |
| 97 | The environment… |
| 98 | EP4: Yeah |
| 99 | EP3: Because it was very within child |
| 100 | Other EPs: Yeah, yeah, yeah. |
| 101 | EP1: And as well as the readiness and what needs to change, it’s about the partnership |
| 102 | And what needs to be there in order for there to be an active partnership for the young |
| 103 | Person. |
| 104 | EP 4: I think erm,… something that’s quite… kinda like can be a conflict as well. And I |
| 105 | Think there’s definitely been some development around this, but is the focus on |
| 106 | Attendance from like a school perspective… |
| 107 | Murmurs of agreement. |
| 108 | EP4: from like a school perspective and then perhaps other practitioners where obviously |
| 109 | it’s the mental health, the wellbeing of the young person that’s the priority. And I think… |
| 110 | Historically, there’s probably been quite a lot of conflict between those two goals. Erm, |
| 111 | I think we’re getting to kind of a more shared understanding around that, aren’t we. |
| 112 | In terms of… just wellbeing just has to be priority, you know? Erm, but, yeah. I just, |
| 113 | I know from, I just remember conversations from when I was working in CAMHS around |
| 114 | Their focus very much being around mental health, because obviously they’re a mental |
| 115 | Health service. But that would sometimes then, like, cause quite a lot of conflict with |
| 116 | Schools who say, “well we need to get this child in.” Erm… |
| 117 | EP1: Mmmm |
| 118 | EP4: And it was seen like they weren’t really understanding each other. |
| 119 | EP1: Yeah… Sorry.. And as an example of that, there was a time when a psychiatrist sent |
| 120 | A letter to… I think to a school, possible (?) saying child X is so unwell at the moment |
| 121 | (meaning mental health) that I think it’s better for them not to come into school at the |
| 122 | Moment, and so that was their priority, was mental health, be at home. And I suppose I |
| 123 | I mean I wasn’t involved with that child at that time, that young person, but I did wonder |
| 124 | Whether if that situation had been looked at a bit more holistically, maybe there might |
| 125 | Have been some aspects of school that might actually have been helpful for that young |
| 126 | Person. |
| 127 | EP3 & 4: Mmm |
| 128 | EP3: One of the school requests that came out of the Attendance conference was some |
| 129 | Training to be done for GPs because some GPs are signing children off too unwell to go to |
| 130 | School for like weeks at a time, without having had any conversation with the school. |
| 131 | And then the school feel quite at odds between the approach being taken. I think some |
| 132 | Of the conflicts that you said around mental health services and education services is |
| 133 | Also within like education and DFE guidance. Like, on one side they’re kind of really |
| 134 | Pushing attendance and on the other side they’re really trying to promote mental health |
| 135 | Support teams and the two don’t always unite do they…. (interrupt) |
| 136 | EP2: They’re not really seeing that they have to go side-by-side. |
| 137 | EP3: I think the new attendance has a greater emphasis on support and having a |
| 138 | Graduated approach and needing to evidence more support based approaches but |
| 139 | Previously it hasn’t and schools have been under huge pressure to increase their |
| 140 | Attendance rates which is at total odds with, but protect their well being. |
| 141 | EP4: Yeah. Absolutely. |
| 142 | EP1: Do you think EWOs are now less focussed on attendance that they were, in , in a |
| 143 | Rigid way? Do you think that they’re more sort of open to the support. |
| 144 | EP3: I think it depends which EWO you talk to. I think in the team there are some who |
| 145 | Get it, who use it a lot, who continue to promote it within their work. There are others |
| 146 | Who probably just say it’s for EPs to do… or… that… they feel like they’ve tried everything |
| 147 | And the best thing to do will just be to fine the family because the family aren’t engaging |
| 148 | So I think it’s very mixed. |
| 149 | EP4: Yeah. |
| 150 | EP3: But there is now, erm, I think school’s can’t use fines in the same way that they used |
| 151 | to, so there’s gonna be a shift in that sense and there’s gonna be a fines pannel within |
| 152 | (LA) so it’s gonna be less driven by schools, more about support. |
| 153 | EP4: And government guidance suggests that reduced timetables can be used more in |
| 154 | Terms of as an intervention, in terms of that gradually getting… |
| 155 | EP1: That’s good. |
| 156 | EP3: I think there was quite a reluctance at times to be using reduced timetables. So that |
| 157 | Kind of more flexibility, which I think gives practitioners permission, doesn’t it, |
| 158 | EP4: Mmmmm |
| 159 | EP3: To act and say. Where as I think to be fair to kind of EWOs and stuff, they’re working |
| 160 | With processes that they’re given, erm, using the tools that they have… |
| 161 | EP4: And they’re also a commissioned service. |
| 162 | EP3: Yeah. |
| 163 | EP4: And the schools commission them to do certain types of activity… |
| 164 | EP1: Particularly to make their registers go up in percentages… |
| 165 | EP3: And to fine… |
| 166 | EP1: Yes. |
| 167 | EP3: And schools would request… to fast track families, that sort of thing. |
| 168 | EP1: I mean, I think I’m finding that EWOs are using the term, ‘mental health’ more, so |
| 169 | They are having that in their awareness more which I would think is a good thing. Erm… |
| 170 | EP2: I think there’s been a big sort of growth in confidence with different practitioners. |
| 171 | EP?: Mmmm. |
| 172 | EP2: Speaking from the perspective of someone who, sort of, started working in the |
| 173 | Service when the resources were relatively new… |
| 174 | EP1: yeah… |
| 175 | EP2: And I felt at that point, I, the EWOs didn’t have a lot of confidence with it. Actually, |
| 176 | I was in a meeting yesterday and, I think it was an EWO, who was saying, recommending |
| 177 | To school to use the resources and, it was coming totally from them. |
| 178 | EP1: Mmm. |
| 179 | EP2: And I don’t think you’d have seen that, even two years ago. But then, something I |
| 180 | Was gonna say, we’re thinking about practitioner groups, about the causes of EBSA. |
| 181 | Actually how that’s situated within school, I think there is still a real jar, because certainly |
| 182 | The school my children go to, they’ve really tightened up on attendance in quite a |
| 183 | Punitive way. So where, sort of viewing it as more sort of, accepting of the fact that |
| 184 | usually there are factors for children’s… I’d say that any, personally, any attendance issues |
| 185 | you should unpick the factors, not just EBSA. |
| 186 | EP2: That’s my personal perspective. I don’t think that punitive measures are helpful with |
| 187 | Any type of absence from school. But I know that certainly, I had to take my son to the |
| 188 | Doctor’s recently, and for the first time ever, so he’s in Year 10, he’s been in school a long |
| 189 | Time, I was asked to bring back a erm, record card from the surgery, to prove that he’d |
| 190 | Been to the doctors. |
| 191 | EPs: Murmurs of wow. |
| 192 | EP2: And I took him to the doctor’s and brought him back on the same day. |
| 193 | EP3: I’m not sure that I like that schools are allowed to do that, you know? They’re not |
| 194 | Meant to ask for supportive medical information for a child being off. But lots of schools, |
| 195 | Lots of local authorities are under huge amounts of pressure… |
| 196 | EP2: Yeah. |
| 197 | EP3: to increase their attendance data coz it’s dropped so much. And even the coms that |
| 198 | We’ve been looking at are very like… you’re trying to target the families where it maybe |
| 199 | Is like a lack of engagement or thinking that it’s just not that important, erm and then |
| 200 | Balancing that with the families where they want the child to be in school. And things |
| 201 | (reference to a local campaign for attendance) is… Eeeek |
| 202 | EP4: I think that it is quite interesting though in that respect that I think (LA) have done a |
| 203 | Lot of work around EBSA, and yet within that coms, there wasn’t any mention of it. You |
| 204 | Know, it was all quite hard hitting messages around attendance. But at the same time, |
| 205 | They were open to changing some of the stuff in there… |
| 206 | EP3: Yeah, and I guess that’s because they’re wanting to target the people who take |
| 207 | Holidays in term time and we’re just thinking about the people with EBSA. But even |
| 208 | Within schools I’ve worked in, I’ve worked with one member of staff who completely got |
| 209 | It, really understood and had good success and another member of staff who did not get |
| 210 | it at all and kept calling it refusal, kept calling at a choice. |
| 211 | EP1: Mmm |
| 212 | EP3: Wouldn’t put any adjustments in place. |
| 213 | EP1: (At the same time) That consistency across members of staff in a single school and |
| 214 | Also across members of staff in a service, like say the EWO service. (Pause). But definitely |
| 215 | There’s been an improvement that we’re noticing in individuals that we’re working with |
| 216 | either in schools or also the EWOs. |
| 217 | EP2: Absolutely, |
| 218 | EP 3 & 4: Yeah, yeah. |
| 219 | EP3: Three years ago, no one even knew what EBSA was. |
| 220 | EP1: There’s been a big improvement that way. |
| 221 | EP2: And even the amount of time people are investing in it. |
| 222 | EPs: Mmmm (Murmurs of agreement) |
| 223 | EP2: I mean, you know, I’ve come to your (LA) groups, the number of professionals who |
| 224 | Attend those meetings is quite amazing. The number of people that are, out of their own |
| 225 | Time, investing an hour to have this meeting, to have these discussions, I think shows |
| 216 | That people have got a greater awareness that, that, whether there’s a unified |
| 217 | Understanding of what the factors are… I don’t think you ever quite can… |
| 218 | EP3: But I don’t think… Like we just said, it’s really complicated, it’s really hard and the |
| 219 | Picture is shifting. So, to have something unified might come in the future, but every case |
| 220 | Is different isn’t it? Every individual circumstance is different… |
| 221 | EP2: I was just going to say… |
| 222 | EP1 & 4: Mmmm |
| 223 | Ep1: So, perhaps an awareness of the complexity, of the need to treat each case |
| 224 | Individually is something we would value as an outcome as practitioners. |
| 225 | EP4: I was just going to say, what I was really impressed with, we recently had that kind |
| 226 | Of strategy meeting from all different services coming together, that (EP3) was leading. |
| 227 | But sat there, I was really impressed by it. I remember it’s only a few years ago when it |
| 228 | Wasn’t even a thing. And yet, in that room there was lots of different service leads, |
