

**Emotional Based School Avoidance: Exploring School Staff and Pupil Perspectives on
Provision in Mainstream Schools**

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Abstract

Aim(s): The present study explored perspectives of school staff, who shared their experiences of facilitators and barriers to mainstream school ‘emotional based school avoidance’ (EBSA) initiatives and practices, and school-aged pupils presenting with EBSA, who described what supported or hindered their school experiences. **Method:** Semi-structured interviews were conducted with six mainstream school staff and seven school-aged pupils who have engaged in EBSA. Staff interviews were analysed using reflexive thematic analysis (RTA), and pupil interviews were analysed using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA). **Findings:** Six main themes emerged across the two samples, two of which are presented in the present study: for school staff, ‘Systemic and Unprecedented Barriers’; and for pupils, ‘Pupil’s Sense of Inclusivity’. Findings from school staff suggest that EBSA initiatives and practices are hindered by financial constraints, less cooperative families, and misalignment with external partners, who may function according to different working models. For pupils, the findings suggest their experience is facilitated when they feel included, accepted, have a sense of school belonging, and where there is attention towards their interests, strengths, and achievements. **Limitations:** This research did not capture parent voices, even though their involvement is a crucial aspect in supporting their children.

Conclusions: This study highlights some of the long-standing (systemic) challenges as well as those associated with multi-agency working and working with families, which threaten to impede effective EBSA initiatives and practices. It also highlights the power of inclusivity and positive relationships for pupils, which may function as a protective factor to their school attendance.

Keywords: EBSA; Absenteeism; Attendance; Qualitative; Teachers; Pupils

Introduction

This research investigates the subject of ‘emotional based school avoidance’ (EBSA); also referred to in the literature as ‘school refusal’, ‘school avoidance behaviour’, and ‘chronic non-attendance’ (not exhaustive). Educators and professionals working with children and young people (CYP) have used varied terminologies associated with EBSA (Torrens-Salemi, 2006), depending on the user’s theoretical standpoint (e.g., Kearney et al., 2022). The label ‘EBSA’ and all associated terminologies should be used cautiously. Harpin (2015) states that labelling of this kind can lead to debilitating and adverse long-term impacts, as it can stigmatise pupils and limit their opportunities. In this research, we consider EBSA to refer to situations where pupils report high anxiety and emotional difficulties resulting in prolonged school non-attendance. There are two reasons why the term EBSA has been used in this paper. Firstly, it brings the ‘emotional’ factor to the fore of the discussion, which differentiates, EBSA from truancy (West Sussex Educational Psychology Service, 2022, p. 3). Secondly, this study explores the views of school staff and pupils within the Borough in which participants were placed. The agencies within the Borough’s local authority, such as the Educational Psychology Service (EPS) and the Children and Adolescent Mental Health Service (CAMHS), use the term, EBSA. Therefore, EBSA was chosen to ensure consistency and familiarity.

School Attendance in England

Recent data on pupil absences for the autumn of 2022-2023, published by the Office for National Statistics, showed that approximately 6.9% of students (all types of provision) are absent from school, and 20.3% of students are persistently missing school (more than 10% of absences in the academic year); showing a rising trend of 4.7% since 2018 (UK Government, 2024).

To tackle this increase, the Department for Education (DfE) (2024) introduced new measures in the UK, aiming to motivate via raising awareness of the long-term impact of missing school. This report (DfE, 2024) highlights how missing even a few days a year can be detrimental to academic attainment (e.g., poorer general certificate of secondary education [GCSE] grades). Findings from the National Association of School Psychologists also suggest that pupils who miss school for extended periods are at higher risk of lower educational attainment (Wimmer, 2013). Moreover, CYP who miss school are more vulnerable to developing psychiatric disorders, alcohol and drug dependency, and social isolation in adulthood (Chou et al., 2006; Jaafar et al., 2013).

EBSA and School Attendance

Notably, while governmental agencies such as the DfE (2021) publish figures on pupil absences across the UK, there is currently no information on how EBSA is represented in the data. This is a complex task for several reasons. Firstly, schools across the UK have different definitions and thresholds for understanding school attendance, and this depends on the school's level of acceptance and tolerance towards factors related to SEMH (Wilson, 2012). Secondly, in the UK, parents may opt for 'elective home education', meaning they take responsibility for educating their children at home (DfE, 2019). Despite the complexity of investigating the prevalence of EBSA, previous research has estimated that within the current national student population, 1-2% of pupils who miss school are experiencing emotional difficulties (e.g., Gulliford & Miller, 2015; Heyne et al., 2004). Recent reports show that approximately 2-5% of school-aged pupils meet 'school refusal' criteria (Kawsar et al., 2022) with secondary school pupils at the highest risk globally (e.g., Gulliford & Miller, 2015; Havik et al., 2015; Kearney, 2008).

