

*Doctorate in Professional Educational,
Child and Adolescent Psychology*



Reducing anxiety at mainstream
secondary school: An appreciative
exploration comparing the views of
anxious and non-anxious young people

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Declaration

I, Amy Suddards, confirm that the work presented in this thesis is my own. Where information has been derived from other sources, I confirm that this has been indicated in the thesis.

Signed:



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Abstract

The prevalence of anxiety for young people in England is increasing (NHS Digital, 2021). Young people with special educational needs and disabilities are more likely to experience anxiety (Bunting et al., 2022; NHS Digital, 2021), and often experience a more challenging transition to secondary school compared to their peers (McCoy et al., 2020). Current national statistics suggest that these factors may coincide to lead to difficulties with school attendance (DfE, 2022), a problem that schools and educational psychology services are responding to nationally (Corcoran & Kelly, 2023; DfE 2023). The school environment is experienced by many young people as anxiety inducing, despite the role that schools are given to reduce anxiety and promote positive mental health.

The present study set out to explore the views of young people to understand how secondary schools may be able to reduce the impact of negative environmental stressors that add to anxiety levels. Two groups of young people in Year 8 in a mainstream secondary school participated, identified as 'anxious' and 'non-anxious'. A strengths-based approach was adopted and views were explored through Appreciative inquiry, including the use of focus groups and semi-structured interviews. Data were analysed using thematic analysis, followed by a cross-case comparison to understand what is supportive to all young people versus some. Findings suggest that anxiety can be reduced for all young people through supportive relationships; aspects of the physical environment; and engaging learning experiences. For young people who present with anxiety, targeted adjustments in these areas are suggested to facilitate feeling able to meet school demands, which was identified as a contributor to their lived experience of anxiety at school. Implications for schools and EPs are discussed with regards to identifying, understanding and responding to anxiety, including targeted support that may be necessary during and following the transition to secondary school.

Impact Statement

This research study has qualitatively explored the views of young people in one mainstream secondary school to understand how anxiety may be reduced, using a strengths-based approach. In addressing a topical and under researched issue, this study has generated a contribution to the evidence base and educational practice. This study employed a creative use of Appreciative Inquiry, embedding it within a case study design to qualitatively compare two groups. The findings of this study have demonstrated that young people perceive a link between their anxiety and the school environment, and that this could be reduced through schools minimising the impact of negative environmental stressors. Although small scale, the findings of this study could be used to inform approaches for the reduction of anxiety for young people at secondary school, reducing the risk of long-term poorer educational and psychological outcomes. The findings suggest that schools can support young people with anxiety through establishing supportive relationships; a calm, inclusive environment; engaging learning experiences; and enabling young people to feel able to meet school demands. The findings also suggest that schools and EPs may better understand and address anxiety needs through a lens of stage-environment fit theory, with consideration of how the school environment fulfils basic needs such as those set out in Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs and Self-determination theory. Based on this, there are implications for schools and EPs:

- **Schools** should consider the implementation of whole-school approaches to support mental health, including systems to support the identification of young people's anxiety. Schools should seek to ensure that staff and pupil interactions are supportive, containing and anxiety-reducing. This could be addressed through additional training, embedding relational approaches and developing policies to facilitate an inclusive, calm and harmonious environment. This study sets out a framework that schools can use to further support individual young people, by auditing their relational safety, experience of the physical environment, learning opportunities and perceived ability to meet the range of school demands. This framework can be used prior to or

following the transition to secondary school. Adjustments in relation to these areas are proposed.

- **EPs** can support schools to adopt a whole-school approach, develop understanding of mental health and anxiety and embed relational approaches and strategies. EPs can work at individual, group and systemic levels using consultation to support shared understanding of needs, training to inform and upskill staff, and research skills to undertake systemic change projects. At the intersection of education and psychology, EPs are well placed to promote positive mental health and facilitate understanding of anxiety, within interactionist and ecological models.

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List of Abbreviations

Ai	Appreciative inquiry
BESD	Behavioural, emotional and social development
CAMHS	Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service
CoP	Code of Practice
DfE	Department for Education
DoH	Department of Health
EHCP	Education, Health and Care Plan
EP	Educational Psychology/ist
EPS	Educational Psychology Service
EPs	Educational Psychologists
LA	Local Authority
LSA	Learning Support Assistant
MHST	Mental health support team
NHS	National Health Service
OFSTED	Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
SAS-TR	School Anxiety Scale – Teacher Report
SCARED	Screen for Child Anxiety Related Emotional Disorders
SDT	Self-determination theory
SDQ	Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire
SEF	Stage-environment fit
SEMH	Social, emotional and mental health
SEND	Special educational needs and disability
SENDCO	Special Educational Needs and Disability Co-ordinator
TA	Thematic Analysis
WHO	World Health Organisation

1. Introduction

1.1 Chapter Overview

This chapter introduces the thesis topic by outlining the research focus, defining the key terms and concepts, introducing the theoretical framework, and setting out the national, legislative, local and professional contexts that have informed and shaped the topic of enquiry. With these in mind, the contribution and relevance to the educational psychology (EP) profession is considered. The chapter will conclude with the overall aim for the research.

1.2 Introduction

This thesis is concerned with the topic of young people's anxiety at secondary school, and their views about how schools may best respond to and minimise stressors found in the school environment. This is in the context of the increasing prevalence of anxiety for young people in England (NHS Digital, 2022) and national concerns about associated school non-attendance (DfE, 2023). As such, this study set out to explore the views and experiences of young people who present with anxiety at school, compared with a group of non-anxious peers, to better understand their experiences and how the different levels of anxiety evoked by secondary school can best be managed. This was explored through adopting a strengths-based approach, looking to identify young people's views on what is working well already to reduce anxiety and what more can be done.

1.3 Key Concepts

A number of key terms and concepts are used within this research which merit some clarification. This section sets out the key terms and concepts relevant to this thesis.

1.3.1 Mental Health

The focus of this study is anxiety, and it is therefore important to consider how this is conceptualised within the broader discourse where the terms ‘mental health’ and ‘wellbeing’ can be found to be used interchangeably. In line with the Special Educational Needs and Disability (SEND) Code of Practice (CoP) (DfE & DoH, 2015), and therefore terminology used in schools in England, this study positions anxiety as an aspect of ‘mental health’ rather than ‘wellbeing’. The terms *‘mental health’* and *‘social, emotional and mental health (SEMH)’* need are therefore used throughout. The World Health Organisation (WHO) defines mental health as ‘a state of mental well-being that enables people to cope with the stresses of life, realize their abilities, learn well and work well, and contribute to their community.’ (WHO, 2022).

1.3.2 Models of Mental Health

‘Mental health’ as a term is traditionally associated with the medical paradigm where the use of the “medical model” to conceptualise mental health is dominant. The term “medical model” characterises a way of thinking that identifies individuals as having something wrong with them that requires treatment (Beresford, 2002). In comparison, psychological and social models locate the person in a social context

that has its own history and influence (Daines, 1997). The current government policy on children and young people's mental health has been criticised for adopting a clinical approach, reflecting the medical model and positioning young people through a deficit lens, requiring clinical intervention to 'fix' them rather than addressing underlying factors at more systemic levels that cause and contribute to mental health needs (Glazzard & Stones, 2021). Educational psychologists (EPs) typically adopt more interactionist and systemic approaches (Cooper, 2005; Toland & Carrigan, 2011) which acknowledge the complexity of, and interaction between, factors and systems surrounding an individual. Despite using the term 'mental health', this study adopts a psychosocial model, focusing on the environmental threats and opportunities for young people who present with anxiety in school. It is argued that adopting the social model allows the types of systemic problem solving and intervention that are most needed in schools to address mental health needs (Gutkin, 2012). This study takes the view that schools can support young people to cope with anxiety by buffering negative environmental stressors (Weare & Nind, 2011). It is important to note that despite this positioning, some research from the medical domain is referenced in order to clarify the current context.

1.3.3 Anxiety

Anxiety exists on a continuum as it is both a natural response to feeling under threat that is experienced by all individuals to some extent, and a clinically diagnosable disorder (YoungMinds, n.d.). For young people, anxiety is described as "a normative response designed to facilitate self-protection with the particular focus of the fear and worry varying according to their development and previous experiences" (Stallard,

2009, p. 1). Anxiety can be considered a mental health problem when it impacts an individual's ability to live their life as they would like, for example when anxious feelings are very strong, disproportionate to a situation, or last for a long period of time (Mind, 2021). This study focuses on young people who experience anxiety in secondary school to such an extent that it is considered an area of need, and impacts their ability to effectively engage in all aspects of school life. The researcher worked with the school setting to reach an agreed definition. Young people included in this study:

- have been identified by their school setting as having SEND where 'SEMH', specifically anxiety, is a recognised need either exclusively or as part of a broader profile of needs. As such, all 'anxious' participants were receiving support in school either at SEN support level or through provision set out in their Education, Health and Care Plan (EHCP)
- are considered by school staff to experience anxiety that impacts their ability to effectively engage in school life, evidenced for example by difficulties with school or lesson attendance, or heightened levels of distress in response to typical school activities (e.g. tests) across a range of contexts rather than specific to one subject.
- consider themselves to experience anxiety and use this term to describe their experiences and difficulties in discussion with school staff.

A multi-informant approach was used to identify anxious young people meeting the criteria above. This included discussions with school staff and reference to screening tools to support shared understanding of what presenting with or without anxiety looks like. These tools and the sampling approach are explained further in the

methodology chapter. Within a qualitative case study design, this approach is sensitive to the legislative and EP professional contexts and recognises the role that schools play in the identification of anxiety as a need.

Whilst anxiety also exists as a clinically diagnosable disorder, young people in this study were not defined as anxious against the presence of a clinical diagnosis or clinical symptoms. No information was gathered from young people themselves on symptoms of anxiety, for example bodily sensations or emotional state. The researcher acknowledges that some young people may have met the threshold for a specific label if a quantitative approach to sampling was used however this was deemed inappropriate within the context of EP practice and how anxiety is identified in school settings. This study takes the view that it is possible to identify potential mental health needs in school settings without quantitative measures, using a multi-informant approach to assess when a young person is not able to 'learn well' or 'cope with stresses' in their school context, in line with the WHO (2022) definition of mental health.

The topic of enquiry was 'reducing anxiety' and as such, this merits further clarification. For ethical sensitivity and to answer the research questions, a strengths-based approach was adopted meaning that the positive opposite of anxiety was explored. During the development of the research proposal, descriptions of anxiety were examined, including on websites such as the NHS (2023), Mind (2021) and YoungMinds (n.d.). Key emotional states were recorded including feeling stressed, worried, scared, upset and unsafe. This study used terms reflecting the opposite of these feelings, using language likely to be understood by young people.

The position therefore is that anxiety may be reduced through promoting feelings of safety, calmness and happiness.

1.3.4 Children and Young People

This study focuses on a mainstream secondary school as the research setting where the majority of pupils are adolescents. As such, the terms 'young people/person', 'pupils' and 'participants' will be used throughout to refer to the research population. The phrase 'children and young people' is used at times where the issue being discussed relates to a broader age group, or reflects terminology used by a referenced source.

1.4 Theoretical Framework

This section sets out the theoretical framework used in this thesis to conceptualise and explore anxiety. Research over time has shown that there is no single explanation for anxiety, and it is instead best understood as the result of a considerable and complex interaction of factors (Weems & Stickle, 2005). Studies have highlighted this complexity, finding links between anxiety and gender, socioeconomic status, parenting, temperament, adverse childhood experiences, genetics, familial interactions, bullying, and environmental factors such as lifestyle, housing and social media use (Cabral & Patel, 2020; Dabkowska & Dabkowska-Mika, 2015; Narmandakh et al., 2021).

Given the complexity, researchers in education have moved more towards the use of a contextual frameworks and systemic approaches to make sense of anxiety presentations and problems (Appleton, 2008; Aston, 2014; Nuttall & Woods, 2013) and to support thinking constructively about the range of ways to overcome it. One example is the Interactive Factors Framework (IFF) (Frederickson & Cline, 2002) which supports formulations based on the identification of biological, cognitive, behavioural and affective factors in relation to the young person, and environmental factors in relation to the systems around the young person such as their family and school contexts. The identification of environmental factors fits with another dominant model which is Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1996), where a young person's development is seen as the result of the interaction between them and their multiple external systems.

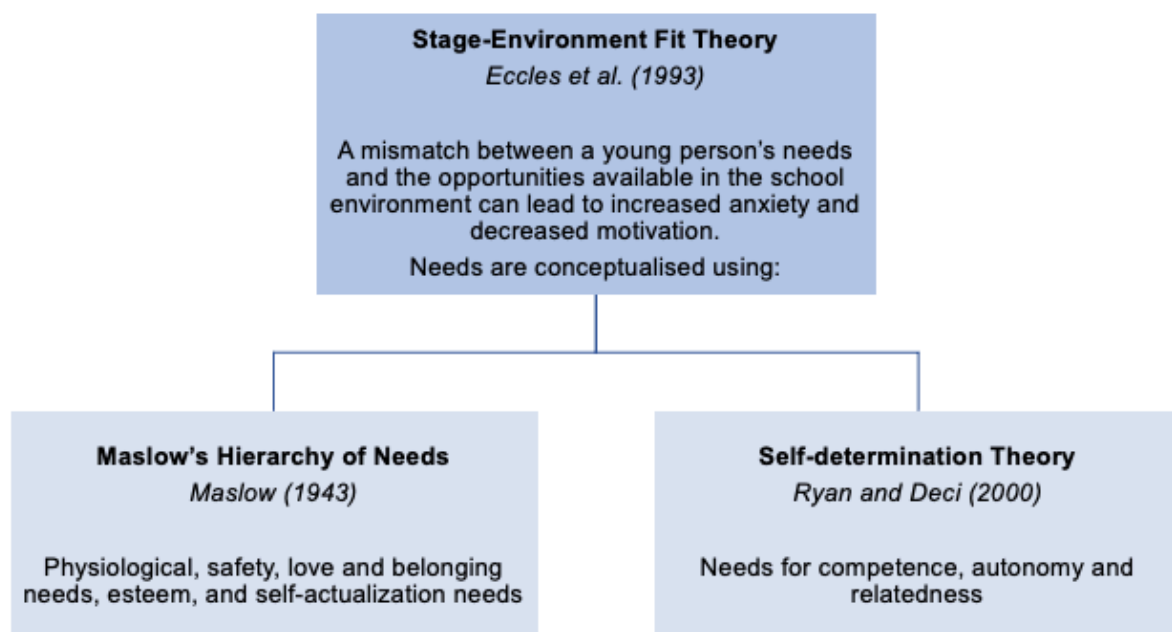
This study adopts a systemic perspective, focusing on anxiety in relation to the interaction between a young person and one environment, in this case school. As such, it is beyond the scope to explore or address biological, cognitive, or behavioural influences despite the recognition that these may well be influential. Cognitive-behavioural theories in particular are prevalent in the evidence base with regards to managing and reducing anxiety, including for young people. From a cognitive perspective, anxiety involves 'the selective processing of information perceived as signifying a threat or danger to one's personal safety or security' (Beck & Clark, 1997, p. 49). This theory assumes that the situation itself does not determine the onset of anxiety, rather how an individual has construed the situation. This study does not seek to minimise or deny the influence of individual thinking

processes, but instead focus on the external stimuli that may be perceived as threats, to consider how these might be minimised within the school environment.

In line with the focus on the interaction between a young person and their school environment, three theories have been selected to inform the synthesis of the literature and findings of the study, as set out in Figure 1.

Figure 1.

Theories for Understanding Anxiety in School



Stage-Environment Fit Theory

Person-environment theories suggest that there is a reciprocal relationship between the characteristics of a person and their environment, and that a fit between the two promotes psychological wellbeing and motivation (Edwards et al., 1998). If an environment is not suitable however, a person may experience stress. Eccles et al.

(1993) developed the stage-environment fit (SEF) theory, which applies the person-environment interaction within a developmental context, as a way to understand the transition to secondary school alongside adolescent development. The theory therefore proposes that a fit between the developmental needs of a young person, and the educational environment that they move in to, is important for mental health, motivation and academic success. In relation to anxiety, this theoretical position assumes that anxiety may be an adaptive response to an environment that does not appropriately meet psychological needs.

The motivation for interacting with the environment is often attributed to a person's desire to fulfil their core psychological needs. Symonds and Galton (2014) conducted an international review of psychological development at secondary transition and suggested that mental health is contingent on a match between the school environment and a young person's core needs for safety, autonomy, relatedness, competence and enjoyment. This fits with a recent review of studies linking adolescent mental health with school environmental factors. In a review of 48 studies, Aldridge and McChesney (2018) concluded that adolescent mental health is related to four sub-constructs which are relationships with teachers and peers, perceptions of school safety, perceptions of school connectedness and characteristics of the academic environment. These four constructs can be mapped to the basic needs set out in Self-Determination Theory and Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs, and as such these are referred to to make sense of potential matches and mismatches between a young person and their school environment.

Self-Determination Theory

Self-determination theory (SDT) proposed by Ryan and Deci (2000) suggests that we all have basic needs of autonomy (choice and feelings of control), competence (a sense of mastery and feelings of effectiveness) and relatedness (belonging and feelings of connection with others). Anxiety at school may be influenced by a need not being met, such as not being able to access learning and therefore not developing a sense of competence. Self-determination theory does not encompass a need for safety and given that this is relevant to anxiety occurring as a potential response to feeling unsafe, this study also draws upon Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs (1943).

Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs

Maslow conceptualised basic needs as a hierarchy, beginning with the foundation of physiological needs, followed by safety, love, belonging, esteem, leading to self-actualisation. Key ideas overlap with SDT and express the same needs using different terms, for example belonging equates to relatedness, and esteem relates to competence. The need for safety encapsulates a key idea in relation to theories of anxiety which is 'uncertainty'. Uncertainty is seen by some theorists as a core part of anxiety (Strongman, 1995), where something is perceived as a threat until it is made 'external and objective' thereby reducing uncertainty. Part of the conceptualisation of 'safety' in the hierarchy of needs is the need for a safe, predictable environment.

These three theories will be used to make sense of threats in the school environment, seeing these as a mismatch between a young person and their needs. These theories have been chosen for this study as they are complimentary and encompass many of the theoretical positions of the existing literature, where a single need is identified and explored such as 'sense of belonging'. A broader theoretical framework allows greater breadth and possibilities when considering the link between the environment and psychological needs.

1.5 Context

1.5.1 National Context

The mental health of young people in England has been a growing concern, as evidenced by the government establishment of 'The Children and Young People's Mental Health and Wellbeing Taskforce' in September 2014 and publication of the 'Transforming Children and Young People's Mental Health Provision' Green Paper in December 2017 (DoH & DfE, 2017). Official rates of mental health diagnoses are not publicly available however national statistics have shown an increase in the prevalence of probable mental health disorders, based on surveys administered by NHS Digital to children and young people and their parents, using the Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ) as the main measure of mental health. National surveys have been administered in 1999, 2004, 2017 and yearly since 2020. The SDQ measures aspects of mental health including problems with emotions, behaviour, relationships, hyperactivity and concentration. Based on SDQ responses, findings suggest that rates of probable mental health disorders have risen from 1 in

10 children and young people aged 5 to 16 in 2004, to 1 in 6 in 2022 (NHS Digital, 2022). Historic trends (NHS Digital, 2017, 2021, 2022) show that the prevalence of emotional disorders has increased since the first survey in 1999 whilst other disorder types have remained stable. Within the category of 'emotional disorders', anxiety disorders (characterised in the SDQ by feelings of fear and worry) are most prevalent (9.2%) compared with depressive and bipolar disorders. Taken together, these trends over time highlight the likelihood of increasing levels of anxiety.

The NHS trends are reflected anecdotally in recent findings of a survey of 1,130 school staff (Place2Be & National Association of Head Teachers, 2022), with 95% of respondents reporting that they had witnessed increased levels of pupil anxiety, negatively impacting their ability to engage in learning. The most recent NHS (2022) survey gathered data on young people's feelings about school and found that those with a probable mental health condition were less likely to report feeling safe at school and enjoy learning compared to peers without. They were also more likely to have higher rates of school absence.

Despite increasing prevalence, it is difficult for young people to access support services for mental health needs, with the NHS 'Long Term Plan' (NHS, 2019) suggesting that only a third of referred young people benefit from services. The threshold to access Children and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS) has raised in response to increasing levels of demand, meaning that many young people are discharged without support or placed on lengthy waiting lists (Children's Commissioner, 2021). It has been suggested that the COVID-19 pandemic has adversely affected some young people's mental health, due to difficulties associated

with illness, bereavement, social distancing measures, disruption to education, and financial strain (Holt & Murray, 2021). As a result, it has been estimated (O'Shea, 2021) that 1.5 million young people in England will need new or additional mental health support as a result of the pandemic, further exacerbating existing service waiting times and access issues.

1.5.2 Legislative Context

Given the rising prevalence of mental health concerns as well as difficulties accessing services, schools have been increasingly recognised as a setting in which to promote positive mental health, through early identification and intervention and more joined up working with external services such as facilitating access to specialists (DoH & DfE, 2017; DoH & NHS, 2015). This was recognised in the Children and Families Act (2014) which set out a joint commissioning role for health, education and care services. The Green Paper (DoH & DfE, 2017) published in 2017 set out plans for funding 'Mental Health Support Teams' (MHSTs) linked to schools to provide early intervention for mild to moderate needs, and incentivising secondary schools to identify a Designated Senior Lead for Mental Health to lead on the whole school approach to mental health. The plans have been criticised as lacking impact and ambition due to slow timeframes and a lack of funding (House of Commons Health and Social Care Committee, 2021, p.5).

In the context of education settings in England, anxiety may be recognised as a special educational need. The SEND CoP (DfE & DoH, 2015) sets out the statutory duties for educational settings in relation to the identification, assessment and

provision for young people who may have SEND. Schools have a duty to adopt a graduated approach to make sure pupils get appropriate support. There are four key stages to the graduated approach which are assess, plan, do and review (APDR). In accordance with the Equality Act (2010), schools must make reasonable adjustments and promote the inclusion of those with SEND.

Within the CoP, needs are categorised under four broad headings. In an update in 2015, the category 'behaviour, emotional and social development' (BESD) was removed, and a new category of need was included titled 'social, emotional and mental health' (SEMH). The key change was the removal of the term 'behaviour' to describe a presenting need in favour of recognising what it may communicate, such as a mental health difficulty. If recognised as a need, anxiety would fit within this umbrella term. The CoP acknowledges that individuals with 'SEMH' needs are not a homogenous group and their varying needs present in different ways, sometimes accompanied by a diagnostic label. In the Government publication 'Mental Health and Behaviour in Schools' (DfE, 2018), schools are advised to use the graduated response when they suspect mental health difficulties, and some measurement tools are named as potentially supportive for screening and identification purposes.

Despite a recognition of the important role schools have to play with regards to mental health, there is no requirement to have a standalone policy. It is generally recommended that schools should have an overarching approach with an offer at universal, targeted and specialist levels (DfE, 2018). Evidence suggests that mental health provision in schools is inconsistent (Patalay et al., 2016), under-researched (Carroll & Hurry, 2018) and impacted by barriers such as a lack of funding,

commissioning expertise, inconsistent quality and lack of accountability (Thorley, 2016). Studies examining provision in secondary schools in England have concluded that approaches are often reactive rather than preventative (Vostanis et al., 2013), that there are different interpretations of the 'whole school approach', and that provision does not necessarily correlate with pupil scores on mental health screening tools (Garside et al., 2021). Carroll and Hurry (2018) suggest that positive and trusting relationships between pupils and staff underpins effective practice in schools in terms of meeting SEMH needs, and that much can be achieved for young people with SEMH needs through high quality teaching at the universal level. More research is needed to understand the impact of school factors, and how the school environment can adapt to meet the needs of anxious young people.

1.5.3 Professional Context

EPs work with children and young people aged between 0-25 years, typically through their education setting, using psychological skills and knowledge to promote child development and inclusion. The core functions of an EP are broad, described as consultation, assessment, intervention, training and research, working at individual, group and systemic levels (BPS & DECP, n.d.). Given that SEMH is a category of need within the CoP, and the known impact that SEMH has on learning and development, EPs have a role to understand and support young people with these needs. The potential contribution of EPs in the area of mental health has been largely unacknowledged in government policy and publications (Roffey et al., 2016). Despite the EP profession's recognition of and response to increasing school attendance difficulties, they are not explicitly referenced in the recently published

government guidance summarising responsibilities where a mental health issue is affecting attendance (DfE, 2023). In contrast, research has suggested that schools are drawing on EPs to support them to meet and manage mental health needs more than any other external professionals (Sharpe et al., 2016). There is evidence that EPs can address young people's mental health needs at different levels through their practice, utilising all core functions of the role. There is a role for EPs to support schools systemically, using consultation, research or training to promote awareness, reduce stigma and build capacity around mental health (Ackerley & Bunn, 2018; Atkinson et al., 2019; Weare, 2015; Zafeiriou & Gulliford, 2020). The DfE (2022, p. 4) describe the role of school staff in relation to mental health as 'ensuring that school is a calm, safe, and supportive environment where all pupils want to be and are keen and ready to learn'. EPs can support school staff to enact this role, using psychology to highlight and minimise the impact of the school environment (Roffey et al., 2016). In terms of reducing anxieties about the transition to secondary school, EPs may be involved in supporting planning for individuals using person-centred planning techniques (White & Rae, 2016), or supporting schools to consider transition support or interventions for young people with SEND (Bunn et al., 2017). In relation to the presentation of anxiety at secondary school, EPs may deliver therapeutic interventions to individual and groups of young people, using for example Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (Atkinson et al., 2011), or take on a role supervising school staff delivering interventions (France & Billington, 2020; Rait et al., 2010).

In summary, EPs are well placed to work alongside young people, families, school staff and other professionals to promote positive mental health. This is an important part of EP practice, especially given the increasing prevalence of anxiety and the

impact that this has on school attendance and engagement, and in light of the recognised difficulties with whole school provision and access to specialist services.

1.5.4 Local Context

This research took place in an inner London local authority (LA) where the CAMHS service is struggling to meet the demands for young people with mental health needs, leading to long waiting times. Schools have access to a traded EP service which they can use to purchase school visits from a link EP. Some schools are supported by MHSTs which provides them with a link CAMHS practitioner. This enables access to early intervention support for young people experiencing mild to moderate mental health difficulties. Young people experiencing anxiety are increasingly referred to these services, and within secondary schools these young people are often struggling to attend school. The LA's five-year plan for children and young people in the borough sets out a range of priorities for mental health, including generating more understanding of how to support the transition to secondary school for those with mental health difficulties. There is a desire to generate preventative systemic solutions rather than responding reactively at an individual level.

1.6 Rationale

The school environment is experienced by many young people as anxiety inducing, despite the role that schools are given to reduce anxiety and promote positive mental health. Evidence suggests that young people with SEND are more likely to experience anxiety (Bunting et al., 2022; NHS Digital, 2021), and often experience a

more challenging transition to secondary school compared to their peers (McCoy et al., 2020). Current research suggests that these factors may coincide to lead to difficulties with school attendance (DfE, 2022b; NHS Digital, 2021; Place2Be & NAHT, 2022), a problem that schools and EP services are responding to nationally (Corcoran & Kelly, 2023; DfE 2023).

A systematic literature search demonstrated a dearth of research examining young people's experiences of anxiety in secondary school, with just one study found to have explored this topic for autistic adolescents (Costley et al., 2021) using a qualitative approach. The evidence base is dominated by studies where children and young people's anxiety is conceptualised within the medical model, using clinical groups and quantitative methodologies to measure and correlate variables. A gap therefore exists in the literature with regards to young people's accounts of their school experiences where anxiety is a factor. In addition, there is an overall lack of research from young people's perspectives with regards to school-based mental health practices and environmental stressors (Aston, 2014; Atkinson et al., 2019) including those with and without SEND. Whilst young people with SEND have higher incidence of probable mental health conditions (56.7%), the rate for young people without SEND is 12.5% (NHS Digital, 2021), highlighting a need to consider how anxiety can be reduced for all young people. This study therefore aims to give a voice to young people who are underrepresented in the research, with their views adding an important perspective to understanding school-based anxiety, given that it is a subjectively experiential phenomenon. More recent qualitative studies have focused on experiences of school non-attendance and reintegration (Corcoran et al., 2022; O'Hagan et al., 2022), leaving a gap for understanding what school

experiences protect against non-attendance in the first place particularly where anxiety is a factor. Seeking pupil voice fits with recommendations made in the SEND CoP (DfE & DoH, 2015) which states that LAs must ensure that young people are involved in discussions and decisions about their support. This is particularly relevant given that the code states that “SEN support should include planning and preparing for transition, before a child moves into another setting or school” (DfE & DoH, 2015, p. 88). It is also advocated for in Article 12 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child, which states that children have a right to have their views heard and taken seriously (UNCRC, 2009).

The existing literature suggests that anxiety may be caused, exacerbated or maintained by the secondary school environment through four main threats; negative interactions and relations, an overstimulating environment, challenging learning experiences and unpredictability. Less is known from a strengths-based perspective about the more positive and protective experiences of young people experiencing anxiety that prevent attendance struggles, the conditions required in order for them to make use of reasonable adjustments and the role of early secondary school experiences as preventative to anxiety problems. There is a gap for a study addressing these questions in order to further understand how schools can buffer negative stressors and reduce poor outcomes for this group.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Chapter Overview

This chapter will introduce the key issues in relation to anxiety at secondary school, based on a summary of literature from a broad scoping review of papers. This chapter will then present the findings from a systematic literature search, conducted in order to review evidence relating to the experiences of anxiety for young people attending mainstream secondary schools. The details of the systematic literature search are provided, with a summary of conceptual themes arising from a thematic analysis of selected papers. Finally, a summary of the literature is outlined.

2.2 Current Issues Relevant to Secondary School-Based Anxiety

2.2.1 Anxiety in School

Anxiety is best understood as a threat response, involving physiological, cognitive and behavioural components (Weems & Stickle, 2005). Anxiety and fear are differentiated in the literature, with fear described as a response to immediate threat, and anxiety relating more to *perceived* or *potential* threats (Appleton, 2008). Anxiety can be experienced by young people in school based on “what they are expected to do in school; how they are treated by others in school; the types of situations they are asked to be productive in; and how they come to view themselves mentally, physically, emotionally and spiritually” (Schults & Heuchert, 1983, p.24). Two major areas of school life that can cause anxiety are performance situations and peer

interactions (Cassady, 2010) and as such, there is a wealth of literature focusing on specific types of anxiety in school such as 'test anxiety' and 'social anxiety'. As set out in section 1.3, this study takes a broader view of anxiety, moving away from clinical or measurable definitions of anxiety and associated constructs in order to fit with the legislative context of schools in England and professional EP practice.

2.2.2 School Context

Longitudinal research suggests that school context has a consistent influence on adolescent mental health (Resnick, 1997). There is a body of research exploring the relationship between constructs that are reflective of the school environment, such as school climate, and adolescent wellbeing and mental health. School climate is a broad and multidimensional construct that typically refers to the feelings and attitudes elicited by characteristics of the school environment (Loukas, 2007). This includes for example norms, values, and expectations that support people feeling socially, emotionally, and physically safe (Cohen et al., 2009). A systematic literature review of 48 studies pertaining to school climate and adolescent mental health research found a 'sizeable body of evidence' that the two are related (Aldridge & McChesney, 2018, p. 130). Across the studies, four main sub-constructs were prevalent including relationships, school connectedness, school safety and academic environment, measured using a range of quantitative and qualitative approaches. This highlights the value of exploring school-level factors in relation to the presentation of anxiety.

The influence of wider systems on school climate is acknowledged in some school climate studies through the use of Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory (Aldridge & McChesney, 2018; Rudasill et al., 2018) which links to broader research on the impact of the sociocultural landscape on school policies and practices, and as a result school climate. Some studies highlight that school policies and practices may establish an environment that exacerbates or in some cases causes anxiety. One aspect is the changing accountability measures in schools leading to increased focus on academics, adding pressure to the system and individuals within it (Hutchings, 2015). As a result of the pressure on achieving results and competing in a 'market-driven' system (Kerr & Ainscow, 2022), the culture of schools can become performative, with young people feeling that school rather than individual needs are prioritised (Brown & Dixon, 2020). A highly pressured school environment is likely to have implications for core need fulfilment, for example sense of competence may be impacted by unattainable academic expectations. This links to another aspect of the sociocultural context which is the continued use of punitive and behaviourist approaches to regulate behaviour in schools (Glazzard, 2019), seen as restrictive and controlling by young people (Jessiman et al., 2022; Kidger et al., 2009) reducing their sense of autonomy. The use of punitive approaches has been found to impact on relationships between pupils and staff (Nash et al., 2016), impacting sense of relatedness. For some young people, the punitive approaches intended to maintain safety may actually lead to feelings of anxiety, due to the threat of sanctions, particularly given that this can extend as far as permanent exclusion. Global comparative data (OECD, 2023) found that young people in the UK scored in the bottom third on measures of school belonging and experiences of bullying in comparison to other OECD countries. This body of research suggests that aspects of

the school climate, reflective of the wider socio-political context, may contribute to the prevalence of anxiety.

2.2.3 Co-occurrence of Anxiety and Other SEND

Of particular relevance to EP practice and schools is the high level of overlap between SEND and mental health difficulties for young people (Bunting et al., 2022; Rose et al., 2009). Recent surveys conducted by NHS Digital (NHS, 2021) found that 56.7% of young people with SEND had a probable mental disorder, compared with 12.5% for those without SEND. Sammons et al., (2011) found that 26% of young people with SEND reported anxiety compared with 18% of other students. Autism Spectrum Condition (ASC) in particular is associated with anxiety (Kent & Simonoff, 2017), and research suggests that anxiety may worsen during adolescence as individuals become more aware of their differences (White et al., 2009). Nason (2014) cites social communication differences, insistence on sameness, intolerance to uncertainty, sensory processing differences and executive dysfunction as potential causes of anxiety for autistic young people. The reasons for co-occurrence continue to be investigated and there are different positions within the literature on whether autistic traits cause anxiety (Milosavljevic et al., 2016), or whether autistic anxiety is caused by living in a 'neurotypical world' that is not adequately set up for them (Cage & Troxell-Whitman, 2019). The latter position fits with the social model of disability, and has been found to be reflective of qualitative accounts of masking, where autistic individuals 'hide' aspects of themselves in order to fit in with social norms (Hull et al., 2017). Chapman et al. (2022) found that autistic teenagers were more likely to mask in mainstream secondary schools compared with other environments, and more

likely to experience anxiety as a result. This could fit with basic need fulfilment in a range of ways, for example social norms may minimise possibilities for relatedness, or a lack of safety is felt through unpredictable or negative interactions. Additionally, research suggests that girls tend to be more impacted than boys (Yoon et al., 2022).