| 229 | Coming together, so it might be that we don’t have a unified understanding in that each |
| 230 | Of us has the same thought, but at least there’s that commitment to working together, |
| 231 | Which we know is what is needed. |
| 232 | EP1: Yeah. |
| 233 | EP2: You’ve just put what I was trying to say much more eloquently. |
| 234 | EP1: That leads to, do you find that there’s an awareness of appropriate responses to |
| 235 | EBSA so that the commitment to working together is part of the appropriate response |
| 236 | Isn’t it? |
| 237 | EP4: I think so. Yeah. And that willingness to… talk to each other. |
| 238 | EP3: To collaborate, to learn, to… change the way that we have done things… |
| 239 | EPs: Yeah |
| 240 | EP3: To reflect and update the guidance and doing that project around radically re - |
| 241 | Writing the EBSA guidance with parents and carers. And I think… |
| 242 | EP1: Radically re-writing… |
| 243 | EP3: Radically re-writing it. (laughter). And one thing that I’m thinking of is that it’s about |
| 244 | An ethos and it’s about principals, rather than step-by-step you need to use this… |
| 245 | EP1: (At same time) that sounds like a good idea. |
| 246 | EP3: Then use an anxiety ladder… |
| 247 | EP1: Yes, because I think people can just get stuck when they use those. Sort of, it’s a bit |
| 248 | Like I’ve done step 1 and step 2a and what do I do next? Because it’s not quite gone |
| 249 | According to plan. |
| 250 | EP3: Yes, because I suppose the previous guidance was very much: gather the pupil’s |
| 251 | Views, listen to the family… Erm… get a sense of what the push and pull factors are, |
| 252 | Really enhance the push, reduce the pull, then use an anxiety hierarchy. And when that |
| 253 | didn’t work, everyone was stuck. |
| 254 | EP1: Yeah. Yeah. |
| 255 | EP3: Said EBSA didn’t work and everyone was still stuck in the problem. I think it was |
| 256 | Because in some ways it was maybe a bit too prescriptive for very, very complex |
| 257 | Situations and that’s maybe where the guidance has got to move on. For some children |
| 258 | That works really well and it has worked really well. But for others it hasn’t. |
| 259 | EP2: And I think what the research is quite unified in saying, is that early intervention |
| 260 | Can be very effective and can be, effect quite quick change. |
| 261 | EP: Mmmm |
| 262 | EP2: And can really lead to positive outcomes. But when you’re talking about more |
| 263 | Neurodiverse populations or entrenched EBSA |
| 264 | EP: Mmm |
| 265 | EP2: That’s where it a… step by step guide just wasn’t fit for purpose. |
| 266 | EP3: And I think there are some themes coming out. That again, listening very closely to |
| 267 | What the young person and the family are saying, believe what they’re saying, focusing |
| 268 | On rest recovery, well-being… |
| 269 | EP1: (At same time) Are these some of your principles? |
| 270 | EP3: I think they’re the themes that seem to be coming out. Rest recovery, for |
| 271 | Neurodiverse young people, self awareness, acceptance and some mentoring. |
| 272 | EP1: Mmm |
| 273 | EP3: So it’s interesting that the Barnados erm, project is based on EEF, you know their |
| 274 | Evidence that says that like mentoring and family approaches are the most effective at |
| 275 | Supporting… |
| 276 | EP1: Well… |
| 277 | EP3: And that’s what XXXX (name)… |
| 278 | EP2: Massively. My research with the parents… Massive part of that was that change had |
| 279 | To happen within the family home, kinda first, before you know you could effect any |
| 280 | Change. |
| 281 | EP1: And what kind of changes were happening in the family home that were helpful? |
| 282 | EP2: Erm, well, it was a very small study. The key things really were professionals |
| 283 | Working together, and sort of… you hear these terms all the time, ‘a joined up approach’ |
| 284 | But they really said how important. Because with the population that I work with, the |
| 285 | Complexity wasn’t… Lots of the young people there were medical difficulties as well as |
| 286 | Mental… |
| 287 | EP3: Mmm |
| 288 | EP2: They had such a complex picture of need that they… parents had been working with |
| 289 | Loads of professionals and felt that they were kind of being left to manage all of that |
| 290 | Themselves. And when everyone came together they said that that was a massive thing |
| 291 | That was supportive. |
| 292 | EP3: Mmmm |
| 293 | EP 2: within the home. One family spoke about family therapy, and they had some |
| 294 | Therapy themselves, and they said it was really helpful because it really unpicked some |
| 295 | Of their anxieties and the root of some of why they were responding in the ways that |
| 296 | They did that had probably led to the EBSA becoming more entrenched. And when they |
| 297 | Started to slightly shift how they dealt with the problem, they, they said they started to |
| 298 | See some change. |
| 299 | EP1: That’s really interesting. |
| 300 | EP4: Go on EP3 |
| 301 | EP3: I was going to say, other families, I guess what they’ve talked about is that the |
| 302 | Parents have perhaps, sort of traumatised themselves by being asked by professionals to |
| 303 | Do things that they know is not helpful for their child and then never feeling that they’ve |
| 304 | Been able to say that, or that they’ve done things and they regret it, in the past like |
| 305 | taking them and dragging them into school, you know. Dragging them out of the car and |
| 306 | Making them go into school. And that… Eliza Fricker talks about just needing to sit at |
| 307 | Home together and to eat crumpets. And to see that as the healing that needs to happen |
| 308 | Within the family. |
| 309 | EP2: Yeah. And I think that for some of the entrenched cases, coming to school is just |
| 310 | Such a massive step. You know, these young people might be in their bedrooms, so |
| 311 | Actually getting them out of the bedroom to spend more time… and that was something |
| 312 | The parents said to me, was actually we started to see change when she was out of her |
| 313 | Bedroom a little bit more. |
| 314 | EP?: Mmm |
| 315 | EP2: You know, and that was a massive step forward. It wasn’t about her attending |
| 316 | School or even getting out of the house but she was spending a little bit more time with |
| 317 | us. So it’s… |
| 318 | EP4: Yeah, it’s very. It’s just very, very tricky. I think that also highlights how quickly and |
| 319 | How much things have developed, so that the fact that we’re distinguishing between |
| 320 | Those early, emerging concerns and early identification, and then entrenched EBSA, |
| 321 | Because entrenched EBSA is a term that we bat around a lot now. But it wasn’t |
| 322 | Something... We didn’t make that distinction early on did we? |
| 323 | EP?: No. |
| 324 | EP4: And I think we’re now at a point where we can identify that entrenched EBSA needs |
| 325 | A different approach to perhaps those early, earlier difficulties. Again, we’ve come a long |
| 316 | Way with that thinking haven’t we? |
| 317 | EPs: Mmmm, yeah. |
| 318 | EP1: And I’m just thinking about what the factors that you’ve talked about (EP2) with |
| 319 | Those families and that does resonate a bit with the family that I worked with through |
| 320 | Consultation and we just had lots and lots of consultation reviews over time, with quite |
| 321 | A few extra professionals there. I think that helped with the joined up approach. And |
| 322 | Also, just thinking back to what you were saying about the family reflecting themselves, |
| 323 | I think that that joined up approach helped the mum to feel more empowered. And I |
| 324 | think that that in turn helped her to, you know, persuade and support her child to come |
| 325 | Into school more, so, yeah. I think that the actual self awareness of the family can be |
| 326 | really important in it, can’t it? |
| 327 | EP2: But I think what’s really interesting, where this is a slight tangent, there is a lot in |
| 328 | The press at the moment about absence from school. |
| 329 | EP?: Mmmm. |
| 330 | EP2: But the rhetoric you kind of hear in the press is quite blamey. |
| 331 | EP4: (at same time): It’s truancy. |
| 332 | EP2: And it’s about… Well it’s about truancy, but I, A lot of it is a lot to do with parents |
| 333 | Since the pandemic don’t see the value of sending their kids to school anymore…. |
| 334 | EP1: (at same time) They can’t bothered to send them in, type of thing. |
| 335 | EP2: You know, and that’s sort of… |
| 336 | EP3: It’s not helpful is it? |
| 337 | EP2: I don’t think that’s necessarily helpful because I think that’s where you’ve got |
| 338 | Problems, like my kids school, asking me for, you know, a slip to prove that I actually did |
| 339 | Take him to the doctors, you know. |
| 340 | EPs: Mmmm |
| 341 | EP2: It’s been… everyone in the country understands that its, there’s a difficulty here |
| 342 | around attendance – attendance figures have dropped. But I think that the government |
| 343 | Are still seeing it through a different lens… to how we are really. |
| 344 | EP3: It’s like all the initiatives and agendas that schools have to bring together never fit |
| 345 | Together, do they? It’s like how, how… |
| 346 | EP?: No. |
| 347 | EP3: They’re all in competition with each other. Like, “get all your children in 100%. |
| 348 | Don’t accept any excuses. But then also support their mental health. Make sure… |
| 349 | EP1: There are a lot of contradictions. |
| 350 | EP3: There are a lot of contradictions. “Increase your attendance rates. But also be hard |
| 351 | Line with behaviour. Use exclusions. |
| 352 | Laughter |
| 353 | EP2: And it’s seeing those things together. I mean I’m talking from the perspective of high |
| 354 | Schools where behaviour and attendance are kinda the same thing. So one of my sons |
| 355 | Last year didn’t get to do a reward thing, despite the fact that he had impeccable |
| 356 | Behaviour, because his attendance was too low, because I’d been keeping him off, |
| 357 | Because he was unwell. |
| 358 | Mmmm yeah (murmurs). |
| 359 | EP1: Appropriately. |
| 360 | EP2: Appropriately, yes. That was really frustrating because it was like, you know, give |
| 361 | Those certificates for 100% attendance, I think are really, really problematic. I think all |
| 362 | Attendance either isn’t necessary and it’s not ideal because a child’s unwell, or there’s a |
| 363 | Problem to unpick and work with the family around. |
| 364 | EP3: I mean, it’s just the go to isn’t it? When you want a quick fix, everyone just resorts |
| 365 | To a very behaviourist approach, and tell everyone of and give a reward to people who |
| 366 | Do it right… |
| 367 | Laughter. |
| 368 | EP3: I think what the guidance will hopefully do over time is.. have a …. |
| 369 | EP1: Bring more support in… |
| 370 | EP3: B ring a more nuanced approach. |
| 371 | EP4: Coz, what I am interested in as well is how it links back to whole school approaches |