Current Practices to Address EBSA in Schools

Several suggestions have been put forward that may help to reduce incidence of school refusal (EBSA) that can be located at the individual, group, and systemic level (Pellegrini, 2007). For example, some research focusing on individual and group approaches has demonstrated the effectiveness of cognitive behavioural therapy (e.g., Elliott & Place, 2019). Other commonly researched approaches include meditation and relaxation training, and group treatments, like parent training and group counselling, to help families understand their child's needs (Lauchlan, 2003).

Elliott (1999) argued that if the root and perpetuating factors associated with EBSA are not addressed, then individual treatments might only provide short-term outcomes. Elliott and Place (2019, p. 12) recommend a 'multisystemic' model for tackling EBSA as current direct interventions still require further research to prove their efficacy. Moreover, schools which place additional focus on ensuring pupils feel accepted can facilitate better reintegration by creating a heightened sense of belonging (e.g., Havik et al., 2014).

Schools that have made active efforts to build supportive relationships with their pupils and then mediate those complex relationships have shown that school attendance can be increased in this way (Archer et al., 2003). Another way to reduce EBSA is to build peer relationships at school (e.g., Hodges et al., 1999). Indeed, strong peer friendships may decrease pupils' chances of being bullied and lead to lower levels of fear around school (Reza-Nakhaie et al., 2007).

Further, previous research has shown the benefits of involving parents in their children's educational journeys, with more involvement leading to added motivation for parents to support their children (e.g., Turnbull et al., 1999) and their children benefiting from increased confidence there (Ames et al., 1993).

Summary, Rationale, and Research Question

Taken together, it appears that school absenteeism (and EBSA) is on the rise in the UK, and this can be detrimental for the pupils concerned (Parker & Conversano, 2021) and cause hardship for families, and strain on educational services. Currently, many interventions have approached EBSA using a psychotherapeutic perspective, with the most common intervention being cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT) (Maynard et al., 2015). Evidence supports the positive effects of individual and family therapy using CBT to reduce school refusal (Elliott & Place, 2019; Ingul et al., 2019), but little research has explored how the fundamentals of CBT, discovering an individual's thoughts, physiological responses, and emotions, can be integrated into whole-school practice. This research acknowledges the positives of using a psychotherapeutic model but rejects the idea that EBSA experiences can be changed without considering the 'environmental' factor surrounding CYP. Broader literature on school absenteeism suggests the impact of stakeholder voices. For example, educational psychology research has shared positive outcomes from obtaining the views and voices of stakeholders, such as gaining a deeper understanding of the facilitators and barriers to school outcomes (e.g., Finning et al., 2020). Stakeholders are regarded as 'whole beings', and Smith and Osborn (2008) suggest that researchers should practice this to ensure that their interpretation can fully capture the views, perceptions, and experiences of this homogenous group of learners.

From the existing research on this subject, it emerged that many qualitative researchers adopted a single-informant approach (exploring one perspective, e.g., pupil) (e.g., Myhill, 2017). Across this research, a key takeaway is the importance of capturing the voices of stakeholders (e.g., parents, pupils) to best understand EBSA in mainstream education. Other literature that examined school practices in non-mainstream schools, such as alternative provisions or home education (e.g., Gregory & Purcell, 2014; Kljakovic & Kelly, 2019), has also found success in eliciting the views and experiences of pupils refusing school, as well as

those of the stakeholders working with them which Flutter and Ruddock (2004) describe as an intervention in its own stead. The recommendations suggested by these studies provide valuable insight as to how to support EBSA, while also iterating the importance of preventative work in relation to school reintegration.

This research aims to deepen understanding of mainstream school processes, to understand the facilitators and barriers to good mainstream EBSA practices. As with previous research that has found success in promoting stakeholder voices around EBSA, this research hopes to increase pupil and staff voices, which fulfils the remit of EPs.

The overarching research question of this study is: *What are the facilitators and barriers to good mainstream school EBSA practices?*

Methodology

Research Design

As this study explores participants' lived experiences, a qualitative approach was chosen. The research philosophy lies within 'interpretivism' which adopts the works of phenomenology, which integrates the study of humans and how they make sense of their lived experiences (Schwartz-Shea & Yanow, 2020). Overall, the role of an interpretive researcher is to consider the participants' accounts as personal and to discover meanings by capturing the rich, complex information embedded in what they choose to share (Creswell, 2009; Robson, 2011). Interpretivism adopts the works of phenomenology, which integrates the study of humans and how they make sense of their lived experiences (Schwartz-Shea & Yanow, 2020). The unique feature of phenomenological studies is the commitment to go beyond investigating and describing the phenomenon statically and objectively (e.g., predetermining categories), but rather take an idiographic (stance that experiences are personal and individual) approach, using eidetic methods to elicit and understand lived experiences (Orbe, 2009).