2.2.4 Anxiety and the Transition to Secondary School

Young people's anxiety has been found to be highest between 10-12 years of age (Van Oort et al., 2009) coinciding with the onset of adolescence as well as the transition to secondary school in England. Issues have been identified for young people with SEND which may exacerbate anxiety as they move to secondary school. This includes significant and often unanticipated changes to support (Bagnall et al., 2021; Bailey & Baines, 2012), higher levels of concerns pre and post transition (Hannah & Topping, 2012; Neal et al., 2016; Rice et al., 2011), decreased school and peer connectedness (Hebron, 2018; Lester et al., 2013; Midgen et al., 2019; Nowland & Qualter, 2020), increased reports of bullying (Evangelou et al., 2008), decreased sense of security (Scanlon et al., 2016) and an overall less successful transition (McCoy et al., 2020). The issues highlighted seem to reflect young people's responses to the transition experience and school environment, rather than being 'within-child' problems. For example, Neal et al., (2016) found that systemic strategies used by schools to support the transition (such as 'bridging' projects) were associated with higher anxiety levels for those with SEND. Bailey and Baines (2012) found lower levels of belonging and relationships for young people with SEND despite higher levels of individual resiliency factors of 'sense of trust', 'optimism' and 'perceived access to support'. In a review of the evidence, Hughes et al., (2013)

suggest a need for studies which support the understanding of factors that influence how young people with SEND adapt to secondary schools, examining specific areas of need rather than treating 'SEND' as a homogenous group, and using comparisons to typically developing peers to develop appropriate interventions and support plans.

2.2.5 Impact of Anxiety on Education

Anxiety can affect every area of life and is associated with a range of negative longer-term outcomes such as decreased academic attainment, reduced educational engagement and reduced physical health (Allen et al., 2020; Gutman & Vorhaus, 2012; Lereya et al., 2019). In addition to academic achievement, of particular concern to schools is the association between anxiety and non-attendance (Finning et al., 2019). Government statistics demonstrate that rates of persistent absence are increasing, rising from 10.8% in 2018-19 to 22.5% in 2020-21 (DfE, 2022b). In addition to anxiety, prolonged periods of absence from school are a risk factor for non-attendance, which may explain increasing rates of persistent absence after schools re-opened following periods of lockdown due to the COVID-19 pandemic. In response, several EP services have developed and published guidance (Hampshire County Council, 2021; Staffordshire County Council, 2020) on what is increasingly referred to as emotionally based school avoidance (EBSA) or non-attendance (EBSNA). Alongside, the government have issued guidance on support for pupils where a mental health issue is affecting attendance (DfE, 2023). Attendance data published by the DfE (2022b) shows a consistent pattern of persistent absence increasing most sharply from Year 7 to Year 8, potentially reflecting difficulties for some young people in successfully adjusting to the secondary school environment.

Pellegrini (2007) suggests that there is a bias in the evidence base towards clinical constructions of school non-attendance, focusing on pathology and the presence of 'disorders', locating the problem within the person rather than looking at the interaction of the young person and the environment. This is in contrast to qualitative accounts where young people affected attribute the onset of non-attendance to school-based factors, including difficulties in the social, physical, or learning environment of school (Corcoran & Kelly, 2023). Although young people and parents/carers have emphasised school factors (Archer et al., 2003; Gregory & Purcell, 2014), there are more studies focused on the home environment rather than school. This suggests that there is a need for research which considers the role of school factors in anxiety problems to better understand how environmental changes can promote better outcomes. In particular, preventative measures that can be taken to reduce the likelihood of issues such as school non-attendance.

2.3 Overview of Systematic Literature Search Process

A systematic search of the literature was conducted in order to explore the experiences of anxiety for young people attending mainstream secondary schools.

Two overarching questions guided the search and selection of relevant literature:

- To what extent has research explored the views and secondary school experiences of young people in relation to anxiety?
- What do young people's accounts suggest with regards to how anxiety needs may be effectively supported by mainstream secondary schools?

Searches were carried out in April and December 2022 using the following electronic databases; British Education Index (BEI), Education Resources Information Centre (ERIC), PsycINFO, Science Direct and Web of Science. A search using Google Scholar was carried out as a final step to cross-reference and check for any additional sources to ensure a comprehensive search.

Search terms were identified through initial scoping searches and an initial review of literature used to guide the development of a research proposal. The search terms listed below in Table 1 were used in various combinations using ‘AND’ and ‘OR’ to retrieve relevant articles. An asterisk was used to broaden the search, for example *anxi** returned results including *anxious* and *anxiety*. Speech marks were used to search for specific terms relating to transition, to minimise the likelihood of returning irrelevant literature relating to other educational transitions.

Table 1.

Systematic Search Terms

Search concept	Population	Needs	Transition	Environment
Search terms used	<i>Pupil*</i> <i>Student*</i> <i>Child*</i> <i>Adolescen*</i> <i>“Young person”</i> <i>“Young People”</i>	<i>Anxi*</i> <i>Internalising</i> <i>Social</i> <i>Emotion*</i> <i>Social-emotion*</i> <i>Worr*</i> <i>Stress*</i> <i>SEMH</i> <i>BESD</i> <i>SEBD</i> <i>SEND</i> <i>“Mental Health”</i> <i>“Special Educational Need*”</i>	<i>“primary school to secondary school”</i> <i>“primary-secondary”</i> <i>“secondary transition”</i> <i>“transition to secondary”</i> <i>“transition from primary”</i>	<i>Environment</i> <i>Climate</i> <i>Safe*</i> <i>Belonging</i> <i>Connected*</i> <i>Related*</i> <i>Adjust*</i> <i>Adapt*</i> <i>Support*</i> <i>Interven*</i> <i>Experience*</i> <i>Views</i>

In addition to the search questions, inclusion and exclusion criteria were determined (outlined in Table 2) to ensure relevance to the context of this research study.

Table 2.

Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

	Inclusion Criteria	Exclusion Criteria
Language	English	Language other than English
Publication year	2002-2023	Prior to 2002
Research type	Original/primary research	Secondary research
Context	Exclusive focus on mainstream secondary schools	Other education settings or stages
Country	Conducted in the United Kingdom and Ireland	Outside of the UK and Ireland
Focus	Effective secondary school factors, support and interventions for young people with anxiety School transition, adjustment and overall experiences of young people where anxiety is referenced	No specific reference to anxiety Factors, support and interventions outside of a mainstream secondary school setting School based interventions requiring staff additional training or delivery by external services
Participants	Data collected from young people	Exclusive focus on parent or staff views.

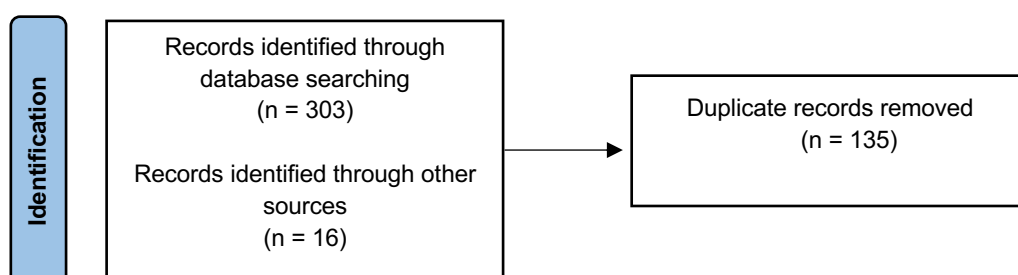
Initial searches produced 319 articles (BEI n = 32, ERIC n = 174, PsycINFO n = 14, Science Direct n = 4, Web of Science n = 79). An additional 16 studies were

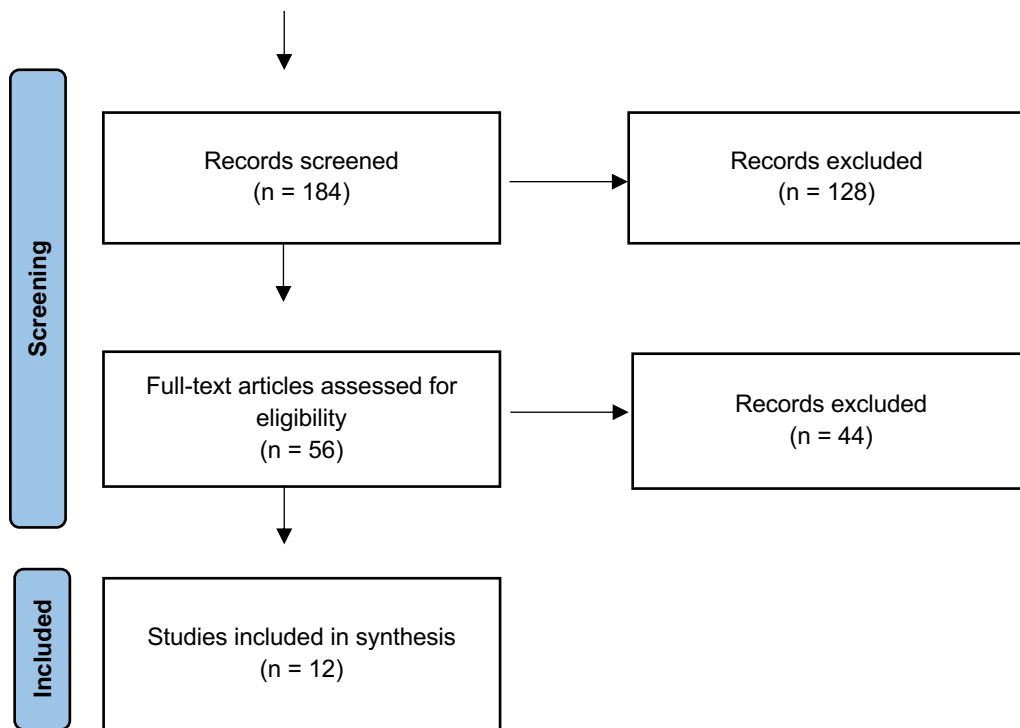
identified through examining the references of identified studies, and a broader search using Google Scholar to identify relevant sources from grey literature. Once duplicates had been removed, there were 184 studies remaining which were screened by title and abstract for relevance against the inclusion criteria and search questions. Following this process, 128 studies were excluded, leaving 56 to be screened at greater depth by reading the articles in full.

Of these, 44 were excluded using the criteria set out in Table 2. Reasons for exclusion included inappropriate focus (n = 24), context (n = 9), research type (n = 5), participants (n = 5) and country (n = 1). Important to mention are the large number of studies focused on specific interventions that mainstream secondary schools have implemented to support young people presenting with anxiety, particularly through the use of cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT), and approaches for re-integrating pupils who have stopped attending school. These were deemed important issues but beyond the scope of the literature search question, and as such studies in these areas were used to inform the discussion of the current context in section 2.3. A total of 12 studies were included in the full literature synthesis. Figure 2 below shows the number of records at each stage of the literature identification and screening process.

Figure 2.

PRISMA flow diagram





2.4 Synthesis

2.4.1 Overview of Studies

In total, 12 studies were included in the literature synthesis in order to answer the two overarching questions for this review, with 6 studies included on the transition to secondary school, and 6 focusing exclusively on experiences in the secondary school environment. Key information about each study is provided in Appendix A. All studies except for one were published in 10 peer-reviewed journals including *Educational Psychology in Practice*, *Emotional and Behavioural Difficulties*, and the *Journal of Research in Special Educational Needs*. The non-journal article source was the findings of a study reported in a book chapter. This was included due to its

relevance and contribution to the topic area. Two studies took place in Ireland, and the other 10 were conducted in the UK.

Only four of the identified 12 studies were positioned with an explicit focus on anxiety and mental health. Three used quantitative measures of anxiety, administered to young people over the transition period (Akister et al., 2016; Neal et al., 2016) and to compare the mental health of autistic young people compared to typically developing peers (Hebron & Humphrey, 2014). The fourth study used a qualitative approach to explore the anxiety experienced by autistic adolescents at secondary school (Costley et al., 2021), sampling based on SENDCO perceptions of young people presenting with symptoms of anxiety. The other eight studies were included due to anxiety being mentioned in the findings. They sought more general views of school and transition experiences for autistic students (Goodall, 2018; Hebron, 2017; Humphrey & Lewis, 2008; Neal & Frederickson, 2016; Stack et al., 2020; Tobias, 2009), autistic girls (Tomlinson et al., 2022) and girls with SEND (Porter & Ingram, 2021). In total, nine studies sampled autistic young people, highlighting the co-occurrence with anxiety. Across the 12 studies, themes were present in relation to the causes of heightened anxiety in school, as well as what young people find supportive.

2.4.2 Thematic Analysis

In order to make sense of the studies included in the literature search, a thematic analysis was undertaken, with a focus on synthesising findings that related explicitly to young people's experiences of anxiety in secondary school environments. This approach was taken due to the range of methodologies, sampling approaches, and

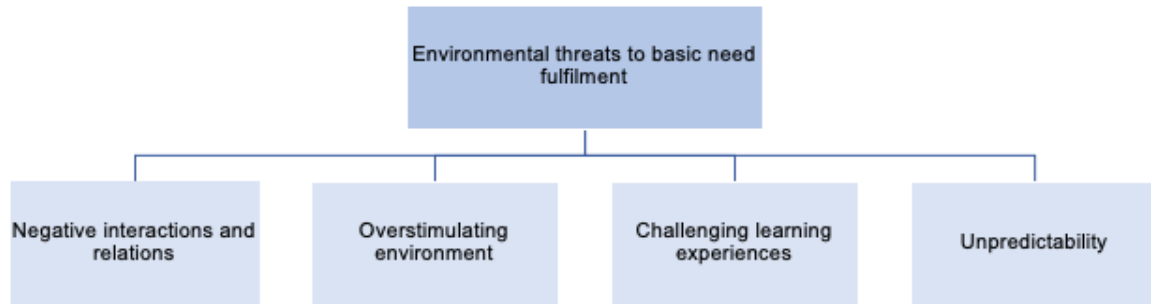
foci of the included studies. The researcher used a systematic and iterative process to ensure rigour. The researcher used a Microsoft Excel spreadsheet to record key information about each study and findings that related to the search questions, looking only for references to anxiety or experiences that contributed towards it. Once this process had been repeated, the key findings that had been recorded were organised into categories representing salient ideas and themes. These were further refined through an iterative process, and finalised when all key findings that had been recorded were represented within a theme. The researcher checked against the search questions repeatedly to ensure that the themes were representative of young people's experiences of anxiety in school. For each theme, there was at least one finding from 10, 11 or all 12 of the included studies.

2.4.3 Themes

Four overarching conceptual themes were identified in the literature which reflect the various aspects of the secondary school environment that pose threats to basic need fulfilment and may cause or exacerbate anxiety, as demonstrated in Figure 3 following the use of the theoretical framework. The themes are presented as threats however were dually found to represent opportunities, for example unpredictability encapsulates ideas with regards to enhancing predictability.

Figure 3.

Conceptual Themes from Systematic Search Synthesis



Negative interactions and relations

Interactions and relations with other people in the school environment came up frequently across the studies, with anxiety being a potential result of interactions and relations that are perceived negatively. One of the main threats for young people across the studies was the sense of not 'fitting in' socially, causing anxiety through a sense of isolation, worrying what other people think, concerns about causing offence, being bullied and an overall feeling of social exclusion (Costley et al., 2021; Goodall, 2018; Hebron & Humphrey, 2014; Tobias, 2009; Tomlinson et al., 2022). These ideas represent a threat to the basic need of relatedness, by not feeling a sense of belonging and acceptance in school. Conversely, friends were identified as a key source of support and buffer against social exclusion, particularly where young people could feel accepted, supported and able to relate (Costley et al., 2021; Goodall, 2018; Hebron & Humphrey, 2014; Neal & Frederickson, 2016; Porter & Ingram, 2021). Part of the anxiety-reducing function of friendships appeared to be receiving support in specific situations, such as not knowing where to go or not understanding teacher instructions. Included studies did not interpret how this peer

support reduces anxiety but it could be argued that worries about sanctions or being bullied for not keeping up with social and academic pressures are reduced.

In terms of relationships with adults in school, a range of difficulties were highlighted which focused on not feeling listened to, understood as an individual or cared for (Costley et al., 2021; Goodall, 2018; Hebron & Humphrey, 2014; Stack et al., 2020; Tomlinson et al., 2022) with an overall lack of support and care exacerbating anxiety. Young people linked their willingness to seek support with the level of trust they felt in their relationships with staff members, being more likely to respond to adults who offer consistent and visible support, show care and take time to get to know and understand them (Costley et al., 2021; Hebron, 2017; Humphrey & Lewis, 2008; Porter & Ingram, 2021; Tobias, 2009; Tomlinson et al., 2022). Porter and Ingram (2021) link this to feelings of safety, with trusting relationships enabling young people to be themselves. Costley et al. (2021) found that some participants talked about not seeking help, particularly when they first started at secondary school, and only after several years there feeling safe to ask for help. It was not clear why it took this length of time or what would have instilled feelings of safety sooner, and this is an important area to understand further. This is particularly relevant given that age may be a potential factor. One study with an older sample found that participants were less likely to speak about teachers as the relationships tend to be more transitory (Porter & Ingram, 2021), compared with Costley et al. (2021) findings that younger pupils rely more on adults for emotional regulation. With the lens of stage-environment fit theory, it could be hypothesised that trusted relationships are particularly important during and after the transition period, when young people are adjusting to an

environment with a level of autonomy that may or may not be developmentally appropriate for them (Symonds & Galton, 2014).

Important to the young people was the sense of being known, understood and accepted as an individual by both staff and peers. With adults, this linked to the extent to which they had an understanding of their needs, and were therefore able to implement appropriate strategies and individualised plans (Tomlinson et al., 2022). The need for individualised support arose in studies regarding the transition, with suggestions that there should be a designated member of staff responsible (Stack et al., 2020) and that it should be shared more widely with teaching staff so that individual needs are well understood and appropriate support strategies are used when young people arrive at secondary school (Hebron, 2017). This reduces anxiety as young people can feel more confident that they are in a setting that adequately meets their needs, removing the burden of having to request adjustments or explain themselves, a barrier highlighted by Porter and Ingram (2021) to the effective use of pupil passports.

Participants in the studies seemed to be aware of their differences and felt unable to show their true selves at times. This manifested as masking feelings and having a sense of self-reliance in managing anxiety, in order to protect themselves from social exclusion (Costley et al., 2021; Hebron & Humphrey, 2014; Porter & Ingram, 2021). There were some differences across two studies with regards to whether this was conceptualised as a result of young people's own lack of acceptance and understanding of their autism (Hebron & Humphrey, 2014) or the formation of a negative identity being the result of peer perceptions of autistic traits (Humphrey &

Lewis, 2008). Either way, studies generally concluded that masking has a detrimental impact on mental health due to the time and energy required to maintain it throughout the school day, as well as the likelihood that difficulties are not known or identified by school.

In summary, interactions and relationships with both peers and adults appear to act as a mechanism for enhanced relatedness and reduced anxiety. Porter and Ingram (2021) describe 'negative interactions being a site for the co-construction of not belonging' (p. 72) demonstrating the importance of enhancing positive as well as minimising negative interactions. Strategies to facilitate more positive interactions and relations across the studies were social skills groups (Tomlinson et al., 2022), pupil passports (Porter & Ingram, 2021), help to meet and make new friends (Hebron, 2017) and a welcoming school ethos that celebrates difference (Tobias, 2009). Further understanding of how to foster positive relations and establish a sense of safety during early secondary school experiences is needed.

An overstimulating environment

In 10 of the studies, young people mentioned environmental factors as a source of anxiety and difficulty, describing school as generally loud and overcrowded, contributing to feelings of stress, intimidation and sometimes confusion. Unstructured times of day including break, lunch and lesson changeovers were mentioned as anxiety-inducing due to high levels of crowding and noise, described by young people as chaotic, bustling, and at times dangerous (Costley et al., 2021; Hebron & Humphrey, 2014; Humphrey & Lewis, 2008; Porter & Ingram, 2021; Stack et al.,

2020; Tobias, 2009; Tomlinson et al., 2022). There were a range of reasons for unstructured times posing a threat and causing anxiety. Firstly, young people spoke about sensory sensitivities, for example sensitivity to touch or loud noise, and this being difficult to manage within the secondary school environment. The second issue related to feeling unsafe, based on the threat of being pushed, shoved or bumped in the large crowd. Finally, unstructured times were conceptualised as socially complex, with large socially-defined groups congregating which could be perceived as intimidating or confusing (Tobias, 2009). Young people seemed to communicate a sense of hypervigilance, needing to carefully navigate the environment to keep themselves safe. Porter and Ingram (2021) describe that this can exacerbate existing worries, such as being on time, not getting lost and finding one's 'place' socially.

The classroom was identified as a potentially anxiety-inducing environment, based on high levels of noise from staff or peers through shouting and lively group discussions, and the resulting impact on concentration (Costley et al., 2021; Goodall, 2018; Humphrey & Lewis, 2008; Tobias, 2009; Tomlinson et al., 2022). This linked to feelings of competence, where young people shared difficulties being able to concentrate and therefore complete work. Some young people expressed a desire for smaller classes or placement in 'well-behaved' classes as a way to manage this. In two studies, the role of adults was mentioned, with young people feeling that they have a key role in maintaining a calm, orderly environment (Costley et al., 2021; Porter & Ingram, 2021).

A range of adjustments were mentioned in order to minimise the overstimulating environment, including corridor passes to leave lessons earlier, a time out card to have a break from the classroom, access to a quiet space at unstructured times and more opportunities for movement (Costley et al., 2021; Goodall, 2018; Hebron, 2017; Humphrey & Lewis, 2008; Porter & Ingram, 2021; Stack et al., 2020; Tomlinson et al., 2022). Findings from one study suggested that young people may be too self-conscious to use reasonable adjustments, based on worries about being seen to be different and being bullied as a result (Costley et al., 2021). A participant in Goodall's study (2018) suggested that the physical environment including the school building is less important than the ethos within it.

Overall, the complex and busy nature of secondary schools can be threatening to some young people, potentially based on sensory needs, difficulties navigating social aspects of the environment and feeling unsafe due to crowding. More understanding is needed about the conditions that facilitate a less stimulating environment and the effective use of reasonable adjustments, to enhance feelings of safety.

Challenging learning experiences

Across 10 studies, young people mentioned learning as a source of stress and anxiety. Tests, exams and assessments arose frequently as anxiety-inducing (Costley et al., 2021; Goodall, 2018; Porter & Ingram, 2021; Tomlinson et al., 2022), due to the pressure to perform well and perceiving the approach to exam preparation as rigid. This sense of pressure seemed to be exacerbated by teachers' focus on results, making the assessment process closely tied to feelings of competence and

worth. Many of the young people's examples of stressors linked to learning were linked to threats to their feelings of competence, for example not keeping up with the teacher, being picked on and not knowing the answer, not understanding the work or working independently without peer or staff support. The causes of this were a lack of appropriate differentiation, including the pace and content of learning, and an overall lack of understanding of individual needs.

In one study (Porter & Ingram, 2021), young people spoke positively about active and practical subjects and activities, such as PE and learning about finances for the future but it was unclear what made these less anxiety-inducing. A range of supportive strategies were mentioned including access to a homework club, exam access arrangements, fidget toys and smaller classes. The idea of stigma arose with regards to learning adjustments, with young people feeling a sense of failure (Tomlinson et al., 2022), judgement (Goodall, 2018) and difference (Humphrey & Lewis, 2008), being scared to make use of strategies or raise their hand to ask for help. Findings from the studies highlight a range of threats arising from learning experiences. Studies generally focused on challenges with regards to learning, suggesting a need to generate more understanding of learning experiences that promote competence and reduce anxiety.

Unpredictability

The theme of unpredictability reflects the how the secondary school environment can be experienced as uncertain and unpredictable, leading young people to feel unsafe. A range of uncertainties were highlighted including being able to do the work in

class, being able to fit in socially, navigating social contexts including knowing what other people are thinking and how they are going to behave, managing unexpected changes to the day such as substitute teachers and finally, being on time and staying out of trouble to avoid negative consequences (Costley et al., 2021; Goodall, 2018; Hebron & Humphrey, 2014; Humphrey & Lewis, 2008; Stack et al., 2021; Tomlinson et al., 2022). Predictable features of the school day were raised as positives, including order, rules, routines and warnings, which serve as a 'security blanket' (Humphrey & Lewis, 2008, p. 37) meeting young people's need to feel safe in their environment. Within most studies, unpredictability was seen as one aspect of anxiety, however Costley et al. (2021) used the 'Intolerance of Uncertainty' theory (Hodgson et al., 2017) to frame the triggers of anxiety for autistic adolescents. This argues that uncertainty is the driver of anxiety. The qualitative accounts of participants highlighted other potential explanations, for example one young person shared about forgetting homework "oh you're going to get a detention [...] police are going to come for you" (p. 8). In this case, the school rule which it could be argued provides certainty rather than uncertainty, still evoked anxiety. This suggests that uncertainty as a concept is not necessarily able to explain all instances of anxiety. Further exploration of school rules and how these can promote safety rather than fear is warranted.

Another idea in relation to uncertainty arose with regards to the transition. Young people valued opportunities to be exposed to, and become familiar with, the secondary school environment prior to starting (Akister et al., 2016; Costley et al., 2021; Hebron, 2017; Neal et al., 2016; Neal & Frederickson, 2016; Stack et al., 2020; Tobias, 2009). There was a particular focus on the importance of individual

planning. Neal and Frederickson (2016) hypothesise that exposure to secondary school helps to overcome any cognitive bias, allowing negative thoughts or expectations to be challenged through experience, therefore reducing anxiety. It could be argued that familiarisation enables other need to be met, including establishing relatedness through relationships and belonging, increasing competence through feeling prepared and informed, leading to greater feelings of safety. A range of opportunities were seen as reducing uncertainty including visits and tours, written guides and maps, workbooks, meeting key members of staff and a graduated settling in period.

A more detailed assessment of specific transition intervention types can be found in a study conducted by Neal et al. (2016) which explored the longitudinal association between interventions to support the transition to secondary school and anxiety. Researchers collected data on 621 children at the end of primary school, and again during the first term of secondary school. A range of 'Transition Strategy' questionnaires were administered to primary and secondary staff to identify the interventions that children were accessing, subsequently categorised by the researchers as cognitive, behavioural or systemic. They also administered child and parent 'Transition Questionnaires' and children also completed the Screen for Child Anxiety Related Emotional Disorders (SCARED) scale (Birmaher et al., 1997). They found that systemic approaches, focused on continuity between primary and secondary settings such as 'bridging' projects, were most associated with lower levels of anxiety. For children with SEND however, systemic approaches were associated with higher levels of anxiety. There is no explanation for this association however the researchers hypothesise that children may feel increasing anxiety once

exposed to secondary school curriculum materials that are too challenging for them to access. Reporting the findings by separating out those with SEND does not add to the understanding of the interaction between SEND and anxiety, or the impacts for young people whose SEND is anxiety. A further limitation of this study is that follow up data was collected at the beginning of Year 7, potentially not allowing time for anxiety levels and adjustment to stabilise over time. In addition, given the large number of participating schools, the three categories of interventions are likely to overgeneralise and miss differences in the way that schools design and deliver their support. This said, transition planning clearly needs to be carefully considered in order to avoid exacerbating anxiety through exposure to an environment that is not developmentally appropriate and is therefore perceived as threatening.

2.4.4 Methodological Approaches

Only four of the included studies specifically set out to explore anxiety, and they used contrasting approaches, including evaluating a transition activity project (Akister et al., 2016), correlating transition strategies with anxiety (Neal et al., 2016), comparing mental health profiles of pupils with different needs (Hebron & Humphrey, 2014) and seeking views on contributing factors (Costley et al., 2021). Studies using a quantitative approach were able to make associations but did not reach firm conclusions due to the absence of control groups and the likelihood of other explanatory variables. Two studies had a qualitative approach or component, highlighting a gap in the literature base with regards to hearing the views of young people who experience anxiety in the school environment.

In addition to different approaches were the different sampling methods used, highlighting the complexity of defining and identifying anxiety. Two studies relied on pupil self-reports, using the Beck Youth Inventories (Hebron & Humphrey, 2014) and SCARED scale of child anxiety (Neal et al., 2016). Two studies used teacher perceptions, one alongside a diagnosis of autism (Costley et al., 2021) and one through a 'teacher concern' form and the Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ) (Akister et al., 2016). There were limitations for each of these, including a clinical rather than experiential definition of anxiety and the use of different staff members completing scales for the same child between time points (Akister et al., 2016).

Another limitation in terms of the study by Costley et al. (2021) and the other eight studies focusing on autistic young people is the potential for some young people's experiences to be missed due to not yet being diagnosed, effectively masking anxiety needs, or both. This has been found to be the case particularly for autistic females, who are underdiagnosed (Goodall & MacKenzie, 2019) and mask to a greater extent (Wood-Downie et al., 2021). Unsurprisingly, across the seven studies where gender was reported, 58 males participated compared with 20 females. This demonstrates the value of Porter and Ingram's (2021) study, where girls were sampled based on self-reporting any SEND. Overall, there appears to be a gap in the literature with regards to qualitative accounts of experiencing anxiety in school, particularly where anxiety is used as the sampling criteria as opposed to a specific diagnostic label to enable a wider range of experiences to be included.

A final limitation noted across the studies was a lack of engagement with different theoretical perspectives to explain anxiety or young people's experiences of school. Only three studies made use of theories to contextualise findings, and these were the Intolerance of Uncertainty theory (Costley et al., 2021), stage-environment fit theory (Stack et al., 2020), and sense of belonging (Porter & Ingram, 2021). This suggests that there is space in the existing literature base for more theoretically grounded accounts of young people's experiences of anxiety in school.

2.5 Overall Summary

The review has explored what is known about young people's experiences of anxiety in secondary school. The review has established several links including those between school climate and mental health, the prevalence of anxiety and SEND, the impact of the transition to secondary school, and the impact of anxiety on learning including as a result of potential persistent absence from school. The thematic synthesis demonstrated that aspects of the school environment evoke different levels of anxiety for young people, with particular concerns based on negative interactions, an overstimulating environment, challenging learning experiences and unpredictability. Whilst these environmental threats are seemingly well established, the national context suggests that more understanding of the barriers and facilitators for positive change is needed. Taken together, review highlights the need for further research with regards to young people's experiences of anxiety in secondary school.

The systematic search found evidence of only one study using a qualitative approach to explore young people's views and experiences of anxiety in secondary

school (Costley et al., 2021). Studies excluded throughout the systematic search process demonstrated that young people's anxiety has historically been explored quantitatively, with a focus on clinical groups and those with specific diagnoses. This represents a significant gap in the evidence base and a need for qualitative accounts of the lived experiences of young people experiencing anxiety, particularly in their school setting in which they spend a significant amount of time. The results of the systematic search highlighted that anxiety was frequently a finding of qualitative accounts from autistic young people about their secondary school experiences and this fits with national statistics indicating higher incidence of probable mental health conditions for young people with SEND (NHS Digital, 2021). It is not clear how their experiences may differ from their peers, and whether there are any common experiences that might best be addressed by whole-school approaches. This is particularly relevant given that the incidence of probable mental health conditions is at 12.5% for the 'non-SEND' school population (NHS Digital, 2021), evidencing a need to understand and reduce mental health difficulties in school for all young people.

Given that there is an understanding of environmental threats, a strengths-based approach to this problem could facilitate greater understanding of what is working well to reduce anxiety. A study focusing on a common presenting need, in this case anxiety, could provide more clarity about what mainstream secondary schools can do to support these young people, and how their needs differ or align to those of the wider student body. This relates to the government recommendation for levels of support, in terms of understanding what is important at a universal as well as targeted level.

2.6 Research Aim and Questions

The overall aim of this study is to understand what experiences and aspects of secondary school enhance feelings of safety, calmness and happiness for young people who are seen as presenting with anxiety. This adds an important perspective to understanding school-based anxiety, given that it is a subjectively experiential phenomenon. Additionally, young people's views could inform further thinking around how schools might best respond to anxiety and reduce poor outcomes such as non-attendance. This will be explored through three main research questions:

1. What aspects of secondary school make young people who present with anxiety feel safe, calm and happy?
2. What ideas do young people who present with anxiety have about changes to their secondary school environment that would make them feel safer, calmer and happier?
3. What differences exist in the answers to the research questions, between young people who have been identified by school staff as presenting with anxiety in the school setting compared with those who have not?

3. Methodology

3.1 Chapter Overview

The overall aim of this chapter is to provide a rationale for the methodological approach taken, and details of how the research was carried out. It will first set out the research paradigm and rationale for a qualitative design, followed by an overview of data collection and analysis, and ethical considerations.

3.2 Research Paradigm

3.2.1 Ontological and Epistemological Position

In the context of the present study, the school setting and anxiety experienced within it are positioned as a 'reality', representing real social and physical worlds and a real problem that is observable through national statistics showing increasing rates of anxiety, as well as the observable behaviour of young people presenting with anxiety. The research aim is to explore this 'real' phenomenon through the experiences of young people. As such, a critical realist position has been adopted. Critical realism asserts that there is an objective reality that exists independently of individual perception, however it recognises the role that individual subjective interpretation plays in defining it (Sayer, 2010). Braun and Clarke (2013) describe that through a critical realist lens, research problems are considered real in order to produce knowledge that might lead to meaningful change. In order to understand the reality, the present study accepts that interpretations will be varied due to different

individual perspectives (Qu, 2022). It acknowledges the value of understanding and interpreting meaning (A. Sayer, 1999) whilst seeking to conceptualise how this meaning is construed within a particular real world context. It has been suggested that a critical realist model and use of qualitative methodologies can contribute to the understanding of stress and anxiety within academic contexts such as schools (Putwain, 2007) and to challenge the 'psychiatric positivism' underpinning much of the existing mental health research base (Pilgrim, 2014). Critical realism therefore aligns with the research questions, which are concerned with young people's perceptions of the mechanisms in the school setting that can reduce anxiety. Taking this position justifies the participatory nature of the data collection methods and allows for potential changes to the school setting to be identified in order to improve the experiences of participants. In addition, critical realism fits with the theoretical framework. Stage-environment fit theory acknowledges a 'real' world through accepting and highlighting the bidirectional causal role of individual and environmental characteristics on motivation, behaviour and ultimately mental health.