| 372 | To mental health. |
| 373 | All: Yeah… |
| 374 | EP4: In terms of… I was interested in seeing some of the research where it’s identified |
| 375 | The importance of school belonging for young people. And actually, if you promote |
| 376 | Belonging with young people who are struggling with EBSA, then actually that could be… |
| 377 | And that’s just… it takes us back to the whole school approach and stuff like that. So I |
| 378 | Think there are quite a lot of school -factors that are a benefit to all young people |
| 397 | That… if… can be done in a really positive way, can hopefully lead to a reduction in this |
| 380 | As well. |
| 381 | EP1: It’s a good point. |
| 382 | EP3: I know that would help with those early intervention cases as well as the more |
| 383 | Entrenched cases. |
| 384 | EP1: Yeah. I was just going to say that the other lad that I was working with, where I did |
| 385 | Lots of consultations over time, he had a friend who was attending school, and I think |
| 386 | That helped with his sense of belonging. And that was a sort of crucial link to motivate |
| 387 | Him to come into school. |
| 388 | EP4: Coz I think sometimes there’s been a focus on… I know from individual cases that |
| 389 | I work with, where, the goal is almost being put on the young person, the attendance |
| 390 | Goal. |
| 391 | EP3: Mmmm |
| 392 | EP4: Without looking at, well actually, what is meaningful to the, to the young person. So |
| 393 | Actually, is it more that they’ve got a club that they can go to, or a friend that they…you |
| 394 | Know, something that they … there’s a reason for them to go to school, rather than |
| 395 | Attendance itself being the goal. |
| 396 | EP1: Ah yes, right… |
| 397 | EP4: And in those cases where attendance has been the goal, it hasn’t been effective, |
| 398 | Because that isn’t what is motivating |
| 399 | EP1: Not meaningful enough. Yeah. |
| 400 | EP1: You know that thing about the appropriate responses. And I notice that I have this |
| 401 | Resistance, and I know it’s a bad thing I think, but when you say about these ones where |
| 402 | Really you need time at home to just rest and recover and having crumpets together? |
| 403 | And I notice there’s part of me that doesn’t really… but, but, but that could just go on |
| 404 | For ever sort of thing. And I’d love to know kind of, the trajectory of when that works as |
| 405 | An approach, what happens? Can you describe it a bit? |
| 406 | EP3: So these are just cases I’ve heard second hand. So Eliza Fricker said that it’s when |
| 407 | You notice… there’ll be a period of everyone relaxing and calming and everyone kind of |
| 408 | settled and it was healing. And then she noticed that it wasn’t really working anymore. |
| 409 | And there was a little bit of frustration and a little bit of boredom and a little of like, she |
| 410 | Just said these little shoots start to show that there’s signs and that we need to do |
| 411 | Something slightly different. And I think what would be useful is for professionals to be |
| 412 | Able to check in at those points and see what’s the next little thing that we could nudge? |
| 413 | And not jump straight to attendance. So just because she is coming out of her bedroom, |
| 414 | Doesn’t mean she’s ready to go back to school. |
| 415 | EP4: Right. |
| 416 | EP3: And I think that there was a type of discussion where it kind of like, “Oh well we see |
| 417 | Her going to the shops with her mum so I don’t know why she’s not coming into school.” |
| 418 | And it’s like “owwww… it’s a slightly different concept.” |
| 419 | EP1: So that’s a sort of appropriate foray out into the world. |
| 420 | EP4: Yeah. |
| 421 | EP3: And there is, alongside re-writing the guidance, there’s a whole other sub-group |
| 422 | Working on trauma, like burn out recovery guidance. And what can support that. XXXX |
| 423 | Has given the example of a young person who was out of school for two years and had |
| 424 | Some really effective mentoring support and has now gone back to mainstream school |
| 425 | Without many reasonable adjustments. Because… |
| 426 | EP1: That’s really helpful to know that. |
| 427 | EP3: He’s had time to recover and understand himself and his preferences a lot more. |
| 428 | Rather than the masking and the burnout (completed jointly with EP 4) |
| 429 | EP1: Is that someone with AS… |
| 430 | EP3: With autism, yeah. |
| 431 | EP2: And that was something that came out of my research actually, was around their |
| 432 | Relationship with their diagnosis of autism. Erm, it was a tiny study, and the girl, very |
| 433 | Much… it was part of the journey. She was diagnosed while she was off school. And for |
| 434 | Her it was like a tangible, ‘right, well I kind of understand now what’s been going on a |
| 435 | Bit better, I understand it. But I’ve also got this evidence.’ Because she was really |
| 436 | Motivated to get to sixth form college. She didn’t want to go back to school but she |
| 437 | realised she had to some GCSEs to go to college and that was what eventually got her |
| 438 | Back. And she now feels like her diagnosis of autism, her EHCP is something she can say, |
| 439 | “You’re not meeting my needs and I’ve got these needs, look, here’s legal documents |
| 440 | That say that.” For the lad, he was diagnosed when he was 6 or 7 and has never really |
| 441 | Thought about being autistic until we did the research. But actually, when he reflected |
| 442 | On the research, said it was actually really helpful to think about it and I’m glad I did. |
| 443 | And wider research does… there are sort of positive links with a positive autistic identity |
| 444 | and well-being. So, there is evidence that suggests that, and I’ve started to include |
| 445 | it in outcomes actually, when it’s appropriate, that when the young person is ready, they |
| 446 | Explore their autistic identity because, yeah, the evidence is there that, you know, |
| 447 | Positive relationship with your autistic diagnosis is going to support your well being, so… |
| 448 | EP3: Definitely. I know you had a little bit of a check list that you were starting to work |
| 449 | On. The thing about it being never ending, I’ve also worried about that. It being never |
| 450 | Ending and maybe being a safe-guarding risk and… But there’s also something like, if you |
| 451 | Can go back to Maslow or self-determination theory – no one wants to be stuck. Most of |
| 452 | The young people will report wanting to have social connections, wanting to do things |
| 453 | But feeling burnt out or depressed or too anxious to do any of those things. And I think |
| 454 | If you allow for that recovery that will enable those things to happen whereas, the |
| 455 | Constant pressure to be at school and feel that everyone is failing, or that… stops that |
| 456 | Growth…. |
| 457 | EP4: … Something that’s made me think of though, coz I guess I’ve got a couple of |
| 458 | examples in my head. And erm, I can see where that concern comes from (EP1) in terms |
| 459 | Of have kinda just been left. |
| 460 | EP1 and EP3: mmmm. Yeah |
| 461 | EP1: That’s the danger isn’t it? |
| 462 | EP3: That’s the thing about having a lead professional. |
| 463 | EP4: Exactly. I was just about to say that. So I guess that there’s still, the difference |
| 464 | Between being left and forgotten about and never, ever checked in with again, to having |
| 465 | That time to recover but still having people around that are checking in, seeing how the |
| 466 | Young person is up to… |
| 467 | EP3: That’s low pressure. And maybe the family leads on… |
| 468 | EP4: …Yeah. |
| 469 | EP1: So ongoing connections and a lead professional… |
| 470 | EP4:… and that’s part of the process… |
| 471 | EP1: Yeah… |
| 472 | EP4: And that’s not (MISSING WORD) forever. That, that’s… they need that right now. |
| 473 | EP1: A sort of lower intensity of involvement but still connected… |
| 474 | EP4: Mmm. |
| 475 | EP4: Done as almost part of a planned response. |
| 476 | All: Yes, Yeah. |
| 477 | EP4: That this person, right now, needs this time to recover. Rather than, that young |
| 478 | Person just forgotten. |
| 479 | All: Yes, Yeah. |
| 480 | EP4: It’s obviously intentional. |
| 481 | EP1: And it kind of reminds me of the attachment cycle of when the child is in distress |
| 482 | And needing to be close to their attachment figure. And then they come close for a |
| 483 | Cuddle and then they have the soothing and then it might take a while for them to |
| 484 | Regulate, and then once they’re calm, then their curiosity is activated and then they can |
| 485 | Go out into the world… |
| 486 | EP4: Ready to take the next steps. |
| 487 | EP1: Yeah, leave their safe place, yeah. But it might just take longer to have in that |
| 488 | Soothing cuddle sort of space. |
| 489 | EP4: You know, it’s that anxious state isn’t it? So if someone is still in fight or flight all the |
| 490 | time, where you’re not ready to challenge themselves… |
| 491 | EP1: You can’t push them, no…. |
| 492 | EP4: So it’s getting them out of that fight or flight response, isn’t it? |
| 493 | EP3: And processing the traumatic… The feelings, the trauma that they’ve experienced |
| 494 | And talking it through so that they’re not re-triggered every time that they go back into |
| 495 | School, even if they are, much better in other environments. |
| 496 | EP2: Yes. And I think what you said again linked back to my research, was around |
| 497 | Motivation. That was something the young people really said was important. Was when |
| 498 | They had motivation. |
| 499 | EP4: Mmmm |
| 500 | EP2: And you can’t… |
| 501 | EP1: You can’t magic it out of nowhere… |
| 502 | EP2: You can’t magic that. But it’s kind of… I think it’s quite a useful thing to think about. |
| 503 | About, what is it that motivates this young person? And do they know yet? If they don’t |
| 504 | Know yet… |
| 505 | EP1: …Can we help them find out… |
| 506 | EP2: Can we help them to find that thing that’s moti… Because if it doesn’t come from |
| 507 | Within, it’s not going to be successful. |
| 508 | EP4: And that, and that links to kind of working, listening to the young person, but also |
| 509 | Working with them around setting goals up that are important to them. I do feel that |
| 510 | Traditionally a lot of goals are set around young people, especially because attendance |
| 511 | Are right, we need to get them to like, ninety whatever percent attendance. Whereas, |
| 512 | Like that’s not motivating to them then it’s not going to work is it? |
| 513 | EP1: No… And going back to that case that I was working with that lad, he started to say |
| 514 | His mum that he wanted to go into school. He just had little moments when he said that. |
| 515 | And she was like really surprised but it was so wonderful, but I think that it’s to do with |
| 516 | Him being ready enough, and not kind of like… |

