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An exploration of teachers' attributions for the causes of emotionally based school avoidance

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List of Abbreviations

ACEs	Adverse childhood experiences
ADHD	Attention deficit hyperactivity disorder
DfE	Department for Education
EBSA	Emotionally based school avoidance
EP	Educational psychologist
EPS	Educational psychology service
LA	Local Authority
LGBTQ	Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, or questioning
SEN	Special educational needs
SENCO	Special educational needs coordinator
TEP	Trainee educational psychologist
TA	Teaching assistant
UK	United Kingdom

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Abstract

Background

School attendance issues are well-researched and acknowledged internationally as an area of concern for schools (Gren-Landell, 2021). Poor school attendance is associated with negative academic, social, and mental health outcomes (Ingul, Havik, & Heyne, 2019). Emotionally based school avoidance (EBSA) is a form of school attendance difficulty, wherein young people experience emotional distress related to school attendance which can result in prolonged absences (West Sussex Educational Psychology Service, 2018).

Research with teachers indicates they perceive home- and pupil-related issues as more important in causing EBSA than school-related issues which is in contrast to perceptions of parents and young people (Dannow, Esbjørn, & Risom, 2020; Gren-Landell, Ekerfelt Allvin, Bradley, Andersson, & Andersson, 2015). How teachers perceive and attribute the causes of pupil behaviour impacts upon their behaviour to support pupils (Soodak & Podell, 1994). The present study aimed to explore the attributions made by teachers for EBSA in young people aged between 11 and 16 years.

Methods

This study employed a non-experimental fixed design, utilising a survey strategy to explore attributions. The first stage of the research involved creating a survey measure, through the content analysis of interviews with school staff (n = 6), parents (n = 2), and young people (n = 2). The final survey was distributed online to teachers within the Local Authority (LA) and more widely through social media. The final sample included for analysis was n = 201 teachers.

Findings

Data were analysed through factor analysis, resulting in the extraction of a five-factor model. The attributional pattern of teachers for the causes of EBSA was nuanced, highlighting the perceived interplay of issues across systems that could increase the risk of EBSA. Teachers attributed a high level of importance to peer-related and home-related factors in causing EBSA. The least importance was attributed to school environmental factors. This indicated somewhat of a self-protective bias in attributions, which aligns with findings of previous attributional studies with teachers.

Implications

Though there are limitations to this study that must be considered, results highlight implications for schools in developing an understanding of the role of school-related factors in EBSA, within which there is a potential role for educational psychologists (EPs) as facilitators. Implications for future research are also discussed, including the utility of further exploring and comparing the attributions of different populations such as wider school personnel, parents, and young people.

Chapter 1 Introduction

The researcher's interest in the perceptions of individuals for the causes of attendance difficulties began during her first year as a trainee educational psychologist (TEP). At the time, the researcher was undergoing a six-month placement in a Local Authority (LA) and was undertaking a piece of casework with a school, supporting a 12-year-old student who would often refuse to attend school. This casework coincided with university-based teaching from writer and psychologist, Andy Miller, about his research exploring the differing and conflicting attributions of school staff, parents, and pupils for the causes of challenging behaviour in schools (Lambert & Miller, 2010; A. Miller, 1995, 1999; A. Miller, Ferguson, & Byrne, 2000; A. Miller, Ferguson, & Moore, 2002).

Throughout the casework, parallels emerged between how school staff and parents seemed to attribute the causes of school attendance difficulties and how research indicated the same parties attribute the causes of challenging behaviour. It seemed that the differing perceptions held for the causes of attendance difficulties were acting as a barrier to effective communication between those involved in the case. This highlighted the potential role of educational psychologists (EPs) in casework with young people experiencing attendance difficulties where there may be conflicting attributions for the causes. EPs can apply their interpersonal and consultation skills to facilitate communication between schools, parents, and pupils, eliciting empathy and understanding for each party, and supporting a return to school for young people.

This experience led to the development of the current study. In researching attributions for the causes of attendance difficulties, the researcher hoped to further explore the parallels that seemed to emerge with previous attributional literature with school staff. It was also hoped that novel research could contribute to the body of research in the area and support the development of policy and practice to support young people who struggle to attend school.

Chapter 2 Literature review

This chapter aims to provide an overview of the existing body of research that led to the development of the rationale for a thesis exploring the attributions of teachers for the causes of emotionally based school avoidance (EBSA). The review starts by providing context for the project with an overview of school attendance, its importance, and an overview of the prevalence of EBSA. Following this, different forms of non-attendance are explored, with a focus upon EBSA and risk factors associated with this. This is followed by an exploration of the application of attribution theory to understand how individuals perceive the causes of behaviour. This narrows to a focus upon how attribution theory can be applied in educational research to understand how individuals attribute the causes of pupil behaviour in schools, how this impacts teacher behaviour, and how this may be applied to enhancing understanding of EBSA. A systematic literature review is then presented, which provides a detailed summary and qualitative synthesis of seven studies, addressing the review objective of exploring how key stakeholder groups perceive the causes of EBSA. Finally, the rationale for the current study is presented with an outline of the research question and main research objectives.

2.1. School attendance

2.1.1. The importance of school attendance

There is a large body of evidence highlighting the benefits of good school attendance and potential negative outcomes resulting from poor school attendance. Gottfried (2010) drew comparisons between attendance and academic achievement of 86,000 students, aged between five and 13 years, in a North American school district over five years. Results showed that attending school was highly correlated with higher academic achievement (Gottfried, 2010). More recently, Gottfried (2014) examined the effects of chronic absenteeism on academic and socioeconomic outcomes. Based on data from 10,740 kindergarten pupils (mean age 66 months), Gottfried (2014) compared outcome measures of chronic absentees and average attenders. Results showed that being a chronic absentee was associated with lower maths and reading achievement, lower educational engagement, and lower social engagement. Although Gottfried's (2014) research is based upon outcomes of young children, it is a good example of large-scale research in the area. Other research supports these findings

across ages, and on an international scale, also linking school absenteeism with mental health difficulties, difficulties finding employment, and antisocial behaviour in adulthood (Ingul et al., 2019; Kearney, 2008b; McKay-Brown et al., 2019; Taylor, 2012).

2.1.2. Conceptualisations and definitions of school non-attendance

There is a range of terms that have been used historically to describe groups of children that fail to attend school. Thambirajah, Grandison, and De-Hayes (2008) produced a list of the salient features of what they consider the five main types of non-attendance:

1. *Truancy*: absence from school without the knowledge, approval, or consent of parents or school authorities.
2. *Parentally condoned absence*: unauthorised school absence in which the parents keep the child at home for reasons of their own.
3. *School phobia*: an outdated term that was used to describe a specific fear of a school situation leading to school non-attendance.
4. *Separation anxiety*: extreme difficulties in separation from the attachment figure at home, usually leading to school refusal.
5. *School refusal*: difficulties attending school, or absence from school due to severe emotional difficulties at the time of attending school.

The focus of the current research is upon the fifth category; children who experience an emotional barrier to school attendance.

Research suggests that teachers distinguish *truancy* as distinct and separate from *school refusal*, wherein school refusers were seen as displaying higher levels of anxiety and depression than truants (Cooper & Mellors, 1990). Even so, it has been commented that broad and overlapping definitions of *school refusal* between groups can hamper identification and intervention for those experiencing attendance difficulties (Archer, Filmer-Sankey, & Fletcher-Campbell, 2003). The lack of consistency in terminology and conceptualisations has persisted over time. In a recent review, Heyne, Gren-Landell, Melvin, and Gentle-Genitty (2019) list 20 different terms used in published literature between the years 1932 and 2015 for phenomena commonly known as *school refusal*.

Although it is generally agreed that the term *school refusal* refers to children whose reluctance to attend school is associated with emotional distress (Heyne et al., 2019), the wording of the term itself has been argued as being problematic as it connotes wilful behaviour on the part of the child (Pellegrini, 2007). Categorising the behaviour as wilful leads to "within-child" explanations of causes, which can deflect the attention from other important factors such as the school environment (Pellegrini, 2007).

Similarly, the term *school phobia* is now considered outdated and unhelpful (Thambirajah et al., 2008). It is argued that the term can imply psychopathology, again deflecting attention from other causal factors (Pellegrini, 2007).

The more neutral terms of *chronic non-attendance* and *extended school non-attendance* have been argued as more appropriate as they describe behaviour, without suggesting the underpinning causes of non-attendance (Baker & Bishop, 2015; Lauchlan, 2003; Pellegrini, 2007). However, it can also be argued that such broad terms may not appropriately capture the emotionally based nature of the behaviour of this group, with risks that it could also encompass young people who may have extended absences due to chronic medical needs.

The term *emotionally based school avoidance* (EBSA) is described by the West Sussex Educational Psychology Service (EPS) (2018) as a "broad umbrella term used to describe a group of children and young people who have severe difficulty in attending school due to emotional factors, often resulting in prolonged absences from school" (West Sussex EPS, 2018 p.3). EBSA frames the nature of the behaviour descriptively, unlike terms such as *chronic non-attendance*, but in a way that avoids emphasis on within-child models such as *school phobia*. Therefore, the term *EBSA* will be used henceforth in this thesis to describe this phenomenon, with other terms only used if quoted from literature.

2.1.3. Prevalence of EBSA

Due to the complexity and range of terminology used to describe EBSA, estimates of prevalence are variable (Gren-Landell, 2021; Pellegrini, 2007). Ingul et al. (2019) draw together international evidence to estimate that 0.4% to 5.4% of all youth experience a form of school refusal at some point in their school career.

2.1.3.1. School absence in England

In England, the law states that children must receive full-time education between the school term after their fifth birthday and the last Friday in June in the school year they turn 16 (Department for Education (DfE), 2020). If a child is seen as “missing school without a good reason,” local councils have powers to enforce attendance orders upon parents and possess the power to prosecute and fine parents whose children do not attend school.

Schools must keep attendance records in England, though despite the potential prevalence of EBSA, there is no obligation for schools to monitor numbers of pupils experiencing attendance difficulties on an emotional basis; absences are either categorised as “authorised” or “unauthorised”. In England, the DfE reports annual and termly data on school absence, the most recent (at the time of writing) being for the school year from 2018 to 2019. Although data is not collected for children experiencing EBSA, the DfE does report rates of “persistent absenteeism”. A pupil is defined as a persistent absentee if they miss 10% or more of their possible school sessions, thus many pupils who experience EBSA will fall within this group, depending on the persistence of their difficulties. In the school year, 2018/19, persistent absentees accounted for 39.3% of all absences, an increase from 38.5% in the previous year (DfE, 2020). In the school year, 2018/19, statistics show that 10.86% (771,863 pupils) of all enrolled pupils were persistent absentees.

Research by Archer et al. (2003) explored, on a national level, the issues of identifying and monitoring pupils defined as school refusing or phobic. Their survey, conducted within English Local Authorities (LAs), indicated that just over one quarter of LAs was routinely collecting information on numbers of pupils who were identified as “school refuser or phobic”. The data showed large variations between LAs on the numbers of pupils identified, which the authors considered could be related to differences in defining school refusal or phobia between authorities.

2.1.3.2. School absence internationally

Gren-Landell (2021) has recently developed an anthology of contemporary research on school attendance problems, to give an overview of the prevalence of school attendance problems internationally. The author summarises attendance data from several countries across multiple continents, including, Europe, North America, Asia,

and Australia. The author surmises that school attendance problems are a global issue, requiring global cooperation to find evidence for ways to prevent it, assess it, and intervene successfully (Gren-Landell, 2021). However, it must be noted that the conceptualisation of school non-attendance used in Gren-Landell (2021) also includes truancy-related problems which are reflected in the statistics drawn upon to summarise the issue, thus does not solely represent research on school absence with an emotional basis.

Considering studies that focus more upon anxiety-related non-attendance, Chu, Guarino, Mele, O'Connell, and Coto (2019) reported results of a survey on the prevalence of school refusal of 5-18-year-olds within three school districts in North America. Prevalence was an average of 6.67 students in each school who met the school refusal threshold (missing five or more days of school in a year). Although numbers were small, authors commented upon the disproportionate funding required to support these students, an average of $94,052 per school to support individual students within the district, and $496,657 for out-of-district placements (Chu et al., 2019). Results of older North American studies indicated that 2.0% to 2.3% of participating young people experienced anxious school refusal (Egger, Costello, & Angold, 2003; Stickney & Miltenberger, 1998). In Norway, in a self-report study of 5,465 students, 3.9% reported that they had missed more than 10 days of school in three months, with a tendency for older students to be more likely to miss school (Havik, Bru, & Ertesvåg, 2015a). These studies reflect the suggested statistic that 0.4% to 5.4% of youth experience school refusal, also emphasising the costly nature of supporting young people who struggle to attend school. This again highlights the need to understand the nature of school avoidance and risk and resilience factors, to be able to take preventative action.

2.1.4. Theoretical frameworks for school refusal and EBSA

As the causes of EBSA can be varied, interacting, and complex, researchers have proposed various theoretical frameworks that can be applied to support understanding of the issues at play. Below, two popular frameworks are described.

2.1.4.1. A functional model of school refusal behaviour

Kearney and Silverman (1990) proposed that a behavioural perspective should be taken to consider the function of school refusal behaviour, rather than focusing upon

categorisation through symptoms. They identified four main functions of school refusal behaviour:

1. To avoid the experience of severe anxiety or fearfulness related to school attendance.
2. To avoid social situations that cause fear or anxiety.
3. To seek attention or to reduce feelings of separation anxiety.
4. To enjoy rewarding experiences that non-attendance may bring.

Kearney (2007) demonstrated the utility of this model with a study analysing the data of 222 school refusing young people (aged 5-17 years) and their parents. Parents and young people completed a range of measures related to school refusal behaviours and functions. Results indicated that examining the function of school refusal behaviour was a better determinant of the degree of absenteeism than examining the form of behaviour or "symptoms". Additionally, this functional analysis of non-attendance is said to have led to increasing recognition of a school's responsibility for attendance problems (Lauchlan, 2003).

2.1.4.2. Eco-systemic frameworks

Thambirajah et al. (2008) suggest joint systems approaches are useful to conceptualise school refusal. To do this, Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological systems theory can be applied. This model places the individual child in the centre of five systems that have varying degrees of direct and indirect impact upon the young person, from the impact of the microsystem of their peers and classroom to the macrosystem, considering the culture and policies of the school and wider government. Taking systems approaches to understand EBSA draws attention to the interactions between systems and how this may cause or perpetuate the problem.

Recent reviews continue to highlight the importance of understanding systemic influences in school refusal, given continuing emerging evidence of the interplay of factors across systems that contribute to EBSA (Tonge & Silverman, 2019). Additionally, in drawing upon published literature around the multi-systemic risk factors for school absenteeism, Melvin et al. (2019) have proposed the Kids and Teens at School (KiTeS) framework, applying Bronfenbrenner's (1979) bioecological systems model to facilitate the understanding of attendance and absence for all school students. The authors suggest that their model highlights the complex array of factors

within different systems that can contribute to school absenteeism for diverse student populations by placing the child within a nested framework of interacting systems. In doing this, the authors argue that this framework can work to identify both risk and protective factors for attendance issues which can be used to inform appropriate interventions.