3.2.2 Qualitative Methodology

Qualitative research is concerned with how people make sense of the world and how they experience events (Willig, 2022) and typically has an exploratory rather than explanatory focus, looking to generate meanings and understandings rather than cause and effect relationships. Research exploring young people's mental health has historically been predominately quantitative, and it is acknowledged that qualitative approaches enable the collection of rich, meaningful data that can inform practice in this area (O'Reilly & Parker, 2014). A qualitative methodology was selected for the

current study based on the aim of understanding young people's experiences of secondary school, and views on what they perceive to make a difference to their feelings of safety, calmness and happiness in order to reduce anxiety. A benefit of doing qualitative research with young people is its nature as participative research (Greig et al., 2013). Creswell (2018) notes that a qualitative methodology allows for an 'emergent' design, meaning that phases of the research process may shift or change in response to data collection. The present study was initially focused on exploring practices to reduce the anxiety associated with the transition to secondary school, however this became a secondary aim following the first meeting with participants, where it became clear that a more holistic exploration of reducing anxiety at secondary school was needed (of which the transition was an aspect rather than the primary focus).

3.2.3 Researcher Values

Research paradigms can be understood as broad value systems encompassing assumptions and principles that guide ideas about ideal research practice (Braun & Clarke, 2022). Reflections on the researcher's own values are therefore important to consider and acknowledge as these shape the decisions made throughout the research process. In their training and practice as a trainee EP, the researcher uses person-centred and strengths-based approaches to promote positive change, and as such these have informed the overall research approach. Person-centred approaches are antithetical to the medical model, and were built on the view that human beings have a tendency towards optimal functioning, but require the right social environment in order to achieve this (Kelly et al., 2017, p. 190). Positive

psychology developed this further, advocating for approaches which focus on amplifying strengths and positive experiences rather than deficits (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). These approaches therefore centre the views of the individual, see them as having the expertise to solve their problems and look for existing strengths within individuals and systems. The researcher's values informed the interest and approach to the research topic, however the values were also reinforced by the extant literature base, where there has been a historic focus on quantitative studies (O'Reilly & Parker, 2014), and a lack of research from young people's perspectives with regards to school-based mental health practices and environmental stressors (Aston, 2014; Atkinson et al., 2019). In sum, this led to hopes for a participatory, person-centred and strengths-based research study.

3.2.4 Researcher Position and Reflexivity

The researcher positions themselves in a qualitative study, meaning that aspects of their background and the impact this has on the research study is acknowledged and reflection upon during the various stages of conducting research (Creswell, 2018). Initial interest in this topic came about through the researcher's previous experience as a pastoral manager in a mainstream secondary school, responsible for overseeing the transition process. Information shared from primary schools about how they had supported anxiety did not feel applicable to the complex environment of a secondary school, leading to feelings of disempowerment. The researcher noticed in their role as a trainee EP that this seemed to be a wider issue for secondary schools, particularly following the COVID-19 lockdowns and challenges around attendance. The researcher encountered a range of narratives and

understandings about anxious young people. At one end of the spectrum school staff were describing them as 'irrational' or requiring intervention to 'fix', and at the other, they were acknowledging the challenges of the school environment but felt powerless to enact change. In order to make sense of ongoing experiences with this topic, and to consider the impact on decision-making and interpretations, a reflexive diary was kept from the beginning of the research to record thoughts and issues as they arose. The notion of the 'space between' (Dwyer & Buckle, 2009) was used to consider the complexities of the insider vs outsider positionality, considering both similarities and differences with participants and subsequent impact on the research process. The researcher referred to the diary in particular throughout the data analysis process, to reflect on how experiences and beliefs may be shaping interpretations and the themes generated. The researcher reflected for example on the theme of 'uncertainty' being the only theme from the literature search not to have subsequently been generated from the data gathered. The researcher re-read diary contributions and noted their earlier response to the 'Intolerance of Uncertainty' theory used by Costley et al. (2021), having written that this theory alone did not seem to be able to explain the incidence of young people's anxiety in schools which are more often seen as environments with high levels of predictability.

3.3 Research Design

3.3.1 Qualitative Comparative Design

This study adopted a qualitative comparative design, which describes using two contrasting 'cases' using identical methods, in order to better understand social

phenomena and how they vary between groups (Foster et al., 2021). In this study, two representative cases (Yin, 2014) were identified comprising a group of young people with an identified SEMH need of anxiety, and a comparable group of same-age peers with no identified needs. This design was chosen as it enabled exploration of the overarching research aim of understanding the adjustments that mainstream secondary schools can make in order to reduce pupil anxiety. Understanding whether the needs are different for the two groups in this study adds weight to the implications for practice by exploring what is useful to some versus all young people. This fits with the legislative context and guidance for schools to use a tiered approach in the response to mental health needs with universal and targeted provision (DfE, 2018). A comparative design offers a contribution to the evidence base where the majority of studies have focused on eliciting the views of autistic young people without comparisons to other groups of young people, and a current absence of any qualitative studies exploring the mediating influence that school experiences may have on anxiety. Additional strengths of qualitative comparisons include added rigour, reduced bias and the ability to highlight areas for further support (Lindsay, 2019).

3.3.2 Appreciative Inquiry

In order to explore the research questions, Appreciative inquiry (Ai) was chosen as an appropriate model for data generation. Ai is a model for organisational and systemic change that was developed during the 1980s by David Cooperrider and Suresh Srivasta. It is described as a robust process of inquiry that enables participants in social systems to shape the world they most want (Reason &

Bradbury, 2008). This fit with the research questions, looking to establish what is working well and eliciting ideas for change within an organisation. Through a process of systematic discovery, individuals come together to identify the strengths and capabilities of an organisation (Cooperrider & Whitney, 2005) in order to identify “what works” and to do more of it. In this sense, it is typically used as a form of action research within organisations where there is a motivation to work towards a shared ideal. Given the current national and local contexts, schools were invited to express interest in the present study based on the assumption that it would appeal to organisational priorities of promoting positive mental health for pupils. Despite this, it was not positioned as an action research project due to practical and ethical considerations that are reflected on later in this chapter. Instead, Ai was used in the present study as a framework for data generation. Part of the justification for this was based on the researcher’s values, with Ai positioning young people as the experts of their experience within the school setting, using a positive framing to promote a sense of hope for change.

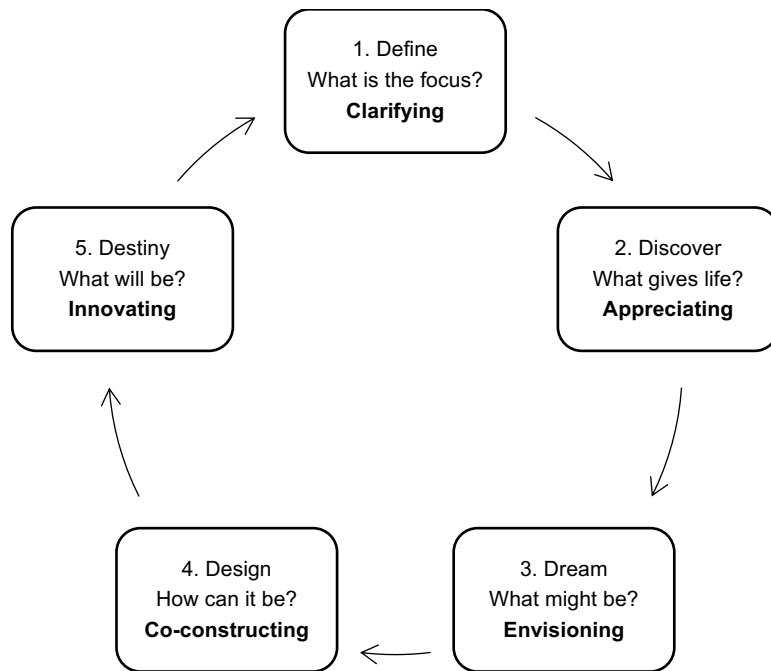
In contrast to other models of organisational change that seek to solve problems and deficits, Ai uses a strengths-based orientation (Reed, 2007). The approach is underpinned by the idea that all organisations have untapped and rich accounts of the positive. This positioning is aligned with the researcher values including the use of positive psychology and participatory approaches. The positive framing of questioning when using the Ai model fits appropriately with the research questions, looking for current and future practice that can make young people feel calmer, safer and happier in school. The positive framing of Ai has been criticised in a similar vein to other strengths-based approaches in psychology, where the lack of opportunity to

share challenges or negative views is seen as a missed opportunity or way to avoid known problems (Rogers & Fraser, 2003). Many of the critiques of Ai are focused on the strengths-based approach and concerns about its effectiveness as a model for change (Clouder & King, 2015). It was felt that these criticisms were less relevant to the present study, given the need to explore a sensitive topic ethically, and the use of Ai for data generation rather than organisational change. Ai is regarded as 'highly appropriate' (Shuayb et al., 2009) for exploring sensitive issues. It was therefore deemed appropriate as a way of sensitively exploring the issue of mental health, to avoid feelings of blame, identifying deficits or engaging in negatively framed discussions. Previous research suggests that using Ai as a model for organisational change or data generation is appropriate in educational research and studies with young people (Bergmark & Kostenius, 2018; Greenwood & Kelly, 2020; Shuayb et al., 2009).

Using appreciative inquiry involves undertaking a five-step process, known as 'the 5D cycle' which is represented in Figure 4. The implementation of this model in the current study will be outlined in 3.5.

Figure 4.

Appreciative Inquiry 5-D Cycle



Adapted from Tschannen-Moran and Tschannen-Moran (2011, pg. 425)

3.4 Participants

3.4.1 Research Recruitment

A recruitment letter (Appendix B) was sent to mainstream secondary schools in the LA where the researcher is completing a placement with the EP Service as part of their doctoral training. The decision to focus on one LA was partly pragmatic, based on increased likelihood of access to participants, and additionally based on the fact that the research aim was closely linked to a priority area for the LA. Schools were asked to contact the researcher to express interest in the study, and following this, initial meetings were arranged to discuss the project in more detail. Two schools responded and initial meetings were held with both, however one decided that they did not have capacity to facilitate the recruitment and participation of their pupils. It

was decided that recruiting the two groups from a single setting as part of the qualitative comparative design would be sufficient in order to answer the research questions and fit with the theoretical framework which stresses the importance of the environment and context in understanding 'reality'. Within the practical limitations of the study, it would have been difficult to have an additional element data analysis through comparing cases within and between different school settings.

3.4.2 Research Setting

Brownleaf School (pseudonym) responded to express an interest. The researcher was already familiar with the school through their work as a trainee EP. Brownleaf School is a mixed, voluntary-aided, all-through school with separate sites for primary and secondary phases, assessed as 'Good' in their latest OFSTED inspection. The secondary phase is relatively small, with 120 pupils in each year group. The school is non-selective but is described as a 'grammar-style' school, using ability streaming to create top 'grammar' sets in each year group. Pupils tend to perform slightly above the national average on GCSE and attainment 8 performance indicators. Brownleaf had noticed an increase in the number of young people struggling to attend school following the COVID-19 pandemic, and young people with SEMH needs at secondary transition. Many young people transition from the primary to secondary phase, however the school also recruits from a large number of other feeder schools in the area. Brownleaf is above the national average in terms of the proportion of students eligible for FSM and those speaking English as an additional language. The school population is ethnically diverse, and the majority of pupils represent Black Caribbean, Black African and White British ethnic groups.

3.4.3 Sampling

Purposive sampling was used to identify participants meeting a set of predefined criteria. Participants were sampled through discussion with three members of staff including the SENDCO, a Learning Support Assistant (LSA) and the Head of Year 8. The group of pupils forming the anxious group were sampled first, using the following criteria:

Table 3. Sampling Criteria and Rationale

Criterion	Rationale
In Year 8 in the 2022-2023 academic year	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Attendance data published by the DfE shows a consistent pattern of persistent absence increasing most sharply from Year 7 to Year 8, and the literature review highlighted transition as a period of risk for anxiety problems. It was felt that a Year 8 cohort would therefore be appropriate based on being able to reflect on early experiences of secondary school and the transition. • The Year 8 cohort are the most recent to have had a transition to secondary school that was undisrupted by the COVID-19 pandemic, meaning that their experiences are more relevant in terms of typical practices around this period of time. • In England, Year 8 is an academic year with no formal examinations, meaning that participation in the research project during this year would be less likely to exacerbate existing anxiety levels which are known to be impacted by exams and academic pressures.
On the SEN register at 'SEN support' or 'EHCP' level, with an identified SEMH need best understood by the school as anxiety	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The focus of the study is reducing anxiety and meeting social, emotional and mental health needs within the current legislative context for schools in England, therefore it was important for the participants to be understood and identified within this framework. • Recruiting participants recognised with SEND additionally reflects the existing evidence of an overlap between having SEND and having social, emotional and mental health needs.

Participants were identified using staff perceptions, with researcher discussion and reference to screening tools to support a shared understanding of what presenting with or without anxiety looks like. The screening tools used were the 'emotional

problems' subscale of the SDQ and the School Anxiety Scale – Teacher Report (SAS-TR) (Appendix C). The SDQ was selected due to its use in previous studies and its inclusion in DfE guidance as an appropriate screening tool for identifying mental health needs (DfE, 2018). Not all items of the SDQ are reflective of explicit behaviours (for example 'many worries, often seems worried') and so the SAS-TR was selected as a secondary option to allow deeper discussion of how anxiety presents beyond a more subjective view (for example 'this child does not volunteer answers or comments during class'). In comparison to other anxiety scales, the SAS-TR focuses on behaviours that may be apparent when a young person is anxious in school. Other anxiety scales were considered, including the Revised Children's Anxiety and Depression Scale (RCADS), the Spence Children's Anxiety Scale (SCAS), the Beck Anxiety Inventory for Youth (BAI-Y) and the Screen for Child Anxiety Related Disorders (SCARED). These scales are lengthy, use parent or self-reports, focus on behaviours that are less likely to be observable in school, and take a more pathologizing approach in order to identify the presence of a 'disorder'. These scales were therefore ruled out due to being less relevant to the research context and less aligned to the position of this study in challenging within-child perspectives on mental health.

Once the anxious group had been sampled and recruited, discussions took place with the Head of Year 8 in order to identify a comparable group who had no identified SEN needs and did not present with behaviours in school that were understood as anxiety. Additional guidance was given to ensure that the comparison group represented pupils with a range of characteristics and were not solely representative of those with the highest achievement or greatest engagement in pupil leadership

roles. It was acknowledged with staff that all pupils will experience anxious feelings at certain times, and therefore those in the non-anxious group may well find aspects of school anxiety-inducing, however the key difference between the groups is the identification of this as a specific need.

An additional consideration was deciding whether to focus solely on the experiences of autistic young people. Existing evidence shows that anxiety is co-occurring with a number of other circumstances and diagnoses, and the evidence base strongly highlights the link between an autism diagnosis and experiencing anxiety in school (Strang et al., 2012; van Steensel et al., 2011). Despite this, the decision was made to focus on recruiting participants based on the presentation of anxiety, rather than a specific diagnostic label. Again, this was linked to focusing on the real-world context, where pupils may or may not have a specific diagnosis. This study, in line with the legislative context, argues that the absence of a diagnostic label should not make a difference to anxiety needs being recognised and met. This is especially relevant given the barriers to an autism diagnosis for girls (Lockwood Estrin et al., 2021). The researcher was aware that through the sampling approach, it was possible that only autistic young people would be included, and therefore steps were taken to ensure the study would be appropriate for and sensitive to these needs.

3.4.4 Participants

Once participants had been identified, information sheets and consent forms were shared with them (Appendix D) and their parents and carers (Appendix E).

Participants were recruited to take part in a 'research group' in order to contribute to

the understanding of how to make the school the best it could be, rather than focusing on anxiety. Initially six pupils were identified for the anxious group, however one stopped attending school in the early stages of recruitment and it was therefore decided that her participation would be inappropriate. This left five pupils who all gave consent to participate, and a subsequent five pupils consented to the non-anxious group. Participants were given the choice to choose their own pseudonym or be randomly allocated one by the researcher. Table 4 sets out participant information for the anxious group.

Table 4.

Anxious Group Participants

Pseudonym	Profile
River	River is on the SEN register. They do not have any diagnoses but have been referred for an ADHD assessment.
Blue	Blue is autistic and is supported by an EHCP in school.
Ocean	Ocean is autistic and is supported by an EHCP in school.
Ash	Ash is on the SEN register and does not have any diagnoses.
Moss	Moss is on the SEN register and is autistic.

In order to protect anonymity, sex and ethnic group characteristics are reported here separately. The anxious group comprised of four male pupils and one female. They represented white, black, Asian and mixed heritage ethnic groups.

The non-anxious group comprised three male pupils and two females, whose pseudonyms are Adam, Malachi, Stanley, Natasha and Tianna. They represented white, black, and mixed heritage ethnic groups. All participants were in Year 8.

3.5 Data Generation

3.5.1 Data Generation Methods

This study used Ai to guide the generation of data and as such, the research questions were linked to the different stages of the Ai process (Figure 4) with consideration given to the most appropriate data collection method. An overview of this can be found below in Table 5.

Table 5. *Research Questions and Data Generation*

Research Question	Ai Phase(s)	Data Collection
1) What aspects of secondary school make young people who present with anxiety feel safe, calm and happy?	Discover	Focus Group
2) What ideas do young people who present with anxiety have about changes to their secondary school environment that would make them feel safer, calmer and happier?	Dream	Semi-structured interviews
	Design	Focus Group
3) What differences exist in the answers to the research questions, between young people who have been identified by school staff as presenting with anxiety in the school setting compared with those who have not?	Discover and Dream phases repeated with non-anxious group	

It was decided that a combination of focus groups and semi-structured interviews would be appropriate in order to answer the research questions, facilitate participation and meet the research aims. The procedure involved meeting with participants more than once across group and individual sessions, and this is seen as a strength in terms of techniques that enhance the trustworthiness of qualitative research. This includes triangulation across multiple data points, prolonged

engagement with participants, and opportunities for member-checking (Robson, 2016; Tracy, 2010). An explanation of how each method was used and the justification for doing so will be outlined in the following section.

3.5.2 Data Generation Procedure

Data was collected between October 2022 to January 2023, over a series of phases, as shown below in Table 6. This was informed by the Ai model depicted in Figure 4.

All data generation sessions took place in a quiet space within the school setting during lesson times.

Table 6. *Overview of Ai Process*

Ai Phase	Data generation method	RQ addressed	Anxious Group (n=5)	Non-anxious group (n=5)
Define	Group meeting	N/A	✓	×
Discover	Focus group	1 and 3	✓	✓
Dream	Individual interviews	2 and 3	✓	✓
Design	Focus group	2	✓*	×
Destiny	To be carried out with school staff as part of the dissemination process of the research			

**One participant (Ash) was absent on the day of the Design focus group and as such their views were not captured during the final phase of data generation.*

Session 1 – Define

The ‘define’ phase of the Ai model is undertaken in order to clarify the focus of the inquiry with group members. The session aim within this study was to seek informed

consent, build rapport with the group, explain the key concepts and seek views on their priorities. The define phase took part exclusively with the anxious group given the research focus, though time was spent at the beginning of the first session with the non-anxious group in order to seek consent and build rapport.

This session began with some icebreaker activities and problem-free talk to build rapport with the group. They were then shown a power point presentation (Appendix F) which explained the researcher role and background, the key concepts of the research and the research process including a visual of Ai (slide 5) and steps involved. They were given opportunities to ask questions, share views on the topic of inquiry, and complete the consent form. Although the researcher did not mention anxiety, it came up during discussion with a group member saying *“we are all quite anxious, we have that in common”* during the ice-breaker activities. The group also shared that they had current worries about the transition to into Year 8 and this seemed a more prominent issue to them compared with their experiences of the transition to secondary school. Given the importance of their views in this study and person-centred values, this initial session shifted the research more towards reducing ongoing anxiety levels at secondary school and subsequent session materials were adapted in response.

Session 2 – Discover

This phase of Ai is focused on ‘the best of what is’. This session focused on eliciting positive experiences and aspects of secondary school that were already contributing to greater feelings of safety, calmness, and happiness for participants. It was

decided that a focus group would be appropriate in order to reflect on the current school setting, due to the ability to gain additional insight from the interaction of ideas among the group in comparison to individual interviews (Mertens, 2014). The use of focus groups is said to be appropriate when it is possible, when participants are similar and cooperative with each other, and when participants may be more hesitant in a one-on-one interview with an unfamiliar adult (Creswell, 2018; Lewis & Lindsay, 1999).

The focus group involved participants recording the things they like about their school on individual post-it notes to create a mind map. These were then discussed and arranged by the participants by 'theme'. Participants then wrote a second set of post-it notes depicting the reasons why they had chosen each of their positives. The researcher asked appreciative questions (Appendix G) to promote discussion and explore group consensus. The researcher offered to scribe for any participants who felt less confident writing. This session was conducted for each of the two groups and each lasted for 45 minutes. Two mind-maps (Appendix H) were generated which formed the basis for data analysis rather than a transcription of the discussion.

Session 3 – Dream

This phase of Ai is focused on 'what could be'. This session focused on eliciting pupil views on what their 'dream' would be for a safe, calm and happy school. As the researcher had built rapport with participants by this point, and anticipated that 'dreams' would differ by individual, it was decided that semi-structured interviews would be the most appropriate method of data generation for more in-depth

accounts. Unlike the other phases of Ai, this phase is not tied to the current 'reality' which provided less justification for group discussion. Semi-structured interviews allow for the same lines of inquiry to be pursued with all participants, whilst allowing the researcher to probe and explore further (Patton, 2002).

An appreciative semi-structured interview was conducted with each individual from both the anxious and non-anxious groups. The interview schedule (Appendix I) was created based on the 'Drawing the Ideal School' technique (Williams & Hanke, 2007) developed as a suitable approach to enable autistic children to describe the key features of an ideal and non-ideal school. This was chosen due to its suitability for use with young people, and alignment with the language of the 'dream' within Ai. The broad focus of this activity also gave the opportunity for the themes identified in the literature review to be explored. Young people were given a range of creative materials and Lego and were asked to create their dream school, by drawing, making or writing, using the materials however they wished. Visual prompt cards depicting aspects they may want to consider were used to support this activity. Following the creative activity, a semi-structured interview took place where the 'dream' school was explored. Within the time constraints of the school timetable, participants had 20 minutes to complete this activity to allow 40 minutes for the interview. Participants were reassured that they were not expected to finish creating their 'dream' school but that this would generate some ideas that could subsequently be discussed. Interviews took place with 10 participants and a ranged from 26 minutes to 45 minutes in length.

Session 4 – Design

This phase of Ai takes ideas from the 'Discover' and 'Dream' phase and considers 'how could they be' focusing on ideas in practice that bridge the current with the ideal. This phase was exclusively conducted with the anxious group given that there was not a need, in practice or in answering the research questions, for the non-anxious group to propose changes to the school to reduce anxiety. A focus group method was used for this phase with the same justification as the 'Discover' phase, to enable participants to reflect on their current school setting and build upon each other's ideas for future changes.

Between the dream and design phases, the researcher generated a list of provocative propositions. These are statements that summarise the ultimate goals depicted by participants. During the focus group, these were shared and discussed with participants with opportunities for them to amend or add statements. Following this, participants were given a worksheet (Appendix J) with instructions to scale from 0-10 how close the school were already to the provocative proposition being true, and to highlight their priority proposition. Using the priorities, questions were asked (Appendix K) about the changes that the school could make to move towards 10 on the scale. This discussion lasted for 35 minutes and was audio recorded for transcription.

3.6 Data Analysis

3.6.1 Reflexive Thematic Analysis

Following the Ai process to generate data, all data were subsequently analysed using reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2022). This is described as a method for generating patterns of shared meaning across a dataset, underpinned by a central concept, through the researcher's identification of codes and themes. Reflexive TA is appropriate for addressing exploratory research questions and allows the researcher to centre the voices and experiences of participants whilst also considering how context can affect these meanings. Within a critical realist framework, reflexive TA enables the researcher to consider how the material world and social structures shape and constrain individual's sense-making. Reflexive TA was selected as it is flexible and accessible, yet also provides a systematic approach for interpreting data (Braun & Clarke, 2013) which fit with the need to compare across cases. Braun and Clarke (2022) highlight one of the strengths of reflexive TA as its compatibility with a wide range of data compositions. This fits with the current study where a range of methods were used to generate data, resulting in different types of datasets, outlined below in Table 7. Thematic analysis has been used previously in similar studies using Ai in education settings (Flitcroft & Kelly, 2016; Morris & Atkinson, 2018).

Table 7.

Data Generated Through Ai Process

Ai phase	Data generated
Discover	2x Mind maps of post-it notes
Dream	10x semi-structured individual interview recordings
Design	1x Focus group discussion recording

Through reflexive TA, the researcher engages in an iterative process of making sense of the data. Researchers can approach data inductively, using the data as a starting point, or deductively, using theoretical concepts as a foundation for making sense of the data. Braun and Clarke (2022) point out that these two approaches are not necessarily mutually exclusive, and researchers are likely to draw upon both. In the present study, an inductive approach to analysis was taken initially in order to centre the pupil's voices and use the data as a starting point. The researcher acknowledged however that the theoretical framework provided a lens through which interpretation was likely to have taken place. Once initial inductive coding had been completed, the researcher completed a second round of deductive coding, looking for examples of psychological needs (such as safety, relatedness, competence and autonomy) that could explain or add depth to any of the identified codes. Themes were not generated from the deductive coding process, however they were used in order to support the discussion of themes linked to existing theoretical explanations of anxiety.

Studies using thematic analysis have been criticised for unclear positioning, and lack of methodological transparency leading to concerns about the validity of interpretations (Willig & Rogers, 2017). Researchers have approached quality assurance in different ways depending on the philosophical underpinnings of the research. A more positivist stance has been to create 'code books' which set out explicitly the codes used and definitions. This does not fit with the assumptions of the qualitative paradigm and so in order to demonstrate quality, the researcher has instead situated the reflexive TA within a theoretical framework, used a reflexive

journal to acknowledge their own influence, and demonstrated a systematic approach through an explanation of the analysis process.

3.6.2 Data Analysis Process

The six phases of reflexive thematic analysis were used to structure the analysis process (Braun & Clarke, 2022, p. 36). An explanation of each stage is included below.

Phase 1 – Familiarisation with the dataset

This phase involves becoming immersed in the dataset, becoming deeply familiar with it through processes such as listening, re-reading, and note-taking (Braun & Clarke, 2022). The researcher listened to and then transcribed the audio recordings of the individual interviews and focus group. The post-it note mind maps were recreated on Miro, an online platform for presenting data visually. Through the process of transforming the data to make it possible to analyse, the researcher became increasingly familiar with the content. The researcher kept a written record of the analysis process and wrote initial notes on ideas that felt salient during the familiarisation process, also referring back to the reflexive diary to revisit and compare reflections from the initial data generation sessions.

Phase 2 – Coding

The next phase involved coding, applying code labels which are described as analytically meaningful descriptions (Braun & Clarke, 2022). All data was imported into NVIVO data analysis software for coding. This was based on the ability to maintain a clear audit trail, and flexibility to revisit and amend initial codes. The researcher coded systematically in the order that data had been generated. The researcher started with the anxious group dataset for each Ai phase, and subsequently coded the non-anxious group starting with the codes that had already been created for the anxious group. The aim of this was to reduce bias, so that the researcher did not apply different meanings to potentially similarly articulated ideas based on the presence or absence of anxiety. This process allowed the researcher to think critically about coding, questioning whether there were differences in the meanings across the two groups before creating new codes. Coding was an iterative process, and codes were continually amended and refined where shared meanings were evident. Examples of initial codes (Appendix L) and excerpts of coded transcripts (Appendix M) are included in the appendices. Coding was deemed 'finished' after several rounds of checking code labels against data extracts and collapsing and merging of codes with similar meanings. Due to the Ai approach, a decision was made not to engage in a formal member checking process, as this formed part of the existing procedure. Aligned with the qualitative methodology, the researcher also decided against peer coding.

Phase 3 – Generating initial themes

A theme is defined as a pattern of shared meaning, underpinned by a central concept (Braun & Clarke, 2022, p. 77). In order to generate initial themes, the set of

final codes were printed on paper and cut into strips to allow initial groupings of shared meanings and concepts. Initially, codes were separated for each dataset in order to be able to generate themes to answer each research question separately and sequentially. During this process, the researcher realised that collating the data across all phases of generation allowed a richer interpretation and ‘thicker’ descriptions. The initial themes (Appendix N) from the discover dataset (*supportive relationships, space, familiarisation and enjoyable learning opportunities*) were abandoned and the process was repeated, using conceptual mapping to generate a new set of initial themes (*supportive relationships, increased flexibility, enjoyable learning experiences and calming spaces*). During this stage, the researcher was mindful of the data generation activities and the potential risk of generating topic summaries rather than themes with shared meaning. For example, not grouping all views on ‘staff’ or ‘reasonable adjustments’ as a theme but carefully considering the meaning that those views communicated.

Phase 4 – Developing and reviewing themes

During this stage, initial themes are reviewed against coded extracts to review the viability and consider whether there are alternative patterns. Following the use of the conceptual map to tease out more clarity around the boundaries of themes and sub-themes, an initial thematic map was created (Appendix N). Braun and Clarke (2022) caution against becoming attached to early themes. Relatively early on in the process, the theme ‘calming spaces’ was generated, to encapsulate both physical spaces as well as ‘space’ and time between lessons. The researcher reconsidered this grouping and felt that the meaning behind this ‘space’ for participants related

more closely to the 'increased flexibility' theme and as such the 'calming spaces' theme was re-conceptualised to exclusively include the more concrete aspects of the physical environment that had been identified. Another subtle change was the re-wording from 'attunement' to 'proactive support' which better described the value participants placed on staff who were able to attune to their needs. A range of other changes were identified, and a second thematic map was created.

Phase 5 – Refining, defining and naming themes

Between the second and final thematic map, the researcher grappled with decisions on how best to include the deductive coding reflective of the theoretical framework. Initially a new overarching theme of 'everyone's needs are met' was added which reflected participants various comments linked to self-determination theory. When generating theme descriptions, it became apparent that this did not stand alone as a mutually exclusive theme, and as such the ideas were subsumed into existing themes. An example of this is 'desire for relatedness' which fit more analytically within the 'supportive relationships' theme. The sub-theme 'there is something for everyone' reflected participants desire for the environment to have facilities and equipment for everyone, and as such it fit better within the existing 'a calm, predictable environment' theme, which became 'a calm, inclusive environment'. Descriptions of final themes and sub-themes were produced to check for clarity and clear boundaries. Following a recursive process of checking code extracts against theme descriptions, the appropriateness of the names was checked and finalised. An example of a theme with sub-themes, codes and data extracts is included in the appendices (Appendix O).

Cross-case analysis

The thematic analysis process described above was undertaken concurrently for the non-anxious group, however themes were finalised for the anxious group first in order to give a framework for the cross-case analysis. Therefore, sub-themes that were generated for the non-anxious group were tested for fit with the four overarching themes for the anxious group as a starting point. It was felt that given the semi-structured nature of data collection and aim of recognising differences, this was an appropriate way to begin the comparison process. A thematic map for the non-anxious group was created (Appendix Q), with four slightly different overarching themes of 'supportive relationships', 'an interesting, spacious environment', 'engaging learning experiences' and 'feeling more motivated'. Sub-themes, codes and data extracts were compared across the four overarching themes in a cross-case synthesis in order to answer the third research question of the study.

3.7 Ethical Considerations

3.7.1 Ethical Approval

Ethical approval for this study was granted in August 2022 by the Institute of Education Research Ethics Committee at University College London (Appendix R). A range of guidelines were drawn upon to ensure ethical practice including British Psychological Society ethical guidelines (BPS, 2009), the HCPC Standards of

conduct, performance and ethics (HCPC, 2016) and UCL's Code of Conduct for Research (UCL, 2013).

3.7.2 Informed Consent

Information sheets were shared with participants and their parents and carers (Appendices D and E). Researcher contact details were shared to enable follow up contact and discussion if required. A power point presentation was delivered to both groups of participants during an introductory session prior to gaining consent, outlining the research focus and involvement (Appendix F). The comparative design was outlined in the introductory session (slide 3) which highlighted the recruitment and comparison of two groups. Participants were encouraged and given opportunities throughout the process to ask questions about their involvement. They were reminded of their right to withdraw at the beginning of each session, and it was explained that this would be possible up until the point that data had been transcribed and analysed.

In keeping with the strengths-based and positive core of the research aims and Ai approach, the researcher initially chose not to share and discuss 'labels' with the groups of anxious and non-anxious young people and to include this in debriefing. This was deemed important in order to maintain the non-pathologising approach and ensure that all participants felt that their contribution was valid in and of itself and not linked to the group that they were assigned to, particularly as the comparison was a secondary aim of the research. Over the course of the research, the anxious group self-identified as 'anxious' and were keen to share their experiences of anxiety, and

emerging themes were discussed throughout as part of the Ai process. The researcher used the 'Design' session of the Ai to reflect with the group on which of their 'provocative propositions' were different to the other group, and whether the solutions they came up with should be for all young people or just those like them who feel more anxious. Answers to the research questions were discussed in a final debriefing discussion, and a debriefing sheet (Appendix S) has been prepared for dissemination.