**Transcript of Mixed Focus Group 1**

P1: Youth worker

P2: Headteacher of alternative provision

P3: Learning Support worker

P4: Local Authority Attendance Officer

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| 1 | P4:I think there's been a heavy amount of resource put into… by the council to try and |
| 2 | raise that awareness. I think the difficulty is that, with these sort of things. They always |
| 3 | kind of go to one person inside of an organisation largely. So inside of schools, they're |
| 4 | Always tends to be one person who gets the EBSA training and stuff. And then it's about |
| 5 | How they disseminate that information. So from my experience, the schools that I work |
| 6 | With the attendance leads that I work, will often know about it, but it's then how much they |
| 7 | disseminate that message to wider staff because it's more than just one person because |
| 8 | that one person might not have the best relationship with the young person who they’re |
| 9 | trying to support to be in school more regular. |
| 10 | P3: I feel like that's probably true as well in schools as well. I don't know if that's what |
| 11 | you're saying. But I know that in our team we've all got a similar awareness and |
| 12 | understanding. And the other teams that we work with, other services that we work with |
| 13 | in a school, it might only be a small proportion of people. |
| 14 | P2:  Mm Yeah, sometimes in schools, I think it for me, it's about the people who |
| 15 | understand factors that cause EBSA, so it's people who can work to try and resolve those |
| 16 | issues and it only seems to be a very small proportion of people within a big organisation |
| 17 | of a mainstream school, who have maybe the capacity to devote a lot of time to trying to |
| 18 | understand those factors and trying to work with those factors. Because obviously they |
| 19 | have a very high workload doing lots of other things within a mainstream School. So think |
| 20 | people try to want to understand and try to understand. erm but yeah, I think it is quite a |
| 21 | concentrated amount of people… Within schools and across the Local Authority who have |
| 22 | that really good awareness… of the factors. |
| 23 | P1:  I think across our work force the youth workers, and it's probably a very good |
| 24 | understanding of young people and why they don't go to school on a very broad |
| 25 | level, but whether they understand the terminology of EBSA. And the causes of it and |
| 26 | specific… I suppose the that language is probably new. I mean, I've talked to them about |
| 27 | getting some EBSA training for the youth workers. And they all looked a bit blank at me |
| 28 | when I said do you want to go on it? But they will be working with those young people on |
| 29 | things like anxiety, bullying, you know, all the things that I think cause it, so. They probably |
| 30 | Know it but don't know they know it, if you know what I mean. |
| 31 | P2:  And I think there's a good, you know, there’s lot of committed people and |
| 32 | practitioners within XXXX local Authority. I mean, I know the names of all the people on |
| 33 | this group. Well, I might have worked with you or I might not have worked with you but |
| 34 | there's a lot of really committed people and there is a lot of good awareness and practice |
| 35 | but it isn't spread widely enough. |
| 36 | P3: Maybe we pigeonhole as well though in Services. Maybe we think that, oh if it's an |
| 37 | attendance issue, it's somebody else's issue. It's the attendance people's issue. Do you |
| 38 | know what I mean? if that's the main thing that's coming up. Maybe I'm guilty of thinking |
| 39 | Oh, it's an attendance thing. Somebody else needs to pick that up. It's attendance. |
| 40 | Thinking from a service perspective. |
| 41 | P2: What so you’re saying it's like identifying what the issue is, and it's an attendance |
| 42 | issue. |
| 43 | P3: Maybe. Maybe thinking, maybe thinking even though we might know that a |
| 44 | young person you know, maybe autistic or undiagnosed needs. I think that sometimes we |
| 45 | have a tendency. It's a pigeonhole the use of services and not think a bit more laterally |
| 46 | about… the actual the skill sets of people who could help. Rather thinking, right that’s the |
| 47 | attendance service will leave attendance to that kind of service, or that's the EP service, |
| 48 | We'll leave the education issues to the EP, Do you know what I mean? |
| 49 | P1: And I used to go to a meeting called ‘education on track’, which was some of the |
| 50 | poorest attenders in the city were brought to that meeting and we all sat around. It's very |
| 51 | Multi agency meeting and people sat around and I suppose the EBSA reasons were some |
| 52 | of the biggest reasons. Those emotional reasons are probably the most intractable ones. |
| 53 | And are the ones that are really hard for people to try and respond to and I guess our |
| 54 | response from the youth work side was to try and, you know, build that relationship with |
| 55 | that young person and identify their strengths and what they wanted to do and whether |
| 56 | there's any ways we can incentivise and get in there and all that. But erm, a lot of time |
| 57 | they, they were quite complex issues really and I suppose that was my experience of that |
| 58 | EBSA, you know, directly in terms of…  talking about and discussing those young people |
| 59 | looking at how jointly yourselves, CAMHS service, the school Health Service, any, anyone |
| 60 | could actually do something really and make a difference. And there was a wide range of |
| 61 | us and it was all your team's (Authority Attendance Officer) bringing those young people |
| 62 | too to that meeting. So that was my experience it and emotional health, sleep anxiety all |
| 63 | those sort of things were really, really big and so I think, I think there’s awareness of it are |
| 64 | from my point of view. I think people understand some of those factors just erm and most |
| 65 | of my team will come back and tell me exactly why that young person isn’t going to school |
| 66 | But they wouldn't necessarily relate it the EBSA terminology, I think. |
| 67 | P2: Yeah, I think maybe there's an awareness of certain factors, but maybe not a really |
| 68 | good awareness across all practitioner groups of the complexity of the factors, sort of all |
| 69 | of the factors that come in and… |
| 70 | P3: Yeah. |
| 71 | P2:  Not all services are set up to deal with or manage or address the complexity of |
| 72 | factors. So, you might only be addressing one. Particular Factor like attendance or you |
| 73 | might only be addressing the particular factor. And maybe we're not all. Aware of the |
| 74 | complexity and the dynamics of those factors and how they all sort of interplay. |
| 75 | P3: I would agree. So then that does kind of affect the responses, doesn't it? They think |
| 76 | about that next part do you fact do you find that there's awareness of appropriate |
| 77 | responses? I feel like the initial answer is yeah, we know what the appropriate responses |
| 78 | are. But maybe going off what you're saying (P2), you might miss some responses if |
| 79 | got that full breadth of skill sets. If we're thinking if we're coming from supporting a young |
| 80 | we've not person who's not attending. from our own service perspective rather than that |
| 81 | full breadth. Then you might not come up with the appropriate responsible. Then that's |
| 82 | Why EBSA is good in theory because it brings everyone together around the child, |
| 83 | doesn't it? The Pathway. |
| 84 | P4:  It’s the difficulty of, I suppose with schools or a lot of schools which are sweep them |
| 85 | all on the same statement, but lot of schools want immediate, quick responses and most |
| 86 | Of the time the damage is already been done. Greater down the line so to speak so |
| 87 | Obviously then playing catch up and then it takes longer to actually bring about that |
| 88 | change. It wants to go to more… Tokenistic ideas of why that child isn't attending that kind |
| 89 | of in at times can maybe absolve them of any blame or responsibility. |
| 90 | P3: Yeah. |
| 91 | P2: And yeah, yeah, I mean it's emotion based School avoidance. And so if you talking |
| 92 | About young people's emotions. that's not necessarily going to be a really quick fix when you say |
| 93 | (P4) things have been going on for a very long time while that child's identity’s being |
| 94 | formed. So there’s not just a quick fix that you can do most of the time for that. And that |
| 95 | does seem to be the expectation. Of mainstream schools, they want interventions and |
| 96 | quick fixes. And we all know I think, us four on this call know, that isn't how it works. |
| 97 | P3: And maybe the point of referral is that is a bit late. maybe it's a case of thinking about |
| 98 | Of people know Do we all and skills have appropriate responses under our belts earlier |
| 99 | On down the Line. Can we see those early signs do know? Do we know? |
| 100 | P4: I do feel sorry for practitioners inside of schools because they are obviously thread |
| 101 | bare on resources and they're naturally going to focus all the attention on. so a more |
| 102 | pressing issues as such and… |
| 103 | P3: High end. |
| 104 | P4: Often that is too late. the point of the EBSA tools and resources is to try and |
| 105 | obviously avoid it getting to a point where obviously you have to escalate into a pathway. |
| 106 | But often because of the amount of time that those cases do take, that takes away from |
| 107 | the other end because of the fact that there's not enough resource across the board now. |
| 108 | I’d say that's a common theme. |
| 109 | P3: Yeah… |
| 110 | P2: Yeah, and I mean, I know the secondary schools have been thinking about for years, |
| 111 | How can we identify these young people earlier? And should there be a checklist of |
| 112 | children who've had lots of school moves and absence is starting to hit a particular |
| 113 | percentage and what the result of looking at those kinds of things, but there's never really |
| 114 | been a successful answer to that. And maybe and maybe there isn't an answer to that. |
| 115 | P1:  Sometimes it's that frustration, isn’t it? that a young person might experience some |
| 116 | of these issues at primary. but the nurturing nature of that school setting means it's not |
| 117 | Addressed… |
| 118 | P2: Yeah… |
| 119 | P1:  Because it doesn't materialise so much because it's one class that someone may |
| 120 | have been in for a few years and they've built up a lot of trust and feel comfortable and |
| 121 | then suddenly that's thrown up in the air when they go to high school. And that's a |
| 122 | structural thing isn't it that you've got that nurturing environment that means you feel like |
| 123 | maybe you don't need to address some of those issues because that not Coming to the |
| 124 | surface. And when they moved to high school, they come out flying then because there |
| 125 | isn't that nurturing environment or that is less nurturing. |
| 126 | P2: It’s that closer eye, isn't it? it's nothing that closer eye of the young people and the |
| 127 | amount of adults around that young person who see them daily more often and can pick |
| 128 | up on little emotional signs and know about things at home a bit easier, a bit quicker |
| 129 | Sooner, that it just goes doesn't it? At high school because of that structure. |
| 130 | P2: Yeah, also because young people who go to high school. They're then becoming |
| 131 | more peer dependent aren't they? They’re becoming more influenced by peers rather |
| 132 | than perhaps the adults in the lives, but for the ones who are struggling like you say with |
| 133 | the social communication Etc. they struggle to have those relationships with peers. |
| 134 | P3: Yeah. First line of defence isn't it to vote with feet and stay home. |
| 135 | P4: Okay, so there's an element of parents as well expecting maybe a higher levels of |
| 136 | support of saying that my child's struggling with anxiety. So therefore remove them from |
| 137 | that rather than accepting that anxiety is a sort of normal element. That every young |
| 138 | person's life and it should be managed with support. So they kind of remove them from |
| 139 | the anxiety inducing thing which obviously in turn makes things worse ultimately and |
| 140 | sort of facts that young person to sort of feel that that's the only way to respond as such. |
| 141 | P3:  It's a really fine line, isn't it? Because I know that I'm talking to some parents. The |
| 142 | way that they act and respond thinking about appropriate responses. It comes from a |
| 143 | place of guilt that they are almost fell... They say that they feel guilty for sending the child |
| 144 | into an anxiety provoking situation in school. So that guilt is what drives them to want to |
| 145 | protect the child and keep them home and from a professional side of view we’re like that |
| 146 | wouldn't be the most appropriate and effective response because with the need to be |
| 147 | accessing education, they need to be in the setting but then it's that fine line of actually. |
| 148 | hearing them on that and supporting them with that feeling of guilt. But helping |
| 149 | them manage their own anxieties. And working together really isn't it? So, of course what |
| 150 | one person thinks is an appropriate response, another person might not think is an |
| 151 | appropriate response. It's so individual isn't it, for each family? |
| 152 | P1:  I don't think we know as a youth service youth workers understand what the |
| 153 | responses are that the school's put in. I think we know some of them so, the emotionally |
| 154 | friendly schools type approach where you try to do that that sort of whole school, trying to |
| 155 | train up teachers, trying to look at the environment, look at the behaviour policy, look at |
| 156 | the trauma response, that sort of stuff but I'm not sure people would badge that as EBSA. |
| 157 | I think that's the mismatch where I think the people might know some of those things but |
| 158 | not necessarily know or relate it to that. That's the sort of stuff I would think are the |
| 159 | Responses. Something on the whole school level and then going down to try and in a bit |
| 160 | like preventative sort of work as well as going down to the sort of more Target and stuff |
| 161 | with individuals. |
| 162 | P2: I think in terms of the awareness of appropriate responses to EBSA. I mean you just |
| 163 | mentioned parents and that's a really massive area that we try and work with, erm an |
| 164 | awareness of an appropriate response. So whether it's our response as an education |
| 165 | Setting or whether it's a parent's response to their child's School avoidance erm, what we |
| 166 | find is that there are a lot of inappropriate responses perhaps within schools and within |