2.1.5. Factors contributing to EBSA

Evidence indicates that EBSA and school attendance difficulties are complex phenomena with a wide range of contributing factors. Research typically groups the causes of school attendance difficulties into the categories: child-related; home- and family-related; and school-related factors (Gren-Landell, 2021; Ingul et al., 2019; Thambirajah et al., 2008). Therefore, the following sections seek to give an overview of research identifying contributing factors to EBSA within these categories.

2.1.5.1. Child-related factors

Mental health, medical or neurodevelopmental conditions

An existing clinical diagnosis of anxiety presents as a risk factor for school refusal (Ingul et al., 2019; McShane, Walter, & Rey, 2001). It is thought that a young persons' general anxiousness may lead to a greater nervousness about going to school, which could result in school refusal. Separation anxiety is also thought to contribute to school refusal behaviour (Bagnell, 2011; Egger et al., 2003). Egger and colleagues' (2003) study indicated that students experiencing anxiety-related school refusal were also more likely to exhibit symptoms of depression.

In a study in Norway of 865 high school students (aged between 16 and 21 years), Ingul and Nordahl (2013) explored features that differentiated anxious students with good attendance and anxious students with high absenteeism. Results indicated that anxious students with high absenteeism experienced higher levels of social anxiety than good attenders. Also, individuals' reactions to feelings of anxiousness separated the groups; those who feared somatic symptoms of anxiety experienced higher levels of panic and were more likely to have higher levels of absenteeism.

A recent systematic literature review exploring the association between anxiety and poor school attendance found further evidence to support this relationship (Finning et al., 2019). Authors synthesised findings from 11 studies, which indicated associations

between school refusal and *generalised anxiety disorder*, *social anxiety disorder*, and *simple phobia*. However, there were only two studies in the sample exploring school refusal specifically, as the majority explored unexcused absence and truancy. Authors comment that this supports claims regarding the lack of consensus on measuring and defining school attendance issues and conclude that further research is needed to explore the relationship between anxiety and absenteeism (Finning et al., 2019).

Considering neurodevelopmental conditions, research has indicated that children with autism are more likely to experience school refusal than neurotypical children (Munkhaugen, Gjevik, Pripp, Sponheim, & Diseth, 2017). Munkhaugen and colleagues' (2017) study included 216 students (78 with autism diagnoses) from Norway, aged 9-16 years, whose school attendance behaviours were monitored for 20 consecutive days by their parents and teachers. Results indicated that as well as being more likely to experience school refusal, the refusal was likely to be longer in duration and more severe than for typically developing children, though generalisations of these results are limited due to the short timeframe in which data was gathered.

School transition points

EBSA has been known to occur as early as the first years of schooling (Ingul et al., 2019). There is evidence to suggest that refusal behaviour tends to peak at key school transition points; aged 5-7 years, aged 10-11 years, and age 14 years (Elliott, 1999; Ingul et al., 2019). Depending on the country, these ages correspond to the start of early schooling, transition to secondary school, and nearing the end of compulsory education, respectively. In England, survey evidence from schools and LAs indicated that there were more pupils identified with attendance problems at secondary school age (11-16 years) (Archer et al., 2003). Other transitions have also been identified as risk factors for EBSA including moving to a new area or school, the beginning of a school year, following an absence due to illness, and the departure or loss of a friend or family member (Ingul et al., 2019).

2.1.5.2. Family and home-related factors

Family functioning

Within the home, research highlights several risk factors for school refusal, such as anxious parents, parental mental health issues, parental conflict, and single parenting

(Pellegrini, 2007). Within-family dynamics have also been identified as influential upon the risk of EBSA. In a recent study, Fornander and Kearney (2019) used a regression tree analysis to identify potential family environment risk factors for different levels of school absenteeism severity. They found that more severe absenteeism (15% or higher absence rate) was related to low *familial achievement orientation* (the extent to which activities are cast in a competitive framework), low *active-recreational orientation* (participation in recreational or social activities), low *cohesion* (family member support of one another) and low *expressiveness* (encouraging expression of feelings). Although this study does not distinguish between different forms of absenteeism, it supports the findings of previous studies that have indicated that problematic family functioning is more common amongst the families of school refusing children than school attenders (Ingul et al., 2019). Ingul et al. (2019) also comment in their review that further longitudinal research is needed to illuminate the role of family functioning as a risk factor for school refusal.

Adverse childhood experiences (ACEs)

Stempel, Cox-Martin, Bronsert, Dickinson, and Allison (2017) link *adverse childhood experiences* (ACEs) with chronic absenteeism. ACEs are defined as traumatic events in childhood that could be related to abuse, financial hardship, parental separation, bereavement, and family dysfunction amongst other events (Felitti et al., 1998). The Stempel et al. (2017) study was of a large (n = 58,765) and national scale across North America. Results showed an association between ACEs and chronic absenteeism, wherein experiencing multiple ACEs increased the risk of absenteeism. Strong relationships were found between witnessing violence in the community or parental substance abuse and absenteeism. This study quantified absenteeism as missing more than 15 days of schooling per year, thus does not specifically explore relationships between EBSA and ACEs as this will also include truant and physically unwell children. Even so, this study highlights the importance of considering ACEs as a risk factor for attendance difficulties.

2.1.5.3. School-related factors

Pellegrini (2007) comments that the school environment does not often come under scrutiny with regards to their role in EBSA. It has been noted that there is a tendency for school personnel to explain school refusal in terms of parents' attitudes or home

environment, whereas parents and students explain absences in terms of school factors (Havik, Bru, & Ertesvåg, 2014; Ingul et al., 2019).

Student-teacher relationships

A recent Italian study used *self-determination theory* to explore the impact of student perceptions of teacher control on school refusal behaviour (Filippello, Buzzai, Costa, & Sorrenti, 2019). Self-determination theory posits that an individual's effective functioning depends on the satisfaction of three fundamental psychological needs: autonomy; relatedness; and competence. Results from 263 randomly selected students, aged 13-20 years, suggest that perceived psychological control from teachers has a significant influence on the frustration of psychological needs at school and is associated with increased school refusal behaviour. Authors suggest that if a teacher adopts controlling behaviour, students experience a sense of external control. This may lead students to doubt their abilities and feel anxious, resulting in avoiding school-related stressors through school refusal behaviour (Filippello et al., 2019). Previous qualitative studies have supported this finding, with parents reporting that their child's school refusal was associated with a lack of teacher support, and school refusing pupils have reported experiences of feeling frightened of controlling and strict teachers (Baker & Bishop, 2015; Havik et al., 2014).

Conversely, research has also shown that among secondary school students, teacher support in the form of good classroom management is directly linked to a reduced risk of school refusal (Havik, Bru, & Ertesvåg, 2015b). Authors suggest that teachers may reduce the risk of school refusal by regulating student-student relationships, and through effective organisation of classroom activities (Havik et al., 2015b). Similarly, a recent study with 272 young people aged 13-18 years in North America used self-reported experiences of victimisation, sense of safety in school, and attachment to teachers alongside attendance data for a full school year to investigate relationships between these variables (Williford, Fite, Diaz, & Singh, 2021). Results showed that strong attachments to teachers and perceived school safety were negatively associated with school absence, leading authors to hypothesise that if students feel their teachers care for and support them, they may be more likely to feel connected to school which may then reduce absences.

School environment

Systemic factors such as large school sizes and school day structure, including unstructured times and transition times between lessons have been identified as influential in the onset of EBSA (Archer et al., 2003). This can also be influenced by how well-monitored areas such as toilets, corridors, and playgrounds are (Lauchlan, 2003). Also associated with unstructured times in school, high noise levels, and unpredictability of the environment have been identified as contributors to EBSA (Havik et al., 2014).

Peer difficulties within school

Experiencing bullying is a commonly reported factor contributing to school refusal (Archer et al., 2003; Baker & Bishop, 2015; Havik et al., 2014; Thambirajah et al., 2008). Supporting this, a large-scale study with 5,645 students in Norway suggested that poor peer relationships are an important risk factor for school refusal (Havik et al., 2015b). Results of this study also showed that school refusal was positively associated with feelings of social isolation.

A recent study with children with autism indicated that for this group, bullying and friendship difficulties were the most important reasons for their school refusal (Ochi et al., 2020). Furthermore, research with children with autism has indicated that children with co-occurring autism and attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) were more likely to refuse school due to bullying, more so than children without co-occurring conditions (McClemont, Morton, Gillis, & Romanczyk, 2020). For these children, having one-to-one support from a staff member in class was identified as a protective factor against school refusal.

Home-school communication

There is evidence that when schools and families cooperate well and engage in interventions together, this can have a positive impact on school attendance (Sheldon, 2007). A recent study piloting a multi-disciplinary intervention to support a return to school for school-refusing children found that parental involvement in the programme played a crucial role (McKay-Brown et al., 2019). By working with parents, schools could better understand barriers to attendance in the home, such as parenting behaviour, which schools could support and empower parents to address. Supporting this finding, parents of children experiencing EBSA perceived support from school as

important for the prevention of attendance issues (Havik et al., 2014). However, the same sample reported that they had felt some staff had not taken concerns for their children seriously until school avoidance had developed, preventing early intervention.

Thambirajah et al. (2008) explain that parents can often feel blamed by school for their child's non-attendance, and experience accompanying feelings of shame and guilt. Thus, for positive cooperation, schools must listen to and acknowledge the challenges for parents in this situation (Thambirajah et al., 2008).

2.1.6. Summary: School attendance

School attendance is important for educational and future prospects (Taylor, 2012). Poor school attendance is associated with higher incidences of unemployment, mental health difficulties, and antisocial behaviour (Ingul et al., 2019).

There are different ways in which school non-attendance can be conceptualised. It is accepted that there is a distinct phenomenon wherein school attendance is impacted by a child's emotional distress at the prospect of going to school (Thambirajah et al., 2008). There is little professional consensus on definition and terminology here, which can hamper identification, assessment, and intervention (Pellegrini, 2007). The term deemed most appropriate for use in this thesis is *emotionally based school avoidance* (EBSA) (West Sussex EPS, 2018). Due to difficulties in identification, the prevalence of EBSA is difficult to define, though it is estimated to occur in between 0.4% and 5.4% of children (Ingul et al., 2019).

Evidence suggests there are some common risk factors associated with EBSA that can broadly be categorised into being child-, family-, and school-related (Thambirajah et al., 2008). However, there seems to be somewhat of a lack of consensus between schools and families on the contributing factors of EBSA, with school staff tending not to identify as many school factors as contributors, where parents and children have indicated that these play an important role in EBSA (Pellegrini, 2007). Differences in the understanding of the causes of EBSA can hamper effective home-school relationships thus can act as a barrier to a return to school for pupils (Havik et al., 2014; Sheldon, 2007). Additionally, teacher practice and good student-teacher relationships can be a protective factor against poor attendance (Havik et al., 2015b; Williford et al., 2021).

If teachers and school staff are not aware of the potential importance of school-related factors or the impact of teacher practice upon EBSA, this could act as an indirect risk factor for EBSA. It is therefore important to understand how teachers understand the concept of EBSA and its potential causes. *Attribution theory* can be applied to support understanding of how individuals perceive the causes of behaviour. This can support understanding how teachers, parents, and young people perceive the causes of EBSA. This will be explored further in the following section.

2.2. Attribution theory

Although commonly referred to as attribution *theory,* Kelley (1973) poses that the concept is more accurately defined as "a set of general principles offered to explain certain observed phenomena" (Kelley, 1973 p.2). Broadly, attribution theories are scientific theories about how people *perceive* the causes of behaviour (Försterling, 2001). Attribution theory is not directly concerned with the *actual* causes of behaviour. Thus, attribution theory makes a "naïve psychologist" of the "man on the street" by examining how he explains his own or other individuals' behaviours (Försterling, 2001). Causal attributions for behaviour can impact future actions and interactions. For example, when someone asks themselves the question "Why did I succeed in this exam?" the way they explain their success can impact how they approach exams in the future. Explaining success through hard work might motivate them to continue to work hard for future exams, whereas perceiving that success was due to the task being particularly easy, may lead to a decrease in motivation to work as hard for the next exam.

In considering how people attribute causality of events, Heider (1958) theorised that there were two broad categories of attribution: *dispositional* (internal cause) and *situational* (external cause). Dispositional attributions position the cause of behaviour as due to an internal characteristic of a person such as their personality or beliefs. On the other hand, situational attribution assigns the cause of behaviour to something that is outside of a persons' control, such as environmental features. Thus, in the example given above, assigning success in an exam to hard work would be a dispositional attribution, whereas attributing success to an easy exam would be to perceive the cause as situational.

2.2.1. Jones and Davis' theory of correspondent inferences

Based upon Heider's (1958) work, Jones & Davis (1965) developed the *theory of correspondent inferences*. A correspondent inference refers to an occasion where an observer infers that a person's behaviour corresponds with their personality. Thus, this theory seeks to explain how people make *internal* causal attributions. Jones and Davis (1965) theorised that people draw upon five sources of information that lead to the development of correspondent inferences: *choice*; *intent*; *social desirability*; *hedonistic relevance*; and *personalism*. However, there has been little empirical evidence to support this model (Försterling, 2001). The theory of correspondent inferences has since been eclipsed somewhat by the more popular and widely tested *covariation model* proposed by Kelley (1967, 1973).

2.2.2. Kelley's covariation model

Broader than the theory of correspondent inferences, the covariation model seeks to identify what determines whether a person attributes a behaviour to either internal or external causes. Kelley's (1967, 1973) covariation principle states, "an effect is attributed to one of its possible causes with which, over time, it covaries". The principle applies when the attributor has information about the effect at two or more points in time.

Kelley (1973) expands upon the concept of internal and external attributions by organising the possible causes of behaviour into three categories: *person*, *entity*, and *circumstance*. Like internal attributions, if a behaviour is perceived to be caused by a factor like personality or beliefs, it is a *person* attribution. An *entity* attribution is made when the perceiver believes behaviour is due to a stable characteristic of an entity, such as the ease of an exam. *Circumstance* attributions are made when causes are attributed to features of an event such as enjoying a song based upon current mood or explaining someone's success by their extraordinary expenditure of effort. Whether an effect (e.g., exam success) is attributed to the person, entity or circumstance then depends upon the covariation of the effect with three criteria:

1. *Consensus*: the extent to which other people behave in the same way in a similar situation. If a lot of people demonstrate the same behaviour in a given situation, there is a high degree of consensus.

2. *Distinctiveness*: the extent to which the person behaves in the same way in similar situations. If a behaviour is distinct and does not usually occur in a given situation, we are more likely to attribute it to an entity or circumstance.
3. *Consistency*: this is the extent to which the person behaves like this every time the same situation occurs.