Sampling Considerations

Sampling Method and Participant Selection

Single informant studies (e.g., those focusing solely on one particular group, such as parents) can be problematic as there is an increased risk of biases and random errors (Pagell & Krause, 2005; Wagner et al., 2010). Thus, this study integrates the views and experiences of school staff and pupils (multi-informant) in order to understand mainstream school-based systems that support and hinder EBSA provision through different lenses. Kelliher (2005) suggests that an ‘integrated approach’ such as this, allows for triangulation of findings to make sense of the phenomenon, which Alexander et al. (2017) suggest can increase the validity of results.

This research used a combination of ‘purposive sampling’ and ‘snowball sampling’ methods to recruit participants. Cohen et al. (2011) explain that purposive sampling allows researchers to look for homogenous participants with specific and targeted characteristics. This sampling method is commonly used for research taking an Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) model (Smith & Osborn, 2008, p. 48). Unsurprisingly, it was challenging to recruit pupil participants, as many of them were not attending school; therefore, a snowballing method was also adopted to broaden awareness of the present study and to enhance the sample size (Mack et al., 2005).

Inclusion criteria

For school staff, inclusion was limited to those with at least one year of work experience in a mainstream school (primary or secondary) supporting pupils experiencing EBSA. For pupils, inspired by previous EBSA research (Berg et al., 1969; Thambirajah et al., 2008; West Sussex EPS, 2022), and in line with the UK Government’s (2022) advice on persistent absences, inclusion was limited to those who: has/had a history of ‘persistent absences’ (over two weeks and attendance falling below 90%) when attending a mainstream

school in Borough A; reported anxiety or emotional difficulties when asked to attend school after persistent absence; have/had parents who knew the child's location when they missed school; did not have conduct and antisocial disorders. Pupils with conduct and antisocial disorders were excluded as the former ties in with truancy (Elliott, 2019).

School staff participant descriptions

Six school staff (five female and one male) participated (see Table 1).

<<<TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE>>>

All participants work in mainstream schools and have worked with pupils experiencing EBSA for over a year. School staff participants hold a range of roles at their respective schools, supporting EBSA initiatives in various capacities. Participants came from mainstream primary and secondary schools at Borough A, with none working at the same school.

Pupil participant descriptions

Seven pupils (five males and two females) participated in this research study, and all met the inclusion criteria outlined earlier (see Table 2).

<<<TABLE 2 ABOUT HERE>>>

Table 2 shows that two pupil participants are of primary school age and five of secondary school age. Six out of seven have a diagnosis of Autism Spectrum Condition (ASC) and met threshold for anxiety/emotional difficulties according to the Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ; Goodman & Goodman, 2009). Regarding their provision types, whilst all seven pupils are registered in mainstream schools, only three currently attend. The other four participants temporarily access education in an Alternative Provision (AP) at Borough A due to SEMH needs.

Data Collection and Materials

This research was reviewed and approved by the researcher's University and adherence with the British Psychological Society's Code of Ethics and Conduct. Parental consent forms were required for pupil participants before participating. At the start of the interviews, participants were reminded that they could withdraw during the session if they felt uncomfortable, without issues or reasons. Furthermore, participants were also informed that they could withdraw their data for up to one month after taking part, and they were given contact details to do so. The identities of all participants are kept anonymous. Anonymity extends to their names and the schools they originate from. Pupil participants were asked to form their preferred pseudonym, which is used in all their statements' references. Likewise, school staff were offered the opportunity to form a preferred pseudonym, or they could accept a generic suggestion (e.g., SS1, SS2). In addition, all references to the borough and local authority use a pseudonym (e.g., Borough A, Local Authority A).

Interviews

Questions were framed in a semi-structured format as this helps researchers gather in-depth findings in an open and time-efficient way (Denzin & Lincoln, 1995; Given, 2008). School staff were interviewed virtually (platform preferred was taken into consideration) due to COVID-19 school restrictions, which lasted approximately 50 minutes. The interview included briefing, safeguarding protocols, and a debrief. As for pupil participants, seven pupils were interviewed in person when schools resumed with reduced COVID-19 protocols in their respective schools to ensure familiarity and comfort. The session with pupils included icebreaker activities (e.g., card games, online games) in the first 15 minutes to ensure they felt comfortable and to build rapport, as well as an introduction that reiterated the purpose of the research study and the potential impact their sharing would bring to future initiatives supporting pupils. These lasted approximately 40 minutes. In addition, from the pilot study that was conducted beforehand, it was recognised that pupil participants might find it difficult

to verbalise challenging school experiences; therefore, this research used various supporting materials (e.g., drawings, emotion charts, and blob pictures) as a conversation starter and to help them share non-verbally. According to Kaplun (2019), using materials such as drawings and visuals with young people are suitable to support conversations, allowing for deeper reflection on experiences, views, and beliefs.