| 167 | Families erm that at all. They don't help the young person. They don’t help the family. And |
| 168 | they just sort of compound difficulties, really. |
| 169 | P3: And sometimes that's, it's hard. Isn't it? when So sometimes it's what I was trying |
| 170 | to say was it that inappropriate response isn't always known Sometimes I think in families |
| 171 | act that way because that is coming from a place of anger or frustration with the |
| 172 | school and they might know that it's inappropriate to keep the child at home. But then I |
| 173 | think in other family situations they don't know that their actions are having that knock |
| 174 | on effect of making the situation worse, do they? |
| 175 | P2: Yeah, and I'm not just there talking about parents of, obviously parents heavily |
| 176 | Involved but I am talking about the responses of schools as well. |
| 177 | P1: Right. |
| 178 | P2: They're not always appropriate. Parents are very often doing the right thing, I would |
| 179 | say, and schools perhaps aren't doing the right thing and… |
| 180 | P1: That’s interesting… |
| 181 | P2:  then sometimes it's the way around… |
| 182 | P1: When we were looking to find five primary schools to do our resilience building |
| 183 | project in, and it was linked in with the ed psych, who helped us identify the program and |
| 184 | we looked at some of the criteria like need and What else is going on in the school and |
| 185 | things like that? But one big factor was the school sort of cultural understanding of mental |
| 186 | health and whether there could be arsed dealing with it or not. And… |
| 187 | P2: Yeah… |
| 188 | P1:  how sympathetic they were to dealing with the issue of mental health and that was |
| 189 | quite shocking for me, that, they understood primary schools as well. Not high schools. |
| 190 | This was primary school sort of leads in the council, saying to me. |
| 191 | P2: Right. |
| 192 | P1: That Head doesn't really think mental health is an issue, and I'm thinking hang on a |
| 193 | Minute, that's a bit scary in this day and age innit? And then go into High School. Hey how |
| 194 | Behavioural policies clash with sort of that mental health and Trauma response. So |
| 195 | When we were talking about trauma training, I was talking to the lead of secondary |
| 196 | schools, and he was saying that trauma is sometimes a dirty word in some high schools. |
| 197 | Because maybe it's been see seen by some staff as making excuses for young |
| 198 | People’s behaviour. And that was quite shocking to hear as well. |
| 199 | P2: Yeah. |
| 200 | P1: It's in different work groups, you've got cultures where people aren't of accepting |
| 201 | Some of these underlying factors are really, really important and the general effect young |
| 202 | people's Mental Health. |
| 203 | P2:  I'm not identifying people but there's almost a lack of humanity I would say, |
| 204 | in some of the schools that we work… |
| 205 | P1: Empathy at least. |
| 206 | P2: We work with all the high schools across (X Local Authority) and it's different people |
| 207 | coming through all the time. And different there's been a lot of change and churn of |
| 208 | leadership in schools and things like that and people come in with sort of new ideas |
| 209 | wanting to impose things, but there's quite often a real lack of empathy, humanity towards |
| 210 | these young people and towards the families, and I'm not being soft. I totally get that we |
| 211 | have to give high challenge as well as high support and that's a really important thing. But |
| 212 | yeah, there's just a complete lack of understanding, which is strange and maybe it's not in |
| 213 | the teacher training courses that people go on, I don’t know. |
| 214 | P3: I'm always sure that it is a lack of understanding. I do see that situation a lot where |
| 215 | the schools haven't put as much effort in, if you like, as I would have hoped but I don't think |
| 216 | it's about a lack of understanding and I think it's about that lack of motivation because of |
| 217 | that workload and pressure and their own mental health in dealing with the other issues |
| 218 | that they've got going on in school because it's just a ridiculous situation in schools at the |
| 219 | Minute. Erm, that, that, and it does come down to individual people like we said at the |
| 220 | start, doesn't it? That some people are just obviously putting up their own kind of… ways |
| 221 | Of dealing with these really complex situations their own defences, which is a “I can't deal |
| 222 | with this right now. I can't do this right now.” It happened they have to do this, this and if |
| 223 | they're not doing it, we can't deal with it. So, I mean that's what you come across all the |
| 224 | time isn't it in schools? And It's really hard. It'd be really interesting to hear what schools |
| 225 | think as part of this discussion as well, and what schools come back with and I know |
| 216 | from my conversations, they're just at capacity and when you have a really complex tricky |
| 217 | Situation, with the most vulnerable people in the city. The school at a loss and it comes |
| 218 | Across as lack of empathy and lack of understanding really, and It might be me being soft, |
| 219 | But really, digging deeper than that, I think they would want to help but they just can’t. |
| 220 | P2: Yeah, I think people do want to help but it all comes down.. particularly in schools. I'm |
| 221 | going off parents again now, but going back to schools themselves and the staff in |
| 222 | schools. For me, where we work, it's about us. When we turn up at school, what are we |
| 223 | bringing because we're co-regulating children, etc, etc. And yeah, I think a lot of people |
| 224 | Sort of aren't aware that how important that is and like you're saying n |
| 225 | (P3) the pressure on staff within special in mainstream schools- it's on another level isn't |
| 226 | it? And so there so they’re coming into school and they're not able to bring those sort of |
| 227 | authentic selves and to be with the children in terms of the emotional regulation. |
| 228 | P3: Yeah, no. Absolutely. I would agree. And they don’t have the same setups as… |
| 229 | P2: Yeah… |
| 230 | P3: …what perhaps your specialist setting has got to help empower the staff to recognise |
| 231 | that. Emotionally friendly schools. I know we are drive to help staff recognise and work |
| 232 | towards that, but they just don’t. |
| 233 | P2: No. No, and the pressures on schools, and including where I am, the pressures on |
| 234 | Us. because it's not really taken into account that it's not really seen as important. It's all |
| 235 | about the attendance, the outcomes, the academic outcomes, really. All those kinds of |
| 236 | measurable things. The other side of it, that kind of human side of it, it isn't really taken |
| 237 | into account massively by the powers that be, I would say. |
| 238 | P3: I Was going to say unless you've got a leader saying, “no, I’m not bothered about t |
| 239 | hat” – It’s got to come from leadership, hasn’t it? Not “I’m not bothered about that” |
| 240 | I’m being facetious. |
| 241 | P2: And most heads are bothered but most heads of the secondaries especially are in |
| 242 | multi- academy trusts and the message comes from somewhere higher up. |
| 243 | P4: The difficulty that I see is that you’re never able to report. |
| 244 | P2: Yeah. |
| 245 | P4: If someone asks you a question about what you've done with this child. Obviously, |
| 246 | you can't say that if we put these resources into this child. It's at the detriment of the |
| 247 | resources for these children, or something like that. It's all about what's maybe missing |
| 248 | from this package of support? Obviously, we know that services are thread bare at |
| 249 | present. and therefore, by fixing one problem you just creating another somewhere else. |
| 250 | So you may be able to go and put an extra T.A. in that class that needs some high level |
| 251 | intervention. But then that just absolutely unsettles on the other place where that TA |
| 252 | maybe was originally. Or I'm gonna move that teacher to because they're a better the |
| 253 | management of that class. I'm going to move them over there, but then that creates so..,. |
| 254 | It’s an impossible situation for all those involved. |
| 255 | P1: I’ve got a good example of that sort of structural thing. I was talking with one of yy |
| 256 | youth workers who runs the erm, the LGBT groups in (local authority) he was saying that |
| 257 | the attendance of particularly the trans young people, which is the majority in the LGBT groups, the attendance on PE |
| 258 | days has gone totally down. Don't go and it's totally fear. It's anxiety inducing for those |
| 259 | young people to go on that day because they just don't want to be in the situation of just |
| 260 | the complexity to worry about where they would be changing and who would look at |
| 261 | them and what the people would say to them and everything else. So they just don't go. |
| 262 | And that's sort of a resource issue then isn’t it? Do you have a specific resource? Do |
| 263 | you… it's a bit like the criticism I’ve had at my youth centres about no gender-neutral |
| 264 | toilets. And yeah, it’s on a list to get some done when the resources come, but I can’t |
| 265 | magic it overnight. And it's that sort of stuff that the young people are making the |
| 266 | requests based on their needs, that may be new to the sort of.., or emerging, but we've |
| 267 | got the resource to cope with it at this time, or there isn't enough teachers to put on the |
| 268 | dedicated sort of group, or whatever, but that means that those young people don’t go |
| 269 | into school – things like that. |
| 270 | P3: I think it's the same for services as well. In an Ideal World, we would all love to be |
| 271 | Able to dedicate more time. It’s the most precious commodity isn't it? Like with adults for |
| 272 | The children in these really complex situations. But you can’t, you have to approach the |
| 273 | situation knowing the knock-on effects of, you can’t, you can’t… there’s just too many |
| 274 | unfortunately, young people isn't there with such significant need who are at home. That |
| 275 | you can’t… you want to be there for all of them. You’re always constantly having to think |
| 276 | about the knock-on effects of what you’re suggesting. And that’s not really…You’re |
| 277 | always having to think of suggestions that'll suit everybody in… suit the whole |
| 278 | situation. I feel rather than what the child really needs, which is more time with adults to |
| 279 | Give them. |
| 280 | P2: I feel that it’s, and I'll go talk about parents a bit as well. It's about having time to |
| 281 | understand parents and work with parents and all the adults around the child who's got |
| 282 | emotion based School avoidance. All those adults around the child have to be responding |
| 283 | kind of consistently to that child and often there are issues either with the frustration of |
| 284 | the parents or the frustration of the school staff and we've all got to kind of get onto a |
| 285 | level… together to support that young person and so that's an area that I think is really |
| 286 | Important, in terms of approach, how to respond appropriately because quite often |
| 287 | It’s been going on for such a long time. Like P4 said, this has been going on for a really |
| 288 | long time developing into school avoidance, and P1 said, it's been going on since Primary |
| 289 | School very often. There's been signs and signals there. It's not being picked up and then |
| 290 | they come to high school and it's just entrenched and it takes a lot of skill to unpick that |
| 291 | and get all those adults onto the same page because you've got… you’re dealing with |
| 292 | adult emotions not just child emotions. And those adults are highly anxious at that point |
| 293 | and stressed and against schools because they don't think schools are doing what they |
| 294 | should be doing, parents will often tell me what fights they've had they’re in battles. If you |
| 295 | Go on any sort of parenting groups on social media, you hear them constantly talking |
| 296 | About having to fight and battle with schools… |
| 297 | P3: Yep. |
| 298 | P1: That's their experience of school isn’t it? There's a lot of adults in (L. A.) who've had |
| 299 | Really poor historic experiences of school, and all it almost like a sort of celebratory |
| 300 | culture of not disliking it. So then when their children come through they're not gonna |
| 301 | be… they’re gonna be siding with children aren’t they, to a degree. And that, it's quite hard |
| 302 | to get over that or challenge that sometimes. And if there’s parental mental health issues, |
| 303 | you know adult mental health services are really, really limited, so people can be waiting |
| 304 | for a long time and waiting for services and not finding them really as well, so. The other |
| 305 | factor is we've got a very big domestic abuse issue in the city, which has a massive |
| 306 | impact on young people's mental health. And I think that that's a factor in the city. That |
| 307 | means that young people have that and that levels of anxiety are high, that levels of sort |
| 308 | of, that emotional abuse, that impacting on young children on a regular basis. And on |
| 309 | those your children are on a regular basis because of domestic abuse in the household |
| 310 | and quite a lot of them feel as we get to Youth Service, that's something that’s happening |
| 311 | in the family. |
| 312 | P3: Nice and cheery for a Monday morning. |
| 313 | P2: I think the only other thing I'd add is to say there's a lot of fear. I don't think we've |
| 314 | talked about fear and whether it's like P1 said fear of school from the parents and that's |
| 315 | kind of come down or s also fear around… there's a lot of organised crime stuff that goes |
| 316 | on in (Authority) and that's within communities and that will feed into people's anxieties |
| 317 | As well. So there's a lot of social issues going on in the background that will impact this |
| 318 | Aswell. |
| 319 | P1: mmm Yeah, I could give a case of a young person that lived on the (local housing |
| 320 | Estate) and didn't want to go to school because they didn't want to go out the house. The |
| 321 | too scared of people in their neighbourhood. So, yeah… |
| 322 | P2: Yeah, that's quite often. I think that the children don't want to leave the parents on |
| 323 | their own, they spent the parents either been ill or there's things happening on the estate |
| 324 | and they don't want to leave their side. They think they can protect them. She's not really |
| 325 | anything to do with school or being scared of school. it's something completely home |
| 316 | Based. |
| 317 |  |
| 318 |  |