3.7.3 Confidentiality

Steps were taken throughout the research process to ensure confidentiality and anonymity. This included setting ground rules for the groups during the initial meeting, with agreement that views shared during our sessions would be kept confidential. The researcher explained that they would not share information from the sessions in an identifiable way, unless there were concerns about the safety of a participant or others. The researcher transcribed the sessions using pseudonyms, so that data could not be linked to any individual following the initial collection of it. Participants were made aware that they may be able to recognise themselves and other group members in the write up based on quotes being shared. In addition to individual names being pseudonymised and reporting individual characteristics separately, the name of the school was changed, and the name of the LA has been left out. Data including consent forms, recordings and transcripts were stored electronically with password protection, on a secure password protected laptop.

3.7.4 Minimising Harm

The BPS Code of Human Research Ethics (BPS, 2021) sets out the duty for researchers to minimise harm. Given the sensitivity of the topic, a range of considerations were made in relation to the positioning of the study. Firstly, the researcher chose to frame the questions in a positive manner, in order to promote discussion of positive rather than negative experiences. This minimised the risk of participants reflecting on any challenging or upsetting aspects of their secondary school experiences. The term 'anxiety' was not raised by the researcher, and instead the study was positioned as gathering pupil's ideas on how things could be better. The researcher sought to create a safe and supportive space for each data generation session, and responded with empathy and understanding when young people raised issues relating to stress or anxiety.

The second issue in relation to the positioning of the study pertained to the participatory nature of involvement. It was hoped that there would be a transformative opportunity for participants, either through the research process itself or through subsequent changes to the school environment. However, as this was not possible to guarantee, the decision was made not to frame it as participatory action-research. The researcher acknowledged the tension between the theoretical and philosophical underpinnings, centring the voices of young people as experts, and the real-world implications of their lack of agency and power to enact change within complex systems. For this reason, the researcher carefully managed participant expectations of the research and implications, including ensuring they understood that their ideas may not lead to changes in their school setting. The researcher

referred to Hart's ladder of participation to consider the ways that young people could be consulted throughout the process to move their involvement beyond 'tokenism'. This involved seeking their ideas in the initial session to make sure the research contributed to their priorities, checking of themes and implications for practice, and joint discussion on how best to disseminate findings.

Considerations were made to ensure that participation did not exacerbate anxiety levels. This included consideration of participants' year group and academic pressures, additional time dedicated to building rapport and trust with participants, explicit information given with regards to involvement including the ability for participants to request interview questions in advance, supporting participant understanding during sessions through scaffolding, modelling and visual prompts, providing a range of sensory and fidget tools for use during sessions, and using professional skills of attunement and active listening to carefully monitor participant wellbeing throughout. A member of school staff was available at the end of each session in case of any safeguarding concerns or signs of emotional distress.

4. Findings

4.1 Chapter Overview

This chapter will present the findings from the Ai phases, generated through the thematic analysis process. The findings are presented in two sections in order to address the research questions (outlined in Table 8). The first section presents the analysis from the discover (*what is*), dream (*what could be*) and design (*what should be*) phases with the anxious group participants. The first two research questions are presented together in order to avoid repetition however findings will be presented sequentially within each sub-theme. Through the analytic narrative, clear distinctions will be made between what exists already reflecting current experiences, and ideas for change towards more ideal school experiences. The second section presents the analysis generated through the cross-case analysis process, with a summary of differences identified between the data generated with the anxious and non-anxious groups.

Table 8.

Structure of Findings Chapter

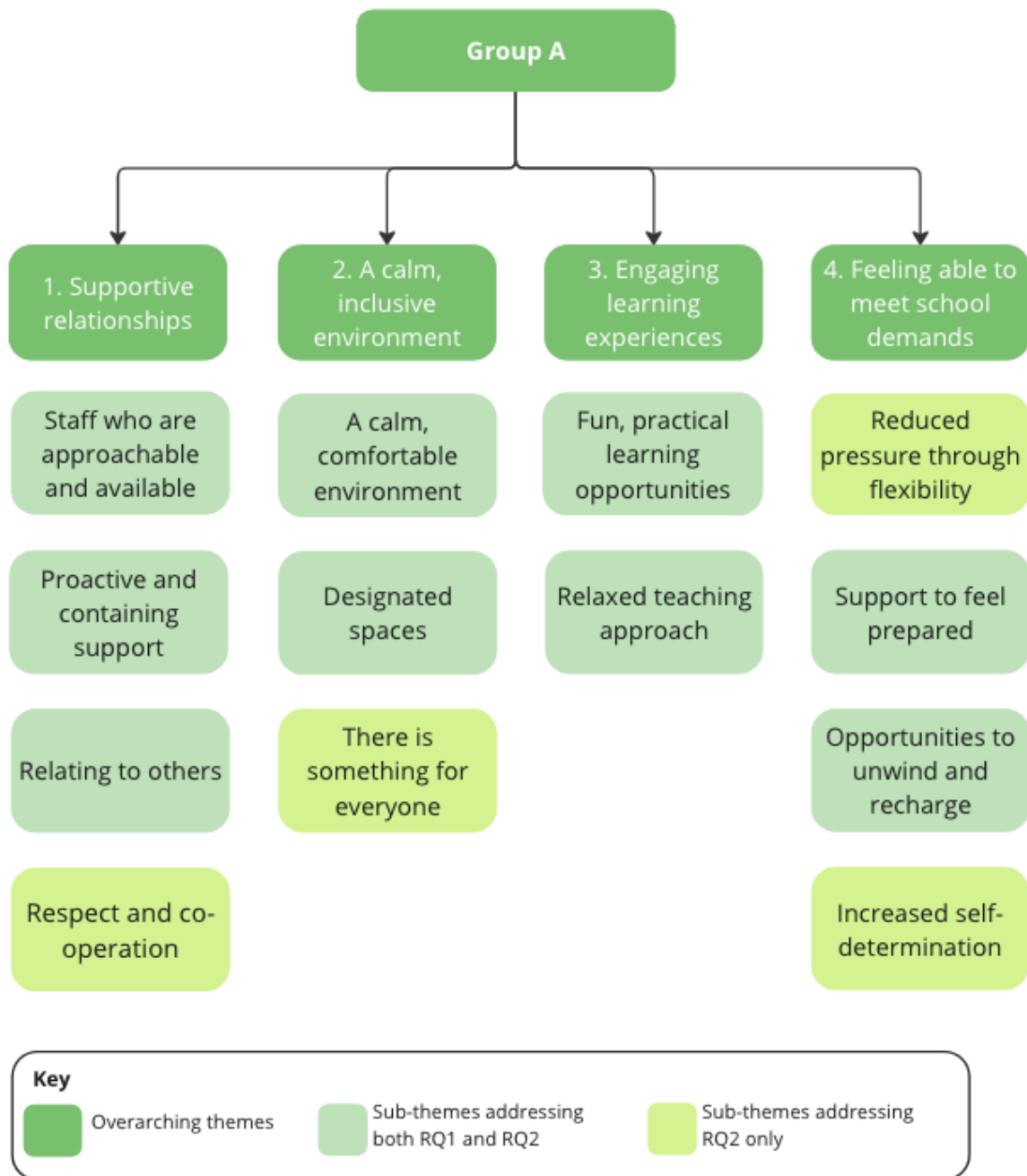
	Research question(s) addressed
Section 1	RQ1: What aspects of secondary school make young people who present with anxiety feel safe, calm and happy? RQ2: What ideas do young people who present with anxiety have about changes to their secondary school environment that would make them feel safer, calmer and happier?

Section 2	RQ3: What differences exist in the answers to the research questions, between young people who have been identified by school staff as presenting with anxiety in the school setting compared with those who have not?
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4.2 Findings Section One – Overview of Themes

Four overarching themes were identified through the analysis process which encapsulated shared meanings with regards to what is working well already to support pupils with anxiety, and their ideas for changes to enhance feelings of safety, calmness and happiness. Themes were *'Supportive relationships'*; *'A calm, comfortable environment'*; *'Engaging learning experiences'* and *'Feeling able to meet school demands'*. A thematic map (Figure 5) sets out the four overarching themes and associated sub-themes. The thematic map contains a key, setting out the colour coding used to differentiate themes and sub-themes. Sub-themes are further differentiated between those that were present across all data generation phases, addressing RQ1 and RQ2 and reflecting both current and ideal experiences. Sub-themes that were generated only through exploring ideal experiences are also highlighted, suggesting an absence of these in terms of current experiences. Themes and sub-themes will be outlined sequentially throughout the rest of this section. Data extracts are used to illustrate each sub-theme. Data extracts from the 'Discover' phase represent post-it notes generated through the mind-mapping exercise. As such, these are reported in quotation marks as opposed to speech marks and are representative of group consensus unless otherwise stated. Data extracts from the 'Dream' phase represent individual quotes from semi-structured interviews. Data extracts from the 'Discover' phase represent verbal exchanges from the focus group discussion.

Figure 5. Overarching thematic map for the anxious group (Group A)



4.2.1 Theme 1 – Supportive relationships

This theme encapsulates the supportive function of relationships that participants described in both their current and dream school settings. Participants value and desire interactions and relations with other people in the environment who offer support, containment and connection. Sub-themes generated within this theme include staff who are approachable and available; receiving proactive and containing support; relating to others and respect and cooperation.

Staff who are approachable and available

This sub-theme was generated through identification of specific characteristics that participants value about staff and those that facilitate supportive relationships. Within the 'Discover' group mind mapping exercise, participants recorded positive characteristics of particular staff at their school including '*nice*', '*supportive*', '*approachable*', '*helpful*' and '*easy to talk to*'. They emphasised the importance of staff being available. The value of being available was conveyed through the sense that staff members are 'there' unconditionally, for example '*they are always there for you*' and '*they are there to support you with anything*'. For participants with EHCPs, availability was more explicitly about the physical presence of staff, for example valuing that '*they come to lessons*' and '*they come to class with you*'.

In terms of the 'Dream' schools described by participants, they repeated and expanded on these ideas individually. All five participants in Group A used the word "*nice*" to describe their dream school staff and reflected on the importance of

availability, sharing for example that “*they would be supportive all the time*” (River) and “*it would be good to know they have time, and where to find them*” (Moss). Participants would like for staff to express their availability literally, by clarifying how, when and where they can be accessed, and metaphorically, through a sense of consistency and unconditional support. All participants felt that having approachable and available staff could involve the introduction to and provision of a key, identified member of staff. As well as being nice and approachable, they described this as “*someone I know that I can see often and talk to*” (Moss), “*having someone to go to when you get stuck or stressed out*” (River) and a desire for the school to “*show me who I can go to with my worries*” (Ocean).

Participants shared during the ‘Design’ group that they would feel better in their current school if *all* staff were nice and approachable rather than just some. Rather than having a neutral response to unapproachable staff, the group shared that they seek to actively avoid staff members that they perceive to be unapproachable, as evidenced in the exchange below:

Ocean: *Not all of them are easy to talk to. [Staff name] is the harshest*

Moss: *Yeah definitely. I find it hard to talk to her. She has that intimidating presence that makes you want to just avoid her really [...]*

River: *I try to avoid her*

Blue: *Yeah, same*

This highlights the value of approachable staff, who create ease around communicating with them, reducing the need for pupils to monitor and avoid certain adults in the school environment.

Receiving proactive and containing support

Closely linked to the characteristics of staff were ideas about the type of support valued by participants and the function that this serves for them. This sub-theme was generated based on the comforting and containing functions that supportive relationships offer participants, 'holding' and reducing participants' anxiety. During the 'Discover' group, participants' reasons for valuing peer and staff relationships were recorded as they *'help you to feel more confident'*, *'help you to feel more comfortable'* and *'you can tell them stuff'*. For participants with EHCPs, the physical presence of staff in class offers containment, with Ash summarising *"they come to class so I don't need to worry"*. He later followed this up in his individual interview, sharing that with constant staff support at his dream school he would feel *"not anxious, because I've got someone with me"*.

About their dream schools, all participants expressed a desire for more reassurance from staff. They would like staff to *"compliment you"* (Blue), *"tell me everything will be OK"* (Ocean) and *"comfort you and tell you everything's gonna be good"* (River). Linked to this was the idea that at the dream schools, staff are attuned to pupils' needs, notice when they need support or containment and offer appropriate help proactively. Participants reflected this with comments such as *"they know when to help you"* (Blue) and *"say if you're like stressed like they will come over to you"* (River). They would like it if *"teachers actually just realise that something is wrong even though you look ok on the outside"* (Moss). Participants appear to feel a sense of burden around help-seeking, for example Ocean shared *"you have to figure out how to ask the teacher [to use a time out card]. I can't deal with that"*. Their

comments suggest that staff who are proactive in offering support, reassurance and containment 'deal' with the emotional load and in doing so, reduce anxiety.

Relating to others

This sub-theme was generated based on participant's appreciation of spaces, people and opportunities that help them to feel connected to others, and how feeling a sense of relatedness supports the development of valued relationships. With regards to their current school setting, participants mentioned the SEN room as a space where there are others who *'relate to you and understand you'*. Participants also mentioned specific staff members who they felt were *'relatable'* and provided *'someone to talk to and feel connected to'*. Participants felt that opportunities to work with other pupils at school supported relatedness, as well as being chosen for specific opportunities including this research study, as it communicates that they are valued and included.

When creating their dream schools, participants spoke about the importance of feeling known, understood and accepted in order to build relationships. They felt that information about them and their needs should be known before they start so that support could be *"a lot more personalised"* (Moss) and *"they would understand me more"* (Ocean). They also created schools with peers who understand them better, as summarised by Ocean when describing the other young people at her dream school:

“From my experience maybe being more nicer. Understand that people get anxiety and they can’t cope with it sometimes. And you can’t say that they’re annoying when they click their pen or something, what I do, because I’m just trying to focus in class and stop my anxiety from coming” (Ocean)

During the ‘Design’ group discussion, participants expressed a desire to have a scheduled time to meet with a group of relatable peers to share their feelings and experiences. This was during an exchange about experiences of masking at school. They suggested that they feel unable to be their authentic selves and express emotions due to lack of understanding and acceptance from others:

Moss: *A weekly group would be good. You might be feeling OK but it can change quickly so if you always had that time you could use it to you know, offload a bit*

River: *You can feel related because other people feel how you feel*

Ocean: *Correct. Otherwise you could just be faking your feelings*

River: *Yeah that’s what I do*

Moss: *I have to do that as well...masking*

River: *Yeah I do it because I don’t want to embarrass myself*

Blue: *I do it all the time*

Ocean: *Me too. Every day*

Moss: *Yeah, I just keep it in like if I feel upset or anything. I have to do it because I don’t want to bring attention to myself*

Masking is something that participants feel they ‘have’ to do in order to protect themselves from judgement and avoid negative attention. Not feeling understood or accepted leads participants to hide their feelings and removes opportunities to ‘offload’. Moss shared during this discussion that *“it would only really change if people actually understood”*, highlighting the power and importance of feeling relatedness.

Respect and co-operation

Participants' ideas about supportive relationships extended to the interactions between those around them, wanting to feel that there is mutual respect and co-operation between all staff and pupils. This sub-theme was not generated from any data gathered in the 'Discover' phase, potentially suggesting that they do not perceive their current school setting to be a place of respect and co-operation. Participants described the other young people at their dream school as "*polite*" (Ash) and "*they would treat you and other people with respect*" (Blue). The importance of this related to reducing conflict in order to be able to work harmoniously together. This is something that is valued in relation to the sub-theme of containing support, where learning together takes the pressure off the individual, and the sub-theme of relating to others, where working together establishes peer connections. A co-operative atmosphere seems to reduce the sense of stress that participants feel, describing the 'dream' classroom as "*not so toxic because [...] there's usually some arguments and controversies that hang around*" (Moss) and "*everyone would get along [...] then there's no stress*" (River).

Ideas of respect linked additionally to participants' desire to feel a sense of privacy in order to make the most of support and reasonable adjustments. During the 'Design' group, participants shared that they all have access to 'time out' cards. This card can be used at participants' discretion to exit the classroom if they need to. At present, they find it difficult to make use of the card due to feelings of judgement and questioning from peers:

Researcher: *And none of you use your time out cards?*

River: *I find it kind of embarrassing to use it*

Blue: *Yeah same. I've never used mine.*

Moss: *It doesn't really help because you have to walk into the room and people are gonna start asking questions like "what's the matter?"*

Ocean: *Correct. I hate that so much. Everyone will ask you all about it.*

Blue: *I feel like it's embarrassing to use*

River: *I find it really embarrassing to walk in front of the class after crying or... it's like everyone's not gonna leave you alone*

4.2.2 Theme 2 – A calm, inclusive environment

This theme was generated based on shared meanings across participant views on the characteristics of the physical environment that are valued. Their narratives focused on aspects that instil a sense of calmness, predictability, and inclusivity. Sub-themes generated within this theme include a calm, comfortable environment; designated spaces and there is something for everyone.

A calm, comfortable environment

Participants identified a range of environmental characteristics that support them to feel calm and comfortable. This included nature-filled areas, spaces with reduced crowding and noise, and spaces that promote physical comfort and the meeting of sensory needs. Within the current school environment, participants identified the library, the foliage around school, the SEN room, certain departments and being seated near a window as spaces that are valued for being 'homely' and 'quiet' or where they can 'connect to nature' and feel 'calm and relaxed'.

In participants' descriptions of the dream schools, four of them wanted a school that felt less crowded and more spacious, for example having *"a bigger playground [...] so I don't feel crowded"* (Ash). They also wanted more access to the outdoors and nature including *"loads of trees and plants"* (River) and *"sensory flowers like lavender"* (Moss). Reasons for this linked to the calming effect of nature:

"Trees [...] Maybe to calm your mind a bit like maybe if you're a bit agitated or frustrated that maybe you can't do the work...you can look at the tree and maybe it will just make you feel a bit better. A bit calmer." (Blue)

"I was thinking about a sort of garden maybe. Because I know gardens can be quite relaxing." (Moss)

The key characteristic that came up multiple times across all participants' descriptions of their dream school was the importance of quietness in the both the classroom and wider school environment. Descriptions included classrooms that are *"not so noisy"* (Moss) and spaces where *"I don't hear shouting"* (Ash). All participants linked this to their ability to focus and learn, sharing that *"It's hard for me to focus when there's noise"* (Ocean), *"you can't really concentrate"* (River) and *"it can be too much...too distracting"* (Blue). Participants felt that if the environment was quieter, *"I could focus more and get my work done"* (Ash) and *"It wouldn't be so distracting. It would help with focus"* (Moss).

In addition to a spacious, quiet and nature-filled environment, participants wanted their dream schools to have adaptations that enable physical comfort. This included some control over sensory aspects for Blue including *"you can set the temperature*

[...] *you can turn off the lights off*". Ash spoke about the dream school having "lifts" because "the problem is you get really tired from walking up stairs". Participants mentioned enhanced physical comfort in other ways including "the chairs are more comfortable" (Blue), "comfortable benches" (Moss) and "something comfortable to wear" (River). Participants felt that reasonable changes that could be made to their current school included having more plants and a garden area.

Designated spaces

This sub-theme relates to participants articulating ideas about the need for spaces that have a clear function, controlled access and where the rules of the space are observed. During the 'Discover' mind-mapping exercise, participants spoke about valuing the library, due to liking the *'quiet days they do'* and it being *'a place where you can sit and read and do homework or study'*. In addition to valuing the quiet nature of the space, participants seemed to communicate that it is a predictable space where they know to expect reduced noise, and where the function of it is clear. This came through during the individual interviews about the dream school, where three participants would have "more libraries" (River), "an expanded library" (Moss) and "a bigger library" (Ash). Having more libraries was less about the desire to have spaces that serve the function of a library, such as access to more books, and more about the guarantee of a predictable, orderly space. With this in mind, participants described the 'library' spaces meeting different needs such as "one library would be designated to reading and stuff. One library will be like, you can just chat" (River) and "there would be a seating area for people to sit and do work" (Moss).

Descriptions of the dream schools included access to a quiet space for the same three participants desiring more 'library' space, describing being able to go to "a quiet room" (Ash), "a certain room" (River) and "a garden" (Moss) to relax when needed. This idea resurfaced in the 'Design' discussion group and all participants agreed that a designated room to go to would be helpful. This focused on a quiet space to access during lunch and break time, accessible to those who need it, for example after "an emotional event" (Moss). Ocean expressed that she is currently able to access certain spaces at break times, though they do not necessarily fulfil the need for quiet as the rules of the space may not be observed by others, sharing that "some people get the SEN pass just to get in and then do bad things... it's not really that quiet".

In addition to space at recreational times, participants spoke about access to a space during lesson time, particularly when the 'time out' card has been used, so that there is a designated space for "people like us" (River) to speak about feelings and unwind.

There is something for everyone

This sub-theme was generated through participant's sentiment that the school environment should be well-equipped with a range of facilities that suit everyone's needs and facilitate engagement. This is another sub-theme that was not present during the 'Discover' phase, suggesting that it is not one of the valued aspects of the current school environment.

At their dream schools, participants spoke about having an environment and areas that are visually stimulating and interesting to look at, such as *“loads of displays”* and *“[the school] it’s gonna be multi-coloured”* (River) and *“kids do Art and murals on some walls”* (Moss). Participants also spoke about a wider range of facilities that enabled choice, such as *“a playground as well where people can choose what they want”* (Blue) and *“some recreational areas so people could play football and basketball if they wanted to”* (Moss). Participants spoke about activities that they would like, as well as wanting to feel that there is something for others too to support inclusion:

“Because if there’s only one type of certain thing and you don’t like that, then you’re going to feel left out. And then you might not enjoy going to school. You will just feel not included.” (River)

The group felt that the lack of space at their current school would make it difficult to have the wide range of desired facilities available, however they shared that recreational time could be made better with more equipment available and having zones for different activities.

4.2.3 Theme 3 – Engaging learning experiences

This theme reflects participants’ need for learning experiences that are engaging, where there are opportunities to have fun, be taught in a relaxed way and feel a sense of competence. Sub-themes generated within this theme include engaging learning opportunities and a relaxed teaching approach.

Engaging learning opportunities

This sub-theme encapsulates participant's views on the opportunities within school that are engaging, including learning in fun and practical ways, having accessible work, working with peers and having access to a range of opportunities and trips that are enjoyable. Participants recorded a range of specific subjects when mind-mapping the positive aspects of their current school, tending to prefer those that are practical in nature such as PE and Food Tech. Their reasons for valuing these lessons included *'it's fun'*, *'you can actually enjoy it'* and *'you can work together'*. In addition to specific lessons, participants recorded extra-curricular activities, trips and off-timetable days as positive aspects of school. These are valued similar reasons, such as *'going to fun places'*, and *'connect with others and try new things together'*.

All participants used the word *"fun"* to describe learning at their dream schools, sharing that there would be *"more practical activities, which would make learning a lot more engaging and a lot more fun for people to do."* (Moss) and they would like to be *"doing fun things to learn [...] more fun activities"* (Ash). Participants also felt that support to understand the learning would be important, through *"personalised things in class"* (Ocean) and teachers who *"make sure you understand the work"* (River) and *"help you understand the work"* (Blue). Being able to have fun and work with others seems to take the pressure off, reducing participant's anxiety through learning feeling like a fun, shared experience that is more easily remembered. This was particularly pertinent for participants with EHCPs:

Ash: *We would learn all together.*

Researcher: *What do you mean?*

Ash: *You all say the answers.*

Researcher: *Ah, so you would learn as a group, and not have to say the answer on your own?*

Ash: *Yeah*

Researcher: *How would that help?*

Ash: *So... if someone gets it wrong you can do it together. So it's like, not anxious. More fun.*

Ocean: *It would be more fun. It would be more easy*

Researcher: *And why would that be good?*

Ocean: *Because then I wouldn't have to be struggling, and asking the teacher and pretending I know when I don't. I would understand it more.*

Learning that is fun and delivered in a relaxed way enables participants to engage more, fulfilling their need for competence. Participants desire to learn came through strongly throughout the data generation stages, with the sense that ultimately they want to feel able to make progress and develop. Reasons given for valuing current engaging opportunities and lessons in school included *'you can more easily remember and learn'*, *'bettering yourself'*, *'gives you an advantage for the future'*, *'helps with your confidence'* and *'chances to help others'*. These demonstrate the various ways that engaging opportunities lead to greater feelings of competence, as summarised by Moss:

"Well, obviously, you're going to learn a lot more, and it's not just going to fly over your head cause it's going to be...it's gonna be like a memory you can cherish. And if you can remember the information that was retained in that lesson then you have a better chance of doing good in exams and in the real world, like outside of school." (Moss)

A desire for more fun was similarly echoed during the 'Design' discussion, where participants shared that the learning at their school could be made more fun through additional practical activities and more opportunities for discussion.

All participants expressed a desire for *"more trips"* and opportunities to have fun at their dream schools, being able to feel that *"there is more to the school than just writing"* (Blue), *"it keeps the students entertained"* (River), *"you get to learn new things"* (Ocean) and *"have fun together"* (Ash).

Relaxed teaching approach

Linked to the learning itself were participants' ideas of staff teaching styles, valuing those with a more laid-back approach to teaching and those who make the learning more fun. This was evident during the mind-mapping exercise, where participants recorded that they are *'able to learn more when they are not too strict'* and value *'funny staff. I learn more. If they are too serious, I don't learn anything'*. As with fun learning activities, the relaxed teaching approach reduces the sense of pressure and allows participants to focus on the learning.

Teaching staff at the dream schools were described as *"calm"* (Blue and Moss), *"fun"* (Ash) and *"funny"* (River). Linked to the importance of reduced noise, participants described teachers as *"not too loud"* (Blue), with Ocean sharing:

"They shout at me sometimes because I'm lost in space. So I would have teachers that don't shout. It scares me." (Ocean)

During the 'Design' group discussion, participants shared similar thoughts to ideas in relation to the sub-theme of approachable and available staff, feeling that there could be more consistency in terms of the teaching approach of staff at their current school. They expressed that this would make it easier to learn:

River: *Just be nicer*

Ocean: *Yeah, don't go too harsh and shout*

Blue: *Not be so serious all the time*

River: *I really liked Miss X*

Moss: *Yeah, she was fun*

River: *She made it seem like you weren't even really learning but we actually all did really well*

Moss: *The more fun she is, the more you can remember stuff. And therefore you can remember the content*

Blue: *They just need to be calmer. That would make it easier*

4.2.4 Theme 4 – Feeling able to meet school demands

This theme encapsulates participants' overarching ideas of how to feel safer, calmer and happier at school, linked to adjustments that support them to feel more able to meet the demands of school, and the impact these have on their self-determination. Sub-themes generated within this theme include reduced pressure through flexibility; opportunities to unwind and recharge; support to feel prepared; and increased self-determination.

Reduced pressure through flexibility

This sub-theme reflects participants views of school as an inflexible system that is difficult to change. As such, participants narratives of changes to school focused on the ways that these current inflexible systems might bend to meet their needs. This sub-theme was generated from data gathered during the dream and design phases, reflecting ideas for change rather than the current school environment.

Despite having the freedom in the 'Dream' school activity to create the school they most wanted, participants were bound by the realities of the current school system, and felt therefore that even their dream schools would be likely to have rules, homework, exams and detentions despite these being a source of stress. For example, saying *"well obviously school is an environment where a lot of people would be stressing about because of homework or having a new exam"* (Moss). Within this inflexible system, participants expressed the likelihood of their dream ideas being possible. After suggesting that there should be fidget tools in the classroom, River commented *"it might be hard for that to happen"*. In relation to the dream school having a shop to buy sweets, Blue shared *"it would have to be outside the school. The school won't get a shop like that"*.

Another aspect of inflexibility that was present in participant's comments related to the perceived strictness of their current school, and the purpose of this being to meet the school's needs rather than the pupil's. This was reflected in comments such as *"they really want this school to be outstanding so they're really making the rules strict."* (Moss) and *"the only thing they really let us know about is GCSE's and that... that's the only thing they care about. The teachers are very strict. The rules are very strict. They just want you to get high exams."* (Blue). The strictness of school seems

to add a sense of pressure to some participants. They described feeling a need to explain and justify their behaviour to adults in order to avoid the threat of punishments. This can restrict their ability to use reasonable adjustments, such as the time out cards:

River: *Or you'll get shouted at*

Moss: *Exactly. It's so like... you have to continuously present it to teachers walking past, and they'll say "have you been parked? [removed from a lesson]" and it's like, "no"... "are you parked?"... "no". Over and over.*

During the discussion about the perceived strictness of school, participants shared concerns about detentions. The pressure felt from the strict rules seems to impact some participant's motivation to attend school:

Moss: *I've had some close calls but none yet. I worry about it a lot. Especially in Year 7 but I still have slight worries now.*

River: *I've had quite a lot so I don't worry about it that much now but I used to worry a lot. It's a bit too strict.*

Blue: *Sometimes I feel like moving school. Go to a different one.*

River: *Yeah, sometimes I don't wanna come into school and I don't come in*

Participants described dream schools that had more relaxed and flexible rules, for example they would be "not so strict" (Blue), there "would be a lot less reasons to get into trouble" (Moss) and "you probably wouldn't get in trouble in my dream school. For minor things you wouldn't." (River). Participants described a range of activities that would be allowed in order to minimise stress, facilitate learning and reduce concerns about sanctions. These are described in the subsequent sub-themes.

Support to feel prepared

Participants shared the importance of feeling ready for the various aspects of school life, including day to day activities such as lessons, as well as transitions between years and adjusting to new rules. Reflecting on their experiences of starting at their current school, participants valued opportunities to be introduced to staff and other pupils, learn about the school and reduce worries. This included visits from staff to their primary schools, and taking part in a summer school at the end of Year 6.

Reasons for valuing these activities focused on readiness, for example *'gave me information and told me what to know'*, *'told what not to worry about'* and *'get to know the school more and know your way around'*. When reflecting on how they would like to be welcomed to their dream schools, participants shared similar ideas about the importance of having information in order to feel ready, through welcome packs, tours, and a gradual start. Feeling ready reduces concerns about sanctions, with participants sharing *"you don't want to go to a place you're not supposed to be in"* (Blue) and *"I can't get late to lessons on my first day like I did here"* (Ocean).

Dream schools were described as places where you *"have information about the school"* (Moss), they help you *"get ready"* (Ash), you *"know the rules"* (Blue) and you *"feel prepared"* (River). Three participants spoke about the availability of equipment at their dream school, sharing that there would be ways around remembering to have the things that they need so that they *"don't need to worry about equipment"* (Ash) and *"in case you forget stuff"* (River). In order to meet the requirements of an inflexible system, Moss suggested a shop at his dream school where people could

buy equipment, sharing *“that way they don’t get equipment detentions [...] it would take away a lot of the stress about getting equipment”*.

The group felt that their school could support with feeling ready by keeping policies and rules as consistent as possible, giving plenty of advance warning of any changes and allowing an adjustment period during which time it is acceptable to make mistakes. The same applied to aspects of learning, feeling that it is important to know about upcoming tests, and receiving information ahead of transitions between years. This would reduce the sense of being ‘tripped up’ by rigid behaviour systems and unexpected changes.

Opportunities to unwind and recharge

This sub-theme was generated based on participants frequent mention of the value of breaks, in terms of existing scheduled break times within the school day, as well as other opportunities that allow them much needed time to unwind and recharge. Participants value break time at school currently for the opportunity to *‘get used to yourself again’*, *‘take a moment away’*, *‘unload stress’* and have *‘a chance to get ready for your next lesson’*. Some participants also mentioned PE lessons as a break, describing them as *‘a stress reliever’* and *‘it helps your stress’*. School trips were included as an additional type of break, with *‘getting to go out of school’*.

All participants expressed a desire for more of this time that enables them to feel less stressed and recover from the range of stressors at school, such as the *‘chaotic’* environment and challenging learning experiences. At their dream schools, this

would be through extended break times, breaks within the school day, and opportunities to be off timetable:

“[in the garden] if people can just sit down for a moment and take a breath of fresh air then it would be beneficial for their mind.” (Moss)

“[a day off timetable] Because you get a break from the class. In my feelings I’d be finally having a break.” (Ocean)

“They [teachers] would give you a bit of space when you need it [...] a time out to just breathe and think because in the classroom you get a bit flustered with all the questions thrown at you” (Blue)

“They [staff] would let you have breaks between lessons” (River)

“[at break time] more time so you play more [...] feel calmer” (Ash)

In addition to having time, participant’s dream schools enabled them to engage in specific activities to reduce stress. Example of this include:

“[in the classroom] there would be fidget toys [...] release my stress so you don’t feel anxious” (Ash)

“Maybe like a gaming area [...] And like maybe that can like be a way to, you know, just calm down a bit.” (Blue)

“And something that I can use, like the garden, to help me relax and not stress over things.” (Moss)

“play music [...] it would help my anxiety” (Ocean)

“there would be a swimming pool [...] it would be a good way to let off steam”
(River)

Participants shared that their current school could extend break times so that they are long enough to ‘make a difference’ and serve the purpose of unwinding and recharging, feeling that they are *“too short* (Blue), *“you don’t get a chance to really do anything”* (River) and *“it’s a quick break and then you’re back to it”* (Moss).