As highlighted, the overarching research question of this study is: *What are the facilitators and barriers to good mainstream school EBSA practices?* Thus, the questions posed to school staff revolved around school ethos around EBSA, identification, assessment, collaboration, and intervention practices in their respective schools. For example, school staff were asked, “Could you tell me once your school has identified and assessed pupils with EBSA? How does your school support them?”. As for pupil participants, questions revolved around their lived experiences, including past experiences of being supported, and their advice for schools to support students with EBSA. For example, pupils were asked, “How do you think your school and teachers can/could have do/done better to support you or pupils who find attending school difficult?”. Questions for all respondents, were inspired by experts in the field, existing (and relevant) literature, and with the overarching research question in mind.

Data Analysis

Two types of qualitative methods were applied for the data analysis: Reflexive Thematic Analysis (RTA) to analyse school staff findings and IPA to analyse pupil findings. School staff interviews were analysed using RTA, which does not stem from specific epistemological or ontological approaches. Its fundamentals involve a ‘rich and detailed’ examination of qualitative data, which aligns with the study’s interpretive stance (Braun & Clarke, 2019). Research on thematic analysis has recommended that it is a suitable choice when the views and experiences investigated are not first-person accounts (Guest et al., 2020;

Miles & Huberman, 1994). In this case, the discussions with school staff were about pupils experiencing EBSA in their schools, which may be more of whole-school systems instead of their personal ‘lived experiences’; thus, RTA was preferred over IPA to analyse the findings for this participant group. This study follows Braun and Clarke’s (2006) thematic analysis six-phase framework which has been renamed by the authors to Reflexive Thematic Analysis (RTA) in Braun and Clarke (2019), and cited in this paper, which involves familiarising myself with the data, generating codes, searching, reviewing, defining, and report writing, to ensure the utmost trustworthiness and coherence. The lead researcher engaged in reflexive practice during each stage to avoid any bias unintentionally influencing the findings. This is an essential element of RTA to ensure the researcher does not fall into any misassumptions about the findings (Braun & Clarke, 2019, p.590).

Pupil interviews were analysed using IPA, developed by Smith and Osborn. (2008). This approach is frequently used in psychology research (e.g., Smith & Osborn, 2007; Wagstaff et al., 2014). As this study’s pupil participants are homogenous through EBSA, IPA is a suitable method (Larkin & Thompson, 2011, p. 103) for two main reasons: Firstly, the research aims align with the ‘idiographic’ aspect of IPA, in which participants’ ‘lived experiences’ are explored individually to support meaning-making (Moses & Knutsen, 2012; Smith & Osborn, 2015). Secondly, this research adopts a ‘hermeneutic phenomenology’ stance, using exploratory and inductive methods, and experiences should be absent of preconceptions about participant perceptions (Cassidy et al., 2011; Gray, 2013, p. 18). Data analysis followed the structured guidance by Smith and Osborn (2008, p. 67) that consists of a four-stage process. Data analysis was checked by independent colleagues and research supervisors that could give an objective view of the data.

Results

This section discusses themes that emerged from the analysis.

Findings from School Staff

RTA of school staff interviews revealed three superordinate themes: *Effective Collaboration Efforts, Review, and Development*; *Systemic and Unprecedented Barriers*; and *Providing an Inclusive School Climate* (see Appendix 1 for a Thematic Map). Due to space constraints, we present only the main theme of Systemic and Unprecedented Barriers in this report based on weighting of evidence and prevalence.

Systemic and Unprecedented Barriers

This theme refers to the systemic and unprecedented barriers that school staff experienced that often hindered positive mainstream school EBSA initiatives and practices. Unprecedented barriers in this theme refer to obstacles that school staff did not anticipate would happen but occurred and impacted their work supporting students.

Financial constraints

School staff participants explicitly mentioned the financial constraints of their schools as hindering EBSA initiatives. SS2 detailed that her school has had to cope with staffing shortages, due to financial constraints: *'We could not afford funding for him. He [pupil] only had half a day of TA support, which he found challenging, and became highly anxious'*. This was also a difficulty faced by SS1 and SS4. SS1 said, *'The team here is tiny ... They're not able to spend that time with pupils. I feel that my current school is missing this out'*.