**Transcript of Mixed Focus Group 2**

P1: Virtual school rep

P2: Attendance officer

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| 1 | P1: So I'm afraid it's really obvious. What I'm going to say. I think there's a variation isn't |
| 2 | there? So obviously we'd need to Define who the practitioner groups are, but I would say both |
| 3 | within the Local Authority and in our schools… I think there's a variation so I think that are |
| 4 | pockets of good awareness. So for example, within your team (Name), do you know what I |
| 5 | mean? Then of course, it's going to be across the board but…  I think… probably in some of |
| 6 | our other teams and within our schools, you've probably got certain people who have very |
| 7 | good awareness but not everybody. The biggest thing that came up for me. There was the |
| 8 | variation. |
| 9 | P2: So there's a broad understanding at all levels, I think, in the sense that all agencies |
| 10 | probably hear the terminology of EBSA. But then it’s whittled down to individuals that have |
| 11 | that sort of in depth knowledge of it as such, or depth interest of it erm and give it the sort of |
| 12 | courtesy in attention that it needs. |
| 13 | P1:  yeah. So if I think… So Paul, I'm Part of School Improvement now, but only a few months |
| 14 | ago. I was part of the virtual school team. So if I think of… Practitioner groups such as social |
| 15 | care. Obviously, We did a lot of our work together with social care and I would say that there's |
| 16 | a big variation there, in terms of social worker awareness. But then obviously that's not |
| 17 | helped by like high staff turnovers and things like that because they, they, they 've run out lots |
| 18 | of training, didn't they (name)? But obviously you've got people haven't you leaving and… |
| 19 | P2: yeah. |
| 20 | P1:  joining across the board so they might not have accessed. their initial |
| 21 | P2: Is it? I think we're simplifying it as well and I'm in saying it's that turnover. I think there's |
| 22 | also in some ways people's willingness to accept it. They want to try and… |
| 23 | P1: Yeah. |
| 24 | P2: simplify certain issues. Erm,  maybe not take on board how impactful certain |
| 25 | emotions can cause in non-school attendance as well. |
| 26 | P1:  Absolutely. Things like anxiety get talked about a lot. Don't they but… Yeah, do we go |
| 27 | further enough in our exploration to look at all of the different factors, which can cause |
| 28 | school avoidance based on emotional factors? Not necessarily. |
| 29 | P2: There’s that difficulty at the present, where erm, anxiety is very much used as a bit of a |
| 30 | buzzword. It's not nice to say … |
| 31 | P1: Yes. |
| 32 | P2: But one of the buzzword that needs some greater understanding and then some |
| 33 | confidence with practitioners to be able to push back around... Adults saying those sort of |
| 34 | statements… |
| 35 | P1: Yeah… |
| 36 | P2: Because there will be both parents and professionals who will support young people, to |
| 37 | say that they have anxiety, not recognising that anxiety is a perfectly normal. |
| 38 | P1: Yeah. |
| 39 | P2: Emotions to have and feeling. Erm,  use that to try and think that it's an anxiety disorder |
| 40 | disorder, which obviously there's two very different erm… ways of managing them? Should we |
| 41 | Say. |
| 42 | P1:  And then when you look at things like the push and pull factors, you know, within them, |
| 43 | that does everybody have a good. awareness of those? Not nesc… I don't think so. |
| 44 | P2:  It’s, it's rather they need to do that in-depth conversation and relationship building. to |
| 45 | not just take things on a surface level unless I think the biggest thing is challenge at the |
| 46 | minute, in the sense of expressing that it's okay to feel nervous about these things. I think at |
| 47 | the minute, there's a lot of use of the words anxiety, rather than softening in that in some |
| 48 | ways by saying that that is a nervous reaction to things. And it's a natural response from your |
| 49 | body as such. Which causes lots of different emotions as well and stirs them up. |
| 50 | P1: I think the main point for me, is there going to awareness? The variation is huge. I think. |
| 51 | P2: I think if you did a straw poll of things I'd say that. the education psychology service are |
| 52 | possible the highest,… |
| 53 | P1: Yeah, yeah. |
| 54 | P2: Most skilled understanding of the factors that can contribute to EBSA I would… |
| 55 | P1: Absolutely. |
| 56 | P2: then it's probably School Improvement team, but also education welfare… |
| 57 | P1: Yeah. Yeah… |
| 58 | P2: who have that understanding and then it sort of fills down I think school if you go for the |
| 59 | broadest element of school, I think like you say, there's Pockets inside of schools that have |
| 60 | that knowledge and understanding, but I think their less of a voice than the ones that don't. |
| 61 | Which can create tension. I think there are also difficulties around present… Some of the |
| 62 | messaging from very high up the chain. I went to a training session only this week. And, there |
| 63 | was a lot of talk about the impact that pushing children back into school too early can have |
| 64 | impacts longer standing. And it's us all being able to process that and understand that while |
| 65 | also trying to deliver certain targets that we’re being set and… |
| 66 | P1: Yeah. Yeah. |
| 67 | P2: And certain roles that were being given as such. And understanding… This is I think my |
| 68 | motto as such for life - when you fix one issue, it only creates an issue somewhere else. And I |
| 69 | think my buzz word at the minute is that if we… support… non-school attendance because we |
| 70 | see it as being anxiety burnout. What-knot,. Do we then potentially impact on discipline and |
| 71 | doing things because the … careful of my wording… but essentially because we have to, as |
| 72 | such. Not because sometimes we get feelings like we don't want to do stuff but we don't |
| 73 | necessarily respond to them. We just do because it's part of the picture part of the bigger |
| 74 | goal. Erm, because I think we've all probably had feelings where we wanted to be self- |
| 75 | indulged. and not wanted to do things and that therefore it's about doing it because we know |
| 76 | we have to. |
| 77 | P1: And you're right you know, about the contradictory messages that are coming out |
| 78 | because I didn't know that so you've heard that this week, but then obviously you've got the |
| 79 | whole thing about EBSA is about kind of early intervention isn't it? And getting in as soon as |
| 80 | you can and that rapid return. Erm,  and then you've got the attendance guidance, haven't you |
| 81 | saying, children need to be in, obviously, and attendance needs to improve. |
| 82 | P2: Yeah. |
| 83 | P1: And then ofsted are kind of saying, I can't remember the line, but it's something along the |
| 84 | lines of I understand and empathise but do not tolerate. That's their line in terms of |
| 85 | attendance. |
| 86 | P2: Yeah, it is difficult because you always gonna have these conflicts in messages at |
| 87 | times. And I think some of the things that are done to try and support positive attendance if |
| 88 | we give examples of messaging around having the best attendance leads to the best |
| 89 | outcomes for you academically, socially, emotionally and… |
| 90 | P1: Yeah… |
| 91 | P2: All them sort of things. For some people will be anxiety inducing which will then cause |
| 92 | potentially over time, burnout. And leads people feeling like they can’t. And that was one of |
| 93 | the things that came out of this week's training that people can't do something. It's not that |
| 94 | they don't want to. But I will be honest and say that worries me that sort of messaging that |
| 95 | we be accept now that people can't do things because then says that there's an… It suggests |
| 96 | in that moment that there's not a way around it and I think for lots of young people, although |
| 97 | we want to work with them and trust them… Some of their goto messaging, in the first two in |
| 98 | the first instance will be that they can't do something. Erm, and if we're to fully go with that |
| 99 | and believe, and be on board with that, we could end up with quite a dark outcome for many |
| 100 | young people. One of the things that pushback as challenge was that because it was |
| 101 | suggested that those young people may not be essentially fit for school. And they should be |
| 102 | at home to rest and recuperate emotionally and mentally at that point in time, and it's Who |
| 103 | they are surrounded with at that point and whether those people are potentially |
| 104 | compounding that message and actually exacerbating it. And like I say so we could cure it in |
| 105 | one way by taking them away from the thing that is causing essentially anxiety burnout, but |
| 106 | we could then further compound the issue because they are around characters that say that |
| 107 | school is a place that you know, heightens that anxiety and therefore they need to be |
| 108 | removed from it forever more. |
| 109 | P1: Definitely. So I've definitely had children who've been in care, err where they were being |
| 110 | told, “Don't go to school”... Yeah. |
| 111 | P2:  It's my worry at the minute and that's… |
| 112 | P1: Yeah… |
| 113 | P2:  It's my worry at the minute and that's… |
| 114 | P1: Yeah… |
| 115 | P2:  That's my challenge to face and things that obviously, especially in my sort of role where |
| 116 | we're potentially getting to a point where we do end up enforcing it. Are we ending up |
| 117 | causing drift as a result of some of the messaging that's going on. And I do get concerned |
| 118 | because I'm an ambassador for stuff like emotionally based non-school attendance and One |
| 119 | of the bigger voices should we say? That's for it. But there are other things, other elements |
| 120 | that play at the minute, so you can have people who have one hundred percent, genuine |
| 121 | Emotionally Based School Avoidance and that needs that really heavy line of intervention. |
| 122 | But it’s then this sort of the ripple effect as such. As in, we all know that young people are |
| 123 | influenced. And when they see that someone else is being treated differently as a result of |
| 124 | their behaviour they think that they behave that way to get a similar sort of response. |
| 125 | Everything has to be taken on a case by case basis and obviously it's difficult to explain. to |
| 126 | young people and their wider families, why one young person has been treated and handled |
| 127 | differently than their young person because obviously that young person is centre to their |
| 128 | world. And that young person obviously is centre to their will but you can't explain all their |
| 129 | difficulties and intricacies because obviously of data sharing and stuff like that. |
| 130 | P1:  So if we look at awareness of appropriate responses… I'm gonna say same thing. So I'm |
| 131 | going to say that... I know there is a massive variation in this in terms of appropriate |
| 132 | responses and there I mean… from school to school, but also… within teams and again, like |
| 133 | you said you did hierarchy before in terms of who and you could say the same couldn't you |
| 134 | for that? But if I use a case examples again, so say a cared for a child that we had last year, |
| 135 | so I was the one that sort of said, try this, use this, use the EBSA resources whether it's and |
| 136 | the care schedule or, the cards or activities, you know. All the different things that are there. |
| 137 | And I would be asking questions like, what is your action plan? What does the action plan |