Kelley (1973) proposes that patterns of covariation lead to attributions. For example, if exam success is perceived to be low in consensus, low in distinctiveness, and high in consistency, this will lead to *person* attributions, where a student may be perceived as particularly intelligent or a diligent worker. Though, if consensus, distinctiveness, and consistency were all deemed high, this leads to *entity* attributions, where success may be perceived as due to a particularly easy style of exam, or that all students were well-prepared due to high-quality teaching.

Although a popular model, covariation is limited in its application as it assumes the observer has had the opportunity for multiple observations over time, and that an individual will have information across different dimensions before making attributions (Försterling, 2001).

2.2.3. Attribution theory in education

2.2.3.1. Weiner's Dimensions of Causality

Weiner is considered a key figure in the study of causal attributions within educational contexts (Gulliford, 2015). Based upon the work of Heider (1958) and Kelley (1973), Weiner et al. (1971) posed that in achievement-related contexts, the factors perceived as most responsible for success or failure are ability, effort, task difficulty, and luck. Thus, in attempting to try to explain a prior success or failure, an individual would assess themselves across these domains to attribute the cause. Weiner (1979) stresses that these should not be perceived as the *only* determinants of success or failure and that restricting causality to these four areas can lead to false conclusions.

Weiner (1979) developed a classification scheme for the process of attributing the causes of success and failure, comprising of three *Dimensions of Causality*. He built upon the concept of *internal* and *external* attributions, arguing that interpreting any behaviour into either of these categories is subjective and context dependent. Weiner (1979) terms this as the *locus of causality*, wherein attributing towards internal or external causes can be variable between contexts and individuals. The second

dimension of causality is *stability.* This refers to how stable the cause of an event is across contexts and between individuals. Thirdly, the dimension of *controllability* is described as the extent to which the cause of an event is in the control of the individual.

Weiner (1979, 2010) applied these concepts to theorise about how attributions for task success and failure could influence motivation and expectations for future task performance. For example, when a student has performed poorly on an exam, if the cause of this failure is regarded by the student as unchanging or stable, such as ability (internal) or a harsh teacher (external), then there would be an expectation of future failure, leading to a sense of hopelessness (Weiner, 2010). Weiner (2010) also links other attributional-emotional connections as being influenced by beliefs about causal controllability. For example, internal and controllable causes of failure (e.g., lack of effort) elicit feelings of guilt and regret, whereas internal, uncontrollable causes of failure (e.g., low ability), elicit feelings of shame and humiliation. How causes are attributed then impacts upon future motivation. If the cause of poor exam performance is perceived by the student as internal (e.g., lack of effort), unstable (e.g., previous exam success), and controllable (e.g., partying rather than studying), this can give rise to feelings of hope, guilt, and regret, all of which can be positive motivators to enhance future performance (Weiner, 2010).

2.2.3.2. Causal attributions for student behaviour

As the focus of the current study, it would be pertinent here to explore research around causal attributions for EBSA and school refusal behaviour. However, at the time of writing, literature searches highlight a lack of research explicitly applying attribution theory to non-attendance, and a lack of research that quantitatively explores perceptions of non-attendance with an emotional basis, or EBSA, as described earlier in this chapter. Thus, here an overview of research on attributions for student behaviour is presented with some tentative links made where this may be predictive of attributions for the causes of EBSA.

Teachers' causal attributions for student behaviour

The dimensions of causality (Weiner, 1979, 1985, 2010) have been applied to explore how teachers attribute the causes of student behaviour in schools and how this may impact teacher behaviour. Reyna and Weiner (2001) investigated the impact of causal attributions on teachers' actions towards students. Results showed that when teachers

attributed the causes of student failure as within the control of the student, teachers reacted more punitively. Whereas, attributing a lack of controllability elicited a more helpful teacher response. When the cause of student failure was perceived as stable (e.g., a lazy student), this increased the likelihood of a punitive response. These findings suggest that how teachers attribute the causes of student performance can have a direct influence on their behaviour towards them in the future. Similarly, in a study on how teachers' causal beliefs related to their suggestions for addressing challenging pupil behaviour, Soodak and Podell (1994) found that for the small proportion of teachers who suggested school issues were the cause of challenging behaviour, more suggestions were made related to teaching strategies than those who attributed causes as outside of the school context. However, overall, teachers were more likely to make non-teacher-based suggestions than teacher-based suggestions, with more than half of teachers suggesting that outside intervention was the only effective strategy. Authors suggest that the frequency with which teachers attribute home environment as the cause of difficult behaviour may explain, in part, why teachers then seek solutions outside the classroom (Soodak & Podell, 1994).

More recently, Wang and Hall (2018) have undertaken a systematic review of empirical research on the types of attributions made by teachers when faced with student problems and the impact this has upon instructional behaviours. Seventy-nine studies were included for review, published between the years 1978 and 2015, originating from countries across the world, though mostly from westernised areas. Generally, study findings indicated that teachers are more likely to explain student failure as due to factors internal to students or family influences, rather than teacher- or school-related issues. Research also indicates that teachers with greater teaching experience may be more likely than novice teachers to believe that student success or failure to be due to external, uncontrollable factors such as family background or socioeconomic status (Wang & Hall, 2018).

Wang and Hall (2018) also draw together evidence around teachers' attributions for student misbehaviour, including attributions for internalising behaviour. Internalising behaviour, including anxiety, depression, somatic complaints, and social withdrawal, share some features with EBSA as it is described earlier in this chapter, thus it seems appropriate to explore the findings of these studies in more detail. Kleftaras and Didaskalou (2006) measured the emotional wellbeing of 323 students aged 10-13

years in Greece and examined the attributions of the students' 35 teachers for the causes of emotional and behavioural needs. Results indicated that teachers attributed the causes of students' behavioural issues in the following order of importance: problems within families; inappropriate parenting skills; biological or physical deficits in children; and factors related to the school context, though authors note the frequency of reporting school factors were extremely low. Interestingly, results also indicated that teachers tended to underestimate the frequency of pupils presenting with depressive symptoms in comparison with pupil self-report scores. The authors hypothesise that the teacher sample lack awareness of the symptomology of depression and the impacts this can have upon children in the classroom. Authors also suggest that teachers' tendency to attribute causes of emotional difficulties to factors outside of the school reflects teachers' denial and/or lack of appropriate skills to respond effectively to pupil needs. Generalisations from this study must be made tentatively due to the small number of teachers included, the limited geographical spread of participants, and the self-report nature of the pupils' measure of emotional needs.

Also included for review in Wang and Hall (2018) is a Russian study by Savina, Moskovtseva, Naumenko, and Zilberberg (2014), of teachers (*n* = 80), mothers (*n* = 90), and school psychologists (*n* = 30) on their perceptions of internalising and externalising behaviours in children. Participants were presented with two vignettes, one describing a child experiencing internalising problems, and the other describing a child experiencing externalising problems. Upon comparing internalising to externalising behaviours, findings indicated that overall, teachers, parents, and school psychologists perceived that "faulty parenting" and "negative relationships with teachers" were more responsible for externalising than internalising behaviour. For the causes of internalising behaviour, teachers ascribed the most importance to a child's personality, followed by family factors, peers, genetics, then placing the least importance on teacher behaviour. Similar to Kleftaras and Didaskalou (2006), the authors here suggest that teachers in this sample downplay their potential responsibility in children's emotional and behavioural difficulties as a result of a self-serving bias, activated when they have experienced a threat to their self-concept (Savina et al., 2014). Again, the findings of this study must be taken in the context of its limitations; a relatively small sample of all-female participants in one area of Russia.

This limits the generalisability of findings, though they do show parallels with the attributional patterns of other studies.

Students' and parents' attributions for student behaviour

Research suggests there is disagreement between teachers', students', and parents' causal attributions for students' classroom difficulties (Wang & Hall, 2018). Guttmann (1982) compared children's attributional patterns for behaviour problems to the attributional patterns of teachers and parents. Children were most likely to attribute behaviour problems to external causes (teachers, parents, other children, environment) rather than to the misbehaving child themselves. In contrast, teachers were most likely to attribute the behaviour to child-related and parent-related causes. Parent responses were more evenly spread, suggesting they gave equal consideration to child-, teacher-, peer-, and parent-related causes.

Miller, Ferguson, and Byrne (2000) also examined causal attributions made by pupils for difficult behaviour in classrooms. In total, 105 secondary school pupils' attributions towards misbehaviour in school were represented by four factors: "fairness of teacher's actions", "pupil vulnerability", "adverse family circumstances" and "strictness of classroom regime", wherein the first two factors were deemed the most significant contributors. Following this, Miller, Ferguson, and Moore (2002) applied the same measure used in Miller et al. (2000) to explore parents' attributions for misbehaviour. Their attributions were best represented by three factors: "fairness of teachers' actions", "pupil vulnerability to peer influence and family circumstance", and "differentiation of classroom demands and expectations". This is a similar factor model to pupils' and highlights differences from teachers' attributional patterns.

Theoretical exploration of attributional patterns for student behaviour

To explore disagreement between teachers', students', and parents' attributions for student behaviour, one can draw upon Weiner's (1979, 2010) dimensions of causality. Research suggests that, generally, teachers tend to perceive the causes of students' challenging behaviour as external and uncontrollable to themselves, uncontrollable to students, and when attributing responsibility to family factors, this may also be perceived as stable over time (Wang & Hall, 2018). This may then lead to teachers' feeling a sense of hopelessness and helplessness in changing the behaviour of said students. These feelings can influence teacher motivation to change their behaviour,

wherein they may be less likely to make changes if they perceive the causes of pupil behaviour as unchangeable (Soodak & Podell, 1994; Weiner, 2010).

Furthermore, Wang and Hall (2018) argue that *fundamental attribution error* (Ross, 1977) is evident in the research examining teachers' attributions for student behaviour. Fundamental attribution error refers to the tendency for attributors to underestimate the impact of situational factors and overestimate the impact of dispositional, within-person factors in controlling behaviour (Ross, 1977). It has been argued that when observers make attributions that implicate an individual's abilities, dispositions, and attitudes, this can serve to enhance the observer's self-esteem, minimise negative affect, and defend against compromised perceptions of one's abilities (Heider, 1958; Jones & Davis, 1965; Ross, 1977). Thus, placing more importance upon student- and family-related factors, over school- and teacher-related factors as causing negative student behaviour may be indicative of teachers' attributing in a self-protective manner (Wang & Hall, 2018).

Conversely, a simpler account of this pattern of attribution has also been proposed, which postulates that cognitively, failure-related memories are more difficult for individuals to access, and are thus less easily attributable to internal factors, and more likely to be attributed to readily external variables such as observable characteristics of a student (Wang & Hall, 2018). This may be exacerbated by the position of teachers as external observers of students, and as such, they are less aware than students of situational factors that contribute to negative behaviour (D. T. Miller & Ross, 1975; Wang & Hall, 2018).

2.2.4. Exploring attributions for the causes of EBSA

Teachers seem to attribute in similar ways for different aspects of pupils' challenging behaviour and negative outcomes (Wang & Hall, 2018). This influences teacher emotion and practice in response to challenge in the classroom (Soodak & Podell, 1994; Weiner, 2010). These attributional patterns may be replicated for teachers' perceptions of the causes of EBSA. However, there is a lack of research that applies attribution theory to understand how the causes of EBSA are perceived. Considering the findings of attributional research, it would be valuable to explore attributions for the causes of EBSA to then be able to further understand teachers' motivation to adapt practices to support those at risk of EBSA.

In the following section, a systematic literature review is presented which seeks to explore and compare teachers', pupils', and parents' perceptions of the causes of EBSA which may be indicative of the attributional patterns of these groups.

2.3. Systematic literature review

2.3.1. Introduction

Here, a systematic literature review is presented on the topic of EBSA and its perceived causes. Systematic literature reviews are useful tools to evaluate evidence accurately and reliably (Liberati et al., 2009). The review outlines a specific objective that it attempts to meet by identifying, appraising and synthesising relevant studies using transparent and rigorous methods (Petticrew & Roberts, 2006). The current review uses the PRISMA Statement (Liberati et al., 2009) as a guide for the procedure and reporting of results. In contrast to the previous sections, the literature outlined below meet specific inclusion criteria.

2.3.2. Objectives of the review

The aim of this review was initially to present a systematic overview of the evidence around how different groups, namely pupils, parents and teachers attribute the causes of EBSA. However, a search of three databases (PsychINFO, Scopus, Web of Science) in July 2020, and again in April 2021, did not return any published articles that explored attributions towards the causes of EBSA or school refusal behaviour relative to attribution theory as described above. With a lack of attributional studies to review, it was decided that an appropriate objective of this review would be to explore the *perceptions* of the causes of EBSA, given that attribution theory broadly concerns how people *perceive* causes of behaviour (Försterling, 2001).

Additionally, database searches highlighted a lack of published research that operationalised the term *emotionally based school avoidance*, which was not surprising, as this is a relatively recently coined term. This did however necessitate widening the search terms used to identify relevant papers, which is reflected in the inclusion criteria of the review presented in Table 2.1.

A review of returns from database searches also highlighted an issue with searching solely for the perceptions of teachers. Several articles combine teachers' responses with other school personnel, which could include school leaders, teaching assistants

(TAs), school health personnel and learning mentors, amongst others. It would therefore be limiting to the scope of this review to include studies that solely gather the perceptions of teachers and exclude those including other school personnel.

Thus, the objective of this review is to present a systematic overview of the evidence around how pupils, parents and school personnel perceive the causes of EBSA and school attendance issues with an emotional basis.

2.3.3. Method

2.3.3.1. Eligibility criteria

Eligibility criteria were set to identify studies that met the objective of this review. To encompass the range of terminology used to identify EBSA, the parameters of the search were widened to include studies that used the terms “school refusal,” “school phobia”, “absenteeism”, “non-attendance”, and “school avoidance.”

Table 2.1. A table to show the inclusion and exclusion criteria for this systematic literature review.

Inclusion criteria	*Exclusion criteria*
The article focuses upon non-attendance or avoidance of an educational setting.	The article focuses upon non-attendance to another setting (hospital appointments, clinic appointments, etc.).
The article focuses on the non-attendance of young people of secondary age (11-16 years), or equivalent, for the country in which the study was conducted.	The study focuses on the non-attendance of young people either younger or older than secondary age.
Perceptions for non-attendance with an emotional basis (EBSA, school refusal, school phobia, etc.) are gathered.	The study does not describe the nature of non-attendance.
Collecting perceptions of the causes of non-attendance is the primary focus of the study (or is a joint focus alongside other objectives).	Collecting perceptions of the causes of non-attendance is a secondary focus or is implied from other findings.
Participants are school-aged young people and/or school personnel, and/or parents of school-aged young people.	Participants are not school-aged young people, school personnel or parents of school-aged young people.
Access to full text in the English language is available.	Access to full text is not available or is in a language other than English.
To give an overview of perceptions of contemporary school systems, studies are published no earlier than 2010.	The study is published before the year 2010.