Increased self-determination

This sub-theme reflects the importance of creating a more hospitable environment for participants in school, in order to promote their feelings of safety, relatedness, competence and autonomy, and ultimately reduce anxiety. Participants reflected throughout the dream and design data generation stages on the impact that changes would have. It was apparent from their reflections that they perceive a link between their feelings of anxiety and the demands of school. This sub-theme builds on the acknowledgement of a desire for increased relatedness identified in the overarching ‘supportive relationships’ theme and the desire to feel competency, identified in the overarching ‘engaging learning experiences’ theme. At the end of each interview, participants were asked how they would feel if they attended their dream school. Their responses reflected a desire to feel happier and more motivated to attend school:

“I would be happy. I would be like “I can’t wait to go to school”. (River)

“I would be quite happy and satisfied” (Moss)

“I’d feel happy. Maybe I’d stop being so nervous and get on with the lesson, and want to go inside the classroom. Instead of getting a teacher to make me go inside the classroom” (Ocean)

“Happy. Not anxious.” (Ash)

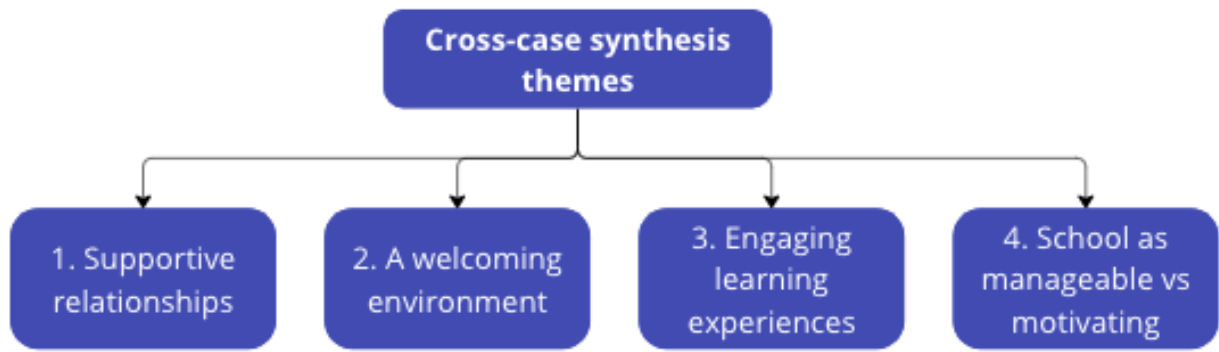
“Happier and more respected. More calm as well. Not so sad and angry. It would have all the things that I like.” (Blue)

4.3 Findings Section Two – Cross-Case Synthesis

Once thematic maps had been created for both the anxious group (Figure 5) and the non-anxious group (Appendix P), cross-case synthesis was undertaken to identify the key differences in the group’s accounts of what they appreciate about their current school, and their hopes when given the opportunity to create a dream school. Figure 6 sets out the four overarching themes across the two cases; ‘supportive relationships’, ‘the need for a welcoming environment’, ‘engaging learning experiences’ and ‘school as manageable vs motivating’. Each theme will be reported throughout the remainder of this section with a summary of similarities and differences between the two groups, supported by Venn diagrams.

Figure 6.

Cross-case Thematic Map

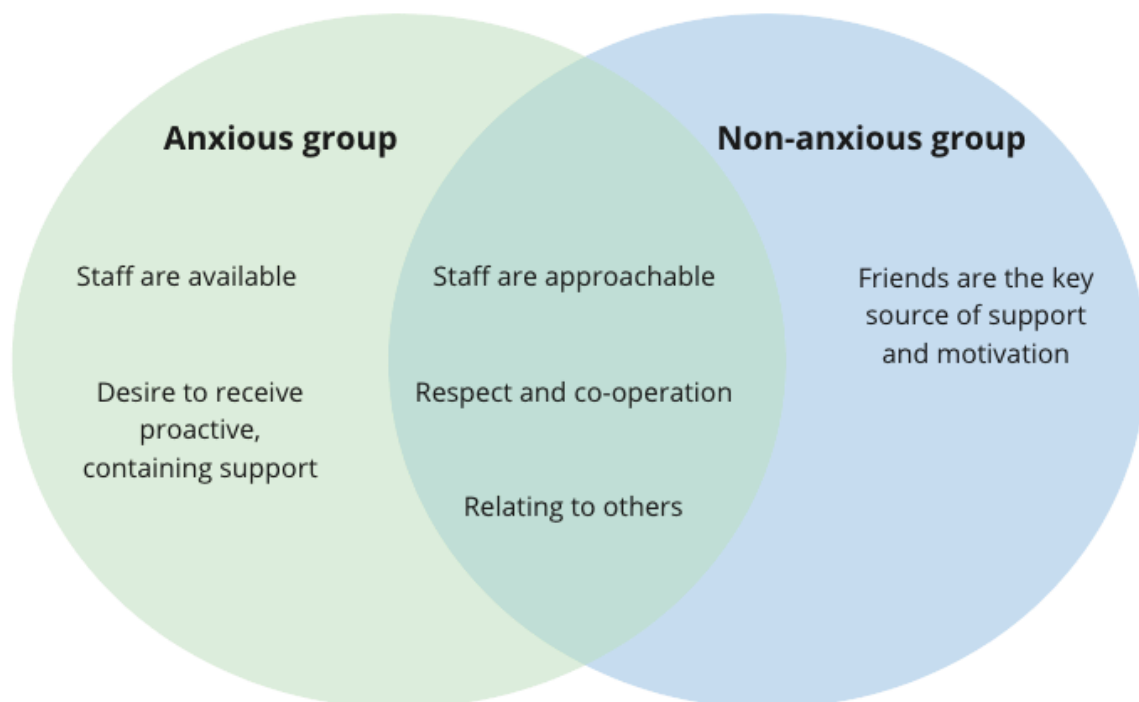


4.3.1 Theme 1 – Supportive relationships

This theme reflects the supportive function of relationships that was identified across both groups, enabling them to feel happy at school. Figure 7 shows the similarities and differences between the two groups.

Figure 7.

Venn Diagram for 'supportive relationships' Theme Comparison



All participants expressed a desire for staff to be approachable, for there to be respect and co-operation between everyone, and to have opportunities to feel related to others. There were mixed views within the non-anxious group but some felt that the ethos of their current school '*promotes kindness*' and '*makes it safe to try new things without judgement*'. The ethos of the current school did not come up in the 'Discover' phase with the anxious group, suggesting that they are less likely to perceive the school in this way. Despite it being mentioned in the 'Discover' phase, members of the non-anxious group expressed similar views to the anxious group in the 'Dream' phase, wanting a "*respectful*" (Tianna and Adam) school community, "*where everyone is just happy with one another*" (Stanley). This suggests that approachable staff, feeling related and accepted, and experiencing harmony within the school community supports all pupils at school.

During the 'Discover' phase, the non-anxious group focused much more on peer relationships as the main source of support and motivation, describing that they make school '*more fun and interesting*' and '*support you with issues*'. Only one participant mentioned a specific member of staff, someone supporting them in a Learning Mentor role. Similarly, in the 'Dream' phase, the non-anxious group had fewer views about staff characteristics beyond them being approachable, with one participant sharing "*I don't really think about teachers*" (Natasha). They valued staff approachability as a facilitator for building "*a good student-teacher bond*" (Adam) and because "*learning can often be a lot more efficient*" (Stanley) but did not describe the same need for containing or proactive support. Their narratives focused more on staff as support that they can decide to access should the need arise, reflected in

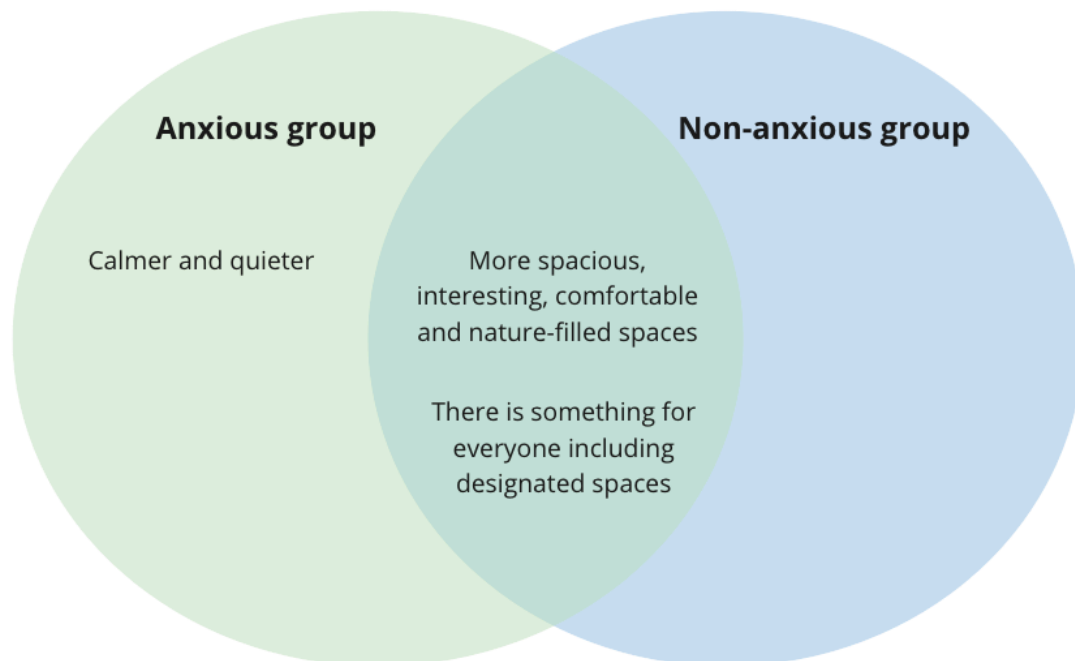
comments such as “*you’re not worried if you need to go up to them*” (Adam) and “*you can go and speak to them*” (Tianna). This highlights the importance of staff proactively building trusting relationships with those impacted by anxiety, offering containment and clarity around how and when they can offer support.

4.3.2 Theme 2 – The need for a welcoming environment

This theme encapsulates views on the physical environment of school, with all participants expressing a desire for an interesting, spacious, visually stimulating, well-equipped and comfortable school environment. Figure 8 shows the similarities and differences between the two groups.

Figure 8.

Venn Diagram for ‘the need for a welcoming environment’ Theme Comparison



When describing their dream schools, all participants made reference to physical characteristics of the environment. Three participants in the non-anxious group made references to more nature, including *“flowers around the outside of the school”* (Adam), *“making everything more green and eco-friendly”* (Malachi), and *“indoor plants”* (Stanley). For two participants this linked to a desire to look after the environment, however one participant mentioned the effect of nature on mood in a similar vein to the anxious group, sharing *“if someone has had a bad day or a bad morning, and then they walk into school, seeing those flowers might just help them to feel a bit better”* (Adam). Participants in the non-anxious group wanted *“bright colours”* (Stanley), *“different colours everywhere”* (Natasha), *“nice, colourful displays”* and *“lots of Artwork”* (Adam), feeling that this would offer variety, inspiration and motivation for pupils in an environment that can feel monotonous. The non-anxious group shared similar ideas of increasing the indoor and outdoor space at their dream school due to crowding in their current school, sharing *“it can get quite crowded”* (Adam), *“it’s kind of hectic”* (Malachi) and *“whenever everyone’s going down one stairs it’s just hectic, like you’re squishing your way to get through the stairs.”* (Tianna).

A key difference between groups was the non-anxious group’s lack of desire for the school environment to be quieter. Their views about changes to the environment and increasing physical comfort were largely to do with feeling restricted rather than overstimulated. Despite feeling that it is ‘hectic’ at times, their adjustment would be to increase the amount of space available so that *“everyone feels comfortable in their own space without having people pushing into them”* (Tianna). Only one participant in the non-anxious group described the link between feeling comfortable and

concentrating, sharing *“[about having comfortable chairs] I guess it just helps you stay focused. If you’re uncomfortable you might get distracted and um, yeah, not learn as much.”* (Malachi). Overall, these ideas were a lot less prevalent in the non-anxious group’s data.

During the ‘Discover’ phase, the non-anxious group highlighted the school library as a valued space for relaxing and concentrating. Unlike the anxious group, the non-anxious group did not make any references to a library space in their dream schools and did not express a desire for ‘designated’ spaces in the same way. Three participants did express however that their dream school would have quieter space available at recreational times. This was conceptualised within the sub-theme ‘there is something for everyone’:

“[about having an indoor recreational area] Because people who don’t like socialise with people as much and they don’t go outside as much, it’s good for them because they can have their space where they wouldn’t be interrupted.”
(Malachi)

“I want a space in the school... not too big or small... but there’s bean bags and you can just chill. If you don’t want to be with everyone else you can just chill. [...] you can just go in there and like think. And like feel at peace.”
(Tianna)

“Maybe just like a room in the school that’s easy to get to, accessible. Where children can come and you know, talk to the teacher if they want, or read or play board games. Generally a relaxed atmosphere.” (Adam)

Overall, there was a shared desire across groups for an environment that they perceive as welcoming, comfortable, and motivational. All participants desire a

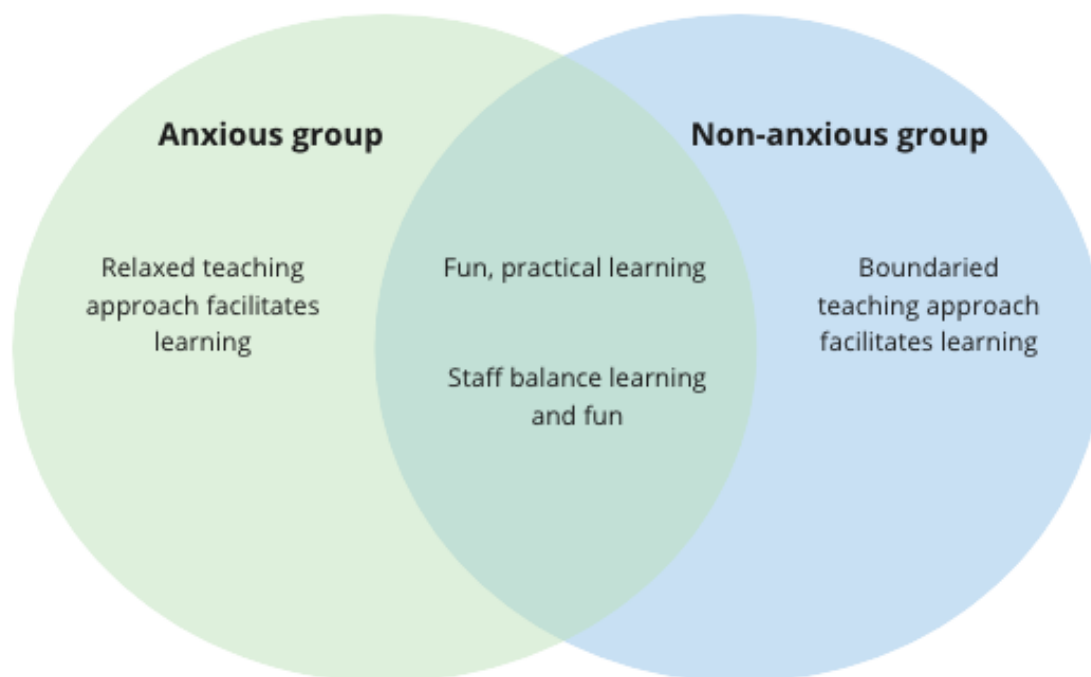
school environment that has something for everyone, and for all of them this included a quiet space available during recreational times. The key difference relates to the overstimulating nature of the school environment for the anxious group, who expressed the need for it to be calmer and quieter in general, with calm spaces that can be accessed all rather than some of the time.

4.3.3 Theme 3 – Engaging learning experiences

This theme reflects the desire across both groups for engaging learning experiences, facilitated by fun, practical learning, extra-curricular opportunities and trips, and the teaching approach of staff. Figure 9 shows the similarities and differences between the two groups.

Figure 9.

Venn Diagram for 'engaging learning experiences' Theme Comparison



The views of participants across both groups were very similar with regards to the value of engaging learning experiences on motivation and happiness at school. During the 'Discover' group, non-anxious participants similarly valued more practical subjects, due to *'learning in different ways'*, *'having more independence'* and *'it makes the day more enjoyable'*. At their dream schools, participants would have *"more practical lessons"* (Tianna), *"more fun lessons"* (Natasha), *"more hands-on activities"* (Malachi). They expressed a desire for learning that *"shows that subjects are linked in more ways"* (Adam) to achieve an overall balance of fun and learning. For most participants this was about increasing the enjoyment of school and less about increasing their sense of competence, however one participant linked it to learning, saying that if it was more fun and interactive *"it would make the learning come easier to you"* (Natasha).

Participants in both groups shared some similar ideas with regards to the approach of teaching staff, wanting them to make learning fun. Views within the non-anxious group were different with regards to the best teaching approach, but the majority wanted to feel confident that teachers would be able to maintain order in the classroom so that they can learn. They described staff who enable *"a mix of having fun and doing a good amount of work"* (Adam) and *"in lesson times they are strict and they get straight to the point. They don't allow distractions in the class."* (Malachi). This differs to the non-anxious group, where a strict teacher would be the distraction in class, making it difficult for them to feel relaxed and able to learn. One participant shared that in addition to "nice" staff, she would want:

"teachers that like, everyone's scared of. Because I don't want a school where people think they can just do whatever they want. I want to have teachers at

my school that can make sure that when they walk into the room, the room is quiet. No one is putting their head up. Everyone is just doing work.” (Tianna)

Another participant shared an opposing view, feeling that a positive relationship between the pupils and teacher is the best way for order to be maintained:

“People generally don’t object as much like to rules and things like that if they know there’s a good reason and a reasonable person giving the rules.”

(Stanley)

The views on the ‘dream’ teacher were less homogenous within the non-anxious group, however participants across both groups appear to value an orderly classroom where learning can take place. The non-anxious group seem to be less negatively impacted by strict staff in comparison to the anxious group, who linked strictness with difficulties engaging with learning.

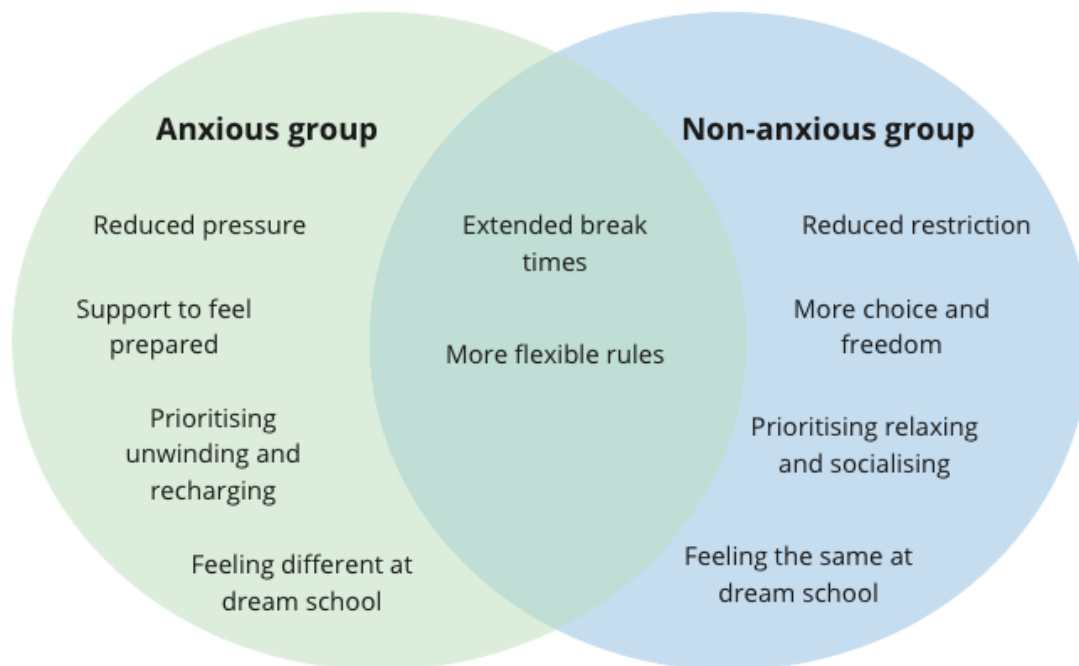
4.3.4 Theme 4 – School as manageable vs motivating

This theme reflects the differences between the two groups with regards to their priorities when designing their dream schools and the needs that these schools would fulfil. For the anxious group, an overarching theme ‘feeling able to meet school demands’ was generated to encapsulate the various ideas that would enable them to find school a more manageable environment. For the non-anxious group, an overarching theme ‘feeling more motivated’ was generated. This similarly encapsulated ideas for change however their narrative centred around the desire to feel more motivated. Whilst some of the ideas for practice were shared between groups, including extended break times and more flexible rules, the underlying

meanings were different. Figure 10 shows the similarities and differences between the two groups.

Figure 10.

Venn Diagram for 'school as manageable vs motivating' Theme Comparison



Participants across both groups expressed a desire for more flexible rules at school. For the non-anxious group, this reflected a desire to feel less restricted and more able to express themselves at their dream school:

“I don’t feel restricted and I don’t get told I can’t do something when I get to school.” (Tianna)

“I feel like school are a bit uptight. And they’re like “well this is what needs to happen” (Natasha)

“I think within my school rules would be important but not completely...people would be able to express themselves fully but like not get in trouble as a

result. Because I often think people feel limited by rules, in the sense that they can't show who they really are because of those rules.” (Stanley)

In contrast with the anxious group, their comments suggested a feeling of restriction rather than pressure, as they did not express the same level of concern about sanctions or breaking rules. This potentially suggests that the current rules of school are experienced as restricting but not unmanageable. Regardless, a shared sentiment across both groups was the need for more flexibility of systems in school.

The sense of restriction for the non-anxious group was also apparent in a sub-theme of ‘more choice and freedom’, generated based on shared ideas with regards to pupils having more of a say through student voice activities, votes and surveys, and an overwhelming sentiment of having more “options”, a phrase used by all five participants. Within this sub-theme was also the idea that their dream schools would be “*forward thinking*” (Stanley) and “*open minded*” (Adam).

Participants in both groups expressed a desire for extended break times. For the anxious group, this focused on opportunities to unwind and recharge. Similar ideas were expressed by some participants in the non-anxious group, who shared that they would like to “*relax and actually take a break*” (Adam) and “*cool down and de-stress*” (Malachi). Additional reasons for more break time included increased time to have fun, pursue interests and socialise. As with other aspects of this overarching theme, the non-anxious group felt that there should be fewer restrictions at recreational times:

“You’re allowed your phone outside because it’s your lunch so you should be able to do whatever you want.” (Tianna)

“Because here, toilets are locked so you have to get the teacher to come and unlock them [...] So I think definitely being able to go into the toilets at break and lunch without a teacher.” (Adam)

“[longer breaks] I think it would give you... it would make you feel more free. Give you more liberty.” (Stanley)

The difference between a desire for school to be more manageable versus more motivating was evident in non-anxious participants’ narratives throughout the ‘Dream’ phase interviews. Rather than being able to learn more or feel more competent, they felt that their dream school would be more enjoyable and therefore more motivating:

“Not to say school isn’t enjoyable, but it would be more enjoyable.” (Stanley)

“I just think it would be different to be like actually excited to go to school for once.” (Natasha)

“It would make you want to come to school because the lessons are more fun.” (Malachi)

“I think I would actually enjoy school more.” (Tianna)

Similarly, when asked how they would be at their dream schools, non-anxious participants were less likely to describe feeling different to how they do already:

“I’d be the same as I am here, or anywhere really” (Stanley)

"I don't think I would be different to how I am now." (Malachi)

"I would be myself. I'm just an energetic person. This school isn't my dream school but I still come in with energy... I'm always happy." (Tianna)

"I think just how I am now really." (Adam)

Despite not necessarily feeling a need for school to be different for them, all non-anxious participants wanted other pupils at their dream schools to be happy and able to be themselves:

"I'd just want them to enjoy themselves really. It wouldn't matter who went as long as they were happy." (Stanley)

"People wouldn't feel insecure coming into school. Thinking "I'm not as good". I want everyone to feel positive." (Tianna)

"I would want them to be themselves. For a child I guess like, 30 hours of the week you're in school, so it has a big impact on you if you're not able to be comfortable where you are. Then it just kind of affects your learning. Because you're thinking about different stuff." (Natasha)

5. Discussion

5.1 Chapter Overview

This chapter discusses the findings of the present study, providing critical analysis in the context of the existing literature base and theoretical framework. This chapter sets out the findings for each research question, followed by a discussion of the overarching themes. Finally, strengths, limitations and issues of overall trustworthiness are considered.

5.2 Overview of Findings

This study set out to understand what experiences and aspects of secondary school enhance feelings of safety, calmness and happiness for young people who present with anxiety. A secondary aim was to understand if and how this is different in comparison to peers who do not present with anxiety. These research aims were addressed through three research questions, the findings of which will be presented in turn with reference to the theories set out in Figure 1.

5.2.1 Research Question 1

What aspects of secondary school make young people who present with anxiety feel safe, calm and happy?

This research question sought to identify aspects of school that are appreciated by young people who present with anxiety. In terms of the person-environment interaction using the SEF theory, findings for this research question have identified aspects of school that can be understood as a positive ‘fit’ between needs and the environment. Young people’s needs for safety, relatedness, autonomy and competency are currently met through opportunities to build supportive relationships, experience a calm environment and participate in learning experiences that they perceive to be engaging. An overview of findings and links to need fulfilment are outlined below in Table 9.

Table 9.

Overview of Findings for RQ1

Stage-environment fits	Need fulfilment
<p>Supportive relationships</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Staff who are approachable and available • Proactive and containing support from staff and peers • Relating to others through shared social and learning experiences 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Supportive relationships with staff and peers promote feelings of safety, relatedness, and competency, supporting anxious young people to better manage their learning and emotions.
<p>A calm environment</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A calm, comfortable environment with nature-filled and quiet spaces • Designated spaces to unwind and relate to others, such as the SEN room 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Areas of school perceived as calm and comfortable, including designated spaces, promote feelings of safety, relatedness and competency. A well-managed environment can instil calmness and offer space to recharge.
<p>Engaging learning experiences</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Fun, practical learning opportunities that enable young people to feel good about themselves and their ability • Relaxed teaching approach with teachers who are not too strict 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Learning experiences perceived as engaging promote enjoyment and feelings of competency for young people, enabling them to concentrate and feel able to make progress.

5.2.2 Research Question 2

What ideas do young people who present with anxiety have about changes to their secondary school environment that would make them feel safer, calmer and happier?

This research question sought to identify changes that could be made in school to promote feelings of safety, calmness and happiness. This research question builds on the previous, as many of the current strengths were reiterated as potential changes, in terms of doing more of the things that already help young people to feel less anxious. In addition, findings for this question highlighted potential ‘misfits’ between the school environment and anxious young people’s needs. These are outlined in Table 10, positioned as opportunities for change and greater need fulfilment.

Table 10.

Overview of Findings for RQ2

Stage-environment fit opportunities	Need fulfilment
<p>Supportive relationships</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Consistency of approach, including all staff being approachable, reassuring and offering proactive support • Being assigned a key member of staff to discuss worries with • Greater understanding of needs to reduce masking and enable use of reasonable adjustments • Reducing conflict and promoting harmony between people in the school environment 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Feelings of safety could be promoted through a consistent staff approach and harmonious environment that reduces feelings of uncertainty and threat. Anxious young people could feel a greater sense of relatedness through developing a relationship with a supportive staff member and being better understood by others.
<p>A calm, inclusive environment</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Quieter classrooms and access to a quiet space at unstructured times and as needed throughout the day • Recreational facilities and varied spaces so that there is something for everyone 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Anxious young people could feel a greater sense of competency through an environment that supports concentration, and spaces to recharge in order to be able to learn and engage effectively. Feelings of relatedness could be supported by an environment that reflects an inclusive ethos.

<p>Engaging learning experiences</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A relaxed teaching approach used more consistently by all staff members • Accessible learning and support to understand the work where needed • More opportunities for learning that is a fun, shared experience 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Feelings of competency and relatedness could be enhanced by a more consistently relaxed teaching approach and fun, accessible learning opportunities.
<p>Feeling able to meet school demands</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • More relaxed and flexible rules, with less focus on sanctions and results and more time to adjust to changes • Keeping policies and rules consistent • Receiving information to support feeling prepared, particularly for tests and exams • Extended break times, and opportunities to take a break • Flexibility to manage anxiety e.g. fidget toys or listening to music 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Overall core needs could be met more effectively through support to feel able to meet school demands. This could be at different systemic levels, including school-level policies and individual-level reasonable adjustments that enhance feelings of competency, autonomy, relatedness and importantly, safety.

5.2.3 Research Question 3

What differences exist in the answers to the research questions, between young people who have been identified by school staff as presenting with anxiety in the school setting compared with those who have not?

The comparative analysis with non-anxious young people demonstrated that supportive relationships, the school environment and engaging learning experiences are important for all young people, though there were subtle differences in the function and meaning assigned to these experiences between groups. Despite different meanings and motivations across themes, there are adjustments to the secondary school environment that would support all young people. A summary of findings from the comparison is outlined in Table 11 below.

Table 11.

Overview of Findings for RQ3

Theme	Key findings
Supportive relationships	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> All young people value staff who are approachable, opportunities to relate to others, and a harmonious school environment free from conflict Young people who present with anxiety rely more on the support of adults at school, compared with their peers who are more likely to turn to friends Young people who present with anxiety need staff to be more available, containing, and proactive compared with their peers.
A welcoming environment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> All young people value a spacious, interesting, comfortable, and nature-filled school environment, with facilities to suit all needs and interests. All young people feel that quiet spaces should be available. Young people who present with anxiety have a need for the overall as well as classroom environment to be calmer and quieter
Engaging learning experiences	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> All young people value fun, practical learning opportunities, and staff who are able to balance learning with fun. Young people who present with anxiety prefer a more relaxed and less bounded teaching style compared to their peers.
School as manageable vs motivating	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> All young people expressed a desire for more flexible and relaxed rules at school. For young people who present with anxiety this was about reducing pressure, compared to reducing the sense of restriction for their peers. All young people want extended break times. For young people who present with anxiety this linked to the need to have time to unwind and recharge, whereas for their peers the time represented an opportunity for more socialising and time to pursue interests. All young people want to feel safe, happy and calm at school, and to have their basic needs met. For young people who present with anxiety, narratives focused less on the need for autonomy compared to peers.

5.2.4 Summary of Findings

Overall, the findings fit broadly with the four themes generated from the systematic literature search, summarised below in Table 12. A key difference arose with regards to unpredictability, with predictability not appearing as a standalone theme. As a concept it cut across other identified themes, and was part of participant's narratives about feeling able to meet school demands. This highlights a contribution of this research study, which by centring the experiences of young people has identified

that feeling able to meet school demands is the underlying value attributed to adjustments such as increased predictability.

Table 12.

Overarching Themes in Relation to Systematic Search Synthesis

Environmental threat identified in literature review	Opportunity to buffer threat identified in the present study
Negative interactions and relations	Supportive relationships
Overstimulating environment	A calm, inclusive environment
Challenging learning experiences	Engaging learning experiences
Unpredictability	Feeling able to meet school demands

Overall, the findings suggest that schools can support young people with anxiety through establishing supportive relationships; a calm, inclusive environment; engaging learning experiences; and enabling young people to feel able to meet school demands. The use of a framework has enabled a theoretical contribution, with the ideas in the themes identified contributing towards meeting basic needs of safety, relatedness, competence and autonomy, promoting a fit between the young person and their environment and potentially reducing anxiety as a result.

The overall findings will be further contextualised and discussed in the remaining sections. This discussion of findings is organised by theme rather than research question, as this will reduce repetition due to the fact that each theme addresses all three questions.

5.3 Discussion of Findings

5.3.1 Supportive relationships

Supportive relationships were valued by all young people in both groups in the research study, and all young people were able to identify the positive relationships that currently support them at school. Positive relations with staff and peers contribute towards a sense of safety and relatedness. This aligns with the findings from the literature review, as well as a broader wealth of literature that highlights the importance of trusted relationships at school, conducive to a wide range of positive outcomes (Allen et al., 2021; Cosma & Soni, 2019; Mowat, 2010). Specific characteristics of staff identified in this study fit with previous studies, for example demonstrating care, consistency, positivity, interest and support (Costley et al., 2021; Russell et al., 2016).

The findings for RQ3 demonstrated key differences between the two groups, with anxious pupils expressing a greater need for available, containing and proactive staff, suggesting that this is particularly important to them for enhancing feelings of safety. The value of staff being available came up in a similar vein to Hebron & Lewis (2014), where participants spoke about consistent and visible support, echoing similar sentiments to the young people in this study with regards to staff who are physically and metaphorically 'there'. The nature of value of staff and peer support in this study was conceptualised with the specific psychological notion of containment (Bion, 1962) which was not explicitly mentioned by any of the studies in the literature review. Containment involves supporting someone to process emotions and restore

their capacity to think clearly, by 'holding on to' their concerns. This is a key part of emotional regulation for young people, and it is suggested that the quality of a relationship can be strengthened by the use of containment (Douglas, 2007). In terms of existing evidence about how school staff respond to anxiety, one small-scale study found that teachers were more likely to report using anxiety-promoting rather than anxiety-reducing responses in interactions with autistic pupils compared with non-autistic peers, including responding with sanctions (Adams et al., 2019). This fits with participant's experiences of interactions with staff who they perceive as unapproachable, who they felt would be more likely to issue a detention "straight away". The notion of containment and responding supportively to anxiety relates to RQ2 and has implications for the way that staff, and potentially peers, interact with young people who are anxious.

The age, and potentially the developmental stage, of participants is relevant here, as the anxious young people in this study focused more on staff than peer relationships, strengthening Costley's (2021) observation that younger secondary-aged pupils appear to rely on adults for emotional regulation more than older pupils. This makes establishing supportive relationships at the point of secondary school transition particularly important for anxious young people, through the provision of a key adult for example. This aligns with the transition literature, where nurturing relationships are acknowledged as a priority during this period (Holt et al., 2022; Tobbell & O'Donnell, 2013; White, 2020), with some young people requiring the additional support of a key, named adult (Aldridge et al., 2016; Coffey, 2013; Mowat, 2010). In terms of anxiety, this study supports the suggestion that staff relationships have the potential to develop young people's resiliency and ability to deal with adversity (Pate

et al., 2017) and as such should be prioritised as the mechanism through which positive change may occur.

In the absence of supportive relationships, there were a number of anxiety-inducing burdens implicit in young people's accounts, including the need to avoid people, work out how to ask for what they need, and minimise or hide feelings to avoid stigma. In addition to approachable and supportive staff, they suggested that genuine understanding and acceptance from others would reduce these burdens. This echoes the findings from the literature review where staff understanding of individual needs emerged as a priority for young people (Hebron, 2017; Stack et al., 2020; Tomlinson et al., 2022). The risk of not being understood and accepted is the likelihood of masking to a greater extent, as suggested by participants in this study and the wider literature, with the attendant demands this may have on mental health. Although masking as a concept is associated predominantly with autism, all young people in the anxious group described masking regardless of whether they were diagnosed as autistic or not. This is nuanced and complex issue that is largely beyond the scope of the current research study, however this finding is in contrast to Tomlinson et al. (2022) who found that diagnosis led to greater self-understanding and therefore reduced masking and associated anxiety. Other research in this area suggests that masking develops as a response to other people's behaviour, and maintains anxiety in the longer term (Chapman et al., 2022). The social context may therefore cause or contribute significantly towards masking, making it difficult for schools to recognise when a young person is experiencing anxiety. As such, schools have a role to manage anxiety provoking scenarios more routinely, as highlighted by Costley (2021). This implication is pertinent across all of the themes from this study,

however an inclusive ethos and supportive relationships appear to be key, meeting the basic need of relatedness.