| 138 | look like for this child? And it didn't exist. So if I hadn't have basically created that for the |
| 139 | school, they wouldn't have happened. |
| 140 | P2: Yeah, that's fair and it's difficult because in an Ideal World. You would not have so many |
| 141 | priorities at present that are put on education... |
| 142 | P1: Oh, it’s massive. |
| 143 | P2: And therefore you would be able to adopt a good approach around it. Obviously like |
| 144 | we've already said at the start there's just conflict all the way through… |
| 145 | P1: Yeah… |
| 146 | P2: Because you've got messaging from organisations such as OFSTED… That say it is |
| 147 | import… imperative that you have high School attendance. |
| 148 | P1: Yeah. |
| 149 | P2: And then you verse it this child's led approach. Which I say, if we go back to that and go |
| 150 | with a child led approach at times... Sure, a lot of school population would opt for a |
| 151 | different way. Approaching school at certain points of their academic career and obviously |
| 152 | that's not conducive to the current environment. both financially and resource wise even. |
| 153 | P1: But then we have some schools don't wait. So I know one they have an EBSA TA don't |
| 154 | they? That's their specialism. That's what they do. And so it's not everywhere… But obviously |
| 155 | I'm just say… |
| 156 | P2: There’s certainly a buy in, there's certainly a buy in. I wouldn't say in certain schools, |
| 157 | I’d say in a lot of schools, |
| 158 | P1: Yeah. |
| 159 | P2: But the difficulty is their buy in is to name a person rather than to. adopt an approach. I know obviously… |
| 160 | P1: Old school. |
| 161 | P2:  if we think about other strands that have been there probably much further than Ebbs |
| 162 | EBSA is in it's (indoctrination) the emotionally friendly schools… |
| 163 | P1: Yes. |
| 164 | P2: It's more an approach from a team of people rather than just employing one TA. |
| 165 | P1: Absolutely. And we're not quite there are we? But like you said, look we've been trying for |
| 166 | years to have trauma responsive schools. Haven't we and… |
| 167 | P2: Yeah… |
| 168 | P1: So it can't happen quickly can it? But, you're absolutely right. Oh gosh, that would be |
| 169 | amazing wouldn't it? If we had like a whole school… you know, everybody understands it and |
| 170 | they know what to do, and everybody sees it as their responsibility… That would be amazing. |
| 171 | P2: Yeah, and I think there will always gonna have that… always gonna have that conflict of |
| 172 | that not being the response because people are people ultimately and we'll take different |
| 173 | views. Otherwise we'd have so much more that conformed as such, or went to an idea… |
| 174 | idealistic approach. We probably wouldn't have Conservatives in government… oh brought |
| 175 | politics into it!  (laughter). |
| 176 | P1: And do know I did think, and I just think in terms of appropriate responses, erm, I was |
| 177 | having a conversation with somebody the other day, and I don't know how you… Obviously for |
| 178 | you (name), it's different because this is like your everything. Erm, I sometimes if, |
| 179 | whenever  something comes to attendance or anything linked to attendance,  non- |
| 180 | attendance, you know, I think I can almost see… and people have actually said to me sort of |
| 181 | go, “I don't know what to do about attendance.” Do you know what to mean? So there are all |
| 182 | of those you said, so in a school lots and lots of different areas aren't there? And policies and |
| 183 | things to focus on… Sometimes I feel as if attendance is… over there (pointing far away). |
| 184 | when people are almost scared aren't they? And they don’t know what to do. |
| 185 | P2: Yeah, I think that's even probably consistent inside of maybe our service… Because, like I |
| 186 | say, you’ve got mixed messages. Do you want them to hit school target, or do you want them |
| 187 | to meet their emotional milestones? And ultimately you want a bit of both but you're not |
| 188 | gonna be able to get that because by, like I said, you're gonna conflict one at the risk of |
| 189 | another aren't you, as such? It's impossible. it’s at times like this I wonder why we do the job |
| 190 | that we do. (laughter). |
| 191 | P1: You do an amazing job. You do… |
| 192 | P2: We try our very best but… |
| 193 | P1: But I do, and you know what? I do think it's important thing to, to say because I think |
| 194 | sometimes there is almost a sort of blocker with this. Do you know what I mean? It’s almost, |
| 195 | that's far too sort of complex for me or I don't want to get involved with that… because it is so |
| 196 | complex isn’t it. |
| 197 | P2: Yeah, and… it's knowing… where young people are in their journey of being open and |
| 198 | transparent around what their difficulties are. And that’s obviously ultimately it's core about |
| 199 | building relationships, but a lot of them have been indoctrinated, that schools... |
| 200 | P1: Yeah… |
| 201 | P2:  That schools are this. They're not going to support you, or be friendly or… |
| 202 | P1: Yeah… |
| 203 | P2:  try and meet your needs. When obviously that's the ultimate aim that we all get into. But |
| 204 | the with us, well particularly us, they’re with us for an even lesser amount of time which |
| 205 | schools for a decent amount, but then with the home environment for the largest period, so… |
| 206 | P1: And then I'm struggling with. The last one…they don't have a unified understanding of… in |
| 207 | My opinion. |
| 208 | P2: What does anyone have a unified understanding of anything ultimately that. Like the |
| 209 | other day, I've been to that EBSA training and I'm sure it was probably 30 odd people there |
| 210 | and we've all comprehended it slightly differently. I know that people have walked away and |
| 211 | gone, “ooh,  this means we should do this now,” and While others have been in there and |
| 212 | gone,  “but if we do it like that, that’s gonna cause this.” |
| 213 | P1: Yeah. |
| 214 | P2: So we can only but aim to keep a unified approach, but I think it's going to take time and |
| 215 | continue. I think it's about ensuring people have understood the messaging how we wish it to |
| 216 | be understood. And again, that's from maybe… Not taking tests in the traditional term of |
| 217 | writing, but like trying to get that feedback to see…if it has resonated in the way that's |
| 218 | expected. |
| 219 | P1: And you make a very good point about everybody's got different priorities haven’t they? |
| 220 | P2: Yeah. |
| 221 | P1: So, of course, they're going to fit it into whatever they believe their priority to be don't |
| 222 | they? It's going to be different. |
| 223 | Researcher: Can I ask what do you think would help get a unified understanding between |
| 224 | different practitioner groups? |
| 225 | P1:  I mean, I think it says hard… but It has to be a repeated. So we're very good as I'm sure |
| 226 | lots of organisations are… at, I've always said this, erm very good at doing things you're like |
| 227 | and I've had no idea we'll do this or I'll run this training thing. Or I will do this event. But then |
| 228 | that's it and I'm not saying this has happened with EBSA, (name) because I know some |
| 229 | absolutely wonderful things have been done, but I think… Surely it has to be… repeated. It's |
| 230 | almost over learning in school where you have to over learn children have to overlearn to |
| 231 | Remember things. It has to be repeated. But obviously the issue with that. It's like time and |
| 232 | Capacity and all those things that people talk about but…It would have to be a regular for |
| 233 | Everybody wouldn't it? |
| 234 | P2: It’s yeah. |
| 235 | P1: Revisited all of the time. |
| 236 | P2: And it's making sure not just… so if we use the example of employing certain people to be |
| 237 | your EBSA Champion, It's not just about your EBSA Champion being in that training. It's |
| 238 | about key players who then can share that message... wider across the school platform or |
| 239 | even the service that they’re within. Because it's not just about one person's understanding |
| 240 | because obviously there's also intricacies about that one person taking that information back |
| 241 | how well respected they are inside of the organisation, all the intricacies around that and… |
| 242 | P1: Yeah. |
| 243 | P2:  I just do feel like it's a thankless task because of the amount of different priorities at the |
| 244 | minute… Erm that are put on lots of different professionals. so… |
| 245 | P1: Yeah. It's true. So it had to be driven by leadership because you made a really good point |
| 246 | there about the TA. anything we all know in schools, for example, it has to be driven by |
| 247 | leadership. Otherwise it doesn't happen. But it's the same in the local Authority. |
| 248 | P2: You've got to be the right person and the right voice in the right position and it's sad |
| 249 | because you should be able to be motivated by any individual, which is something that I take |
| 250 | quite seriously, I don't know who I speak to any given time who really sort of respects my |
| 251 | word or really just absolutely kind of kye-boshes it, but therefore I have to take that sort of |
| 252 | mantra that they may go forward with something that I've said and therefore be careful and… |
| 253 | articulate in my views,… think of the wider impacts as such… Deep thoughts for a Friday |
| 254 | afternoon… |
| 255 | Researcher: Does anyone want to relate anything about specific cases that they've |
| 256 | encountered or anything like that or? |
| 257 | P1: So I do know just that we have had. I remember. Positive case when it was used properly |
| 258 | (name), you know,  information gathering, to using the resources, to creating plans to… I've |
| 259 | seen progress. I've seen children be able to be integrated back into school. And so I've seen it |
| 260 | work. and I suppose sometimes that's probably a bit of the frustration for (name) because I |
| 261 | think it does work in my experience. It works when it's done properly and understood. |
| 262 | P2: I think it's about the messaging for parents as well. And the cop that suppose more so |
| 263 | the comprehension for parents. because… They may look at it as a completely different |
| 264 | angle. |
| 265 | P1: Yeah… |
| 266 | P2:  Because of their emotional responses to the young person that's likely they're accessing |
| 267 | it as a result of erm… |
| 268 | P1: Yeah… |
| 269 | P2:  because like I said something that the message in on I can't remember what day it was. |
| 270 | Tuesday I think it was but if ultimately a similar messaging was shared with the parent. A lot |
| 271 | of parents would feel empowered to keep their child off school. Erm, and then you get |
| 272 | conflict, massive conflict,… |
| 273 | P1: That's very true. Yeah. |
| 274 | P2: then with the professionals because professional groups have another view about the |
| 275 | damage that's potentially happening as a result that again… |
| 276 | P1: Yes… |
| 277 | P2: how do you Maintain a positive relationship when there is such conflict? |
| 278 | P1: Yeah. Yeah. |
| 279 | P2: We've already got a dodgy enough reputation in certain professional groups. and then |
| 280 | when you challenge in certain… |
| 281 | P1: No you haven’t… |
| 282 | P2: It's not the reason… why we rebranded ourselves to the school attendance team? Not on |
| 283 | That at all… |
| 284 | P1: You haven’t though… |
| 285 | P2: …because of our reputation. They say it wasn't the reason I'm sure it was. |
| 286 | P1: Bless you. It's not the week wasn't it was to do with the guidance. |
| 287 | P2: Yeah, because I've seen loads of different local authorities change in their titles. Laughter. |
| 288 | P1: Wasn't it? The new guidance coming out? |
| 279 |  |
| 280 |  |