Financial constraints also prevent expansion to physical school buildings. SS6 explained, *'We want to have a calming room for pupils with anxiety, but, you know, money is an issue'*. Alongside these spacing issues, participants also recounted difficulties in securing traded services (i.e., not offered free, requiring purchase using school money) such as EP time. According to SS3, lack of money also means a lack of preventative intervention from beneficial EPs. SS3 added, *'Limited-time is paid for, you know, and we will push at the moment for implementing Education Health Care Plans. Well, the EP we are linked to, I*

think she's brilliant ... but there's just not enough money, there's not enough resources to secure her services to discuss EBSA'. Likewise, SS4 stated that her school has not been able to fund EP time to support EBSA: 'But there are frustrations around the fact that we just don't have the money to buy in for anything other than assessments of children'.

An unaligned working model with external partners

Participants shared that working with external partners who function according to different working models can sometimes be challenging. SS1 said, *'So, you know, we've all got bits we need to bring together, but it does not quite come together. Because we are not clear on who is doing what action if that makes sense. I think where the issues lie – so, I think the roles aren't defined well enough'.* When discussing which services he found most challenging regarding the alignment of working styles, SS3 said, *'I found Child Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS). I do not know if it is relevant. I am not trying to be rude about anything, but I find it quite difficult to use. We need emotional assessments and advice. We need tips on how to work with children'.*

SS4 shared that as pupils experiencing EBSA are often at home, they are not able to access in-person therapy offered by external partners: *'So intervention is carried out virtually because pupils are not present, so when online, pupils they are there, but their attention is not there. They are on their phones and stuff, so that was a real challenge'.* The speed with which intervention is given was mentioned by SS6: *'But there are occasions where I cannot reach any of them. The pupil might have already been entrenched by then'.* When explaining such communication difficulties, SS5 said, *'Everyone is so busy; it's tough to contact people. And if you do not know them, it is harder'.*

Familial factors

Participants shared that most families are cooperative, but they do encounter parents who are resistant to working together. SS5 said, *'Well, home is important. Parents need to*

work hand in hand; if not, we cannot pull off the intervention'. SS1 said, *'Some of it is to do with the parents as well, you know, I'm afraid, and sometimes putting that pressure on will get them to become more proactive about getting their children in school. I feel it does have to come from both angles as well'*. The reasons for parental resistance can vary depending on the family, but as SS6 explained, parents fear working with agencies such as 'CAMHS' due to the *'stigma around mental health'*.

On parental mental health, SS1 shared that she has observed difficulties in attendance for children with *'parents who have mental health issues'*, suspecting that children may stay home to *'protect and maybe care for them'*. SS4 had similar experiences, referring to an EBSA case where the pupil refuses to *'separate from them [the parent]'* due to excessive worrying for their health. When schools reopened after the national lockdown, SS3 noted a general increase in parental anxiety: *'Reopening was tough because anxiety was everywhere, not just pupils, but parents, and even some of our staff'*.

Findings from Pupils

IPA of pupil interviews revealed three superordinate themes: *Pupil's Sense of Inclusivity; School Environment and Additional Support Needs; and Social Relationships at School* (see Appendix 2 for a Thematic Map). Due to space constraints, we present only the main theme of Pupil's Sense of Inclusivity in this report based on weighting of evidence and prevalence.

Pupil's Sense of Inclusivity

This theme refers to pupils' desire to be included, accepted, and to have a sense of belonging in school.

Positive peer relationships

Pupils spoke about peer relationships and what it meant to them. Gunnersaurus shared that although school was difficult, attending allowed him to meet with a peer: *'maybe to see J*

[friend], *I get a bit happy sometimes*'. Monstrae shared that despite having high levels of social anxiety, his friends were the 'push' (West Sussex EPS, 2022) that helped him attend school. Monstrae said, *I don't want to be here ... but the only thing keeping me here is my friends in this school*'. Watch shared that, over the past year, having *'nice friends'* at school has increased his self-confidence and motivation, which were once low, making school a more accessible place. Pupils generally revealed a longing for positive peer relationships as this has impacted on their school experiences.

School staff that care

Participants affirmed that having school staff that cared for them helped them attend school. Speaking on his new provision, Pencil said, *teachers are nice; they understand when I say I am anxious or not feeling it*'. It seemed that Pencil's school experience has improved, as he now has caring teachers who understand his difficulties. Likewise, Angel shared that her school experiences improved, as she *feels less alone*' now, crediting her teachers' efforts in supporting her emotional needs.