The idea of an inclusive ethos arose through all young people expressing a desire for a harmonious environment where everyone gets along, something that was not a finding for RQ1 suggesting an area for the school to develop. Conflict between others in the environment did not come up in the literature review, however it was implicit in other suggestions such as the need for a welcoming ethos where differences are celebrated (Tobias, 2009), free from 'shoving' and 'pushing' (Porter & Ingram, 2021). Anxious young people in this study shared that they want to be able to be themselves in school without feeling questioned or judged by peers. The existing literature highlights a range of difficulties linked to the social stigma of SEND and mental health needs, including bullying, loneliness and reduced likelihood of help-seeking (Beukema et al., 2022; Holdsworth & Blanchard, 2006; Humphrey & Symes, 2010; Norwich & Kelly, 2004). Interestingly, this sentiment was echoed by the non-anxious group, who want all young people to feel able to be themselves. In relation to RQ3, this highlights a shared priority for young people with regards to social inclusion and suggests that peers may play an important role in reducing stigma and exclusion. Evidence suggests that schools can facilitate this through developing supportive policies tackling issues such as bullying and stigma, and improving mental health literacy (Humphrey & Symes, 2010; Ma et al., 2023; Weare, 2015; Widnall et al., 2021). A personalised approach is important, balancing young people's need for privacy and autonomy around what is shared about them and how it is spoken about.

5.3.2 A calm, inclusive environment

The importance and impact of the physical school environment was apparent for all young people in the research study, with consensus on the need for a spacious, interesting, comfortable and nature-filled environment. Both groups identified aspects of the school that met this need already, however it came up again in the findings for RQ2 suggesting that there is more to do to create the ideal environment. Across both groups, the need for a well-resourced school with facilities to suit everyone's interests was highlighted. The physical environment therefore appears to communicate something about the school ethos and who belongs, echoing existing research findings (Midgen et al., 2019). Existing research has also established a link between the physical environment and mental health (Sixsmith et al., 2004), including the positive impact of green space (Maes et al., 2021), and negative associations between crowding and interpersonal conflict (Matthews & Lippman, 2020). Whilst the layout and structure of a school's physical environment is difficult to change, there are potential implications for how the environment is decorated and managed, to minimise issues such as crowding and discomfort. There are also reasonable adjustments that could enhance individual comfort, such as small adaptations to uniform, lighting and seating. This all fits with principles for inclusive design suggested by Matthews and Lippman (2020), who cite flexibility and ownership of space as a pivotal issue, suggesting that young people should be able to influence change in their environment to suit their needs.

In line with the literature review findings, for RQ2 young people who present with anxiety expressed a particular need for reduced noise and a sense of order in the

environment (Hebron & Humphrey, 2014; Stack et al., 2020; Tobias, 2009; Tomlinson et al., 2022) to facilitate concentration and safety. Their overall views about the dream school fit with research about autistic children's environmental preferences including defined spaces, opportunities for movement, considerations for safety, sensory escapes, a view of the outside, noise control and comfort (Martin, 2016). This is potentially reflective of the sensory differences associated with the autism spectrum, though not all young people in the sample were autistic. In terms of how this might be managed, the role of staff was highlighted as key to maintaining order though importantly not by shouting. This echoes findings from the literature review (Costley et al., 2021; Porter & Ingram, 2021) and has potential implications for school behaviour management approaches and systems.

Another way to minimise the impact of an overstimulating environment arising from RQ2 was the suggestion for a safe, quiet space, accessible during unstructured times and during the school day. This was suggested across both groups but had greater priority for young people presenting with anxiety. This fits with findings from the literature review with regards to safe spaces (Goodall, 2018; Humphrey & Lewis, 2008; Porter & Ingram, 2021; Stack et al., 2020; Tobias, 2009). Whilst a space exists in their current setting, young people were not confident that it would be quiet, instead citing the library as a guaranteed quiet space. This has implications for schools in relation to designating a space and giving consideration to access, staffing and features that ensure it is consistently quiet and perceived as 'safe'.

5.3.3 Engaging learning experiences

Learning experiences that are engaging were valued by both anxious and non-anxious young people, supporting feelings of motivation and competence. Some of their ideas about what makes learning engaging were slightly different, however a consistent similarity was the need for learning to feel fun. Participants were able to identify both existing engaging learning opportunities as well as expressing a desire for more. Learning was deemed fun when it involved practical, hands-on activities and extra-curricular opportunities. This echoes findings from Porter and Ingram (2021), where practical subjects were valued more. It also echoes the broader literature, for example a large-scale study of pupil views in one local authority found that practical subjects were most valued, based on freedom of expression and working in groups (Sixsmith et al., 2004). In terms of RQ3, the notion of group work did not arise from the non-anxious group, and seemed to be more of a feature of engagement for the anxious group. They suggested that they are more able to engage in learning when the pressure is reduced, through learning being both a fun and shared experience. This links to the earlier idea of containment within supportive relationships, where working with other people enables the emotional load of learning to be shared. Overall, this demonstrates the importance of a broad and balanced curriculum for all young people, with authentic opportunities to pursue and develop skills, knowledge and interests. Opportunities for group work may be particularly helpful for reducing the pressure for young people who feel anxious, especially where this is within the context of supportive relationships, for example with friends or trusted adults.

Another idea with regards to engaging learning was the need to feel a sense of competence. This was a more dominant narrative for the anxious group, who valued

support to understand the work, and opportunities to develop and make progress. This fits with the challenging aspects of learning identified in the literature review, including young people's concerns about inappropriate differentiation (Humphrey & Lewis, 2008) and not being able to access the curriculum (Tomlinson et al., 2022). Ensuring that young people can understand seems to reduce their feelings of incompetence and removes the burden of having to ask for help. Government guidance sets out that SEND provision is underpinned by 'high quality teaching' (DfE, 2015, p.25), which includes differentiating and meeting individual needs. This study and others suggests that there may be a gap in teacher's confidence and ability to deliver appropriate teaching to pupils with SEND (Webster & Blatchford, 2019). There are implications with regards to how anxiety may be reduced through effective high quality teaching, though the challenging national context is recognised, with issues of increasing SEND identification, barriers to accessing specialist support, funding and infrastructure, and growing school staff workloads and stress (Warnes et al., 2022). It should be noted that engaging effectively in learning links closely to supportive relationships, where all staff are aware of individual needs and able to meet them. It also links to the school ethos and removal of stigma, in order for young people to make use of adjustments that help them to learn without feeling judged or embarrassed.

The final aspect of engaging effectively with learning pertained to teaching style. All young people across both groups value staff who are able to balance learning with fun, to enable a sense of achievement without too much pressure. They were able to identify some teachers where this is the case but did not feel that it was universal across the school. Young people recognised that this involves careful management

of the classroom to maintain order so that both learning and fun can take place. This fits with existing research about young people's value of a more relaxed teaching approach (Jessiman et al., 2022; Sixsmith et al., 2004). Though it did not arise explicitly in the literature review, young people across the selected studies highlighted what may be perceived as a less relaxed approach, such as being scared to raise your hand, being picked on for a question, or being shouted at (Costley et al., 2021; Goodall, 2018; Porter & Ingram, 2021). This raises the issue of 'strictness' which evoked different responses from the two groups, with anxious young people being much more negatively impacted by perceived strictness, including shouting. This has implications for behaviour management practices during lessons, with a need to promote approaches where order is maintained calmly. This facilitates engagement in learning, and additionally meets anxious young people's need for a calm physical environment with reduced noise.

5.3.4 Feeling able to meet school demands

School was conceptualised by all young people in this study as inflexible, with comments about rigid rules, harsh sanctions and high academic standards. This arose in the literature review in relation to learning, with young people in the selected studies sharing the sense of pressure felt through exams, tests and homework (Costley et al., 2021; Goodall, 2018; Porter & Ingram, 2021; Tomlinson et al., 2022). Accounts from all young people fit with the systemic issues highlighted in the literature review, including pressure brought on by accountability measures (Hutchings, 2015; Kerr & Ainscow, 2022), performativity (Brown & Dixon, 2020), and punitive behaviour approaches (Jessiman et al., 2022; Kidger et al., 2009). In the

setting this research was conducted in, young people without anxiety tended to frame this with regards to feeling restricted, compared with anxious young people feeling pressure and the threat of getting in trouble or being given a sanction. Their hopes for change therefore centred around having fewer reasons to get in trouble, loosening some of the more rigid rules. They felt that some 'threats' could be reframed supportively, for example instead of a detention for missed homework, having a supportive appointment with a teacher who could offer help with completing it. The implication here is that more flexible rules would support all young people, particularly those rules that are seen as unnecessarily punitive or restrictive, and not in the best interests of young people themselves. This again links to behaviour management approaches and policies, which may be adapted to make school feel more supportive and manageable.

In order to be able to manage and keep up with a school system that is seen as inflexible, for RQ2 anxious young people expressed the need for support to feel prepared. This included the transition to secondary school as well as ongoing experiences of new expectations and rules. This aligns with the theme of 'unpredictability' identified in the literature review, where predictability through routines, consistency and warnings offers a sense of safety (Costley et al., 2021; Humphrey & Lewis, 2008). This also fits with the transition literature, and the suggestion that familiarisation with the new school setting through visits and information can reduce anxiety (Akister et al., 2016; Hebron, 2017; Neal et al., 2016; Neal & Frederickson, 2016; Stack et al., 2020). This did not stand alone as a theme in this study, and instead contributed towards the overall need and desire to meet the demands of school. This study argues that supporting young people to feel

equipped to manage school demands may reduce anxiety, and support the fulfilment of core needs. This suggests that schools should consider the notions of consistency and change for young people who are anxious, both on a day-to-day as well as more systemic level, building in systems that allow plenty of warning and time to adjust.

All young people in this study value break times and felt that they should be extended, due to not having sufficient time to achieve all of the functions the time serves, such as visiting the toilet, eating, relaxing and socialising. This has been suggested in previous studies seeking pupil views on mental health, with participants describing break time as 'symbolic of a release from the necessity of school attendance' (Sixsmith et al., 2004, p. 28). A national study conducted by Baines and Blatchford (2019) found that there has been a systematic reduction of break times and increase in supervision resulting in reduced freedom, another product of increased accountability and prioritisation of academic standards. The young people in this study suggested that they use break times in different ways, potentially meeting a range of basic needs including physiological as well as relatedness and autonomy. For anxious young people they represent an important opportunity to 'unload stress' and recharge in order to feel able to meet school demands. With break times insufficient, and anxiety felt throughout the day, anxious young people also highlighted the important of opportunities to take 'breaks' throughout the day by engaging in stress-reducing activities such as using fidget tools, listening to music and accessing a quiet space, reasonable adjustments that arose in the literature review. As suggested by Baines and Blatchford (2019), schools should consider whether break times are adequate, and this would be supported by break time being legislated by policymakers. This should be considered alongside the literature review

findings which highlighted unstructured times as potentially anxiety-inducing due to a range of threats (Costley et al., 2021; Hebron & Humphrey, 2014; Humphrey & Lewis, 2008; Porter & Ingram, 2021; Stack et al., 2020; Tobias, 2009; Tomlinson et al., 2022). This study suggests that these threats could be minimised through a calmer environment and more inclusive ethos.

Overall, the findings have identified aspects of secondary school that are currently appreciated by both anxious and non-anxious young people across the themes of supportive relationships, a welcoming environment and engaging learning opportunities. The findings reflect the different ways that anxiety may be minimised in school. Whilst this study did not seek to identify causal relationships, young people suggested that the inflexible and pressured demands of school are a contributor to anxiety. This enhances the suggestion that schools may be able to reduce anxiety by buffering negative environmental stressors (Weare & Nind, 2011).

5.3.5 Theoretical Considerations

This study used stage-environment fit (SEF) theory as the lens through which to explore school experiences, looking at how the environment fits with young people's desire for basic need fulfilment in order to reduce anxiety. Stack et al. (2020) and Symonds and Hargreaves (2016) both explored stage-environment fit using a qualitative approach in relation to the transition to secondary school. This study has extended the knowledge generated by these studies through further evidence of the 'fits' that young people perceive in secondary school, with a specific focus on how the presence of anxiety may influence such fits. The findings support the assertion

that poor fit between a person and their environment can have a detrimental impact on motivation and wellbeing, with young people describing the ways that school could change to be more motivating or manageable. SEF theory only goes so far in explaining the presentation of anxiety, as it is unclear at what point a 'mismatch' between a person and their environment leads to a lack of motivation versus poorer mental health, as this was an evident difference in the accounts of the two contrasting groups. With this in mind it is important to consider the point at which environmental modifications do not sufficiently reduce anxiety, and when it may be appropriate to consider more 'within child' factors. Further limitations of this theory are the difficulties measuring the concept of a 'fit' beyond qualitative accounts, and how findings can be used to cater for the differing needs of a cohort of young people. The SEF theory offered a lens through which to explore the interaction of young people person and a single environment, however the findings highlight that a broader framework such as Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory may be useful to further contextualise the presentation of anxiety. This is particularly relevant given findings with regards to, for example, the school behaviour policy which may be reflective of wider systemic influences.

This study used Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs (1943) and self-determination theory (Ryan & Deci, 2000) to conceptualise the 'fits' that young people seek in their environment in order to have basic needs fulfilled. Whilst these theories focus on individual motivation and self-actualisation, the findings highlighted commonalities across the two groups, demonstrating environmental changes that would meet the needs of all young people. This suggests that it may be possible to consider and address basic needs at a group level. Further theoretical contributions are in relation

to the combination of theories used, with SEF theory enabling developmental stage and environmental factors to be considered alongside basic needs. The findings of this study suggest that developmental stage and anxiety status is relevant to basic need fulfilment, for example finding that 'relatedness' and staff relationships were of greater importance for anxious young people over the transition to secondary school. The accounts of young people who present with anxiety also suggested that they are operating at the foundational levels of the hierarchy of needs compared with peers, focusing on opportunities for safety and relatedness in an environment that feels threatening. Despite the noted limitations, this study suggests that the use of SEF theory alongside theories of basic need fulfilment can offer a lens through which to explore and address anxiety needs in secondary schools.

5.4 Strengths and Limitations

5.4.1 Strengths

This research has offered a qualitative account of the views and experiences of young people who present with anxiety, in order to better understand how the school environment may be able to adapt to mitigate and reduce sources of stress. This research offers a timely contribution towards a topical issue, with ongoing concerns about increasing anxiety and the impact this has on school engagement and attendance (DoH & DfE, 2017; NHS Digital, 2021). The framing of this study explicitly exploring anxiety represents a contribution to the existing literature, where qualitative studies sampling young people based on anxiety are scarce. This study argues that the perspectives shared are an important contribution, and challenge the

largely quantitative and medicalised approaches dominant in this area. In addition, the strengths-based approach has offered potential solutions to many of the negative experiences identified in existing accounts of young people's experiences at school where anxiety is prevalent.

The young people in both groups in this study responded well to the Ai model for data generation, and the use of Ai to compare across two cases is a novel use of the framework. The model allowed rich data to be generated through repeated sessions with participants and the use of activities such as creating the dream school. Whilst this took additional time, each session built on the previous and enabled greater depth to the accounts. It also gave the researcher flexibility to revisit questions or topics in more depth. The young people in this study spoke positively about the opportunity to have their voice heard and to feel listened to, and this has been found to be important to effective mental health promotion in schools (Aston, 2014; Jessiman et al., 2022; Sixsmith et al., 2004). The participatory nature of the research is therefore a strength. The sampling method was complimentary to this, as young people were able to contribute based on a shared experience rather than a shared diagnostic label, and this generated rich accounts as well as facilitating a strong sense of relatedness between participants.

A final strength is the 'real world' approach adopted in this study, leading to greater transferability to secondary school contexts. Careful considerations were made with regards to the limitations of sampling, for example the distinction between the anxious and non-anxious groups without administering and scoring the identified scales. This decision was made in order to reflect the 'real-world' context and

existing practice within the school, where the SAS-TR and SDQ are not routinely administered and scored in order to identify and understand needs. It was felt that through collaborative discussion of participant profiles, it was possible to develop confidence in the recruitment of two distinct groups. Despite the researcher not using the term 'anxiety' with the group, this term along with 'stress' came up repeatedly throughout the data generation phases, corroborating the school's identification of this as an SEMH need.

5.4.2 Limitations

This study adopted a case study design and qualitative methodology, and whilst there are criticisms with regards to 'generalisability', this was not an intended aim of the study. This said, the researcher acknowledges the potential limitations of conducting the research with a small sample within one school setting. The research may have been strengthened by the recruitment of at least one more school which would have allowed findings to be contrasted, identifying specific areas of effective practice that could be shared between schools in the LA.

Through the sampling approach, the researcher anticipated that more females may participate in comparison to previous studies, due to the issues acknowledged in relation to underdiagnosis of autistic females (Gould, 2017). Despite this, only two females were recruited to the anxious group, and only one participated due to struggles for the second female participant in terms of school attendance. This led to an overrepresentation of male participants. This fits with the existing literature but further highlights the need for more consideration of how anxiety may be masked

and therefore unidentified for girls at secondary school. The lack of female participants may have been a particular feature of the year group sampled, and as such it may have been better to have expanded the age range to include young people in all of Key Stage 3 as opposed to just Year 8. This would still have adequately addressed the research questions and may have enabled greater nuance in terms of meeting the needs of young people at different developmental stages.

In addition to the issues of gender, research suggests that anxiety can present in different ways, including as externalising behaviours (Bubier & Drabick, 2009), and that school staff are less likely to conceptualise this as emotional distress (Nash et al., 2016) instead believing that a young person is making 'poor choices'. It is possible that within the sampling approach of this study, some pupils may have been missed due to presenting with more externalising rather than internalising behaviours. This was discussed with school staff during the recruitment phase however it is acknowledged that the sampling approach was not free of bias. The sample may have been broadened by allowing pupils to self-identify as anxious. The researcher felt that despite this limitation, the study makes a valuable contribution to understanding and reducing anxiety, within the broader context of difficulties identifying 'SEMH' needs which may be a relevant area for future research.

Whilst the use of the Ai framework enabled rich data generation, a limitation of its use came about during the 'Design' phase, where discussion of ideas for change took place. The researcher found that participants found it difficult to think of realistic changes that the school could make, based on their perceptions of it as a rigid

system, and in the absence of an action research model giving participants agency to make changes. In addition to this, the activities were less structured than in previous sessions which allowed more free-flowing discussion. Overall, this meant that the discussion often became problem-focused, and whilst this led to important findings, the researcher acknowledges that a different approach or positioning may have generated more solutions in line with the research aim.

A final limitation is the strengths-based approach adopted by the study. This approach is criticised for avoiding the acknowledgement of problems (Rogers & Fraser, 2003). This study sought not to conceptualise anxiety as a 'within-child' problem, and not to discuss it explicitly with participants based on the sensitivity of the topic for the young people involved. However, in doing so, it could be argued that the study has overlooked or undermined the problematic nature of experiencing anxiety, and the individual factors relevant to this. Participants were open and willing to share their experiences in this area, and as such it may have been possible to take a less narrowly strengths-based approach. This may have allowed more understanding of individual factors and differences, for example through adopting a more holistic risk and resiliency approach.

5.4.3 Trustworthiness

Through careful decision-making, research supervision and a reflexive journal, the researcher has attempted to maintain integrity throughout the research process, in order to achieve findings that are robust, useful and trustworthy. Considerations

have been made using the core principles for evaluating the validity of qualitative psychology (Yardley, 2016), outlined in the remainder of this section.

Sensitivity to context

A range of considerations were made with regards to the different relevant contexts to this research study. A systematic literature search alongside information about the current national context allowed the identification of a topical research study which addressed gaps in the literature. In addition, theory has been considered and outlined in order to fit with the complex theoretical context of anxiety. The researcher ensured that the study fit with the school context, acknowledging how SEND are identified, assessed and addressed within the legislative context, and using this definition to recruit participants rather than through the administration of an anxiety measure, for example. The researcher made a range of ethical consideration to facilitate participation for young people, including the scheduling of data generation sessions, rapport-building and differentiated and age-appropriate data generation materials. The researcher used their reflexive journal to consider issues of power and relationship dynamics, particularly in the context of being the school's link EP.

Commitment and rigour

The researcher has demonstrated in-depth engagement with the topic through the literature review, both setting out the current context, conducting a detailed systematic literature search and providing detailed information regarding the process and findings. The researcher carefully considered the data collection method,

ensuring competence through attendance to a lecture on Ai methodology as part of EP doctoral training, reading examples of previous studies with young people using Ai, and becoming familiar with the literature on conducting Ai more broadly. The researcher used previous research experiences to ensure competency with regards to interviewing, focus groups and data analysis. Different types of data were collected across multiple sessions and themes were presented to participants, demonstrating within-case triangulation, member checking and added depth.

Coherence and transparency

The research process has been clearly outlined and described, and a wide range of additional appendices have been included to demonstrate approaches taken at each stage of the research process. Notably, the data analysis process is described in detail and appendices demonstrate the development of codes, sub-themes and overarching thematic maps, and how these changed to reflect thinking and decision-making and different points. Braun and Clarke's (2022) recent TA textbook was used to ensure the TA process followed the recommended approach. The researcher has ensured fit between the research aim and questions, the theoretical framework and the overall methodology. A reflexive journal has been used throughout the process to record decisions and reflections.

Impact and importance

The focus of the research study is topical and positioned in a real-world setting and context, making the findings relevant to the school and participants involved. The

researcher intends to use the findings to promote positive change for participants in the research setting, as well as consider the applicability of findings to other similar settings and populations. This is particularly relevant to ongoing development of EBSNA policies within EP practice, and the government priority of responding to non-attendance where mental health is a concern (DfE, 2023). The researcher has reflected on the limitations of the research, acknowledging the extent to which they can be transferred and applied beyond the research setting. Importantly, this research has given voice to young people underrepresented in the research base and has been underpinned by the view that their lived experiences are the most valid and important contribution to the research area. Through participation in the study, the group of anxious young people have become a support network for each other. This was an unintended but impactful outcome of the study.

6. Conclusion

6.1 Chapter Overview

This chapter concludes the thesis by exploring the implications of the overall study. Future directions for research are considered, as well as an outline of how the findings from this study will be disseminated.

6.2 Implications

The findings of this study have demonstrated that young people perceive there to be a link between their anxiety and the school environment. Using a strengths-based approach, young people suggested existing and future practices that contribute towards reduced anxiety. Given the national context and concern with regards to increasing prevalence of mental health difficulties, there are important implications for both schools and EPs which will be outlined in this section. The findings suggest that schools can support young people with anxiety through establishing supportive relationships; a calm, inclusive environment; engaging learning experiences; and enabling young people to feel able to meet school demands. Although from an analytical perspective the themes identified are mutually exclusive, findings suggest that within a real-world context they are complimentary. Enhancing each of the four identified aspects of secondary school would promote increased perceived feelings of safety, calmness and happiness for all young people and promote need fulfilment. Universal and targeted changes would support some young people in particular to feel less anxious, and more able to meet school demands. The findings suggest that

all young people in the environment would benefit from these adjustments leading to overall greater feelings of self-determination. The theoretical framework used in this study suggests that schools and EPs may better understand and address anxiety needs through a lens of stage-environment fit theory, with consideration of how the school environment fulfils the range of basic needs. Both Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs and Self-determination theory have much to offer given that a range of basic needs were present in all young people's accounts of more ideal school experiences.

6.2.1 Implications for Practice

This section sets out the implications for practice, including how schools can reduce anxiety and the role of EPs in supporting this. Suggestions arising from the study support the existing evidence which advocates for whole school approaches to supporting and promoting mental health (Carroll & Hurry, 2018; Glazzard, 2019; O'Brien & Roberts, 2019; Weare, 2015), and fostering an inclusive ethos where all young people belong (Greenwood & Kelly, 2019; Midgen et al., 2019). As such, this study recommends that schools look to the wealth of literature with regards to whole school approaches to inform their response to anxiety. The remainder of this section sets out tentative recommendations specific to anxiety, that should be considered by those with context-specific expertise, given that the findings of this study are based on one school setting.

Identification of anxiety needs

The research process has illuminated some of the challenges associated with the identification of young people experiencing school-based anxiety, particularly given the likelihood of masking. Existing research and this study have shown that using school staff perceptions or relying on specific diagnoses can lead to overidentification of male pupils. This study suggests that supportive relationships and an inclusive ethos are vital to enable young people to share their struggles more openly. Alongside, schools may consider embedding mechanisms that enable young people to communicate the need for support in safe or anonymous ways, for example through self-referrals or peer care for concerns. Schools could also consider the use of screening tools, particularly those that give young people the opportunity to self-report. Information about potential anxiety should also be considered as part of the information sharing processes between primary and secondary schools as part of the transition, and screening tools could be used here alongside, in order to agree and understand the presentation of anxiety and associated triggers. This would contribute towards young people's desire for their needs to be recognised and understood. EPs can support schools in this endeavour by creating reflective spaces with staff to support further understanding of anxiety presentations, advising on appropriate screening tools and supporting with the interpretation of and response to the findings.

Understanding, attuning and responding to anxiety

The young people in this study suggested that their anxiety is not always well understood by peers and staff, and this can lead to interactions which exacerbate anxiety levels and stigma. Schools and school staff should therefore seek to draw on

information and expertise available to them to develop greater understanding of anxiety and other mental health difficulties, including how to respond in ways that are supportive, developmentally appropriate and containing. Sources of support and expertise could include EPs, staff associated with MHSTs and other recognised training providers. Schools should consider how to embed, review and share expertise in order to maintain an accepting and understanding culture around mental health needs. In addition to staff understanding, schools should embed mental health literacy across the curriculum to enhance young people's understanding and reduce stigma, creating a culture of safety and tolerance. Part of this could be to establish a peer support programme and opportunities for student voice. EPs could support with these initiatives through supervision of staff with a relevant role (such as the Designated Senior Lead for Mental Health or Emotional Literacy Support Assistants), consultations to develop shared understanding of groups or individuals, or delivering staff training and CPD.

Adopting relational approaches

Relationships emerged as a key theme for supporting young people's safety, happiness and overall success in school, including their own relationships and those between other people. Schools should seek to build relational safety through demonstrating consistent care, positivity, interest and support in interactions with all young people. Particularly important for young people with anxiety is the need for staff to consistently interact with warmth and kindness, and to adopt a relaxed teaching approach. Relationships between young people and staff can be supported by commitment and time taken to understand and accept individual needs. Schools

should foster positive relationships between peers, offering opportunities to connect through fun experiences, working together and sufficient recreational time. As well as facilitating positive interactions, schools should buffer negative interactions through the development of clear, proactive and preventative anti-bullying and anti-stigma policies. Schools should also consider relational repair in response to conflict between young people or school staff, for example through restorative justice approaches. In order to embed relational approaches, schools could consider developing a 'relationships' rather than 'behaviour' policy, which focus on connection and repair for managing behaviour rather than behaviourist principles. EPs can support with this, facilitating the development, dissemination and evaluation of psychologically informed relationships policies.

Targeted support

For young people where anxiety is identified as part of their lived experience of school, more targeted support should be implemented. The findings of this study suggest that this should focus on facilitating the young person to feel able to meet school demands and increasing their self-determination by auditing opportunities for their basic needs to be fulfilled. All young people's experiences are different and this study demonstrates the importance of seeking their voices to understand and respond sensitively and appropriately. Young people suggested that attuned and proactive support is valued, and as such Figure 12 sets out a framework that could be used to audit and plan for young people with anxiety. This could be adapted for use to support planning over the transition to secondary school, to minimise the risk of exacerbated anxiety. The graduated response should be used alongside this

framework to review progress and make decisions with regards to additional support or intervention, including involving an EP.

Figure 12.

Initial Considerations for Responding to School-Based Anxiety

<p>Build relational safety</p> <p><i>Does the young person have supportive relationships with adults and peers in school?</i></p> <p><i>Is the young person understood and accepted?</i></p> <p><i>Are interactions anxiety-promoting or reducing?</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Assign a trusted member of staff who the young person can discuss worries with • Set out how, when and where the trusted member of staff can be accessed for support, ensuring that this is consistent • Co-construct a pupil profile with the young person which sets out their needs, preferences, and adjustments. Agree how this will be shared with the wider school community • Review reasonable adjustments on a half-termly basis, identifying any barriers to their use • Facilitate opportunities to connect with peers and build relationships during lessons and at unstructured times.
<p>Manage the physical environment</p> <p><i>Does the young person feel safe and calm in the environment?</i></p> <p><i>Is the environment equipped in a way that demonstrates that this young person belongs?</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Undertake an audit of the physical environment with the young person to understand spaces, times of day or situations that both cause and reduce anxiety • Create a quiet, calm space in the school that is accessible throughout the school day. Consider how this space can be protected so that it remains quiet • Consider reasonable adjustments including increased access to nature and the outdoors, or changes to lighting, seating or uniform to increase physical comfort. • Ensure that the young person has regular opportunities during the school day to unwind and recharge, through movement breaks or a time out pass. • Work with the young person to identify activities that reduce anxiety, and allow regular use of these e.g. fidget tools, listening to music, walking etc.
<p>Facilitate learning and meeting school demands</p> <p><i>Does the young person experience learning that makes them feel competent?</i></p> <p><i>Does the young person feel able to meet the range of school demands?</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Facilitate learning opportunities that are accessible, fun, relaxed and shared with others. Check understanding and provide additional support where necessary. • Provide information ahead of important events and policy changes, and where possible allow an adjustment period to support the young person to adapt. • Consider the demands and rules that the young person is subject to, and offer increased flexibility and reassurance where possible, particularly with regards to sanctions.

6.2.2 Future Research

There continues to be a gap in the evidence base for school-based action research jointly involving young people with and without mental health needs, and further research exploring preventative approaches to school-based anxiety, drawing on the accounts of young people, school staff and parents and carers. The findings of this study have highlighted aspects of school that may be adjusted to reduce anxiety. Further research could therefore examine and evaluate the whole-school impact of such adjustments both from a qualitative and quantitative perspective. For example, gathering pre and post pupil mental health assessment measures in response to embedding a 'relationships' instead of 'behaviour' policy or following staff training on managing and responding to anxiety. This study highlighted difficulties with regards to identifying girls with anxiety, and as such this is a valuable area for further research, both in terms of how to identify this need as well as understanding lived experiences. Further research might usefully address this by using self-identification in sampling to enable greater participation from girls themselves. Finally, this study explored anxiety using one theoretical framework focusing on environmental factors, and further research could contribute by exploring individual strategies and resiliency factors that support young people to manage anxiety at secondary school.

6.2.3 Dissemination

The researcher intends to conduct the 'Destiny' phase of the Ai, by recruiting school staff members to participate in a focus group considering the findings of the study and the steps that can be taken to move towards the 'dream' school. As part of this,

the researcher will consider the ways that they can support the school and participants through their role as link EP. In addition, the researcher will share the findings with their EP service and consider how the findings can be used to support policy development within the service and the wider LA.

6.3 Conclusion

This study has qualitatively explored young people's anxiety using a strengths-based approach to identify solutions to current national problems with regards to increasing prevalence and school non-attendance. In addressing a topical and under researched issue, this study has generated a contribution to professional EP practice as well as a unique contribution to the evidence base. The findings suggest that both schools and EPs have an important role to play in addressing and reducing increasing anxiety. Whilst a range of potential adaptations have been proposed that could buffer the negative impact of the school environment, this is within the context of wider issues for schools with regards to increasing pressure from accountability systems, and cuts to essential funding for mental health services. As such, EPs have an important and continued role to play, using interactionist and systemic perspectives to reflect on the wide range of factors influencing anxiety problems, and how these may be best addressed within specific contexts.

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Appendices

Appendix A – Table of selected papers

Author, Title and Source	Focus and link to anxiety	Methodology	Key Findings
<p>Akister, Guest & Burch (2016)</p> <p>Can Activity Projects Improve Children's Wellbeing during the Transition to Secondary Education?</p> <p><i>International Education Studies (Impact Factor: 2.25)</i></p>	<p>This study reports on a summer activity project for children identified as vulnerable in the transition from primary to secondary school. Participants were sampled based on teacher concerns including 'anxious', and scores on the SDQ.</p> <p>Theoretical framework: Not specified</p>	<p>A repeated measures longitudinal design. Staff at 10 primary schools in the East of England identified 48 children as 'vulnerable' at transition, based on SDQ scores and categories of concern (including anxiety). This data was collected in Year 6 and again at the end of Year 7. In the intervening period, children attended a summer activity project aimed at easing the transition.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The summer transition project had a positive impact on emotional distress and self-confidence through familiarisation. • 65% of participants scored high/borderline on the SDQ in Year 6 and this reduced to 31% at the end of Year 7. • 40% of participants scored 'high' on the emotional distress scale and this reduced to 15% by the end of Year 7. • 18 participants were identified as 'anxious' at the end of Year 6 and this reduced to 3 in Year 7.
<p>Costley et al. (2021)</p> <p>The Anxiety Caused by Secondary Schools for Autistic Adolescents: In Their Own Words</p> <p><i>Education Sciences (Impact Factor: 2.92)</i></p>	<p>This study explored the extent to which autistic students in secondary schools can recognise and reflect on their own anxiety.</p> <p>Theoretical framework: Intolerance of Uncertainty theory</p>	<p>Semi-structured interviews with 18 autistic adolescents (11 male, 7 female) aged 12-17yrs in different mainstream secondary schools in the UK. Participatory aspect with autistic co-researchers designing interview schedule.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Participants identified strongly with anxiety as a major aspect of their lives at school and something which they needed to continuously manage. • Triggers for anxiety include other people's behaviour, fear of the unknown and sensory sensitivities – concurring with the 'Intolerance of Uncertainty' theory. • Sub-themes with regards to triggers of anxiety include uncertainty, assessments, other people's behaviour and bullying • Sub-themes with regards to support for anxiety included support from school, self-help and fitting in. • Further research suggestion: repeating the research in a wider range of secondary schools, examining the influence of the school setting, and recruiting non-autistic participants to differentiate experiences.