**Appendix G: Outline of the process of discourse analysis as described by Potter and Wetherall (1987)**

Potter and Wetherell (1987, pp158-176) suggest following a 10-stage process when carrying out D A:

1. Identification of the research question (s)
2. Sample selection
3. Collection of records and documents
4. Interviews
5. Transcription
6. Coding
7. Analysis
8. Validation: needs to account for both ‘broad patterns’ and ‘micro-sequences’
9. The report
10. Application

**Appendix H: Examples of coding tables**

Table of conflicting pressures Educational Psychologists

|  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Type of Conflict | Focus Group | Introduced by | agreements | Disagreements / clarification | Quotes |
| Conflict between the school environment and the child’s needs |  | EP3 |  |  | there’s the mis-match isn’t there, between the child’s needs around learning… Mis-match with the school environment and that being an underlying cause |
| Conflicting terminology and understanding of terminology |  | EP3  EP2  EP3 | EP2 |  | L5: EBSA is being defined differently, in different ways across different areas. So there’s Different terms for EBSA   L16: I think there is still quite a difference where some  L67: There’s been a shift… and thinking, very much from this anxiety driven to maybe more of a… something that’s more trauma driven or a trauma response that needs a different approach than overcoming anxiety, CBT, erm laddering type approach. |
| How is the information disseminated? Only a few people know the correct approach  (*Differences in professional responses)* |  | EP1 |  | EP3 | L119: A psychiatrist wrote a letter to… I think to a school, possible (?) saying child X is so unwell at the moment (meaning mental health) that I think it’s better for them not to come into school… I did wonder Whether if that situation had been looked at a bit more holistically, maybe there might have been some aspects of school that might actually have been helpful”  EP3: One of the school requests that came out of the Attendance conference was some Training to be done for GPs because some GPs are signing children off too unwell to go to school for like weeks at a time, without having had any conversation with the school.  EP3. L208: Within schools I’ve worked in, I’ve worked with one member of staff who completely got it, really understood and had good success and another member of staff who did not get it at all and kept calling it refusal, kept calling at a choice.  EP4. L164. Re EWOs: “Schools commission them to do certain types of activity…”  “Particularly to make their registers go up in percentages…”  “And to fine…” |
| Pigeon – holing  (*Professional responses)* |  | EP1 |  |  | L 146:  I think it depends which EWO you talk to. I think in the team there are some who get it… There are others who probably just say it’s for EPs to do… or… that… they feel like they’ve tried everything… |
| Conflicting agendas |  |  |  |  | L104:  can be a conflict as well… is the focus on attendance from like a school perspective…  and then perhaps other practitioners where obviously it’s the mental health, the wellbeing of the young person that’s the priority.”  L: 204Re messaging from LA (Miss school or miss out) “It’s quite hard hitting”  EP2: L330 – 340: But the rhetoric you kind of hear in the press is quite blamey.”  EP3: It’s like all the initiatives and agendas that schools have to bring together never fit Together, do they?...  They’re all in competition with each other. Like, “get all your children in 100% Don’t accept any excuses. But then also support their mental health. Make sure…  There are a lot of contradictions.  EP3. L. 133 – 140: Also within like education and DFE guidance. Like, on one side they’re kind of really Pushing attendance and on the other side they’re really trying to promote mental health Support teams and the two don’t always unite do they….”  EP4: L389: conflict between attendance itself being portrayed as a goal, and there being an actual reason to go to school and promote a sense of belonging. “goal is almost being put on the young person, the attendance goal…. Without looking at, well actually, what is meaningful to the, to the young person”  And in those cases where attendance has been the goal, it hasn’t been effective, because that’s not what’s motivating.” |
| The pressure on schools |  | EP3 |  |  | L194: lots of schools, lots of local authorities are under huge amounts of pressure to increase their attendance data coz it’s dropped so much. |
| Conflict between measurable outcomes and “the human side of things” |  | EP2 |  |  | L182:” they’ve really tightened up on attendance in quite a punitive way” |
| The difficulties of building relationships |  |  |  |  |  |
| Conflict with child vs working with children  (*Working with the child and the family)*  Conflict with parents  Vs working with parents  (*Working with the child and the family)* |  | EP3  EP3  EP3 |  |  | L94: Are they emotionally well enough? Mentally well enough to be challenging themselves around something that they’re very scared of, is very anxiety provoking  EP3. L266:  And I think there are some themes coming out. That again, listening very closely to what the young person and the family are saying, believe what they’re saying,  L: 147: they feel like they’ve tried everything And the best thing to do will just be to fine the family because the family aren’t engaging”  EP3. L266:  And I think there are some themes coming out. That again, listening very closely to what the young person and the family are saying, believe what they’re saying,  My research with the parents… Massive part of that was that change had  L302: Parents have perhaps, sort of traumatised themselves by being asked by professionals to do things that they know is not helpful for their child |
| Conflict with school behaviour policies and mental health |  | EP4  EPs 1, 3 & 4 |  |  |  |
| Conflict and confusion over responses – No single approach  (Put with conflicting responses of professionals) |  | EP3  EP4 |  | EP4 | L67: There’s been a shift… and thinking, very much from this anxiety driven to maybe more of a… something that’s more trauma driven or a trauma response that needs a different approach than overcoming anxiety, CBT, erm laddering type approach.  L77: The fact that a lot of CBT models, until recently have been built on adult anxiety. And I think  with the laddering and things like that, as EPs we know that gradual exposure can only be done in partnership with young people.”  L250 – 260: the previous guidance was very much: gather the pupil’s views… etc. And when that didn’t work, everyone was stuck. |
| Conflict of where to allocate resources – and justify it |  |  |  |  |  |
| Time – schools want a quick fix |  |  |  |  |  |
| Time: The point of referral is too late  Time: Identifying things earlier |  |  |  |  | L 259. EP2: Early intervention can be very effective. And can… affect quite quick change” |
|  |  |  |  |  |
| Time: Adults having enough time to dedicate to the children in these situations /  Time to dedicate to parents to reduce conflict with them |  |  |  |  |  |
| People’s understanding changing over time  (chronosystem)  Changes taking time (e.g. in people’s perceptions)  chronosystem) |  | EP3  EP2  EP3 |  |  | L21: I completely agree and I think that that’s because thinking has changed within this Time period. So a lot of guidance was very within child. It was very school phobia….that there’s a shift in thinking”   I suppose a massive shift has been that people see emotional based school   L 25: translating that to everyone else, I think will take time.  L67: There’s been a shift… and thinking, very much from this anxiety driven to maybe more of a… something that’s more trauma driven or a trauma response that needs a different approach than overcoming anxiety, CBT, erm laddering type approach. I’m not sure every practitioner or CAMHS or mental health service or EWOs have moved with us”  L227. EP4: I remember it’s only a few years ago when it wasn’t even a thing.  L 240: EP3: To reflect and update the guidance and doing that project around radically re – writing the EBSA guidance with parents and carers”  EP4: L 318: I think that also highlights how quickly and How much things have developed, so that the fact that we’re distinguishing between those early, emerging concerns and early identification, and then entrenched EBSA. Because entrenched EBSA is a term that we bat around a lot now. But it wasn’t something… We didn’t make that distinction early on, did we? |

Breaks in the flow of the conversation are unusual

EPs pick out some examples of unity ad people giving up their time: e.g : L223

L226: Lots of people coming together. A commitment to working together

To collaborate and learn. (L235)

Interest in principles, rather than a specific step – by -step approach (EP3)

Suggestion of using a lead professional

**Appendix I: Diary of Supervision**

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Date | Areas of discussion | Actions and outcomes |
| 10/02/2023 | Forms of conversation / discourse analysis:  Conversation analysis – person led. Inductive  Involves Jefferson notation.  Conversation analysis – applying over arching frameworks – deductive  Critical analysis can be political – eg. Foucault, Billington. Post structural  **Discursive analysis:** How identities are constructed during a conversation. Looks at the words spoken. There is attention to language. (Conversation analysis does this in great detail)  Rom Harre is influential – positioning theory.  Vs.  Cognitive analysis: the natural tendency to attribute blame etc.  We then discussed different possible studies: Eg. Analysis of different members of staff in one school;  Interviewing 6 members of a SMT (eg. Headteachers);  Discourse analysis of actual multi agency meetings | Read: Discursive psychology, Classic and Contemporary Issues (Tileaga & Stokoe).  Read // study: Potter & Wetherall, Reality Production Kit (Discourse analysis)  Find & read: Jo Mitchell: Analysing Multi Agency Meetings  Finalise research proposal |
| 13/03/2023 | I had sent Victoria a good draft of my research proposal which was our main topic of discussion.  There were some places in the proposal where the wording could have been more finely honed, such as removing the word “attitude” from the research question (discourse analysis does not claim to offer a window into the mind of the speaker).  We also discussed whether discourse analysis was the best approach for the study or whether conversation analysis might be a better approach as this focuses in on the minutia of the words used and the way that meaning is constructed by groups of people. This would also entail a consideration of my ontological position, with DA being associated with a relativist ontological standpoint and CA being more associated with critical realism.  It is therefore important to explain which form of discourse analysis I wish to use and why. | PW to read VL’s thesis and consider conversation analysis vs discourse analysis.  PW to make any necessary changes to the research proposal. |
| 05/05/2023 | The main focus of this session was the ethics application,  Victoria and I discussed some features of the design of the research, including whether the research would be democratic and whether participants would get to see any drafts (I thought that this would be too complicated to arrange).  We also discussed a timeline for getting a draft ethics application to Victoria. | Draft ethics application to Vicotria by end of next week.  PW to email supervisor in order to advertise the research |
| 17/05/2023 | Focus: Ethics & Ethics proposal.  Victoria and I discussed the draft ethics form and the benefits of referencing directly certain aspects of the 2023 BPS ethics guidance.  A further area discussed was that of potential participant groups (such as home tutors, EWOs and social workers and EPs). This would give as broad a range as possible to the research groups.  Victoria and I discussed the potential time line for data collection, remembering that teaching groups will not be available during August. However, other groups, such as social workers, will be available.  We also discussed the potential advantages of having some of the focus groups containing just one profession (eg. Social workers or EWOs). This would ‘s voice was heard.ensure that each professions | P.W. to look at previously successful ethics applications on White Rose to check the wording used.  Attach a signature form. |
| 02/10/2023 | Online meeting. We discussed the transcription of the focus group and the agreements made between the teachers. We also discussed proposed repertoires for the data.  Victoria suggested focusing on the agreements that were made between people. We discussed whether that would be the same for each group or potentially different because the teachers worked together and wanted to agree.  We also discussed the devices used to change the narrative created and the focus of the narrative (from able to help to unable to help). | Next actions:  Gather more data from social workers and EPs. |
| 17/11/2023 | Victoria and I discussed the data that I have gathered to date (from 2 homogenous groups). We considered that homogenous narratives may come from each institutional domain and that the participants may construct knowledge between themselves.  When I gather more information from the 2 remaining focus group (with participants from different fields).  When the data is gathered it will be interesting to look at any differences and variation between the people within these groups (intra group disagreement) as well as inter group differences.  It will also be worth considering my ontological and epistemological stance. I have started this research from a constructionist stance, considering how different practitioners construct EBSA. However, it may be worth considering people’s pre-existing experiences of social power structures which may suggest a critical realist stance. | * Complete gathering data. * Consider epistemology and ontology * Look again at recent research from Anna Freud Centre on EBSA |
| 18/12/2023 | Victoria and I discussed the themes that are emerging from the transcripts. These themes included:  Blame vs lack of blame (who is to blame?)  Metaphors and figurative language vs non metaphorical language (who use figurative language and why?).  EPs and their use of psychology vs non EPs and whether they use a psychological perspective (and which psychological perspective?)  The use of interpretive repertoires when discussing EBSA – Empowered people (e.g. EPs) and non empowered people (e.g. teachers).  Time vs a lack of time  We also discussed potential authors to investigate, regarding a critical realist epistemology. The work of Ian Parker was mentioned | * Look at articles by Ian Parker * Keep re-reading transcripts. * Look at them in the light of the themes discussed – which is the most interesting? * Start writing the Method section. |
| 19/01/2024 | Data analysis.  I have 4 transcribed focus group transcripts and had been analysing the transcripts looking for an over-arching theme. The theme of conflict stood out.  Victoria and I discussed the different types of conflict found within the transcripts:   * Conflicting pressures – for example, the pressure to increase attendance vs the pressure to look after children’s mental health * Conflicting terminology (Eg. EBSA, ESNA, school avoidance etc).   There were also contrasting ideas, such as the value of collaboration vs. silo working.  Ideas for further analysis: Look at who introduces each topic / theme. Who agrees with them? Who changes the topic?  Consider attribution theory – who is blamed? Parents? How are they positioned? And by whom?  (It is important to look at this across all 4 transcripts).  Bakeman & Gottman (1997) wrote a book which may help with methodology: *Observing Interaction, an Introduction.*  They suggest 3 different types of exhaustion when looking data: 1. Mutual exclusivity  2. Representativeness  3. Exhaustiveness  May also want to look at individual narratives that were important to specific practitioners.  We also considered time as an area of conflict: How is time constructed (eg. As a limited resource)  Look at the passage of time.  2nd reference to look at: Ian Parker (discourse analysis and deconstruction).  Finally, we discussed a possible time table for handing in the thesis.  In the future, it may be worth further research taking a grounded theory approach to the ways in which practitioners create definitions for terms / construct their position in relation to an issue. | PW to look at:  Bakeman & Gottman (1997) wrote a book which may help with methodology: *Observing Interaction, an Introduction.*  And  Ian Parker (discourse analysis and deconstruction).  Aim to complete draft thesis by April 15th.  First task(s) complete data analysis and write methodology |
| 01/03/2024 | Focus of discussion: Data analysis  A number of suggestions were made about how to present data, considering the titles used for the themes that are identified and a second table which clearly shows the types of conflict shown in each focus group (where the areas of conflict are shared).  Suggested titles for themes:   * Conflicting responses from practitioners * Conflict between ‘systems’ (Note: VL suggested amending this slightly as the work systems could be problematic). * Conflicts of time   VL reminded me of the importance of ensuring categories are mutually exclusive and that the analysis is exhaustive (i.e. does the theme come up in all of the focus groups?)  It may also be interesting to do an intra group analysis or look at outlying statements (possibly from the group of E.P.s). VL suggested having a look at an article for an example of this: Institutional talk in the discourse between EP and Parent.  VL also suggested that it would be correct to show a whole section of conversation within the analysis, with the analysed section in **bold**.  The full analysis tables should be placed in the appendix but parts of the table that are highlighted can be shown within the data analysis section.  A FURTHER NEXT STEP: look again at the literature review and see if references to the main themes can be found. |  |