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**Exploring the Experience of Mainstream Education: Perspectives from Pupils in  
Alternative Provision Schooling with Social, Emotional or Mental Health Difficulties**

Facey, D. T.,<sup>1</sup> Holliman, A. J.<sup>2</sup> Waldeck, D.,<sup>1</sup> and Wilson-Smith, K.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup>School of Psychological, Social and Behavioural Sciences, Coventry University

<sup>2</sup>Department of Psychology and Human Development, UCL Institute of Education

<sup>3</sup>School of Psychology, University of Glasgow

**Author Note**

Andrew J. Holliman. <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3132-6666>

Daniel Waldeck. <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1201-7179>

Kevin Wilson-Smith. <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-2841-470X>

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Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Andrew J. Holliman,  
Department of Psychology and Human Development, UCL Institute of Education, 25  
Woburn Square, London, WC1H 0AA, United Kingdom. Email: [a.holliman@ucl.ac.uk](mailto:a.holliman@ucl.ac.uk)

### **Abstract**

This study explores the lived experience of mainstream education, as reported by three 13- to 14-year-old pupils with social, emotional or mental health difficulties (SEMHD), who currently attend alternative provision schooling (APS). Taking a qualitative epistemological approach, the methodology chosen for this study was an interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA). The results of this IPA suggest that the transition from primary to, and through, secondary education, is a significant, and inherently social process in which bullying and violence feature significantly. Furthermore, themes of isolation and desperation reflected SEMHD pupils' maladaptive coping mechanisms during periods of change and instability. The findings have important implications for the way that educational transitions are managed for pupils with SEMHD.

**Keywords:** *School; Mainstream Education; Alternative Provision; SEMHDs; Transition.*

## Introduction

In England (UK), alternative provision schooling (APS) offers specialist teaching for pupils who do not attend mainstream school (e.g., due to school exclusion). Such exclusion from mainstream education is likely to result from a multitude of complex, interrelated factors (see Graham et al., 2019); however, one known 'vulnerability' is having social, emotional or mental health difficulties, SEMHD (a special educational need, in which children or young people have significant difficulties in managing their emotions and behaviour).

Pupils with SEMHD often experience heightened anxiety and may also have difficulties in building and maintaining relationships: this can be exacerbated during times of transition. For example, Trotman et al. (2015) argued that school exclusion for pupils with behavioural difficulties may stem from 'failed' transitions through mainstream schooling. Relatedly, the transition from primary to secondary school has been considered 'salient' for pupils who struggle socially; therefore, it would seem a worthy focus point in understanding the school trajectory for pupils with SEMHD (Pereira & Lavoie, 2018). However, there remains a paucity of research on the 'pupil voice' (Pereira & Lavoie, 2018) investigating the 'lived experience' of mainstream education, through the eyes of pupils with SEMHD (Trotman et al., 2015).

In one notable exception, Pereira and Lavoie (2018) conducted an interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) of the experience of six APS pupils in Canada, and found that the concept of 'school as a social process' (connected to bullying, enemies and allies, and friend conflicts) was a prominent theme: participants emphasized how relationships and inter-personal connections were central to their experiences of being excluded from mainstream education. Inspired by this work, in the present study, we used IPA to help uncover the real-life experiences of three pupils with SEMHD, who had recently made the transition from mainstream education to APS. The aim was to gain in-depth insight into pupils' first-hand

experiences of mainstream education, to help understand what can be done to support those with SEMHD, who may go on to require APS.

## **Method**

### **Design**

Taking a qualitative epistemological approach, an IPA was conducted, as it was congruent with the focus on exploring in detail how pupils make sense of their personal and social world (Smith & Osborn, 2008), during the transition from mainstream education to APS.

### **Participants**

Three 13- to 14-year-old pupils (two females and one male) were recruited via self-selective sampling from a single independent APS in the West Midlands, UK. Each of the participants had been attending the APS for between three and six months at the time that the interviews were conducted.

### **Procedure**

Information sheets and consent forms were distributed to the headteacher, the parents of pupils, and to the pupils themselves. Participants who agreed to take part were then invited to interview. The interviews were conducted in a private space in a busy area of the school and lasted between 22 and 47 minutes. These were audio-recorded. After the interviews took place, participants received a full debriefing.

### **Measures**

A semi-structured interview schedule from Pereira and Lavoie (2018) was used in this study. The 'funnelling method' was adopted, whereby questions moved from more general questions about school to the interviewer probing for more specific issues as each interview progressed (Smith & Osborn, 2008). Participants were encouraged to elaborate upon their

experiences of schooling and specifically, of making the transition from a mainstream school to APS.

### **Data Analysis**

The first step of the analysis was to transcribe the interviews verbatim. The data were then analysed using the four-stage process for IPA described in (Smith & Osborn, 2008).

### **Analysis**

Through following the process of IPA analysis, three superordinate themes emerged: school as an inherently social process; bullying and violence; isolation and desperation.<sup>1</sup>

#### **Theme 1: School as an Inherently Social Process**

Participants described how, as they matured through school, they struggled to navigate the ever-changing social worlds in which they found themselves immersed. Each of the participants explained how managing the complexities and demands of relationships that they had formed at primary school began to become a source of anxiety and stress for them once they reached secondary school. Moreover, finding allies to whom they could turn for support was presented as increasingly difficult, and they felt unable to access the care and help that they required at times, both in terms of physical protection as well as emotional and mental support.

#### **Theme 2: Bullying and Violence**

Participants felt that their own permanent exclusions were predominantly a result of their reactions to long term bullying (and violence) that had not been addressed by their teachers. The concept of retaliation and maladaptive coping mechanisms were evident: participants conveyed a sense of having no other alternatives but to retaliate against bullies or to misbehave in order to draw attention to their situation. This frequently resulted in

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<sup>1</sup> As this is a summary paper, the authors only provide a concise overview of each master theme, however the datasets generated and/or analysed during the current study are available from the corresponding author on reasonable request.

participants being placed in isolation (next theme) or excluded from their mainstream schools.

### **Theme 3: Isolation and desperation**

Without a support network or 'allies' to whom they could turn for help, each of the participants in this study found themselves to be isolated and desperate by the time that they were facing exclusion from mainstream education. A combination of factors kept participants out of lessons and away from peers from whom they may have sought support. Each participant described truanting as a form of escapism and being isolated at school as a sanction for their misbehaviour. References to the fear of rejection and a lack of trust were prevalent in the interviews of participants. As a result of the breakdown of past friendships, and the consequent loneliness and isolation that ensued, participants described this as a barrier to forming new, meaningful friendships.

### **Discussion**

In line with Pereira and Lavoie (2018), participants described having poor social skills and difficulty adapting to the changing social circumstances in which they found themselves at secondary school. Moreover, without perceived 'allies', participants in this study explained how the antecedents of being permanently excluded from their mainstream schools were: bullying, violence and an absence of care or support (Graham et al., 2019).

The implications of these findings are that pupils with SEMHD may require targeted intervention involving all stakeholders (e.g., family, teachers, peers) designed to boost their ability to adapt to new and emerging social situations, particularly those surrounding educational transition points (see Dinham & Rowe, 2009, for some related discussion).

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