To illustrate what her teachers meant to her, Angel said, *When I was going through my traumatic stuff, I felt alone. But what helped was that there's always teachers to talk to*'. Angel's trust in the presence of teachers when she needed support shows their importance in her life. Watch, a victim of bullying at his previous school, was asked about teachers, and used the phrase, *build a relationship, when I feel stuck*', making it evident that relationships require adult consistency, longevity, and patience. Pencil also echoed the positive language of his teachers: *Teachers that was nice, who talked to my mum and stuff, and my mum was like, oh yeah, they said something nice about me*'. Pencil's sharing also highlighted the importance of ensuring pupils feel a sense of achievement.

Building on pupils' interests, strengths, and achievements

Participants shared about their interests, strengths, and achievements that made their school experiences better. Sloth King particularly enjoys art, for example, and shared what supported his anxiety when in school: *'Art will help me a tiny bit and make me feel less anxious and think less about my Mum. There is a very good drawing [points to the wall]. I drew it for five hours.'*

By the same method, Gunnersaurus explained that he is motivated to attend school so he could have access to football practice, which gives him the *'momentum to achieve'* his dream of becoming a footballer. Watch and Angel stated that, in their current provision, the differentiating factor is that teachers give them opportunities to try new things, such as art therapy. Angel used the phrase, *'if this continues, things would be okay'*, indicating that creative activities such as art had a positive impact on her. Findings suggest that whilst school is still a difficult place for many pupil participants, they did not lack aspirations or dreams, suggesting room for stakeholders to continue increasing their interests, strengths, and achievements.

Discussion

This section will reflect upon the findings reported here and discuss the implications for schools and the educational psychology service (EPS).

For school staff, it was felt that systemic and unrepresented barriers hindered positive mainstream school EBSA practices. School staff highlighted that funding limitations were a steep barrier to efficacious EBSA practices. Ofsted and Spielman (2020) investigated schools across England, finding that the majority had reported funding cuts, in turn leading to inevitable cuts to their SEND provisions. In this study, school staff explained that lack of staffing has been an ongoing issue. Recognising the need for pupils experiencing EBSA to have access to support workers, as recommended by the West Sussex EPS (2022), school staff described what a challenge this has posed. Moreover, as services, such as the EPS, have

moved to a traded-delivery model (needing to pay from school budget), EP involvement now has to be purchased by schools (Islam, 2013), which SS3 and SS4 noted as a further barrier to effective EBSA support.

Such funding barriers and the impact on multi-agency working has been an issue for some time; for example, the National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER) reported that financial issues restricted collaborative working partnerships in schools (Kendal et al., 2006). Although in 2021, the UK government pledged increased funding to tackle school absentees (DfE, 2021), considering the rising absentee rate and the continued impact of the Covid-19 pandemic, it is unclear in how far this will mitigate the challenges faced by schools and pupils in the short- or long-term. Parker and Conversano (2021) describe more systemic barriers in schools, pointing out the grave detrimental effects to vulnerable pupils if schools cannot support their needs, leading to lower academic and life outcomes. Overall, this is an important area that merits further exploration.

Aside from funding limitations, school staff cited unaligned working models with external partners as barriers to good practice. School staff recognised that pupils experiencing EBSA may miss school for long periods, meaning that some external partners will solely carry out their intervention models virtually; however, this can negatively impact pupil engagement. A report by People for Education (2020) stated that, while technology has been an effective tool to engage with pupils, it can be more challenging to build a crucial emotional connection, as highlighted by this study's participants. In addition, different agencies work according to varying timelines, which can be challenging to follow. As Cheminais (2009) suggests, this is a long-standing drawback of multi-agency working, and people within these systems should establish clear expectations beforehand.

The findings also suggest that parents may be resistant to receiving school support, presenting another barrier. Previous research, most notably by Kearney and Silverman

(1995), describes the various family types, and ‘enmeshed families’ have shown a higher likelihood of developing school refusal due to overprotective parenting styles, cultivating children who develop an over-reliance on their parents. This study’s findings propose that resistance to support comes from the parental fear of accepting that their children have an issue that could cause schools to place a ‘stigma’ on them, in line with Kearney and Silverman (1995) description of the overprotective family. Additionally, school staff interviews also pointed out how parental mental health difficulties may increase their anxieties over their child’s progress. Acknowledging the importance of parental involvement and collaboration reinforces the need for schools to continue finding effective ways to support them.

For pupils, it was felt that their sense of inclusivity—manifested by positive peer relationships, school staff that care, and receiving approaches that build on their existing interests, strengths, and achievements—was an important factor influencing mainstream school EBSA practices.