2.3.3.2. Search strategy

The articles included in this review were identified through systematic searches within three databases: PsychINFO, Scopus, and Web of Science at two points in time (July 2020 and April 2021). The full list of search terms and numbers of articles returned is detailed in Table 2.2.

Search terms were simple to return a broad range of relevant papers. As stated above, there are several different terms used to conceptualise EBSA, so it was important to include multiple terms to capture this group. Truncation was used to cover a range of key words. For example, “school refus*” would encompass the use of both “school refusal” and “school refuser”. It was also decided for the searches to include synonyms of the word “perception” including “view”, “opinion” and “attribution”.

Table 2.2. A table to show the database searches undertaken for the systematic literature review.

Database searched	*Date*	*Search term*	*Number of returns*
PsychINFO	11.07.20	(school and ("school refus*" or non-attendance or "school avoid*" or "school phobia") and (perception* or view* or opinion*))	105
	16.07.20	(school and absentee* and (perception* or view* or opinion*))	182
	12.04.21	(school and ("school refus*" or non-attendance or "school avoid*" or "school phobia") and (perception* or view* or opinion*))	156
Scopus	11.07.20	(school and ("school refus*" or non-attendance or "school avoid*" or "school phobia") and (perception* or view* or opinion*))	102
	16.07.20	(school and absentee* and (perception* or view* or opinion*))	175
	12.04.21	((school and ("school refus*" or non-attendance or "school avoid*" or "school phobia" or absentee*) and (perception* or view* or opinion* or attribut*)))	588
Web of Science	11.07.20	(school and ("school refus*" or non-attendance or "school avoid*" or "school phobia") and (perception* or view* or opinion*))	63
	16.07.20	(school and absentee* and (perception* or view* or opinion*))	205
	12.04.21	(school and ("school refus*" or non-attendance or "school avoid*" or "school phobia" or absentee*) and (perception* or view* or opinion* or attribut*))	368

2.3.3.3. Quality assessment

Gough's (2007) *Weight of Evidence* model was applied to critically analyse the quality and relevance of identified studies in meeting the objectives of the review. By applying this, studies can be appraised individually for their quality, allowing judgements to be made on the weight ascribed to them in the synthesis process. Gough's (2007) model consists of four criteria by which to judge studies:

- Weight of Evidence A: a non-review specific judgement of the coherence, integrity and overall quality of the evidence presented.
- Weight of Evidence B: A review-specific judgement on the appropriateness of the methods and design employed to address the review question.
- Weight of Evidence C: A review specific judgement of the relevance of the focus of evidence for the review question.
- Weight of Evidence D: An overall judgement of the extent to which a study contributes to the review objectives based upon the weightings given for criteria A, B and C.

2.3.3.4. Data extraction

To address the review question, information was extracted and synthesised from the selected papers using the principles of content analysis. The analysis was completed twice; once for papers with parent and child participants, and once for papers with school personnel participants, so that comparisons could be drawn between the two groups. Firstly, the categories for analysis were informed by existing literature addressing risk factors for school attendance issues, and attributions for behaviour in school, as described in the literature review in Section 2.2. of this thesis. This process indicated that causes of EBSA and attributions for behaviour in school are often organised into the categories of "home/parent", "child" and "school". Therefore, this provided initial broad categories for analysis of the content of each paper for review.

Following this, each of the selected papers was analysed on a phrase-by-phrase basis and findings were mapped onto the pre-determined categories. Each category was then explored narratively to provide an overview of how the papers serve to answer the review question.

Key information on demographics, participants, methods and data analysis within each paper was also recorded and tabulated.

2.3.4. Results

2.3.4.1. Study selection

Applying the search strategies detailed in Table 2.1 initially yielded 1,944 results. One additional paper was hand selected. The process of filtering these results is presented in Figure 2.1. These results were screened at the title and abstract level and articles not meeting the eligibility criteria were excluded. Following this, 19 articles were screened at a full-text level. A further 12 studies were excluded here. Summaries of excluded studies can be found in Appendix 7.2. Finally, a total of seven papers were identified as fully meeting the exclusion criteria: Baker and Bishop (2015); Dannow, Esbjørn and Risom (2020); Devenney and O'toole (2021); Gregory and Purcell (2014); Gren-Landell et al. (2015); Havik et al. (2014); Torrens Armstrong, Mccormack Brown, Brindley, Coreil and Mcdermott (2011). Summaries of these included studies are detailed in Table 2.4.

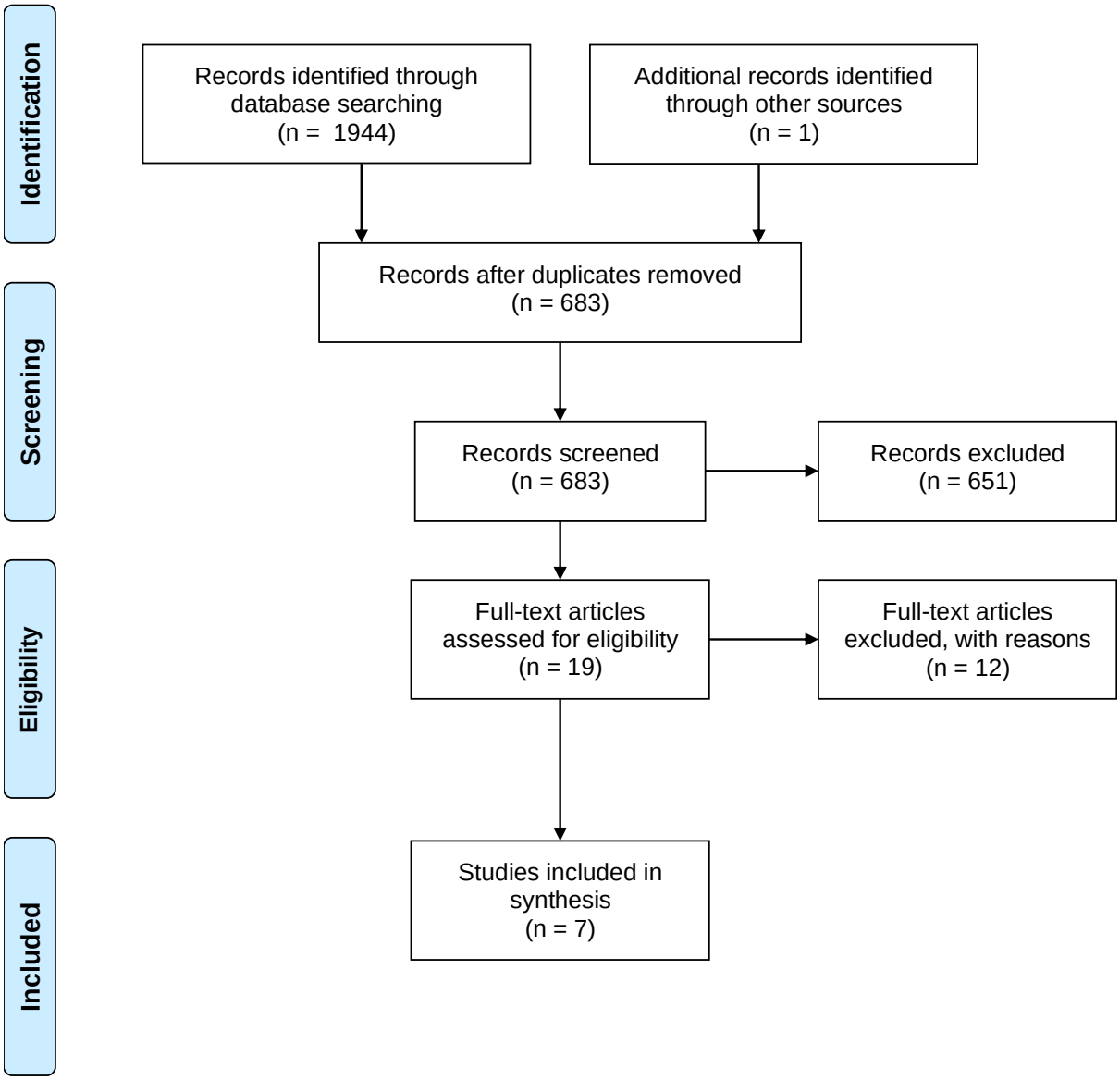

Figure 2.1. PRISMA flow diagram of database search and study selection (Moher, Liberati, Tetzlaff, Altman, & The PRISMA Group, 2009).

2.3.4.2. Reliability and validity of selected studies

Levels of reliability and validity varied across studies. There was one quantitative paper identified for inclusion in the review: Gren-Landell et al. (2015). The paper had some validity issues with regards to methodology as the authors developed their own measure to gather data on the participants' perceptions. This presents the issue of *construct validity,* wherein the created measure may not fully represent the phenomenon the authors are trying to capture.

The remaining six studies were qualitative in their methods. Much qualitative research abides by principles of quality appraisal which differ from those of quantitative methods, wherein the concepts of internal and external validity are replaced with

"credibility" and "transferability", respectively (Bronson, 2011; Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2018). Therefore, in the "Weight of Evidence B" category, qualitative and quantitative papers selected for review were subject to separate criteria (see Appendix 7.1).

Overall, as all the papers included within this review are included in peer-reviewed journals, it was deemed that studies that have passed the process of peer-review will offer adequate levels of reliability and validity.

Quality assessment

Gough's (2007) Weight of Evidence framework and resulting selected criteria scoring model (Appendix 7.1) were applied to individually assess each study for quality and relevance to this review. Table 2.3 shows the scores given to each study.

Table 2.3. A table to show the weight of evidence (WoE) (Gough, 2007) attributed to each selected study.

Study	*WoE A*	*WoE B*	*WoE C*	*WoE D*
Baker and Bishop (2015)	High	High	High	**High**
Dannow et al. (2020)	High	High	High	**High**
Devenney and O'toole (2021)	High	Medium	High	**High**
Gregory and Purcell (2014)	High	Medium	High	**High**
Gren-Landell et al. (2015)	High	High	Medium	**High**
Havik et al. (2014)	High	High	High	**High**
Torrens Armstrong et al. (2011)	High	Medium	Medium	**Medium**

2.3.4.3. Results of individual studies

The key features of each of the eight studies included for review are presented in Table 2.4.

Table 2.4. A table to show a summary of each of the articles included in the systematic literature review.

Study	*Sample*	*Method*	*Analysis*
Baker and Bishop (2015) United Kingdom	*n* = 4 Participants: children experiencing attendance difficulties for at least one term and receiving support from the Home Education Service or are electively home educated. 50% male, 50% female Ages not given specifically, 50% in Year 11, 50% Year 10 (likely aged 14-16 years)	Semi-structured interviews with individual participants	Interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA)
Dannow et al. (2020) Denmark	*n* = 8 (3 children, 3 mothers and 2 fathers) Child participants: children identified as experiencing anxiety-related non-attendance and had been absent for more than 15% of the last 3 months. 100% male, aged 13-15 years. Parent participants: parents of participating children. 40% male, 60% female. Mean age = 52.6 years.	Semi-structured interviews. Children and parents are interviewed separately.	Thematic analysis
Devenney and O'toole (2021) Republic of Ireland	*n* = 17 Participants: professionals who worked in or were supporting second-level schools (schools for students aged 12-18 years).	Participants took part in individual telephone interviews. Interviews were semi-structured, and questions explored experiences and challenges of	Thematic analysis.

Study	*Sample*	*Method*	*Analysis*
	Roles of participants included teacher (*n* = 1), retired principal (*n* = 2), principal (*n* = 9), deputy principal (*n* = 2), school completion officer (*n* = 1), guidance counsellor (*n* = 1), head teacher (*n* = 1) 47% male, 53% female Settings included private and state schools, mixed-gender and all-boys and all-girls schools, and schools eligible for schemes serving communities in low socio-economic areas.	working with young people at risk of experiencing school refusal.	
Gregory and Purcell (2014) United Kingdom	*n* = 8 (5 mothers, 3 children) Child participants: Identified as being electively home educated, and parents cite that school non-attendance is a factor in deciding to home educate. Individual gender and age demographics not given, but pupils identified as secondary aged (11-16 years). Parent participants: 100% female, age demographics not given.	Semi-structured interviews. Children and parents were interviewed separately.	IPA
Gren-Landell et al., (2015) Sweden	*n* = 158 Participants: teachers who reported having experience working with students	A questionnaire was developed for use in the study based upon a review of school absenteeism literature which included 16 questions within domains of	Analysis of variance (ANOVA) repeated measurement was used to analyse differences between the domains.

Study	*Sample*	*Method*	*Analysis*
	experiencing problematic school absenteeism 81.6% female School size varied from 16-1000 students, mean = 408 students Over one quarter of participants were teachers in special education	family, individual, peer and school factors that participants rated on a scale of importance and a rating of how often teachers had experienced this as causing absenteeism.	
Havik et al. (2014) Norway	*n* = 17 Participants: parents of children who were displaying or had displayed school refusal behaviour. Their children were aged from 10-18 years (mean age 14.7). 12% male, 88% female. Aged 41-56 years (mean age 48.1).	Semi-structured interviews with individual parents.	Thematic analysis.
Torrens Armstrong et al. (2011) North America	*n* = 10 Participants: school health personnel (school nurses and health assistants) 10% male, 90% female Years of experience range from 1-25 years.	Individual semi-structured interviews. Participants are asked their opinion on why students do not attend school.	Data analysis described as an iterative process including several steps of review, coding and interpretation. Comparisons were made within and across emergent themes.

2.3.4.4. Synthesis of results

The heterogeneity of the studies selected limits the synthesis of results here. As mentioned above, most of the studies used qualitative designs, with small sample sizes, therefore generalisations are difficult to draw from the data. Below, the studies are discussed in terms of how well they meet the objective of the review, exploring the perceptions of pupils, parents, and school personnel on the causes of EBSA and school attendance issues.

Conceptualisations of school non-attendance across studies

Understanding the terminology and conceptualisation of attendance difficulties used by each study is important, as the parameters on the definition will naturally determine participant recruitment, how participants perceive the issue and how the authors interpret findings. Exploration around terminology has suggested that terms used to conceptualise EBSA and attendance difficulties can impact how individuals perceive its causes (Pellegrini, 2009).

Baker and Bishop (2015) and Gregory and Purcell (2014) both use the term *extended non-attendance* to minimise the within-child focus of other terms. Both papers sensitively acknowledge the complexity of defining the issue and comment upon the underlying anxiety usually present with children experiencing extended non-attendance.

Dannow et al. (2020) use the term *anxiety-related school absenteeism*, describing again the complexity of the condition but highlighting the commonality of feelings of anxiety towards school attendance in those experiencing it.

Havik et al. (2014) use the broad term of *school refusal* but provide their working definition as “child-motivated school non-attendance related to emotional distress experienced in connection with academic or social situations in school”. This again highlights the emotional base of the refusal. This definition also draws attention to school factors, this may be due to the focus of the study specifically exploring the role of school-related factors in school refusal. Devenney and O’toole (2021) also employ the term *school refusal*, conceptualising it in a similar way to Havik et al. (2014).