<p>Goodall (2018)</p> <p>'I felt closed in and like I couldn't breathe': A qualitative study exploring the mainstream educational experiences of autistic young people</p> <p><i>Autism & Developmental Language Impairments (Impact Factor: 1.68)</i></p>	<p>This study explores autistic young people's views on experiences at mainstream, having left and moved to other settings. Anxiety is mentioned throughout the findings.</p> <p>Theoretical framework: Inclusion</p>	<p>Semi-structured interviews and activities with 12 autistic pupils (10 male, 2 female) aged 11-17yrs in mainstream secondary schools in Ireland. Participatory through the use of a Children's Research Advisory Group.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Participants described themselves as being socially, emotionally and physically isolated from peers, with loneliness and bullying experienced by some. • Participants felt unsupported and misunderstood by teachers within a social and sensory environment that was antithetical to their needs. • Support strategies included curriculum adaptations, more breaks, smaller class sizes, less homework, instructions broken down, safe places to use when anxious and teachers who listen to their concerns and take account of their needs. In short, they want to be understood, supported and included. • Further research suggested: Exploring positive aspects of primary vs secondary school.
<p>Hebron (2017)</p> <p>The transition from primary to secondary school for students with Autism Spectrum Conditions</p> <p><i>Book Chapter: Little (2017) Supporting social inclusion for students with autism spectrum disorders</i></p>	<p>This study measured school belonging for autistic pupils over the transition to secondary school and explores their views (as well as teachers and parents) on effective support. Anxiety is mentioned in the findings.</p> <p>Theoretical framework: Sense of belonging</p>	<p>Interviews conducted with 11 autistic pupils (9 male, 2 female), their key teacher and parent at some point from Year 6 to Year 8. Part of a wider study utilising the Psychological Sense of School Membership (PSSM) scale to compare the belonging of autistic and typically developing pupils over primary-secondary transition.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Six main themes were generated from the interviews which included transition planning and management; home and school communication; individualised support; peer relationships; academic considerations and autism identity (including anxiety).

<p>Hebron & Humphrey (2014)</p> <p>Mental health difficulties among young people on the autistic spectrum in mainstream secondary schools: a comparative study.</p> <p><i>Journal of Research in Special Educational Needs (Impact Factor: 0.67)</i></p>	<p>This study explored the mental health profiles of autistic adolescents compared to dyslexic and typically developing peers and explored their views on contributory factors. Anxiety is mentioned in the findings.</p> <p>Theoretical framework: Not specified</p>	<p>Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 5 autistic pupils (4 males, 1 female) in England and Wales. Part of a wider study using a causal comparative framework using the Beck Youth Inventories to compare the mental health of groups of autistic (n=22), dyslexic (n=21) and non-SEN (n=23) pupils.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Quantitative analysis demonstrated that autistic adolescents experienced significantly greater anxiety, depression, anger and lower self-concept than those with no SEN. They also experienced significantly greater anxiety and anger than those with dyslexia. Qualitative analysis revealed that problems in social relationships, bullying, social understanding, self-understanding of autism and disruptions to routine were common contributory factors to the mental health difficulties of participants. Adolescents may conceal anxiety by appearing to cope. Further research suggested: more understanding of how lack of acceptance of diagnosis impacts mental health.
<p>Humphrey & Lewis (2008)</p> <p>'Make me normal': the views and experiences of pupils on the autistic spectrum in mainstream secondary schools</p> <p><i>Autism: The International Journal of Research and Practice (Impact Factor: 6.68)</i></p>	<p>This study explored the views of autistic pupils with regards to inclusion. Anxiety is mentioned as a theme in the findings.</p> <p>Theoretical framework: Not specified</p>	<p>Semi-structured interviews, pupil drawings and pupil diaries were collected from 20 autistic pupils aged 11-17yrs from 4 mainstream secondary schools in England. Gender was not reported.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Central theme was how participants constructed their understanding of what their autism meant to them – often negative perceptions of differences. Anxiety theme – contributors included difficulties concentrating, noise and disruption, disliked subjects, exam nerves, refuge and desire for privacy. Other themes linked to relations with others, negotiating 'difference' and support from school. Further research suggested: research on a larger scale identifying effective practise in the area of inclusion for autistic pupils.
<p>Neal & Frederickson (2016)</p> <p>ASD Transition to Mainstream Secondary: A Positive Experience?</p> <p><i>Educational Psychology in practice (Impact Factor: 1.09)</i></p>	<p>This study explored how young people with ASD experience successful transitions, using qualitative accounts of strategies used to manage anxiety across the transition period.</p> <p>Theoretical framework: Resilience</p>	<p>Semi-structured interviews with 6 white British autistic pupils (5 male, 1 female) in Year 7 from 5 mainstream secondary schools in South East England. Participants were selected based on teacher perceptions of a 'successful transition' and low levels of anxiety.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Strategies to manage anxiety included individualised support, receiving practical information and advice, positive approaches, and strategies with clear purpose. Themes were generated in relation to uncertain emotions and transition being characterised by change (to the environment, systems and curriculum).

<p>Neal et al. (2016)</p> <p>Exploring the longitudinal association between interventions to support the transition to secondary school and child anxiety</p> <p><i>Journal of Adolescence (Impact Factor: 3.26)</i></p>	<p>This study explored how existing transition strategies used by schools, categorised into cognitive, behavioural or systemic approaches, were associated with post-transition anxiety for all pupils, separated by those with and without SEN.</p> <p>Theoretical framework: Stage-environment fit</p>	<p>Longitudinal quantitative design with 621 pupils from 9 mainstream secondary schools in the South East of England. Data was collected at the end of Year 6 and start of Year 7. Measures included a self-report on anxiety (SCARED) and transition strategy questionnaires for staff, pupils and parents. Results for typically developing pupils (n=532) were compared to those with SEN (n=89)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Participants with SEN had higher levels of anxiety compared with non-SEN peers before and after transition. • Systemic strategies were associated with lower levels of anxiety for non-SEN pupils post-transition, but higher for SEN pupils. This challenges the idea that uncertainty (and therefore anxiety) is reduced by exposure to secondary school. • Authors suggest that an individualised approach is most beneficial. • Future research suggested: investigate the types of support associated with positive transition outcomes amongst different SEN groups.
<p>Porter & Ingram (2021)</p> <p>Changing the exclusionary practices of mainstream secondary schools: the experience of girls with SEND. 'I have some quirky bits about me that I mostly hide from the world'</p> <p><i>Emotional and Behavioural Difficulties (Impact Factor: 1.2)</i></p>	<p>This study explored the barriers and supports to inclusion for girls with SEND in mainstream school through a questionnaire. Anxiety is mentioned in the findings.</p> <p>Theoretical framework: Sense of belonging</p>	<p>A questionnaire and the Psychological Sense of School Membership (PSSM) scale was administered to 108 girls in Years 8 and 9 at 4 mainstream secondary schools in England, who self-disclosed SEND.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Girls with SEND report lower sense of belonging, feeling less connected compared with non-SEN peers. • Relational aspects of school most important for girls with SEND. Feeling you belong means feeling safe to be yourself, not hiding “quirky bits” and the attendant demands that has on mental health. • Feeling unsafe at school impacts on girls’ attendance as well as mental health. Issues of mental health arose in many of the girls’ responses with particular reference to anxiety and feeling stressed and pressurised. • Sources of stress included learning experiences including tests, homework and aspects of teaching/learning approaches.
<p>Stack, Symonds, & Kinsella (2020)</p> <p>Student and Parent Perspectives of the Transition From Primary to Secondary School for Students With Autism Spectrum Disorder</p> <p><i>Frontiers in Education (Impact Factor: 2.32)</i></p>	<p>This study explored the perceptions of children with ASD, on the topic of which features of school environment fit more or less well with their needs, as they transferred from primary to secondary schools. Anxiety is mentioned in the findings.</p> <p>Theoretical framework: Stage-environment fit</p>	<p>Semi structured interviews were conducted with 6 autistic pupils (5 male, 1 female) and their mothers in the final term of Year 6, and within the first 2 months of Year 7. Participants attended 6 different mainstream secondary schools in Ireland.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • ‘Fits’ and ‘misfits’ fell within the themes of feelings about school, peer relationships, relationships with staff, curriculum, school organisation and accommodations. • Friendships and kind and understanding teachers were a continuous ‘fit’ from primary to secondary school. • Bullying, disruptive behaviour of peers, and being treated differently were continuous ‘misfits’ from primary to secondary school.

			<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Further research suggested: more longitudinal studies over the transition period.
<p>Tobias (2009)</p> <p>Supporting students with autistic spectrum disorder (ASD) at secondary school: a parent and student perspective</p> <p><i>Educational Psychology in practice (Impact Factor: 1.09)</i></p>	<p>This study explored what support has been most helpful for autistic pupils at secondary school, and what additional support could be provided, through their views and the views of their parents. Anxiety is mentioned in the findings.</p> <p>Theoretical framework: Inclusion</p>	<p>Activity-based focus groups were conducted with 10 autistic pupils accessing a resource base in a mainstream secondary school in England. They were split into two groups based on year group. The Year 11 group had 3 participants, and the Year 9 group had 7.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Support evaluated positively by participants included targeted support at key transition points; the provision of mentors; availability of quiet, calmer spaces; good communication between staff and parents; staff knowledge of ASC and individual students; individual support; a welcoming ethos; thoroughness; lower student/staff ratios. • Possibilities for additional support included developing enhanced self-confidence, sense of belonging, social inclusion, independence and life skills • Further research suggested: comparison to the wider school population.
<p>Tomlinson, Bond & Hebron (2022)</p> <p>The mainstream school experiences of adolescent autistic girls</p> <p><i>European journal of special needs education (Impact Factor: 0.67)</i></p>	<p>This study explored how autistic adolescent girls experience a mainstream secondary school. Anxiety is mentioned in the findings.</p> <p>Theoretical framework: Not specified</p>	<p>Semi-structured interviews were conducted twice with 3 autistic girls, and once with their mothers and a member of school staff at a mainstream secondary school in England. The girls were in Years 10 and 11.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Environmental, social and personal challenges were highlighted. This included inconsistencies in levels of staff awareness of need (particularly among less familiar staff), sensory issues, and struggles with social interactions. • Positive experiences were underpinned by supportive relationships and personalised planning. • Anxiety was one instance where the adults underestimated the difficulties experienced by the girls, which is potentially a consequence of the girls' ability to mask their difficulties • Further research suggested: more studies assessing the challenges of mainstream secondary school environments.

Experiences of secondary school for children who present with anxiety



Invitation to take part in a research study

My name is Amy and I am a Trainee Educational Psychologist at the UCL Institute of Education. I am currently working with local schools through my placement with XXX Educational Psychology Team. I am recruiting for my thesis as part of my Doctorate in Child, Adolescent and Educational Psychology. This project has received ethical approval from the Institute of Education (UCL) and is supervised by Dr Amelia Roberts.

The aim of my research is to explore the views of children who are recognised as having SEND where anxiety is one of their presenting needs, on experiences of the transition to secondary school and what supports them. This area is currently under-researched for children with SEMH difficulties despite evidence that anxiety can have a negative impact on school attendance and educational outcomes.

What does it involve?

The research will take a positive and solution-focused stance, looking to understand what is already working well, and what could make it even better rather than highlighting problems. I am looking for 'case study' schools. Participating in the research would involve two activities:

Focus Groups

I would like to recruit up to 6 children in Year 8 to form a research group answering the question "*what can this school do to make the best it can be for future pupils?*". I will meet with the group four times for up to an hour per session during the Autumn term, using appreciative inquiry to 'discover' (what does the school do well already?), 'dream' (what would the 'ideal' be like?) and 'design' (what ideas do we have for practice?).

Interviews

I would like to conduct 1:1 interviews with the group members to understand more about their views and experiences.

I will need the school to:

- Identify 6 participants who meet the inclusion criteria
- Facilitate the process of gaining consent (e.g. sending a letter home to identified participants)
- Support with scheduling the 4 focus group/1:1 interview sessions and booking an appropriate room
- Share some information about your policies, procedures and existing provision.

What are the benefits of participating?

- You will receive an account of existing practice that is working well and valued by pupils, evidencing how pupil voice is sought for important issues.
- You will receive some recommendations on additional support that could ease the transition and secondary school experience for children who sometimes feel anxious.

What will happen to the data?

The sessions will be confidential except for in the instance of a safeguarding concern which will be shared with the school's Designated Safeguarding Lead. There will be an audio recording of the focus groups and interviews which will then be transcribed. Once transcribed, a pseudonym (fake name) will be given to each child and the school so that participants are not identifiable. The data will be analysed to look for themes. Results will be reported in my doctoral thesis and overall findings will be shared with your school. Data will be stored securely using password protection and an encrypted laptop.

If you would like to participate in the research, or would like to request further information, please contact me by **Friday 16th September** at amy.suddards@XXX.gov.uk.

Thank you.

Appendix C – Screening tools used for sampling

Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire – Emotional problems subscale

Scoring: Not true – sometimes true – certainly true

1. Many worries, often seems worried
2. Often complains of headaches, stomach-aches or sickness
3. Often unhappy, down-hearted or tearful
4. Nervous or clingy in new situations, easily loses confidence
5. Many fears, easily scared

School Anxiety Scale – Teacher Report (SAS-TR)

Scoring: Never – Sometimes – Often - Always

1. This child is afraid of asking questions in class
2. This child speaks only when someone asks a question of them
3. This child worries what other people think of him/her
4. This child does not volunteer answers or comments during class
5. This child is afraid of making mistakes
6. This child hates being the centre of attention
7. This child hesitates in starting tasks or asks whether they understood the task before starting
8. This child worries about things
9. This child worries that (s)he will do badly at school
10. This child worries that something bad will happen to him/her
11. This child seems very shy
12. This child complains of headaches, stomach aches or feeling sick
13. This child feels afraid when (s)he has to talk in front of the class
14. This child hesitates to speak when in group situations
15. When this child has a problem, (s)he feels shaky
16. This child appears nervous when approached by other children or adults

Research Information Sheet

Hello! My name is Amy. My job is called a 'Trainee Educational Psychologist'. I work with children and the adults who know them best (inside and outside of school) to think of ways to make school the best it can be. Because I am a 'trainee', I am also studying at a university called the UCL Institute of Education.

I would like to invite you to be a researcher in a research group that I am setting up. I would like to find out about your views and thoughts to help me answer an important question – “what can schools do to make the adjustment to secondary school the best it can be?”. I would like to find out what secondary schools can do to help children feel safe and happy, and to settle in when they start.



Taking part will involve:

- Meeting three times this term as a group (Focus Groups)
- Meeting once with me individually (Interview)

I have prepared questions for these sessions that you will be able to answer by talking, or by drawing/writing/making if you prefer. There are no right or wrong answers. I am just interested in what you think to help me understand more about this topic. I will try to make sure that you know what to expect before you meet me each time. You can tell me if you need anything else to help you take part.

You are allowed to change your mind at any time if you decide you don't want to take part anymore, even after we meet. You are also allowed to change your mind at any time during our meetings. You can let me know at any time that you would like to stop, or if there is a question that you would not like to answer.



I will record what is said and done in our group sessions but it will be kept confidential.

I will give you a fake name when I write up my project so that you can't be recognised. Your interview will be kept private. However, if you tell me something that makes me worried about your safety or the safety of others, I would have to pass this information on to someone at your school.

I will write a report. When all of our group sessions are finished, I will look at what everyone has said and think about what we can learn from it. All of this will be written into my final research report that I have to submit to my university.



Research Consent Form

I agree to take part in the group meetings and individual interview	Yes <input type="checkbox"/>	No <input type="checkbox"/>
I understand what the project is about	Yes <input type="checkbox"/>	No <input type="checkbox"/>
I know that I can change my mind about taking part	Yes <input type="checkbox"/>	No <input type="checkbox"/>
My initials		
My primary school		
Today's date		

Data Protection Privacy Notice

The controller for this project will be University College London (UCL). The UCL Data Protection Officer provides oversight of UCL activities involving the processing of personal data and can be contacted at data-protection@ucl.ac.uk.

This 'local' privacy notice sets out the information that applies to this particular study. Further information on how UCL uses participant information from research studies can be found [here](#). The information that is required to be provided to participants under data protection legislation (GDPR and DPA 2018) is provided across both the 'local' and 'general' privacy notices. The lawful basis that will be used to process any personal data is: 'Public task' for personal data. We will be collecting personal data such as your name, email address and job title.

Your personal data will be processed so long as it is required for the research project. If we are able to anonymise or pseudonymise the personal data you provide we will undertake this, and will endeavour to minimise the processing of personal data wherever possible. If you are concerned about how your personal data is being processed, or if you would like to contact us about your rights, please contact UCL in the first instance at dataprotection@ucl.ac.uk.

Information Sheet for Parents/Carers

About this research project

My name is Amy and I am currently in my final year of training to be an Educational Psychologist. I am on placement with XXX's Educational Psychology Team and work with children, families and schools in the local area. I am conducting research for my thesis as a requirement towards my Doctorate in Child, Adolescent and Educational Psychology. I would like to recruit some children to be part of two research groups to help explore the topic of adjusting to mainstream secondary school. I am particularly interested in differences between the views of children who are identified by the school as anxious compared with those who are not, in order to find out how schools can best support with emotional needs. This is an area that is currently under-researched. It is hoped that the research will result in recommendations for schools.

This project has received ethical approval from the Institute of Education (UCL).

Your child's involvement

Your child has been invited to take part because they are in Year 8 in a mainstream secondary school in XXX and sometimes feel anxious..

They will be invited to be part of a 'research group' with five other children answering the question *"what can this school do to make secondary school the best it can be?"* using appreciative inquiry to 'discover' (what does the school do well already?), 'dream' (what would the 'ideal' be like?)

The sessions will involve child friendly activities that will support discussion about what they perceive to be helpful in school. They will be offered a variety of ways to share their ideas, including talking, drawing, writing and creating.

Your child's participation is voluntary. Your child can decide if they want to take part and will have the opportunity to drop out up until the time that the focus group and interview sessions have been transcribed and anonymised. I will explain this to your child before the focus groups and interviews and reassure them that they do not have to answer any questions if they do not wish to do so.

The project will start from XXX and will involve missing 4 periods of learning in total.

What will happen to their data?

The sessions will be confidential except for in the instance of a safeguarding concern which will be shared with the school's Designated Safeguarding Lead. There will be an audio recording of the sessions which will then be transcribed. Once transcribed, a pseudonym (fake name) will be given to your child so that their identity is protected. The data will be analysed to look for themes in common across and will not focus on the responses of any single child. Results will be reported in my doctoral thesis and overall findings will be shared with the participating school. Data will be stored securely using password protection and an encrypted laptop.

Parent/carer consent

If you **do not** want your child to participate in this research project, please contact Amy using the email address below, or let [staff name] know. Please respond before **XXX** if you **do not** want your child to participate.

Contact details

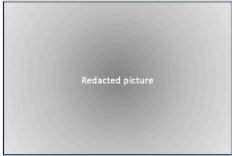
If you would like further information or have any questions or concerns, please contact me using the details below.

Amy Suddards
Trainee Educational Psychologist
[REDACTED]

Supervised by Dr Amelia Roberts
[REDACTED]

Appendix F – Introductory PowerPoint Slides

Who am I?



- ❖ My name is Amy
- ❖ I am a Trainee Educational Psychologist
- ❖ I try to understand how adults can make things better for children and young people in school

1

Why are we here?

What will happen in today's session:

- getting to know each other – introductions and games
- introducing you to the research project
- finding out what is important to you
- answering any questions you have about the project

2

What is this project about?


You are being invited to take part in my research project! If you would like to take part, together we will form one of two 'Research Groups'. This will really help me to understand:

- more about what secondary schools can do to make young people feel calm, safe and happy (because starting at secondary school can be an anxious time)
- what is most important to you about the question above (thinking about the transition to secondary school – is there anything you would like adults to understand better?)
- how ideas about this topic are the same and different for young people who feel more and less calm at school


3

Key words


Psychology




Research



Adjustment



Appreciative



4

Appreciative inquiry



The diagram illustrates the Appreciative Inquiry 4-D Cycle: **DISCOVERY** (Appreciate 'What IS'), **DREAM** (Imagine 'What COULD BE'), **DESIGN** (Deliberate 'What SHOULD BE'), and **DESTINY** (Create 'What WILL BE'). A central **POSITIVE CORE** is also shown.

5

What is involved?

Group meeting 1	We will discover what is good about this school What makes young people feel safe, calm and happy here?
Individual interview with me	You will create your 'dream school' What is this school like? What is good about it?
Group meeting 2	I will bring some statements/ideas based on what you have shared. We will try to come up with our ideas to design how to make things better.



6


What will happen?

- I will record what is said and done during our time together.
- This will be kept confidential so no one else but me will hear the recordings.
- I will change your name so that no one outside of this school knows you took part, or what you said.
- When we are finished, I will look at what has been said and what we can learn from it. This will be written in a report that I submit to my university.

7

It's up to you 😊

- It is your choice if you want to take part or not. You can change your mind at any time.
- If you want to stop, or if you don't feel able to answer a question, you can let me know at any time.
- If there is anything you need that will help you to take part, you can let me know.

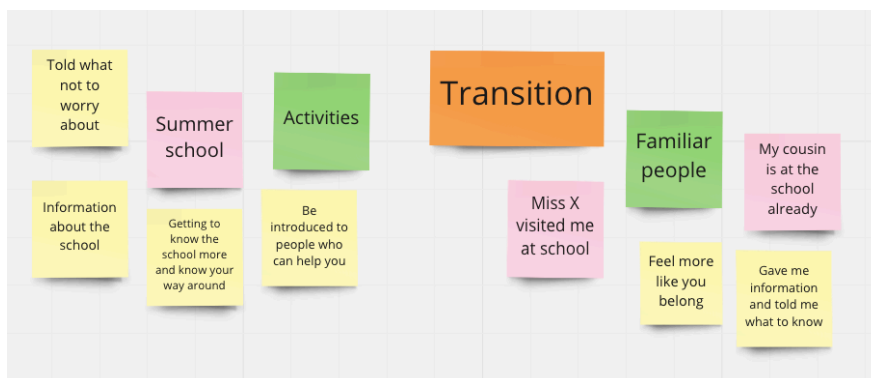


8

Appendix G – Focus group schedule (Discover phase)

Format	Focus Group
Aim	To appreciate 'what is' – what already works well?
Schedule	
<p>Re-cap aims of research and Ai cycle.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Today we are appreciating – focusing on the positives and things that we like • Ground rules – how can we make sure we are comfortable to share ideas? • No right or wrong answers, just want to hear what you think • You might not agree on all ideas and that is OK – it will help me to know how many people think the same or not • Is everyone happy to continue? • Any questions before we start? <p>Question 1: Think of things that you like about this school and write them on a post-it note. If you have more than one idea, write each one on a different post-it note. This could be anything – for example a person, a place or a subject.</p> <p>Prompts: What makes you want to come to this school? What is the best thing? Think about your best day here so far, what happened? What aspects of secondary school make you feel happiest and calmest?</p> <p>Group activity – gather post-it notes to create a mind map of all the positives and ask participants to arrange them into groups.</p> <p>Question 2: Looking at the things you have written, write your reasons 'why' on a post-it note and add it to the map.</p> <p>Prompts: Why is this a good thing? What do you like about this? Why is this important to you? How does this help you?</p> <p>Question 3: Think of one good way that this school supports children to settle in when they join in Year 7 and write this on a post-it note. If you have more than one idea, write each one on a different post-it note.</p> <p>Prompts: What were some of the helpful things that people did to help you? How did you get to know teachers and staff? When and how did you find out about the school?</p> <p>Group activity – gather post-it notes to create a mind map of all the ideas and ask participants to arrange them into groups.</p> <p>Question 4: Looking at the things you have written, write your reasons 'why' on a post-it note and add it to the map.</p> <p>Prompts: How did this help? What was good about that? What difference did that make?</p>	

Appendix H – Focus group example mind maps



Appendix I – Interview schedule (Dream phase)

Format	Individual interviews
Aim	To create the 'ideal' – what would the dream be?
<p>Schedule</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Problem-free talk – how is your day going etc • Thank you for coming to speak with me today. As you know I am really interested in what helps children to feel good about coming to secondary school. • Recap information and consent sheets – are you still happy to speak with me? If you decide at any time that you don't want to, that is not a problem, just let me know and we can stop. • Would you like to ask any questions before we start? • I am going to ask you a few questions about... (explain structure of interview) <p>Activity 1: There are lots of creative materials here for you. I would like you to create your 'dream' school. There is a prompt sheet here to help you think about what you might want to include. It is up to you how you create your school – you can let me know if you want to make, draw, write or just think about it. You will have 20 minutes and then we will talk about your ideas. There are no right or wrong answers and there are no rules. You can make whatever kind of school you would most like to go to.</p> <p>Questions:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. What can you tell me about your dream school? 2. What would this school be like? 3. What would you be able to see as you walk around? 4. What would the learning at this school be like? 5. What would the adults in this school be like? 6. What would the other children in this school be like? 7. What would be your favourite thing about this school? 8. What would be the most important thing about this school? 9. What would it be like to go to this school? 10. What would this school do before you started there to make you feel welcome? 11. What would this school do when you arrived to help you settle in? 12. What other support would this school give you? <p>Prompts for all questions: Why would that be a good thing? How would that help you? What difference would that make?</p>	

Appendix J – Provocative proposition worksheet (Design phase)

The Dream School	Scaling
1. The school gives us lots of information before we start, so we know how everything works and what makes it a great place.	
2. We get to visit the school and have a tour before we start.	
3. We have a gradual start where the rules are relaxed so that we can try things out and make mistakes.	
4. We are introduced to a key adult. This is a member of staff who we can talk to about our worries.	
5. The school knows information about us and our individual needs.	
6. The school runs trips, clubs and activities to help us make new friends.	
7. The school makes sure we are prepared for changes between each year at school.	
8. The school has nice, calm, fun and approachable staff. They are easy to talk to.	
9. School staff notice when we need help and know how to help us. They make sure we understand the work.	
10. The other children at school are understanding, accepting and calm.	
11. Everyone at the school gets along with each other.	
12. The classrooms are quiet, and children behave well.	
13. The learning is interesting and practical. We learn through games, trips and activities linked to the real world.	
14. There is extra help available for learning if you need it, during and outside of lessons.	
15. There are strategies we are allowed to use to help manage our anxiety.	
16. The school environment is spacious, interesting to look at and full of nature. It is calm, quiet and peaceful.	
17. There are indoor and outdoor spaces to relax.	
18. There is outdoor equipment so that children can play and do different activities.	
19. The school helps to make sure we have all the equipment we need.	
20. There are frequent school trips so that we can explore new places and have a break from school.	
21. The school has extra-curricular clubs to suit everyone's interests.	

Appendix K – Focus group schedule (Design phase)

Format	Focus Group
Aim	To create the 'ideal' – what could be different?
<p>Question 1: These are statements about the dream school based on what you have all said in our previous sessions. Let's read through them and check that they make sense. You can let me know if you disagree with any or think they could be changed.</p> <p>Question 2: Using the box next to each statement, write a number to reflect how true it is about <u>this school</u>. On a scale from 0 to 10, how true is each statement?</p> <p>Question 3: Using the highlighter, highlight the one statement that is most important for you. This is the one that you would most like to be true about school.</p> <p>Question 4: We will now look at each priority statement. What could this school do to make this truer? What ideas do we have? (follow-up questions about <i>how</i> e.g. would this be for some people or everyone?)</p> <p>Question 5: If you were in charge, what changes would you make to the school?</p> <p>Question 6: Finish the sentence starter "this school could be better if..."</p>	

Appendix L – Initial codes

Initial codes generated through the TA process	
a calm environment	peer relationships are important
a range of facilities	peers are accepting
a safe environment	peers are calm
ability to try new things	peers treat each other with mutual respect
academic pressure	people at the school make it what it is
access to a calm space	people can make choices in the space
access to quiet spaces	people follow the rules
adjustments that make it possible to meet school demands	practical learning is fun
asking for help is difficult	pressure to justify things to staff
being able to make the most of what school offers	quiet space allows concentration
being given adequate time	receiving support on own terms
being given information in advance	reducing stimulating environment
being given time to get to know the environment	relating to others who feel the same
being given time to get to know the school rules	sanctions are a source of worry
being given time to settle in	school is a stressful environment
being made aware of changes	school is strict
being treated equally	secondary school is less manageable than primary
break time is valued	sensory needs met
calm staff who don't shout	space promotes physical comfort
calming effect of nature	space provides entertainment
clubs support building friendships	Space to develop hobbies/interests
consistent approach from staff	space to pursue hobbies/interests
demands are unchangeable	space/time to calm down
designated spaces	spaces are quiet
designated spaces	spaces to socialise
desire for recreational spaces	spaciousness, less crowding
desire to feel happier	staff are available
difficulties concentrating	staff are containing
everyone gets along, there is no conflict	staff are easy to approach
expanding the library	staff are physically present
extended break times	staff are positive
feeling able to contribute	staff help with learning-understanding
feeling connected, accepted and understood	staff help with social issues
feeling happier	staff know how to help
feeling more competent	staff maintain order
feeling more motivated	staff notice when support is needed
feeling relatedness	staff provide reassurance
feeling stigmatised	staff reduce load and make adjustments

feeling understood	staff who are nice
flexibility on rules	staff who make learning fun
frequent school trips	supportive staff
fun, practical learning	the rules of a space are observed
having a key staff member	the school is inclusive - there is something for everyone
having individual needs met	there is choice-freedom
importance of entertainment	time away from lessons
importance of feeling prepared	time away from school is valued
individualised support	trips and opportunities
inflexibility of school	trusted relationship with staff
large, accessible outside space	unconditional support from staff
learning can be stressful	visually exciting school (challenging the monotony)
learning in preparation for adulthood	visually stimulating classroom
learning is achievable	wanting school to be less strict
learning is fun	wanting to feel more motivated to attend school
masking feelings	wanting to feel physically comfortable
mutual respect and acceptance	wanting to feel valued
nature-filled space	wanting to learn
not wanting to attend	wanting to work with others
opportunities for self-development	well-equipped spaces
opportunities to learn to manage anxiety	working together
opportunities to share views	

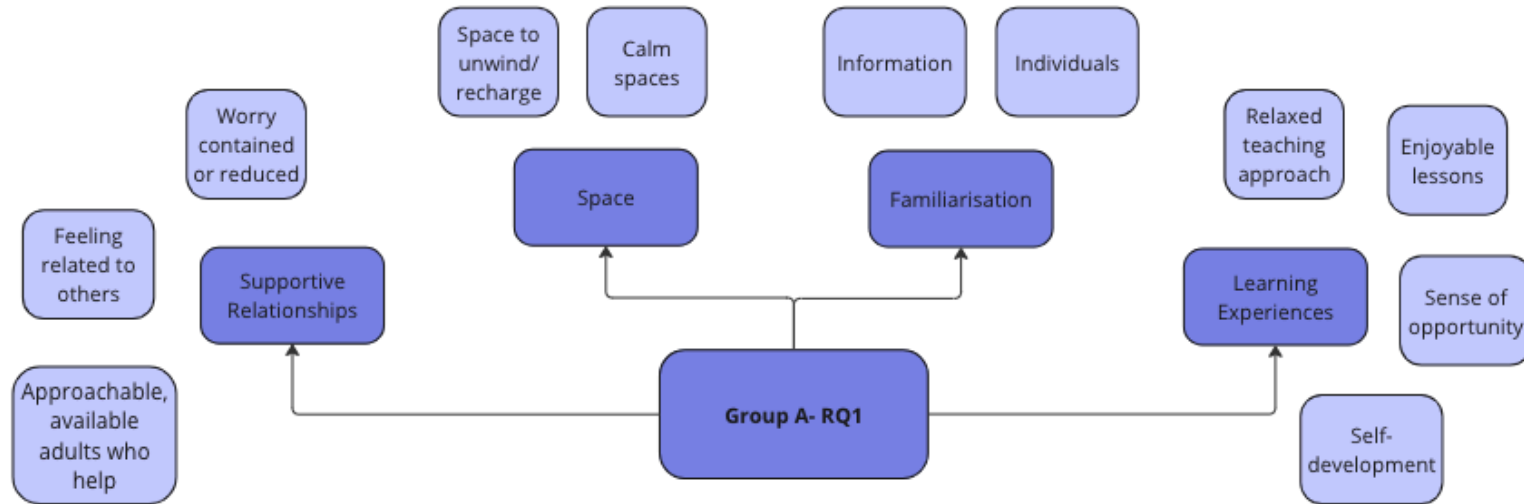
Appendix M – Coding examples (Moss and Blue)

<p>Moss: Well, I was thinking about a sort of garden maybe. Because I know gardens can be quite relaxing so I was just thinking maybe my school could have this, uh, sort of garden.</p>	<p>Nature-filled space Calming effect of nature</p>
<p>Researcher: Ok great. Let's start with the garden then. Tell me a bit more about your garden.</p>	
<p>Moss: Um. Maybe I could have some quite sensory flowers like lavender. Maybe sunflowers. I really don't mind what flower goes in there. Um and there'd be some sort of like comfortable benches you can sit down on. Maybe some lighting as well if it gets a bit dark. I was also thinking about maybe a little stream if that's possible with fencing to make sure nobody accidentally falls in it.</p>	<p>Sensory needs met Nature-filled space Space promotes physical comfort A safe environment</p>
<p>Researcher: Of course, anything is possible. So you like the thought of the garden, and being around flowers and nature. Why would that be important?</p>	
<p>Moss: Well obviously school is an environment where a lot of people would be stressing about because of homework or having a new exam so I'm thinking if people can just sit down for a moment and take a breath of fresh air then it would be beneficial for their mind.</p>	<p>School is a stressful environment Opportunity to take a break Calming effect of nature</p>
<p>Researcher: And how would that help people?</p>	
<p>Moss: I think it would help them to calm down a bit and maybe learn to calm down more easily. Maybe they could even develop some hobbies related to it. It might make them maybe care about nature a little bit more.</p>	<p>Calming effect of nature Opportunities to learn to manage anxiety Space to develop hobbies/interests</p>
<p>Researcher: So it would help with feeling calmer. Why would that be a good thing?</p>	
<p>Moss: Um. If they were more calmer then maybe they wouldn't feel so much negativity. And if they were going through a situation which was negative outside of school then they could use the knowledge they gained from relaxing and thinking about things and apply it to that.</p>	<p>Space/time to calm down Opportunities to learn to manage anxiety</p>
<p>Researcher: Great. What else can you tell me about your school?</p>	
<p>Moss: Um, and maybe there could be some recreational areas so people could play football and basketball if they wanted to. If we had more sort of recreational areas then people could still enjoy the sports they like. Maybe they could exercise regularly if they wanted to. Or if they wanted to have a game with their friend because they were a bit bored then they could.</p>	<p>Desire for recreational spaces People can make choices in the space Space to pursue hobbies/interests Space provides entertainment Spaces to socialise</p>