This study found that an inclusive school climate is a key facilitator to good mainstream EBSA practices, in line with previous research (Hallam & Rogers, 2008; Thambirajah et al., 2008; Watson et al., 2012). School staff mentioned practices that embedded the promotion of pupils’ senses of belonging and acceptance, such as allowing for reasonable adjustments when required, and ensuring relationship building is placed at the fore of their initiatives. Crucially, as direct beneficiaries of these initiatives, pupil participants shared that having staff who cared for their needs supported their school experiences. This included staff who were sensitive to their needs and difficulties.

Various pupils shared difficulties with peer relationships, describing experiences of being bullied when attending a mainstream school, having a traumatising effect on them. The West Sussex EPS (2022) lists bullying as a factor impacting pupil well-being and school

attendance, while research examining the correlation between bullying and school refusal also suggests a positive correlation (e.g., Hutzell & Payne, 2012; Randa & Wilcox, 2010). Schools play a key role in mediating friendships and relationship building, and pupil participants shared experiences in which teachers did not intervene, even when they had been informed of the bullying. This reiterates the pivotal role teachers play in the school experiences of pupils and that consistency is required. Poor support can have a debilitating impact on pupil's social emotional mental health outcomes, leading to permanent fear of being victimised (Hutzell & Payne, 2012; Ingul et al., 2012; Randa & Wilcox, 2010). This is a stark reminder to stakeholders to develop practices mitigating the risks of bullying, and to improve the trust and relationships between pupils and teachers (Watson et al., 2012).

Limitations and future directions

This study's limitations must also be noted, and the first is that the term EBSA was chosen for practical reasons without consulting the participants. Whilst EBSA focuses on the word 'emotional', the word 'avoidance' may imply that missing school is a choice. In hindsight, a more inclusive word in place of 'avoidance' could be used (e.g., emotional school non-attendance), or participants could have been asked what terms they are comfortable with. As Baker and Bishop (2015) found, pupils experiencing EBSA can feel wrongly judged when their low school attendance is assumed to be *a choice*, making the term used an important factor.

Secondly, the research timeline prevented the capture of parent voices, even though their involvement presents a crucial aspect in supporting their children (Lumby, 2007). This is a missed opportunity, but an area for further research. A third limitation was the study's localisation to Borough A, meaning the findings may not have a high transferability, even though the aim was to elicit participant views to make sense of wider pupil experiences. Moreover, as this study is small-scale, the pupils who took part might have already built-up

resilience and coping strategies to attend school better. Views of pupils who are completely non-attending have not been captured.

One area worth further exploring are the experiences of pupils with ASC, considering that six out of seven pupil participants had an ASC diagnosis. Research exploring school attendance for pupils with ASC has been increasing in EP literature (e.g., Finning et al., 2020; Gray et al., 2023; O'Hagan et al., 2022). Given that the impact of research in this growing area can help stakeholders plan better, it is recommended for the LA where participants were studying, to undertake further research, exploring mainstream school preventative practices/measures specific to supporting pupils with ASC to stay in school.

Conclusion

This study explored the views and experiences of six school staff and seven pupils regarding EBSA. School staff were asked about the facilitators and barriers to good mainstream EBSA practices. On the other hand, pupils were asked about their 'lived experiences' and what supported and hindered their school experiences in mainstream education. This research topic grew from the researcher's involvement in the EBSA working group in Local Authority A, where efforts to develop a 'fit for purpose' referral pathway to support schools with identification and assessment are underway. The research findings suggest that school staff participants adopted an inclusive ethos around SEMH and EBSA, which directed their EBSA initiatives. This includes taking a whole-school approach to intervention and a commitment to providing pupils with a positive school climate that promotes a sense of belonging and competence. This study also highlighted the power of relationships for pupils, and how good relationships are a protective factor to their school attendance, reiterating the importance for stakeholders, such as schools and the EPS, to collaborate to support and raise pupils' social capital.

Ultimately, the results of this study also provide an opportunity for the EPS to champion the development of an EBSA policy or guidance (such as the West Sussex EPS, 2022) by collaborating with all stakeholders around pupils. In this way, schools can better understand what EBSA is and how best to tackle it in light of increasing pressure from the DfE (2022) to increase school attendance. Taken together, EPs have a good understanding of the factors that affect school attendance and how attendance can be improved. This includes being well-placed to make an impact in all layers of Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological systems theory, directly (advocating for pupil and stakeholder voices', programs directly to support emotional well-being, etc.) and indirectly (policy-making, EBSA initiatives, etc.). This study has highlighted some of those factors which can be used by schools and how EPs can contribute to multiagency working and provide advice which other over-stretched services (e.g., CAMHS) are unable to.