Torrens Armstrong et al. (2011) also use the term *school refusal* but do not apply the same emphasis on emotional factors. Their definition outlines school refusal as

“student refusal to attend school for various unexplained reasons” and “students who have difficulty in attending school or remaining in school for the entire day”. This broad definition gives scope to include a variety of attendance problems within the perceptions gathered, though results indicate that school staff distinguish between absence due to sickness, school phobia and general disengagement from education.

Gren-Landell et al. (2015) choose to use the term *problematic school absenteeism* which authors position as a unifying term that draws together *school refusal*, *truancy* and *school phobia* and references Kearney (2008a) who devised this term in the hope of reaching a consensus among professionals around attendance problems. Although this definition includes reference to truancy, which is not the focus of this review, within the description of the phenomenon given to participants, the authors refer to absence that causes social exclusion or mental health problems, which are more commonly related to EBSA than truancy, thus it was deemed appropriate for inclusion in this review. However, it must be recognised in interpreting these results that responses are in terms of the unified definition of problematic school absenteeism, rather than EBSA.

The range of terminology, and differing definitions given for the same terms highlight the difficulty in creating a shared understanding of the concept of EBSA. Thus, it is also important to acknowledge that differences in how attendance issues are conceptualised within each study impacts upon generalisations and comparisons made within this review.

Perceptions of pupils and parents on the causes of EBSA

Three of the selected studies included child participants; Baker and Bishop (2015), Dannow et al. (2020) and Gregory and Purcell (2014). Child participants across all three studies are identified as being secondary school-aged (11-16 years) and had all experienced some form of EBSA. Of the three studies with pupil participants, only Baker and Bishop (2015) focus solely on the perceptions of young people. Both Dannow et al. (2020) and Gregory and Purcell (2014) also include parents of the child participants, and in both studies, parent and child data are analysed together, so it is difficult to separate parent and child perceptions. Havik et al. (2014) include only parent participants.

Within these studies, the perceptions of the causes of non-attendance can generally be organised into four categories: pupil-related, parent-related, school-related, and peer-related. These are explored in more detail below.

1. **Pupil-related factors:**
    - Medical diagnoses: anxiety, depression, obsessive compulsive disorder (OCD), Asperger's syndrome, chronic fatigue (Baker & Bishop, 2015; Gregory & Purcell, 2014)
    - Motivation to attend school (Dannow et al., 2020)
    - Separation anxiety (Baker & Bishop, 2015)
    - Fear of failure (Havik et al., 2014)
2. **Parent-related factors:**
    - Limited understanding of absenteeism (Dannow et al., 2020).
3. **School-related factors:**
    - Lack of appropriate support from school (Baker & Bishop, 2015; Dannow et al., 2020)
    - Punitive response to non-attendance (Baker & Bishop, 2015; Gregory & Purcell, 2014)
    - Busy and noisy school environments (Dannow et al., 2020; Havik et al, 2014)
    - Long school days (Dannow et al., 2020)
    - Unpredictable learning environments, including changes to routine and staffing (Dannow et al., 2020; Havik et al., 2014)
    - Academic demands or poorly targeted work (Dannow et al., 2020; Havik et al., 2014)
    - Strict or harsh teachers (Baker & Bishop, 2015; Dannow et al., 2020; Gregory & Purcell, 2014; Havik et al., 2014)
    - Lack of adaptation to individual needs (e.g., passes to leave lessons, not having to read out loud) (Havik et al., 2014)
    - Poor home-school communication (Havik et al., 2014)
    - Poor communication between staff in school (Havik et al., 2014)
4. **Peer-related factors:**
    - Bullying (Baker & Bishop, 2015; Gregory & Purcell, 2014)
    - Exclusion from a peer group (Baker & Bishop, 2015; Dannow et al., 2020; Havik et al., 2014)

- Placement with unfamiliar peer group (Baker & Bishop, 2015)
- Fear of the perceptions of peers (Dannow et al., 2020).
- Negative peer reactions towards non-attendance (Dannow et al., 2020)
- Peer conflict (Havik et al., 2014)

Within the studies, school-related factors were the most cited as contributing to EBSA. Though it is important to state that the Havik et al. (2014) study specified a focus on school-related factors, thus, there is a natural skew in data here, and the views presented in this study may not be fully representative of parents' views towards all factors they consider as contributing to EBSA.

All studies suggest a theme of pupils feeling afraid of harsh teaching practice, highlighting this as an important perceived cause of EBSA within the school-related factors. Parents in Havik et al. (2014) perceived that their children were receiving unfair punishments and that their children were particularly anxious and vulnerable to feeling that a teacher may punish them. This was echoed by participants in Baker and Bishop (2015) who worried about being "picked on" by teachers and felt labelled as "naughty" for not attending school. Conversely, two studies reported how positive student-teacher relationships can play an important role in supporting children to re-engage in schooling. For a child participant, feeling valued, seen and appreciated by teachers helped to evoke a trusting relationship and feeling of belonging (Dannow et al., 2020). Parents also expressed the importance of feeling that their child was appreciated and cared about in school, commenting that this can have a profound impact on helping their child to feel safe and connected to their school (Havik et al., 2014). Positively or negatively, it appears that teachers play an important role in school factors surrounding EBSA.

Peer-related factors were the next most cited contributor to attendance difficulties. Feeling excluded from peer groups was referenced in three of the four studies. A pupil participant commented that feelings of isolation were perpetuated in school when he was able to attend as he was made to work on his own (Baker & Bishop, 2014). Being separated from a peer group within school due to teaching group organisation was also perceived as a causal factor for non-attendance (Baker and Bishop, 2014). It seems that parents also hold concerns for further exclusion and social isolation once their children have stopped attending school (Dannow et al., 2020; Gregory & Purcell, 2014).

In two of the four studies, medical diagnoses of the pupils were perceived to be within-child causes of attendance issues. In both Baker and Bishop (2015) and Gregory and Purcell (2014), pupils' diagnoses of Asperger's syndrome and associated difficulties were thought by pupils and parents to be significant contributors to non-attendance. Diagnoses of depression were also a commonality between the two studies, though interestingly, a pupil comments that despite his diagnosis of depression, he felt he may have still been attending school if his teachers had cared more, relating this again to a school factor of a perceived lack of support (Baker & Bishop, 2015). "Fear of failure" is listed as a child-related factor here as it relates to an internal concept for the child, though in the Havik et al. (2014) study, this factor is paired with the school-related factor of high academic demands and a lack of adaptation to demands made by teachers.

Child participants in these studies do not link any parent-related factors to their absenteeism. Parents in the Dannow et al. (2020) study remark that their lack of understanding of the concept of absenteeism left them finding it difficult to support their children, though they do not explicitly link this as a causal factor for EBSA. Within the parents' narrative, there is a theme of feeling anxious, overwhelmed and helpless in response to their child's attendance difficulties (Dannow et al., 2020; Gregory & Purcell, 2014). There is also a sense that support and cooperation with schools are regarded as valuable, but sometimes challenging, with some parents feeling that school staff did not understand their child's needs or take them seriously (Dannow et al., 2020; Gregory & Purcell, 2014; Havik et al., 2014).

Summary: perceptions of pupils and parents on the causes of EBSA

The four studies discussed here are representations of individual experiences, and Gregory and Purcell (2014) remark that for each child there is no one cause of extended non-attendance, but there is usually a complex interplay between factors individual to each child. Even so, there are clear commonalities in how pupils and parents perceive some of the causes of EBSA, with the most emphasis being placed upon school-related and peer-related factors.

As previously mentioned, these studies are limited in meeting the review objective of exploring the perceptions of pupils, parents, and school personnel, as they are all of a small scale and qualitatively analysed, so findings are not necessarily generalisable

to larger populations. Additionally, pupil and parent perceptions are difficult to separate as interview data is analysed as one in both Dannow et al. (2020) and Gregory and Purcell (2014), so neither group are uniquely represented. Baker and Bishop (2015) and Havik et al. (2014) do however present the views of pupil and parent groups separately.

Perceptions of school personnel on the causes of EBSA

One study included in this review focussed solely on the perceptions of teachers; Gren-Landell et al. (2015). However, in this study, the sample is split into teachers in mainstream schools and teachers in special education, and comparisons drawn between samples.

Devenney and O'toole (2021) recruited a mixed sample of school personnel who all had experience working with young people who had experienced school refusal. Participants had a range of roles within education, which included those in leadership roles, teachers, and guidance counsellors. The establishments in which participants were employed were also varied and included private and state schools. Comparisons are not drawn between participants' roles and their perceptions.

Torrens Armstrong et al. (2011) does not include teachers in the sample. This study qualitatively explores the perceptions of school health personnel towards school refusal in its various forms.

As with the studies exploring parent and child perceptions of the causes of EBSA, the perceptions of school personnel from the selected studies can also be organised into four broad categories: pupil-related, parent/home-related, school-related, and peer-related. These will be explored further below.

1. **Pupil-related factors:**
    - The emotional distress of the young person (Devenney & O'toole, 2021)
    - The pupil has a mental health need (e.g., anxiety, depression) (Devenney & O'toole, 2021; Gren-Landell et al., 2015)
    - Separation anxiety from the parental figure (Devenney & O'toole, 2021)
    - Neurodevelopmental diagnoses (e.g., autism, ADHD) (Devenney & O'toole, 2021)
    - Pupil physical illness (Torrens Armstrong et al., 2011)

- The pupil is not motivated to attend school (Torrens Armstrong et al., 2011)

2. **Parent/home-related factors:**
    - Parental mental illness (Gren-Landell et al., 2015)
    - Parental separation (Devenney & O'toole, 2021)
    - Bereavement of the loss of a family member (Devenney & O'toole, 2021)
    - Adverse home situations (Devenney & O'toole, 2021; Gren-Landell et al., 2015)
    - Parents are not motivated or are not effective in supporting their child (Devenney & O'toole, 2021; Gren-Landell et al., 2015)
    - Parents place a lot of pressure on pupils for academic attainment (Devenney & O'toole, 2021)
    - Permissive parental styles (Gren-Landell et al., 2015)
3. **School-related factors:**
    - Pressure on pupils to perform well in exams (Devenney & O'toole, 2021; Gren-Landell et al., 2015)
    - The transition from primary to secondary education (Devenney & O'toole, 2021)
    - Being singled out in class (Devenney & O'toole, 2021)
    - Ineffective support strategies implemented by the school (Devenney & O'toole, 2021)
    - Education is not adapted to learning needs (Gren-Landell et al., 2015)
    - Traumatic or distressing events within the school (Torrens Armstrong et al., 2011)
4. **Peer-related factors:**
    - Peer victimisation or harassment (Gren-Landell et al., 2015; Torrens Armstrong et al., 2011)
    - Social difficulties (Torrens Armstrong et al., 2011)

Across the three papers, school personnel acknowledge there is a range of factors that contribute to attendance difficulties, though authors suggest that generally, school personnel perceived that pupil-related and parent/home-related causes were more important than school or peer-related factors. Devenney and O'toole (2021) note that participants seemed to conceptualise school refusal as a "within-child condition", with most importance placed upon "emotional distress of pupils" and "adverse circumstances at home" as causes of refusal. Similarly, in Gren-Landell et al. (2015),

participants rated family and individual factors as more important than school and peer factors.

Within Torrens Armstrong et al., (2011), school health personnel distinguished *school phobia* as a separate condition under the broad umbrella of school refusal, placing school factors as more important for this group. They believed that those experiencing school phobia were likely to have faced negative experiences in school which caused their refusal, including bullying, a traumatic event, specific teachers, certain classes, or places within school. Whereas, when referring to pupils experiencing *school refusal,* they also included students who were bored, defiant or with physical illnesses.

An interesting finding emerged from Devenney and O'toole (2021) in that several participants commented on socio-economic status as a factor linked to how families were perceived. It was noted that some participants felt that families with higher incomes were more motivated to support their child to re-engage with school and more willing to work with schools than low-income families. Authors remark that low-income families were more likely to be blamed for their perceived inability to manage their problems. Torrens Armstrong et al. (2011) also note the importance of how participants perceived the causes of refusal in determining the action school personnel take. Participants were deemed to categorise students in terms of "locus of control", "blame", and "victim status". Participants placed blame partially on parents for students who "physically refuse" and were "socially uncomfortable", and no party is identified as to blame for "victim students" (Torrens Armstrong et al., 2011). These findings suggest that how school personnel perceive the locus of students' issues, has important impacts upon how non-attendance is perceived and what action is taken to remedy this (Devenney & O'toole, 2021; Torrens Armstrong et al., 2011).

There also emerged a theme that the role or experience of school personnel had an impact on how they perceived the causes of EBSA. Within Gren-Landell et al. (2015), teachers from special education viewed the school domain as more contributory to absenteeism than mainstream school teachers did. The authors suggest that those working in specialist settings work more closely with smaller numbers of students, so may have a better understanding of individual reasons for absenteeism than mainstream teachers who work with a higher number of students. Gren-Landell et al. (2015) also found that teachers with fewer years of experience were more likely to rate

peer factors as more important than more experienced teachers did which they suggest may be due to those with less experience being younger, and perhaps having a greater insight into the lives of young people.

Although school-related issues were mentioned as possible causes of non-attendance in all four studies, there does not seem much consensus between papers on what these may be. Two studies (Devenney & O'toole, 2021; Gren-Landell et al., 2015) acknowledge academic pressure to perform well as something that can cause distress and anxiety in pupils, with one participant in Devenney and O'toole (2021) noting that school and societal systems make students believe that "their whole life depends on" their exam results. Pressure for attainment was also felt by teachers, who became frustrated with frequently absent students, which could put a strain on relationships (Devenney & O'toole, 2021). A lack of adaptation to need or ineffective support in school is also mentioned in both Devenney and O'toole (2021) and Gren-Landell et al. (2015).

Summary: perceptions of school personnel on the causes of EBSA

The three studies included represent different participant groups within the overarching role as school personnel. Even so, there seems to be a commonality in the findings of all three studies, that attendance difficulties were perceived as being caused more by pupil-related and parent/home-related causes than school-related factors. Although peer-related factors were mentioned in three of the studies, there was much less focus on these as causes of non-attendance than other areas.

These papers also highlight the importance of role and experience on how the causes of EBSA are perceived, wherein younger and less experienced staff allotted higher importance to peer factors, and school health personnel and teachers in special schools gave more consideration to school factors than those in other roles (Gren-Landell et al., 2015; Torrens Armstrong et al., 2011).

The notion of a locus of control over school refusal behaviour also seems to play an important role in how school personnel conceptualise and respond to the problem. In terms of attribution theory and literature, if pupils are seen as not in control of their behaviour, staff may act more helpfully and sympathetically, though if the behaviour is attributable to pupil- or home-related factors, staff may be less likely to feel it is their responsibility to provide support to change the behaviour (Reyna & Weiner, 2001).

Participants in Devenney and O'toole (2021) looked more favourably upon parents from higher-income households and placed less blame on them for their child's attendance problems, thus would possibly be more likely to provide support than for pupils from lower-income households, highlighting issues of inequality and power that authors suggest future research should address.