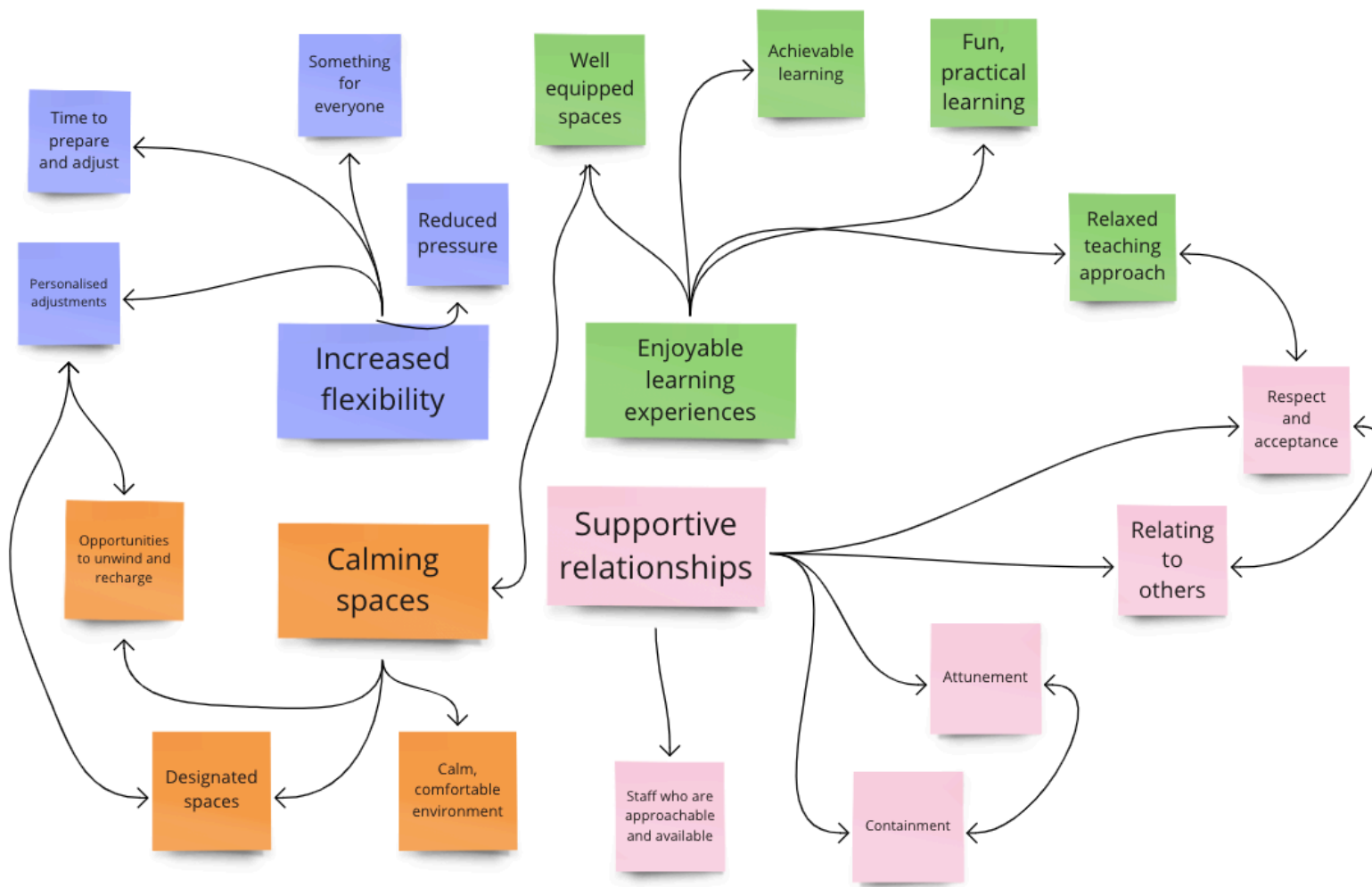
Blue: Maybe a playground as well where people can choose what they want to have there. So it has stuff that everyone can like. Because people may not want the same things as other people. Other people don't want the same thing as other people, you know. Like at Christmas maybe you don't want the same thing or maybe you do want the same thing as your sibling or something.	People can make choices in the space
Researcher: What else?	
Blue: And maybe a gaming area. Because like, there's a lot of kids that like to play games like Fifa and other games. And like maybe that can like be a way to, you know, just calm down a bit. Because it is for me. It definitely calms me down.	Space to pursue hobbies/interests Space/time to calm down
Researcher: So the school is medium sized, with trees and a field, a playground and a gaming area. Anything else?	
Blue: It would be sunny outside as well. And not too hot and not too cold. Just right. So people don't get headaches and migraines. Because a lot of people got that during last summer. They had a lot of headaches. It was really hot.	Sensory needs met Space promotes physical comfort
Researcher: What would the adults at your school be like?	
Blue: They would be calm. Not too loud. There's definitely some teachers in my school that are loud. You know, shouty. They would be happy. They would maybe compliment you. Being complimented by someone such as a teacher, that could lighten the mood if you're not feeling too happy. They could tell you you're doing well. They would give you a bit of space when you need it.	Calm staff who don't shout Staff who are positive Staff offer reassurance Staff know how/when to help
Researcher: What kind of space would they give you?	
Blue: A time out to just breath and think. Because in the classroom you get a bit flustered with all the questions thrown at you. One times two for example. Five times five. I know people can get flustered by those questions so they just need time outside to think.	Space/time to calm down Learning can be stressful
Researcher: Where would that time be?	
Blue: It would be anywhere you want. Have a walk or just stand where you are and think. You don't have to move if you don't want to.	The need for choice/flexibility
Researcher: And how would that help?	
Blue: You could just like get your thoughts sorted and calm down	Space/time to calm down

Appendix N – Development of thematic maps

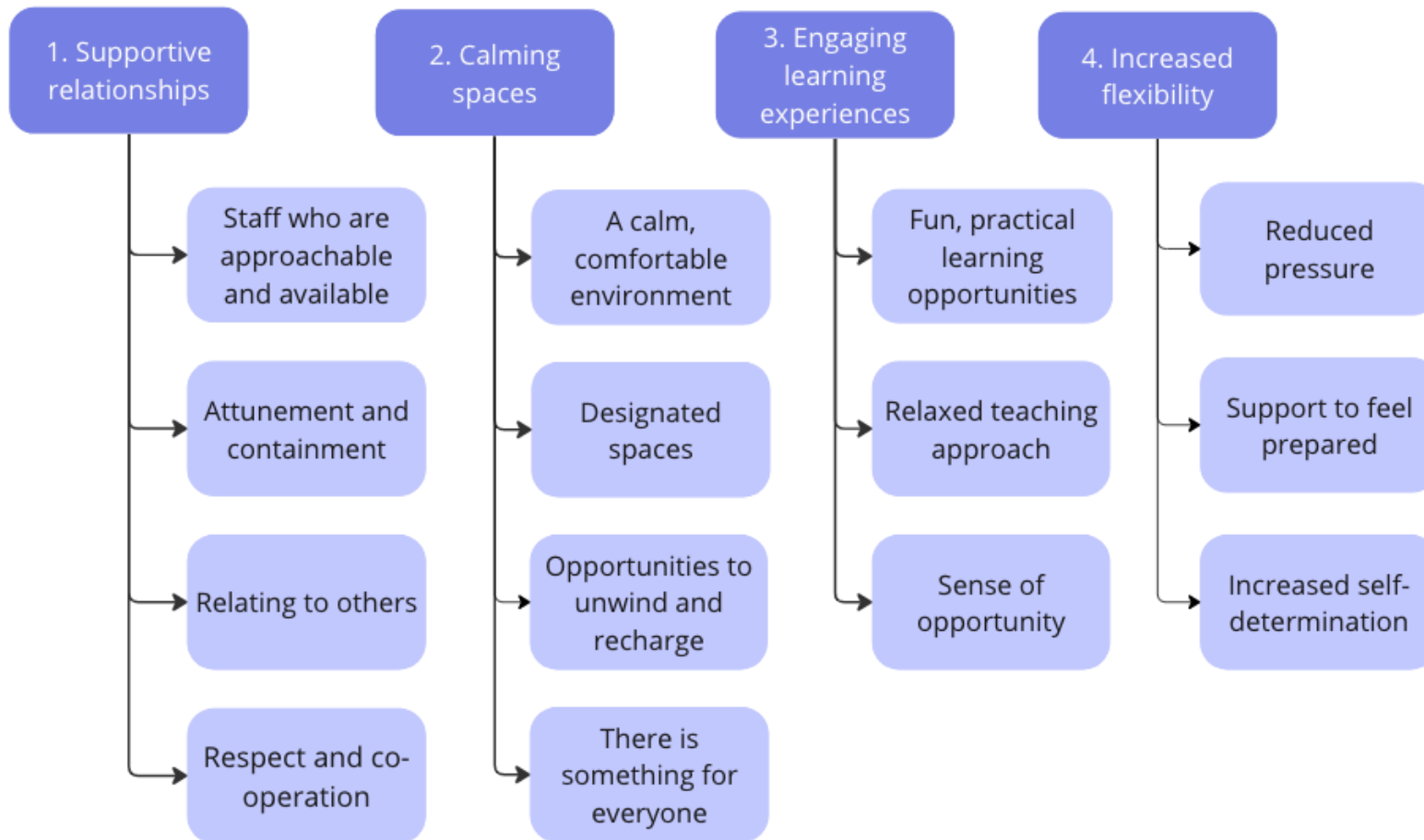
Initial thematic map for the 'Discover' phase with the anxious group



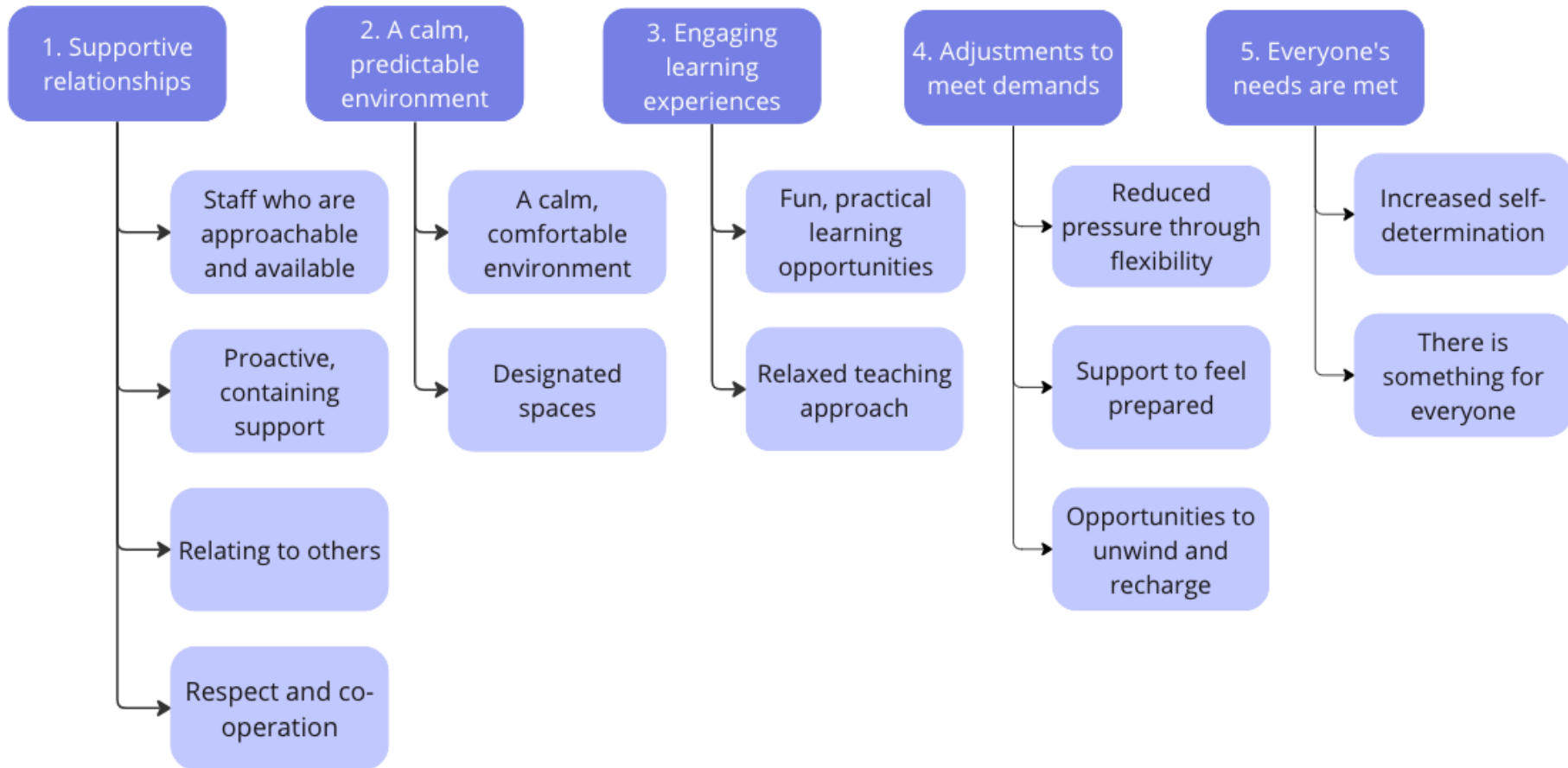
Initial conceptual map for all anxious group data



Thematic map 1



Thematic map 2



Appendix O – Example of a theme

Colour coding: **Discover** phase – post it notes / **Dream** phase – interview quotes / **Design** phase – focus group discussion

Theme: Supportive relationships		
Sub-theme	Codes	Data extracts
<p>Staff who are approachable and available</p> <p>Pupils feel able to approach staff because they are nice, easy to talk to and consistently available. Having a designated person to speak to makes it easier to seek support.</p>	Staff are consistently available	<p>SEN room - There are people who support you</p> <p>Staff - They are there to support you</p> <p>TAs - They are always there for you, like coming to lessons</p> <p>TAs - They are helpful and give you support</p> <p>TAs - They are helpful and come to class</p> <p>Moss: It would be good to know that they have time, and where to find them</p> <p>Ash: They would be with me all the time.</p> <p>Ocean: The TA would be there next to you to help support you. They would be with me all the time. I would have 2 people.</p> <p>Ocean: They would be nice. I don't know how to explain the word.... always there for you.</p> <p>River: They would be supportive all the time.</p>
	Staff are nice and approachable	<p>Staff - Nice</p> <p>Staff - Supportive</p> <p>Staff - Easy to communicate with</p> <p>Staff - Approachable</p> <p>Staff - Easy to talk to</p> <p>Ash: Nice</p> <p>Moss: They are someone you can talk to easily.</p> <p>Ocean: They would be very supportive and nice</p> <p>River: They would be nice and supportive</p>

		<p>River: It really depends on the teachers Moss: Some staff are really nice but some are not Blue: I gave that a 0 Ocean: Not all of them are easy to talk to Moss: They have quite a lot of different behaviours Ocean: Miss X is the harshest Moss: Yeah definitely. I find it quite hard to talk to her.</p>
	<p>Importance of having a key, trusted staff member</p>	<p>Staff – safe</p> <p>Ash: Have someone I like with me. Helping me.</p> <p>Ocean: I think if you know a teacher before you come. They can help you.</p> <p>Moss: Yeah it helps if you know a member of staff who is easy to talk to. Just someone I know that I can see often and talk to.</p> <p>Ocean: Before I start, show me who I can talk to with my worries.</p> <p>River: When you're stuck or get stressed out you could have someone to go to</p>
<p>Receiving proactive, containing support</p> <p>Staff reduce and share the emotional load by noticing when support is needed, being attuned to the needs of the pupil and responding in a way that is containing.</p>	<p>Staff notice and approach pupils in need</p>	<p>Moss: So the teachers actually just realise that something is wrong even though you look ok on the outside.</p> <p>Ash: [staff would be] coming over to me...helping me</p> <p>Moss: [dream staff] they're also really understanding people.</p> <p>Ocean: Like I always have anxiety in class but the teacher doesn't notice and I end up crying.</p> <p>Ocean: And you have to figure out how to ask the teacher. I can't deal with that. I used to use it but now I just can't even ask the teacher</p> <p>River: Say if you're like stressed like they will come over to you and support you and help you.</p> <p>River: Well I think that if you're really down then it's better for them to come to you</p>

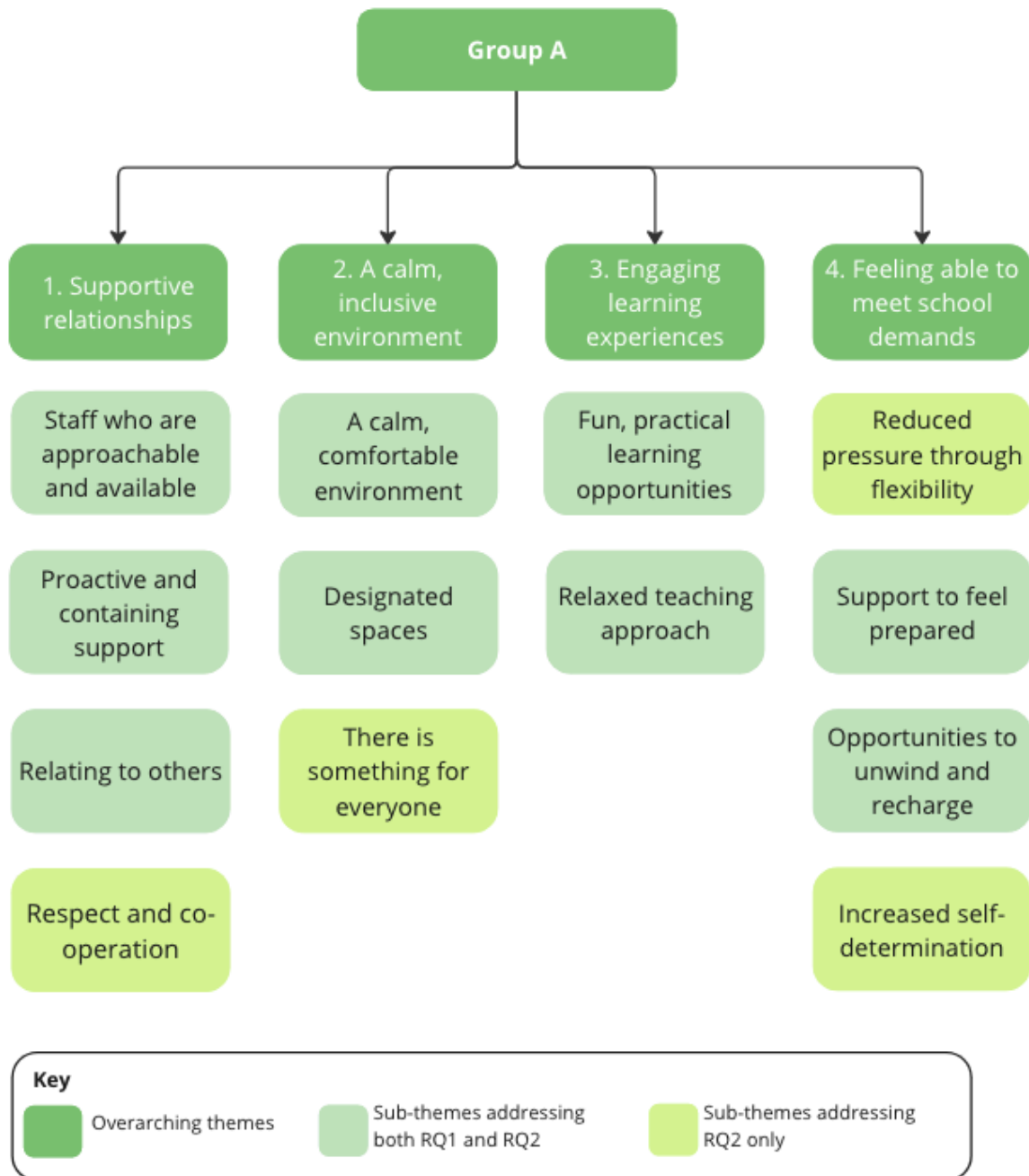
	Staff know how to help	<p>Staff – give you strategies to get over your stress</p> <p>Blue: They would give you a bit of space when you need it.</p> <p>Blue: It's better if they know when to help and when to leave you.</p> <p>Ash: They take you out of the class and chat to you</p> <p>Ocean: Because I find it difficult, talking in class. Because every time the teacher asks me a question I'm always thinking 'why does it have to be me?' because I don't know how to answer.</p> <p>Moss: Well if you're having sort of trouble for example, if there was a person bullying you, you have someone to go to and then you can get the situation sorted out with. They would direct you to the help you need.</p>
	Having worries addressed and contained	<p>TAs - They help you feel more confident Friends - Help you to feel comfortable Friends - Help you to feel more confident Friends - You can tell them stuff</p> <p>Ash: Helping us. Going to us and telling us what to do when we don't know.</p> <p>Blue: They would maybe compliment you. Being complimented by someone such as a teacher, that could lighten the mood if you're not feeling too happy. They could tell you you're doing well. Just encourage you a bit.</p> <p>Blue: I would want them to tell me it's a fun place, everyone loves it here</p> <p>Ocean: They would be there to support you when you have anxiety in class.</p> <p>Ocean: With the TAs it's helpful for me because if I can't speak to the teacher, I speak to them and then they speak to the teacher.</p> <p>Ocean: And let the teachers introduce me to others because I don't want to speak.</p> <p>Ocean: Help with my anxiety. By telling me that everything will be ok.</p> <p>River: Say if you're like stressed like they will come over to you and support you and help you. [...] It puts you in a better mindset. You will be calm and focused and ready to learn.</p>

		River: They would comfort you and just tell you things like, "It's gonna be good"
Relating to others	Connecting with people who are relatable	<p>SEN room - There are people who feel the same way there</p> <p>SEN room - They can relate to you and understand you</p> <p>SEN room - If you're different in the same way as someone else, it's someone to be friends with</p> <p>Staff - Relatable</p> <p>Staff - Someone to talk to and feel connected to</p> <p>Staff – Relatable</p> <p>Working with others - Build trust with other children</p> <p>Moss: I make friends with people that I agree with. Having friends is good...it just lets them know they're not alone and that they have people who they can talk to you if they need to. And it's also it also gives them people who they can relate to. That sort of stuff.</p> <p>Ocean: So you feel like you're not the only one. Because sometimes in class....how do I explain it? I feel like I'm in a room by myself. Not in a room by myself but... I feel like I'm alone.</p> <p>Moss: Yeah. Or a weekly group would be good. You might be feeling OK but it can change quickly so if you always had that time you could use it to you know, offload a bit.</p> <p>River: You can feel related because other people feel how you feel. That's why a group together every week would be good.</p>
	Feeling known, understood, accepted and valued	<p>Opportunities - Being invited and being chosen for things</p> <p>Ocean: They would have everything I need. They would understand me more.</p> <p>Moss: They should know information about you. Because then it's a lot more personalised. Then you can really adjust to the school easily and have your needs satisfied.</p> <p>Ocean: From my experience maybe being more nicer, understand that people get anxiety and they can't cope with it sometimes. And you can't say that they're annoying when they click their pen or something, what I do, because I'm just trying to focus in class and stop my anxiety from coming.</p> <p>Blue: I would want people to show me that they care and they want me to come to this school.</p> <p>Researcher: What would you like them to know?</p>

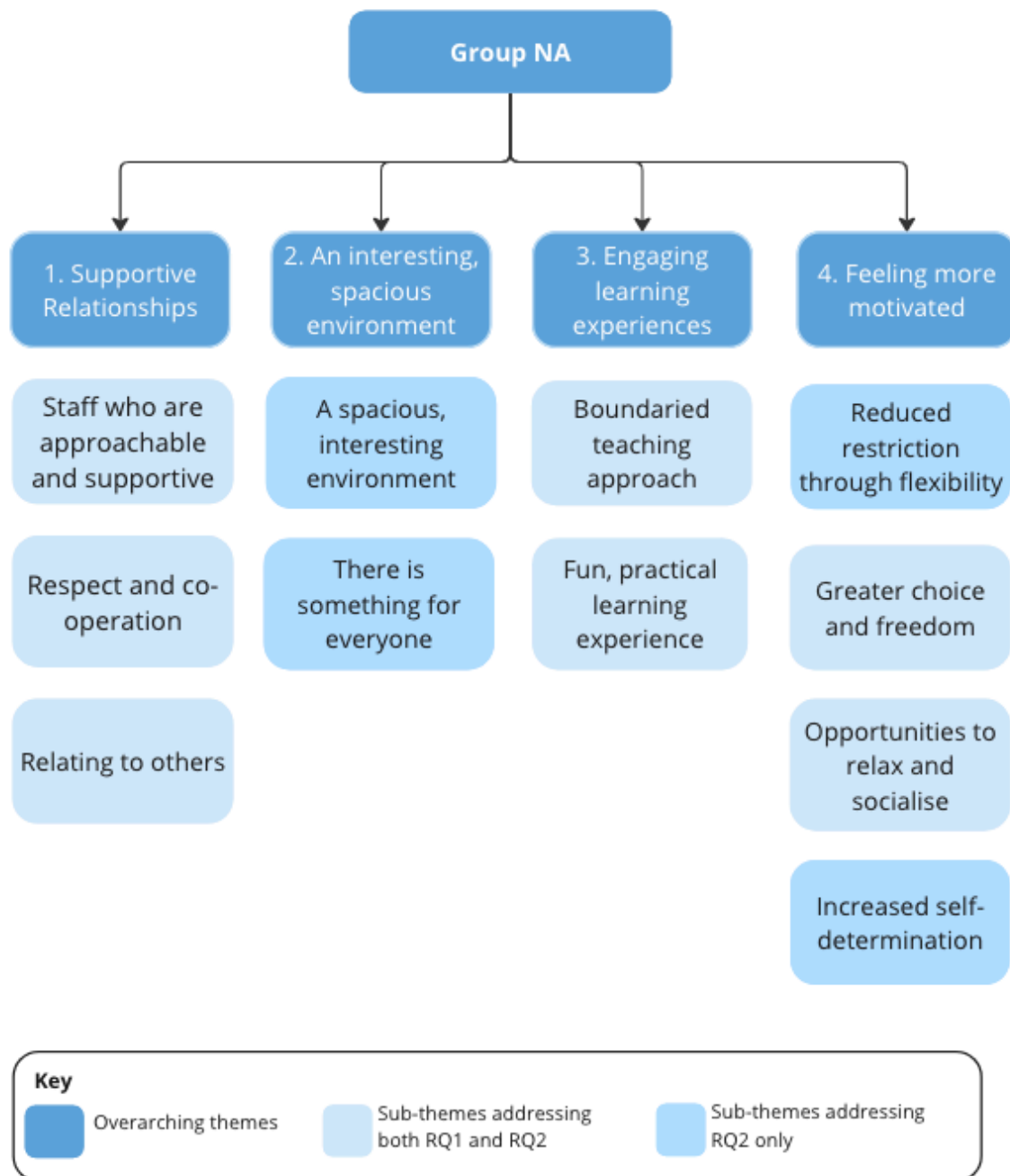
		<p>River: Personal issues and stuff Moss: Yeah. Like how you feel. Blue: If they know more about you then they can go a bit easier on you</p> <p>Ocean: Correct. Otherwise you could just be faking your feelings River: Yeah that's what I do Moss: I have to do that as well...masking. River: Yeah I do it because I don't want to embarrass myself Blue: I do it all the time Ocean: Me too. Every day. Moss: Yeah I just keep it in like if I feel upset or anything. I have to do it because I don't want to bring attention to myself River: I don't get too upset at school but I do get angry and anxious Blue: I feel sad and angry River: I'll either get in trouble or just embarrass myself Ocean: I wouldn't want to show how I feel because people pretend to care about you but they just want to ask questions. Moss: Exactly. It would only really change if people actually understood</p>
<p>Respect and co-operation</p> <p>People within the school are respectful and get along harmoniously. There is respect for privacy.</p>	<p>Mutual respect</p>	<p>Blue: They would treat you and other people with respect. They would treat me how they want to be treated. And I'll treat them with respect. Because respect is important. I want respect. I would know that I wouldn't be going to a school every day where people don't treat you nicely.</p> <p>Moss: [about having a top set] it just starts a thing of 'ha ha I'm better than you'.</p> <p>River: I find it kind of embarrassing to use it Blue: Yeah same. I've never used mine. Moss: It doesn't really help because you have to walk into the room and people are gonna start asking questions like "what's the matter?" Ocean: Correct. I hate that so much. Everyone will ask you all about it. Blue: I feel like it's embarrassing to use River: I find it really embarrassing to walk in front of the class after crying or... it's like everyone's not gonna leave you alone River: That's why a weekly group would be good because then we haven't got to ask the teachers to come, it would just be every week and no one would know or ask questions about it</p>

	Conflict-free	<p>River: Everyone would get along. There would be no arguments, no fights. Then there's no stress. Everyone gets along and that just makes things better</p> <p>Moss: I would like it [the dream classroom] to be not so toxic because I have a feeling there's usually some arguments and controversies that hang around the classroom because of some people not agreeing with each other</p> <p>Ocean: More nicer. They would be continuing with the work and not making the teacher shout at them. Because it scares me. They shout at me sometimes because I'm lost in space.</p> <p>Ash: The other children are polite and nice so you can learn together.</p> <p>Moss: If you have quiet classrooms and it's easier to just listen to each other if you're not just shouting over everyone and fighting over something that isn't that significant.</p>
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Appendix P – Anxious group (Group A) thematic map



Appendix Q – Non-anxious group (Group NA) thematic map



Appendix R - Confirmation of ethical approval



IOE.Doctorate In Educational Psychology <ioe.DEdPsy@ucl.ac.uk>

Tuesday, 30 August 2022 at 10:32

To: Suddards, Amy; Cc: Roberts, Amelia; Monsen, Jeremy

Dear Amy,

I am very pleased to inform you that your research project 'The views of children with SEND who present with anxiety on what supports a successful social adjustment to mainstream secondary school.' for the year 2 research project on the Doctorate in Professional Educational, Child and Adolescent Psychology, has been given ethical approval. If you have any further queries in this regard, please contact your supervisor.

Please note that if your proposed study and methodology changes markedly from what you have outlined in your ethics review application, you may need to complete and submit a new or revised application. Should this possibility arise, please discuss with your supervisor in the first instance before you proceed with a new/revised application.

Your ethical approval form has been logged and will be uploaded to the UCL IOE database.

Very best of luck with your data collection!

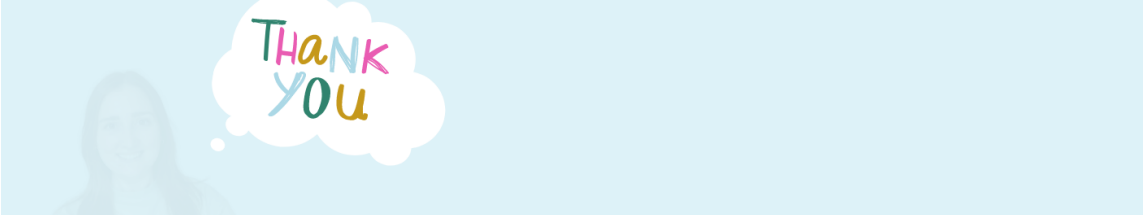
Many thanks,

Kamali Roberts
Programme Administrator

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[DEdPsy Programme Webpage](#)


Appendix S – Debriefing sheet



Debriefing Sheet

Thank you very much for participating in my research project. I was really interested to find out more about what secondary schools can do to help young people feel calm, safe and happy. I was also interested to find out how ideas about this were the same/different for young people who feel more and less worried at school. In order to do this I had two research groups who did the same activities - some who sometimes feel anxious at school, and some who generally feel calm. You took part in the research because your school suggested that you are someone who [sometimes feels anxious/generally feels calm].

I really enjoyed meeting you and working together to think more about how to make secondary school the best it can be. I am very grateful for the brilliant ideas that you shared. These have been written anonymously into a report that has been submitted to my university. I also hope to share the research findings with your school.

What you helped me to find out... 

There were 4 key themes that support young people to feel calm, safe and happy at school, which were found for both groups. There were examples of things already happening at school in each of these areas, and ideas for how each one could be better. The 4 themes were:

- 1. Supportive relationships** - approachable staff, respectful and co-operative relationships between everyone at school and feeling able to relate to others.
- 2. A calm, comfortable environment** - spacious, interesting, comfortable and nature-filled spaces, where there is something/somewhere for everyone
- 3. Engaging learning experiences** - fun, practical activities and learning opportunities, with adults who can balance fun with learning
- 4. Feeling able to meet school demands** - having longer break times and more flexible rules would help with this

Ideas that were only shared by the group who sometimes feel anxious about feeling calmer, safer and happier included:

- having staff members who are available, who know when to help, who can hold on to worries and respond in a way that is calming
- having a quieter and calmer school environment, including in lessons, and having a designated quiet space to go to sometimes
- having staff members who are not so strict and have a more relaxed approach
- having opportunities to unwind and recharge throughout the school day
- having more support to feel prepared for different aspects of school life

Amy Suddards (Trainee Educational Psychologist) **September 2023**