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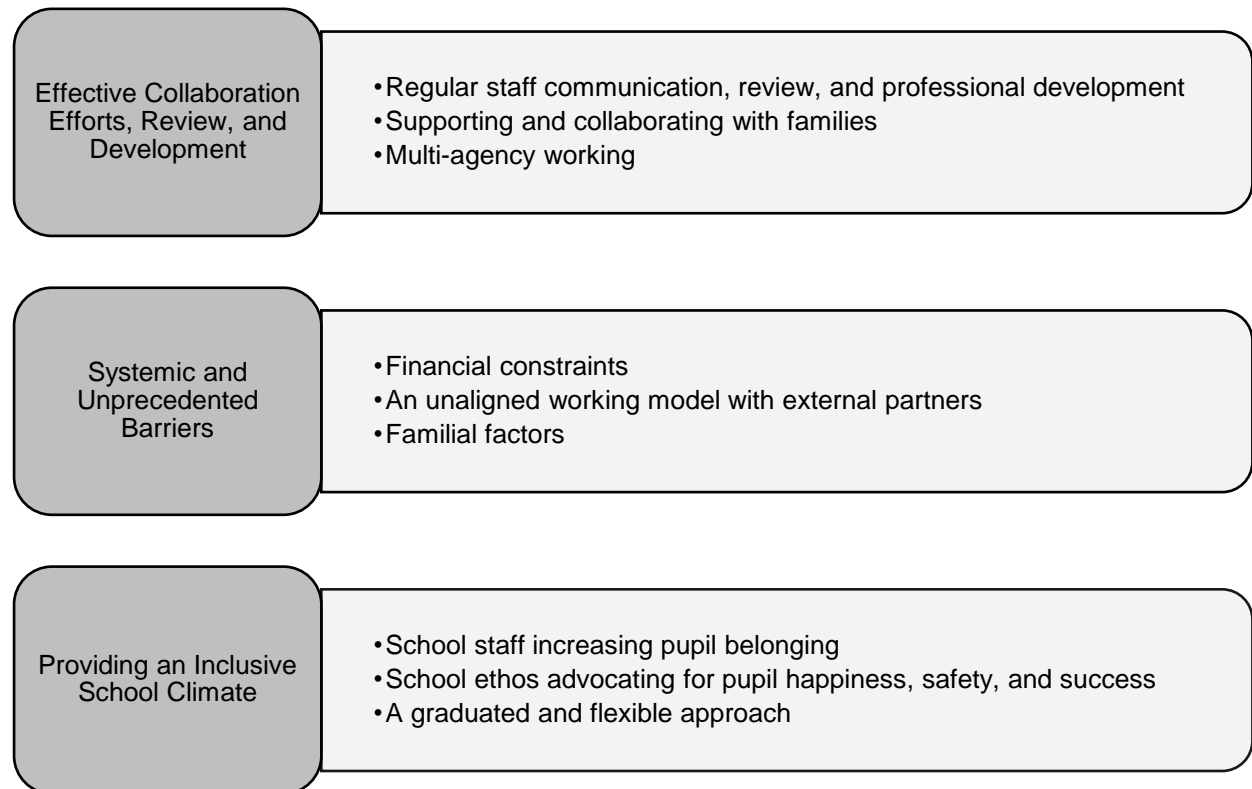
Table 1: *Background of school staff participants*

Pseudonym	Gender	School Type	Main Role
SS1	Female	Mainstream Secondary	SENDCO; Maths Teacher
SS2	Female	Mainstream Secondary	SENDCO
SS3	Male	Mainstream Primary	SENDCO; Inclusion lead
SS4	Female	Mainstream Primary	Assistant Head of Inclusion
SS5	Female	Mainstream Secondary	Wellbeing Coordinator
SS6	Female	Mainstream Primary	Teaching Assistant

Table 2: *Background profile of pupil participants*

Pseudonym	Gender	School Type	Year Group	SEN (if any)
Gunnersaurus	Male	Mainstream Primary	Year 3	ASC
Sloth King	Male	Mainstream Primary	Year 4	ASC
Monstrae	Male	Mainstream Secondary	Year 8	ASC
Pencil	Male	AP Mainstream Secondary	Year 10	ASC
Watch	Male	AP Mainstream Secondary	Year 10	Non-specified
Angel	Female	AP Mainstream Secondary	Year 11	ASC
Ariel	Female	AP Mainstream Secondary	Year 11	ASC

Appendix 1: Thematic Map for School Staff (themes left; sub-themes right)



Appendix 2: Thematic Map for Pupils (themes left; sub-themes right)