There are clear limitations in the application of these four papers in meeting the objective of exploring the perceptions of school personnel on the causes of EBSA. The terminology to conceptualise school attendance difficulties is varied and, in some cases, also captures perceptions of the causes of truancy in addition to emotionally based reasons for non-attendance. Thus, drawing generalisations these studies on the perceptions of school personnel today should be treated with caution.

2.3.5. Conclusions

The objective of the review was to explore the perceptions of pupils, parents, and school personnel on the causes of emotionally based school attendance difficulties. The limitations described above outlined the difficulty in drawing generalisations from the studies identified for review here. However, some themes emerged from the study findings. Studies exploring the perceptions of pupils and parents cited more school-related and peer-related causes for EBSA than pupil- or parent-related causes. Whereas studies exploring the perceptions of school personnel indicated that they were more likely to perceive pupil and parent-related causes as the most important. Interestingly, studies including parents and young people placed higher importance upon peer-related factors as causes of non-attendance, suggesting a more varied range of peer-related causes than school personnel. Additionally, the roles and experience of school personnel seem to influence their perceptions.

The small number of studies identified for this review, and the varying methodological quality suggests there is a lack of literature exploring the perceptions of pupils, parents, and school personnel towards the causes of EBSA, with a scarcity in research focusing on the perceptions of teachers rather than a range of personnel, and in applying quantitative methodologies. Parents and pupils express the importance of the support and understanding of teachers when experiencing attendance difficulties (Dannow et al., 2020; Gregory & Purcell, 2014; Havik et al., 2014). However, school personnel note feelings of frustration towards absent pupils, due to the pressure on

teachers for pupil attainment which can impact relationships with pupils and families (Devenney & O'toole, 2021). Participants in Gren-Landell et al. (2015) also highlight a lack of mental health provision in school and the competency of staff in supporting mental health as important issues. Thus, it may be that teachers' feelings of frustration, stress and lack of competency may be acting as barriers to forming trusting relationships with young people experiencing EBSA and serve to exacerbate attendance problems in some cases. Therefore, there is a clear rationale for conducting further research aiming to understand how teachers perceive the causes of EBSA. Research could serve to inform policy and practice both in directly supporting young people experiencing EBSA and ensuring that teachers understand the important role they play in influencing how pupils feel about school.

2.4. Aims of the proposed research

2.4.1. Rationale for the research

Attendance difficulties are an area of concern and research interest internationally (Gren-Landell, 2021). Good school attendance is associated with more positive outcomes for young people than those who have poor attendance. One form of attendance difficulty is EBSA; a phenomenon experienced by potentially up to 5% of young people at some point in their lives. Its causes are complex and there are usually contributing factors across different systems. Usually, school, home, and individual factors are cited as the most important causes.

The attributions individuals make for the causes of behaviour impact their actions. Research into the impact of teachers' attributions for student behaviour suggests that teachers tend to attribute the causes of behaviour to mainly within-child, or within-family factors. Thus, teachers may see improving behaviour as out of their control and may be less likely to seek school-related interventions to support students. When behaviour is attributed as controllable by students, teachers are more likely to act punitively towards them. In contrast, pupils and parents are more likely to attribute school-related factors as important causes of challenging behaviour.

When considering EBSA in terms of attribution theory, findings seem to reflect similar attribution patterns to research on challenging behaviour; school staff are more likely to perceive pupil and home factors as the most important causes, whereas pupils and parents feel that school factors play an important contributory role towards EBSA.

Parents indicate that support from teachers can have a positive impact on their child's attendance, but equally, a lack of understanding is thought to lead to attendance issues not being taken seriously and an inappropriate offering of support. However, there is little published quantitative research exploring how teachers attribute the causes of EBSA. Considering the influential role teachers can play in supporting attendance, it is therefore important to better understand how teachers attribute the causes of EBSA.

In their practice, educational psychologists (EPs) have a role in supporting young people who experience EBSA (West Sussex EPS, 2018). Research has indicated that if EPs are aware of causal attributions that could prevent positive change, they can work with staff to reframe thinking and practice to support a young person (Ravenette, 2008). Thus, a focused piece of research exploring the causal attributions of teachers for the causes of EBSA would be a valuable contribution to the existing body of research.

2.4.2. Research question

This research aims to establish an understanding of teachers' attributions for the causes of EBSA. An additional aim is to establish the utility of applying attribution theory within EBSA research, and whether this can inform future research and practice within education to support young people at risk of EBSA.

There is one overarching research question for the present study:

- What are the attributions of teachers for the causes of emotionally based school avoidance?

The methodology and procedure for each phase will be described in more detail in the following chapter.

Chapter 3 Methodology

The purpose of this chapter is to describe and evaluate the methodological approaches taken for this research. The contextual methodological issues are addressed, followed by the epistemological stance and ontological position of the research. The process of participant recruitment, data collection and data analysis are described in detail. Matters of reliability, validity and ethical considerations are also addressed.

3.1. Methodological issues

The current study is an example of real-world research, a term referring to applied research projects, which are often small in scale and aim to examine personal experience, social life and social systems to understand the lived reality of people in society (Robson & McCartan, 2016). Real-world research is important for the development of practice and policy, aiding decisions to be made from an informed perspective and informing the development of evidence-based practice (Robson & McCartan, 2016).

The undertaking of this research began in early 2020 which coincided with the COVID-19 pandemic, resulting in a range of measures to combat the spread of infection which included the “lockdown” of society in England imposed by the government and the closure of schools, to all but the most vulnerable children, and children of “key workers” (Eyles, Gibbons, & Montebruno, 2020). In terms of conducting research, the British Psychological Society (BPS) guidance in response to the pandemic states that “no face-to-face research should be conducted unless your university has advised that it is permissible to do so” (BPS, 2020, p. 3). Thus, relevant amendments were made to the methods of data collection, including online interviews, online participant recruitment and online survey distribution, which are described later in this chapter.

3.2. Theoretical considerations

When considering methodological approaches, it is important for researchers to first consider their ontological assumptions (assumptions about the nature of reality). This gives rise to epistemological assumptions (the nature of knowledge and ways of inquiring into the nature of reality) (Cohen et al., 2018). The ontological and epistemological standpoint of a researcher therefore should inform methodological

decision-making, including issues of data collection and analysis. However, Cohen et al. (2018) argue that the purpose of the research should also drive it forwards, whilst drawing upon epistemological and ontological positions to aid in clarifying and organising the researchers thinking about the research.

Ontology and epistemology underpin broader paradigms that draw upon the philosophical assumptions that guide and direct thinking. Psychology and education research today is aligned for the most part with four major paradigms; post-positivism, constructivism, transformative and pragmatism (Mertens, 2015). In adopting an appropriate paradigm for the current research, it was important for the researcher to consider how the aims of the research and the researcher's own ontological beliefs aligned with the fundamental assumptions of the paradigms named above.

3.2.1. Constructivism and transformative

Constructivism rejects the notion of an objective reality for the notion of multiple, socially constructed realities (Mertens, 2015). Constructivist findings are fundamentally interpretive, where knowledge is socially constructed by people active in the research process thus research findings are influenced by the values of the researcher. Similarly interpretive is transformative research, though this differs from constructivism in its focus upon confronting social oppression (Mertens, 2015).

Within interpretivist research, there is tension in maintaining the opposition of subjectivity and objectivity, simultaneously celebrating subjective experience while trying to objectify it (Schwandt, 1998). This subjectivity can pose challenges for assessing the validity of claims of knowledge, though some authors argue that although limited, there is potential to generalise some interpretivist findings (Marsh & Furlong, 2002).

Although it is important to acknowledge the value of context, history and understanding the individual experience offered by situating within interpretivist paradigms, other studies have previously captured individual experiences of young people experiencing EBSA through constructivist and interpretivist methodologies (see, Baker & Bishop, 2015; Billington, 2018). The current study aims to take an approach to understand attributions for the causes of EBSA on a broader scale, which rests within an alternative epistemological position to interpretivist paradigms.

3.2.2. Pragmatism

Pragmatism rejects the scientific notion that social science inquiry can access the "truth" about the real world solely through a single scientific method, focusing instead upon "what works" to address the research question (Mertens, 2015). Pragmatists posit that reality is actively created as individuals act in the world, and is thus ever-changing (Weaver, 2018). With a focus upon selecting the best methods to answer a research question, pragmatism is positioned as a paradigm providing an underlying philosophical framework for mixed methods research (Tashakkori & Teddlie, 2010). Although pragmatism's "what works" approach can be a helpful position for researchers who do not align strongly with a particular ontology or epistemology (Weaver, 2018), in the case of the current research, the aims proposed, and the position of the researcher was more in line with a realist ontology, not aligned with pragmatism at its core.

3.2.3. Post-positivism

Post-positivism is derived from its predecessor, positivism. Positivism views reality as universal, objective and quantifiable, thus arguing that there is one "true" reality that is the same for every individual (Darlaston-Jones, 2007). Positivism poses that objective knowledge can be gained from direct experience or observation (Robson & McCartan, 2016). Within the field of psychology, to take a positivist stance, would be to assume that the social world can be studied in the same way as the natural world and that everything that can be observed can be related to generalisable causal explanations (Mertens, 2015). However, this cannot always be applied to the study of human behaviour. Post-positivists departed from positivism's narrow view, as important aspects of the human experience cannot be observed, such as thinking or feeling (Mertens, 2015). Post-positivism acknowledges that our view of the world cannot be absolute but partial, challengeable, provisional and changing (Cohen et al., 2018). Post-positivism still embraces scientific method and the existence of an objective world, whilst recognising that there is no absolute truth that can be discoverable by humans (Cohen et al., 2018). In accepting that there is an objective reality, post-positivism also adopts a pluralist view of multiple co-existing realities. For example, if there are two observers seated in different positions in a classroom, what they see will differ, but they are still observing the same classroom.

3.2.4. Chosen epistemology for the current research: post-positivism

The current research proposes a quantitative study, aiming to produce tentative but generalisable findings on the attributions of teachers on the causes of EBSA. The researcher acknowledges that there will be multiple co-existing realities in how individual groups observe the phenomenon of EBSA. In this way, the research aligns with the post-positivist paradigm. Additionally, the same paradigm has been adopted in other causal attribution studies (Lambert, 2005; A. Miller, 1995; Raspin, 2019) which influenced the rationale and development of this research.

3.3. Research designs

Once the epistemological position of the research was identified, it was then important to select an appropriate research design that was not only in line with the researcher's epistemological position, but also that served the overall purpose of this research. Below, three research designs are described, followed by an explanation of the research design ultimately selected for this research.

3.3.1. Fixed designs

Within fixed design research, the design of the study is fixed before the main stage of data collection takes place (Robson & McCartan, 2016). Fixed designs are theory-driven, as, to be able to specify procedures and identify the variables to be included, there must first be a substantial amount of conceptual understanding of the phenomenon being explored (Robson & McCartan, 2016). Fixed designs typically utilise quantitative methodologies which are characterised by scientific and experimental investigation with an emphasis on control and producing quantified measures of variables, often expressed and analysed statistically (Hoy, 2010).

A limitation of fixed design and quantitative research is that they are limited in capturing the subtleties and nuances of complex human behaviour on an individual level. However, a strength of fixed designs is in the ability to identify patterns and processes that can be linked with wider social structures and groups (Robson & McCartan, 2016).

3.3.2. Flexible designs

Flexible designs typically employ qualitative data collection methods, though sometimes quantitative data collection could fit within this design (Robson &

McCartan, 2016). Like fixed designs, flexible designs should demonstrate a rigorous approach to data collection, analysis, and reporting. Where flexible designs differ is in the adaptation that can take place as the research evolves, so initial research questions can be tentative and gain more focus as data is collected (Robson & McCartan, 2016). Robson and McCartan (2016) note that flexible designs are often underpinned by constructivist and interpretivist paradigms and describe the main approaches to flexible design research as being: case studies; ethnographic studies; and grounded theory studies.

In the eyes of fixed design researchers, limitations of flexible design research include challenges in establishing reliability and validity of findings in “standard” ways such as through inter-observer agreement, quantitative measurement or explicit controls for threats to validity (Robson & McCartan, 2016). However, flexible design researchers argue that judging the quality of flexible and qualitative research through the same lens as fixed design research is inappropriate. It can be argued that the purpose of flexible design research as providing an in-depth understanding of meanings, phenomena, attitudes intentions and behaviours which necessitates the emphasis of the role of subjectivity in the research process (Cohen et al., 2018).

3.3.3. Mixed method designs

Mixed methods research typically combines various elements of both quantitative and qualitative approaches. The purpose of utilising mixed methods approaches is to give a richer and more reliable understanding of a phenomenon than a single approach would yield (Cohen et al., 2018). Mixed methods research commonly occurs within the pragmatic paradigm, though authors in the field argue that a variety of paradigms may serve as the underlying philosophy for mixed methods research (Tashakkori & Teddlie, 2010). It is suggested that a strength of mixed methods research is that it can overcome the weaknesses and biases of single approaches, serving to increase the reliability of findings through triangulation (Denscombe, 2014).

There are however challenges to employing mixed methods research designs. Combining quantitative and qualitative designs may be difficult as the two may be opposing in terms of paradigm, ontology, epistemology and methodology (Cohen et al., 2018).

3.3.4. Chosen design for the current research: Fixed design

The current research is an example of a non-experimental fixed design. Within non-experimental designs, the phenomena being studied are not manipulated or changed by the researcher, which here are the attributions of teachers for the causes of EBSA. Non-experimental designs are useful for explaining or understanding a phenomenon (Robson & McCartan, 2016).

The main aim of the study is to explore the attributions of teachers on the causes of EBSA as a group. Thus, when choosing a research design, it was important to consider the most appropriate method to collect causal attributional data from *groups* of participants. Causal attributions are *latent* variables in that they are mental states that are not observable but are presumed to exist because their effects are observable. As they cannot be observed, attributions must be measured through indirect measures, such as psychometric instruments (Whitley & Frieze, 1985). Reviewing literature on attributional studies (for example, Lambert, 2005; Miller, Ferguson, & Byrne, 2000; Miller, Ferguson, & Moore, 2002) indicates that survey strategies are appropriate and frequently used to explore the attributions of groups of people. A drawback of using a survey to gather attributional data is that the survey used may not be capable of capturing all of the critical issues that form teachers' attributions as noted in Gibbs and Gardiner (2008). Additionally, within a survey there is a risk that items within the measure are misinterpreted, which cannot be detected through analysis and would impact the reliability of responses (Robson & McCartan, 2016). To mitigate this, a piloting stage can address issues of phrasing and understanding to some extent. In this case, the benefits of surveys in the possibility of representing a wide target population, and gathering standardised information in a short timeframe, outweighed the risks described above. The impacts of the survey strategy selected on the reliability and validity of the results of this study will be further explored in the Discussion chapter.

A survey allows the large-scale gathering of data that can be used to draw generalisations about populations (Cohen et al., 2018). There is a range of different survey strategies that can be employed, which generally fall between two categories: highly structured (closed questions) and unstructured (open-ended questions). Open-ended surveys are said to be suited for small-scale research where the researcher aims to gather the personal views of participants, though there are limitations for larger

participant groups, as the data can be difficult to quantify and draw generalisations from (Cohen et al., 2018). On the other hand, structured surveys using closed questions prescribe the range of responses from which the participant can choose, thus producing quantifiable responses that can be aggregated across participants and analysed statistically (Cohen et al., 2018). As this research aims to gather attributional data for groups of teachers, a structured survey with closed questions was deemed the most appropriate tool.

As there were no published standardised measures of teachers' attributions for EBSA at the time of writing, it was decided that the survey would be developed through interviews with individuals within key stakeholder groups for EBSA, which included teachers, parents, and young people. The interviews were to be based upon two vignettes of fictional pupils experiencing EBSA as described in the literature. Vignettes are thought to be valuable in the study of potentially sensitive topics as they can help to distance the interviewees from the scenario (Robson & McCartan, 2016). This was appropriate here as discussions around experiences of EBSA may have been understandably distressing for participants. Additionally, vignettes are cited as a useful projection technique for carrying out interviews with children to avoid the use of direct questions and reduce the possibility of biased answers where participants may look for cues as to how to respond (Cohen et al., 2018). A limitation in using vignettes is that they can only represent a "snapshot" of limited information on which participants are asked to comment. Therefore participant responses are characterised by the situational context framed by the vignette, so key views of the participant concerning the topic may be missed by the limitations of the vignette (Barter & Renold, 2000). A further criticism of the use of vignettes relates to the artificiality of the technique as they cannot duplicate the complexity of real life to be able to draw any generalisable conclusions from their use in data collection (Barter & Renold, 2000). Even so, within the current research, as the purpose of the interviews and vignettes was to gather views of stakeholders to be able to develop a survey, it was decided that the benefits offered by the strategy, in supporting the inclusion and wellbeing of young people in interviews, rendered this an appropriate strategy to employ. The impact of the use of vignettes in interviews on the reliability and validity of the results derived in this study are addressed in the Discussion chapter of this research.

3.4. Methods

This section details the process undertaken in gathering and analysing data for this research. Information is given about the key stakeholders, followed by detailed descriptions of the procedures of each stage of this research. Each stage had a distinct purpose and method, thus are presented separately. See Appendix 7.15 for a detailed timeline of the completion of this research. Stages were as follows:

- Stage One: The development of a survey instrument to measure the attributions of teachers for the causes of EBSA.
- Stage Two: Measuring teachers' attributions for the causes of EBSA through the survey instrument developed in Stage One.

3.4.1. Stakeholders

3.4.1.1. The University of Nottingham

The completion of a thesis research project was a mandatory requirement for the completion of the Doctorate of Applied Educational Psychology (DAEP) at the University of Nottingham, upon which the researcher was enrolled.

3.4.1.2. The Local Authority

Throughout the completion of this research, the researcher was undertaking a two-year practice placement as part of the DEAP course within a large countywide Local Authority (LA) educational psychology service (EPS). Before undertaking this project, it was discussed and agreed with the Senior EP who supervised the researcher. It was also agreed that the findings of the research would be disseminated within the EPS.

3.4.1.3. Schools, parents, and young people

The school staff, parents and young people taking part in the survey development stage of this research were stakeholders directly involved in the research, as were the teachers who took part in the attribution questionnaire in the second stage. There will also be schools, parents, and young people not involved in the research who will be indirect stakeholders, as it is hoped that this research will support the development of school and EP practice in supporting those experiencing EBSA.

3.4.2. Stage One methods: Survey development

3.4.2.2. Survey design process

Artino, La Rochelle, Dezee and Gehlbach (2014) present a systematic seven-step process for survey scale design, for use in educational research. These steps are detailed in Figure 3.1 and are used to structure the description for the development of the survey instrument in this study.

Seven-step survey design process for researchers:

1. Conduct a literature review to ensure construct definition aligns with relevant prior research.
2. Conduct interviews and/or focus groups to learn how the population of interest conceptualises and describes the construct of interest.
3. Synthesise the literature review and interviews/focus groups to ensure that the conceptualisation of the construct makes theoretical sense and uses language that the population of interest understands.
4. Develop items, ensuring items are clear, understandable, and written in accordance with current best practice in survey design.
5. Conduct expert validation to assess how clear and relevant the items are with respect to the construct of interest.
6. Conduct cognitive interviews to ensure respondents interpret items in the manner the survey designer intends.
7. Conduct pilot testing to check for adequate item variance, reliability, and convergent/discriminant validity with respect to other measures.

Figure 3.1. Seven step survey design process published in Artino et al. (2014)

Step 1: Conduct a literature review

The literature review presented in Chapter 2 of this study was conducted before the development of the survey and was used as a tool to support the understanding of the construct being measured, namely attributions towards the causes of EBSA. This process also identified that at the time, there were no published tools to measure the attributions of teachers for the causes of EBSA thus confirming that it was necessary to create such an item.

Although psychological measures can be created through content analysis of published literature (Cohen et al., 2018), as EBSA is not a commonly used term within school attendance literature, it is possible that using literature with discourses around *school refusal*, *extended non-attendance*, or other such terms may lead to causes of EBSA being inaccurately represented within the measure. Thus, it was decided that it would be more appropriate to conduct interviews to gather views on the potential causes of EBSA. Additionally, conducting interviews is cited as a systematic method to gather information to inform the development of items for psychological measures (Loewenthal & Lewis, 2021).

Step 2: Conduct interviews

Research indicates that transition to secondary education is a common factor related to school attendance difficulties and that the most referrals for support for established school refusal are made in the first two years of secondary education (Ingul et al., 2019). As well as internationally, this pattern is reflected in secondary-aged populations in England, with the DfE indicating that 11-16-year-olds are more likely to be persistent absentees than younger children (DfE, 2019). Thus, this study focuses upon attributions for the causes of EBSA within this age group.

Reflecting upon published attribution studies, comparisons are often drawn between pupils, parents and teachers (Lambert, 2005; A. Miller et al., 2000, 2002). Within school refusal research, young people, parents, and teachers are primary stakeholders and thus their participation is necessary to support our understanding of the phenomenon. Also, research has shown that the participation of young people in research where they can influence matters that relate to them, can have positive effects on both mental health and school attendance (Gren-Landell, 2021). Thus, to develop a survey that was representative of perceived causes of EBSA of key stakeholder groups, it was decided that the target participants for interviews would be:

- Secondary-aged (11-16 years) pupils currently experiencing or who have previously experienced EBSA.
- Parents or carers whose secondary-aged children have experienced or are currently experiencing EBSA.
- Teachers of secondary-aged young people who have experience working with pupils who have experienced EBSA.

This step of survey development consisted of several stages that will be explored in further detail below.

Pilot interviews

Before the interviews were carried out with identified target groups, pilot interviews were conducted with representatives from each participant group, though it was not specified that pilot interviewees needed to have experience of EBSA. Recruitment for pilot interviews was conducted through contacts within the EPS where the researcher is a trainee educational psychologist (TEP). Pilot interviews were carried out with two parents of children aged 11-16, two young people aged 11-16 years, and one teacher employed in a mainstream secondary school. The parents and young people did not have direct experience with EBSA. The teacher participant had directly supported young people experiencing EBSA.

Feedback from pilot interviewees indicated that the interviews were an adequate length and accessible to the participants. The data gathered as a result seemed rich and in-keeping with the purpose of the interview which was to create a list of possible causes of EBSA. Following feedback, no significant changes were made to the interview schedule, though some minor changes were made to the order of the questions to improve the flow of the interview.

Interview sampling and recruitment

The sampling strategy for participant recruitment for the interviews was purposeful, in that the aim was to identify participants with an understanding of EBSA. The approaches to sampling included:

- *Intensity sampling*: The identification of individuals in which the phenomenon of interest is represented. In this case, experience with EBSA was necessary.
- *Snowball sampling:* Identification of key “informants” who can recommend potential participants. In this case, those that could identify individuals within the community with an understanding or experience of EBSA.

Following pilot interviews, within the researcher’s EPS an initial email was sent to colleagues to establish contacts within schools that may wish to take part in this research project. One secondary school was identified, with which the researcher shared recruitment information and information sheets for the study (Appendix 7.3). The main point of contact was the school special educational needs coordinator

(SENCO) who was also a member of the schools' senior leadership team. The SENCO shared information with teachers and parents of pupils experiencing EBSA. Those that expressed an interest and consented to their contact information being shared were then contacted by the researcher who shared further information, answered questions and began the process of gaining informed consent from participants. For pupil participants, this involved parental consent and completion of a "willingness to participate form" by the pupil themselves.

Through discussion with the contact SENCO, the opportunity arose to interview teaching assistants (TAs) as well as teachers. As the purpose of this stage of the research was to create a comprehensive list of possible causes of EBSA, and considering survey development guidance suggesting that interviews are carried out with individuals who resemble the population of interest (Artino et al., 2014), it seemed reasonable and perhaps valuable to include TAs within this stage of data collection.

Artino et al., (2014) suggest that the researcher should continue to conduct interviews until saturation is reached, wherein researcher is no longer hearing new information about how participants conceptualise the construct. Although this was established as an aim for this research, there were also additional constraints of the time limit of the project and limited access and availability of participants that impacted upon the number of interviews it was feasible to conduct.

Interview participant sample

Following pilot interviews, interviews were carried out with three TAs, and two teachers employed in one mainstream secondary school. Interviews with two mothers of boys aged 11-16 years who were currently experiencing EBSA were also conducted. All interview participants identified as white British and were based in England.

Attempts to recruit young people who had previously or were currently experiencing EBSA were unsuccessful. Therefore, it was decided with the consent of both parent and young person, that the data gathered from the pilot interviews with two young people aged 11-16 years would be used in the interview dataset as no major changes were made to the interview schedule following the pilot. The teacher interviewed during the piloting stage also gave consent for their data to be used in the final dataset, and this was ultimately used to give as broad a representation of views as possible. Demographics for the final interview sample are presented in Table 3.1.

Table 3.1. A table to show the demographics of the interview sample.

Participant number	*Gender*	*Agent group*	*Experience with EBSA*
1	Female	Teacher	Yes
2	Male	Teacher	Yes
3	Female	Teacher	Yes
4	Female	TA	Yes
5	Female	TA	Yes
6	Female	TA	Yes
7	Female	Parent	Yes
8	Female	Parent	Yes
9	Female	Pupil (Year 8)	No
10	Male	Pupil (Year 7)	No

Interview methods

The initial intention of the research was to conduct in-person focus groups. However, due to the COVID-19 pandemic, it was necessary to conduct the interviews online and it was decided that individual interviews would be preferable to focus groups on this platform. Individual interviews allowed more flexibility for participants around the timing of the interview and as participant recruitment was challenging, additional flexibility was desirable to gain a wider participant sample.

Participants that had given informed consent and returned signed consent forms to the researcher were contacted to arrange a Microsoft Teams video call for the interviews to be conducted.

All interviews were conducted by the researcher. In each interview, the researcher used the screen sharing function to show a PowerPoint presentation to participants which displayed a written introduction to the interview, a definition of EBSA, the vignettes and interview questions. The researcher read all text aloud and it remained on screen for participants to act as a prompt throughout.

Below each stage of the interview is described in more detail.

Defining EBSA

At the outset of each interview, a definition of EBSA was read aloud to participants as follows, “Emotionally Based School Avoidance (EBSA) is a broad term used to describe a group of children and young people who have difficulty in attending school due to emotional factors, often resulting in prolonged absences from school” (West Sussex EPS, 2018). This ensured a shared understanding of the phenomenon

between participants, allowed the opportunity for participants to seek further clarity on the definition and set the scene for the questions to follow.

Vignettes

The interviews were centred around the presentation of two vignettes of fictional young people experiencing EBSA. Barter and Renold (2000) review the existing literature and reflect upon their own research to suggest several principles to follow when using vignettes for research with children, which informed the development of vignettes within this research. Ultimately, two short vignettes were created through reference to existing research and profiles of two characters were given who were both exhibiting behaviours symptomatic of EBSA. The vignettes were written about a female in lower secondary school, “Jess”, and a male in upper secondary school, “Tom”. This was done to give a representation of genders and ages. See Appendix 7.4 for presentation of each vignette.

Each vignette was read aloud to participants and was displayed alongside related interview questions to act as a prompt.

Interview procedure

The interviews took a *standardised open-ended interview* approach in that the wording and sequence of the questions were determined in advance, and all interviewees were asked the same questions in the same order. This approach is said to support researchers in the organisation and analysis of data which was desirable in this circumstance to inform the development of the survey (Cohen et al., 2018).

Questions were written to elicit list-like responses from participants on what they thought the possible causes of EBSA could be for the two young people introduced through the vignettes. Questions were based upon issues that research suggests are the common causes of EBSA, as described in Chapter 2 of this thesis. Each question was posed twice, once for the “Jess” vignette and once for the “Tom” vignette to gain as an exhaustive list of causes of EBSA as possible.

For example:

> “Are there any factors related to the school environment or culture that might make it difficult for Jess to attend?”

> “Are there any different factors related to the school environment or culture that might make it difficult for Tom to attend?”

See Appendix 7.4. for a copy of the full interview schedule.

Recording responses

The purpose of the interviews was to develop a list of possible causes of EBSA that could contribute to developing survey items. Key points and possible causes raised by interviewees were recorded by the researcher by hand in a bullet-point format that was read back to the participant to ensure their agreement that the information recorded was true to their response. This also acted as a verbal prompt to elicit further possible causes. The objective of this stage of the research did not necessitate more in-depth data recording such as voice recording.

Step 3: Synthesise interview data

Content analysis

Interview data were analysed using *content analysis*, a process of summarising and reporting written data following a strict and systematic set of procedures for the analysis and examination of texts (Cohen et al., 2018). Denscombe (2014) describes the main strength of content analysis as its use in providing a means to quantify the contents of a text in a replicable manner. There is a focus in content analysis on recording the frequency of the occurrence of themes and concepts, thus revealing what the text is establishing as most relevant (Denscombe, 2014). Therefore, content analysis lends itself well to being used to develop a survey with a limited number of items.

Although used in conjunction with qualitative data, content analysis produces quantitative measurements of the frequency of occurrence of coded speech and thus can be seen as a relatively positivist approach (Denscombe, 2014). This fits with the paradigm of the current research. A limitation of content analysis is the risk that the meaning and context of a text can be lost in the summarising process, and implied meaning within writing can be lost (Denscombe, 2014). As the purpose of the content analysis was to ultimately produce a questionnaire appropriate for any teacher of 11–16-year-olds to complete, it was important that items were not context-laden, for it to be relatable to the target participants. Therefore, it was considered that this limitation

of content analysis ultimately would not negatively impact the validity of the measure produced.

Content analysis procedure

Denscombe (2014) describes a six-stage procedure for content analysis. The first five steps of which were followed for the content analysis here. The sixth step concerns the analysis of the text in terms of the relationship between codes which was not relevant to the purpose of the current content analysis to develop items for a survey instrument. The procedure followed for content analysis was as follows:

1. Selection of appropriate text: The text sample was derived from the data gathered through interviews described above.
2. Breaking text into smaller component units: The text was analysed on a phrase-by-phrase basis to ensure the meaning of each phrase was retained.
3. Develop relevant categories for analysing data: Broad categories were developed that covered separate domains (e.g., school, home, individual) to support the organisation of the text.
4. Code units in line with categories: Phrases of text were organised into broad categories and further subordinate categories emerged that covered separate perceived causes of EBSA.
5. Count the frequency with which these units occur: The frequency of codes was recorded and tabulated (see Table 3.2).

Content analysis results

As stated above, two vignettes were employed in semi-structured interviews to elicit a range of possible causes of EBSA from individuals from three agent groups: school staff ($n = 6$), parents of young people experiencing EBSA ($n = 2$) and secondary school pupils ($n = 2$). Following coding on a phrase-by-phrase level, a total of 213 unique codes were produced that represented possible causes of EBSA. See Appendix 7.5. for a sample of the final coding of the interview data. Table 3.2 shows the number of codes produced by each agent group.

Table 3.2. A table to show the number of codes produced through content analysis of individual interviews for each agent group (N = 10).

Participant group	*Number of interviews conducted*	*Number of codes per group*
School staff	6	104
Parent	2	56
Pupil	2	53

The codes were organised into named *categories* that represented the total perceived possible causes of EBSA. Ultimately, the codes were ascribed to 78 initial categories. In some cases, codes were ascribed to multiple categories if coded phrases aligned with more than one category. The category headings can be seen in Table 3.3.

In total, 33 of the 78 categories contained responses from all three agent groups (school staff, parents, and pupils).

Twenty-three categories contained responses from two agent groups. Twenty were parent and school staff, and three were school staff and pupil.

Twenty-two categories were made up of responses from a single agent group. Twenty categories were made up of codes from school staff only. There was one category represented by parents only and one represented by pupils only.

School staff contributed to 76 categories, parents to 54, and pupils to 37. School staff were over-represented in the data. Thus, it was unsurprising that there were a higher proportion of codes produced by this group. Codes do not represent the number of perceived causes, rather the number of codable phrases, so it was to be expected that there would be proportionally more codes from the school staff group.

The items on the questionnaire were to be based upon these 78 categories. It was reassuring to note that 33 categories had the representation of all three agent groups and a further 23 with two of the three groups. Thus, 56 of the 78 categories represented at least two agent groups' views.

Table 3.3. A table to show the number of codes ascribed to each category name and which agent groups' responses are represented within each category

Category heading	*Number of codes ascribed to the category*	*Groups represented within the category*
The school places high importance on academic attainment	25	School staff, parent, pupil
The pupil's needs are not understood or acknowledged by teachers	23	School staff, parent, pupil
The pupil compares themself and feels 'different' to others	19	School staff, parent, pupil
Sensory overwhelm - too crowded, noisy, strong smells	19	School staff, parent
Peers have a negative attitude towards the pupil	19	School staff, parent, pupil
Peer conflict	18	School staff, parent, pupil
The pupil feels anxious about their academic ability	16	School staff, parent, pupil
The pupil finds social interaction difficult	13	School staff, parent, pupil
The pupil has low self-esteem	13	School staff, parent, pupil
Teachers focus on attainment over wellbeing	13	School staff, parent, pupil
Parent(s) are experiencing financial hardship	12	School staff, parent
The pupil feels self-conscious about their appearance	12	School staff, parent, pupil
The pupil has a clinically diagnosed mental health condition	12	School staff, parent, pupil
Lack of friendship group in school	12	School staff, parent, pupil
The pupil is bullied	12	School staff, parent, pupil
Lack of pastoral and mental health support in school	12	School staff
Teachers do not know the pupil as an individual	12	School staff, parent
The pupil feels anxious about life after school	11	School staff, parent, pupil

Category heading	*Number of codes ascribed to the category*	*Groups represented within the category*
Workload is too high for the pupil to keep up with	11	School staff, parent, pupil
Pressure from parents for academic attainment	10	School staff, parent, pupil
Parents are not effective in encouraging attendance	10	School staff, parent, pupil
Perceived pressure from peers	10	School staff, parent, pupil
The school has strict behaviour policies	10	School staff, parent
Transition from primary to secondary school was a negative experience	10	School staff, parent, pupil
The pupil feels they have caring duties at home	9	School staff, parent
Parental conflict	9	School staff, parent, pupil
Lack of trusting or positive relationships with staff	9	School staff, parent, pupil
Parents want to protect the pupil from negative experiences at school	8	School staff, parent
Parent(s) have mental health difficulties	8	School staff, parent
Parental separation	8	School staff, parent
Parents do not offer enough or appropriate support	8	School staff, parent, pupil
The pupil has experienced trauma	8	School staff, pupil
The pupil enjoys safety, comfort and activities available at home	8	School staff, parent, pupil
Puberty and hormonal changes for the pupil	8	School staff, parent
The pupil has special educational needs	8	School staff, parent
Teachers seem unapproachable or dismissive	8	School staff, parent, pupil
The pupil is of a minority ethnicity or religion	7	School staff
The pupil finds it difficult to recognise and express emotions	7	School staff, parent
The pupil feels like they do not want to let others down	7	School staff, parent, pupil
The pupil finds a particular lesson challenging	7	School staff, parent, pupil

Category heading	*Number of codes ascribed to the category*	*Groups represented within the category*
Moving around large school sites is difficult	7	School staff, parent, pupil
Parents and school are not working together collaboratively	7	School staff, parent
School expect a high level of independence from pupils	7	School staff, parent
Home life is chaotic and unsettled	6	School staff, parent, pupil
Parents do not value education	6	School staff, parent, pupil
Parents do not put enough boundaries in place at home	6	School staff
The pupil fears judgement from peers	6	School staff
The pupil does not see the value of school	6	School staff, parent, pupil
Schoolwork is not differentiated and is too difficult	6	School staff, parent
Having to work with multiple teachers within a school day	6	School staff, parent
The pupil is in classes with unknown or disliked peers	6	School staff
Pressure from school to make decisions for the future	6	School staff, pupil
Whole school lack of acceptance and adaptation to diversity	6	School staff, parent
The pupil spends a long time online e.g. gaming or social media	5	School staff, parent
The pupil does not feel able to ask for support	5	School staff, parent
The pupil does not have effective coping strategies	5	School staff, parent
The pupil is fearful of teachers and getting into trouble	5	School staff
Lack of safe space for the pupil to access	5	School staff, parent, pupil
Child has witnessed or experienced domestic abuse	4	School staff, parent, pupil
The pupil does not get enough sleep	4	School staff, parent

Category heading	*Number of codes ascribed to the category*	*Groups represented within the category*
The pupil is experiencing difficulties expressing their sexuality or gender	4	School staff
Some teachers put the pupil on the spot in front of peers	4	School staff, parent, pupil
Physical symptoms of anxiety e.g. feeling sick, panic attacks	3	Parent
The pupil has difficulty coping with changes to school environment	3	School staff
Lack of communication between teachers about the pupil	3	School staff, pupil
Parent(s) had negative experiences at school themselves	2	School staff
Parent(s) have physical health needs	2	School staff
The pupil is involved in substance abuse	2	School staff
The pupil does not have many hobbies or interests outside school	2	Pupil
School days are long and tiring for the pupil	2	School staff
There is a lack of protected time to form relationships with staff or peers	2	School staff
Parents are not cooperating with school's attempt to support	2	School staff
The pupil wants to hide events at home from school	1	School staff
Parent(s) have low academic ability	1	School staff
Parental substance addiction or abuse	1	School staff
Parents are intimidated by the pupil	1	School staff
The pupil has an undiagnosed medical need	1	School staff
Attendance was poor in primary school	1	School staff

Inter-rater reliability of content analysis

Due to the potentially subjective nature of the categorising of codes through content analysis, it was decided that inter-rater reliability measures should be carried out to assess the level of agreement of others with the researcher's analysis.

Inter-rater reliability was calculated in the following way:

1. Twenty coded phrases were selected from the 213 codes at random.
2. A list of the 78 categories was then presented to two inter-raters along with the twenty phrases.
3. Inter-raters were asked to assign each phrase to all the categories they felt would best contain it.

Table 3.4. A table to show the number of phrases correctly matched by N = 2 inter-raters to the researchers named categories for 20 randomly selected phrases.

Inter-rater	*Phrases in the same category as the researcher (out of 20)*
1	14
2	16

Inter-raters placed 30 of 40 items in the same category as the researcher (see Table 3.4). The proportion of agreement between the inter-raters and the researcher was calculated following guidance in Robson and McCartan (2016). The agreement between inter-raters' choice of codes and that of the researcher was 75% which represents an acceptable index of agreement. That 25% of inter-rater responses did not agree with the researchers categorising could indicate that perhaps categories were not mutually exclusive and exhaustive. However, given the constraints of the project and aims of the content analysis, this was not seen as necessary, and 75% agreement suggests that for the most part, the categories were representative of the recorded data. Additionally, the purpose of the content analysis was to reduce the 213 codes into a more manageable number of categories that still represented the data. That some categories were similar and perhaps seeming to overlap was not surprising. When factor analysis took place, it may be that these categories would be placed within the same factor.

Following these measures, the 78 elicited possible causes of EBSA were incorporated into a 78-item questionnaire.

Step 4: Develop survey items and instrument

As previously stated, the initial intention was for the survey to be developed on paper to be distributed in person and completed by hand. However, due to the COVID-19

pandemic, the survey was developed for online distribution and completion through the Qualtrics survey development software (Qualtrics, 2021).

The content analysis of interview data elicited 78 possible causes of EBSA. These possible cases were then organised in a random order in a 78-item survey, respondents to which would be required to rate each item according to how *important* they believed them to be in causing EBSA.

As in studies of a similar design (Lambert, 2005; Raspin, 2019), a five-point Likert-type scale (Likert, 1932) was employed to gather question responses. The five choices offered to participants were “Not at all important,” “Not very important,” “Neither important nor unimportant,” “Quite important,” and “Very important.” Piloting led to a revision of the choices offered to participants.

Step 5: Item validation

The items produced following content analysis seemed consistent with the published literature around EBSA, explored in Chapter 2 of this thesis, and seemed to accurately reflect the construct.

Steps 6 and 7: Pilot testing

The survey instrument was piloted online by two TEP colleagues of the researcher, one academic tutor at the University of Nottingham, one secondary school teacher and two contacts of the researcher who are not employed in the education sector.

Feedback from pilot testers was that the items “Parents are not cooperating with school's attempt to support” and “Parents and school are not working together collaboratively” were very similar. Thus, it was decided that these items would be collapsed and renamed as “Non-collaborative home-school relationships”, therefore changing the questionnaire to a total of 77 items.

The most significant revision following pilot testing was in the wording of the response choices given in the Likert scale. Feedback indicated that respondents felt that most of the potential causes of EBSA were seen as having some importance, which with the original Likert scale, reduced respondents’ options to a choice of two. Feedback also suggested that the “Neither important nor unimportant” response was largely redundant as respondents felt it did not feel like an appropriate response to give.

Following piloting, the Likert scale response choices were amended to offer increased sensitivity within the more “important” options. The five response choices offered in the final attribution questionnaire were: “Not at all important,” “Not very important,” “Quite important,” “Very important,” and “Extremely important.”

Minor changes were also made in the phrasing of some items for clarity. Both the draft and final version of the questionnaire can be found within the Appendices. See Appendix 7.6. (draft version) and Appendix 7.7. (final version).

3.4.3. Stage Two methods: Survey dissemination and analysis

This section outlines the methods undertaken to disseminate the questionnaire developed to measure teachers’ attributions. The process of participant recruitment is described, followed by the procedure followed for completion of the questionnaire by participants. The method of analysis of questionnaire data is then presented.

3.4.3.1. Sample size determinants

As in previous published attribution studies, it was planned that the survey data would be analysed using factor analysis, for which guidance sets out conditions for sample size and the ratio of respondents (number of teachers) to variables (number of questionnaire items). Thus, this guidance informed the minimum number of respondents to be sought for the survey.

The literature concerning factor analysis lacks consensus in what is deemed an acceptable minimum sample size and respondent to variable ratio, though it is agreed that larger sample sizes are preferable (Yong & Pearce, 2013). The minimum acceptable sample size for factor analysis ranges from 100 (Kline, 2015) to 300 respondents (Tabachnick & Fidell, 2013; Yong & Pearce, 2013), with Tabachnick and Fidell (2013) deeming 200 respondents as “fair” and anything below this as “poor”.

As for respondent to variable ratios, again this is not consistent in the literature, with some authors stating that a ratio of 10:1 should be a minimum (Yong & Pearce, 2013) though Kline (2015) argues that evidence indicates a ratio of 3:1 can give factor ratings essentially identical to a ratio of 10:1 and that factors can emerge with clarity with a ratio as low as 2:1.

Given the context of this research and constraints of time and access to participants, it was decided that this stage of the study would seek to meet the minimum

requirements for sample size and ratio outlined above. Therefore, with a 77-item survey, to achieve a respondent to variable ratio of 2:1, the aim was to recruit a minimum of 154 respondents. This would meet the minimum sample size of 100 respondents, though it was hoped that responses would reach over 200, to meet the "fair" standard outlined in Tabachnick and Fidell (2013).

3.4.3.2. Sampling

The target sample to complete the questionnaire were teachers of secondary-aged young people (aged 11-16 years). Teachers were selected as target participants rather than other school staff as it was hoped that the findings from this study could be compared with findings of other published attribution studies, which are predominantly comprised of teacher samples as described in Section 2.2.4 of this thesis. Additionally, although other school staffs' attributions for EBSA would be valuable to explore, the time constraints of the current project would not have allowed for the analysis of another set of data which would have been necessary to compare groups. Convenience and snowball sampling were initially employed, as participants were sought from connections within the researcher's host EPS. The researcher asked EP colleagues to share a recruitment email (see Appendix 7.8.) with headteachers or senior leadership within their link schools within the LA. The template email included information about the study and the link to the survey. Within the template email, if they were willing to take part, school leaders were encouraged to disseminate the survey amongst teaching staff at their school. Within the EPS, the researcher also attended two virtual meetings with school leaders from across the county to discuss the project and share recruitment information.

Uptake within the LA was lower than anticipated. This is possibly due to the timing of participant recruitment, which was in January 2021, just as England was placed under a series of "lockdown" measures by the government due to the COVID-19 pandemic, resulting in the second period of school closures and a transition to online teaching for most teachers. Research with a large sample of teachers indicated that responses to the COVID-19 pandemic and conversion to online learning created many new stressors for teachers to deal with, and teachers reported substantial levels of stress and an increase in negative psychological outcomes as stress levels increased (MacIntyre, Gregersen, & Mercer, 2020). It may be that fewer teachers felt they could

respond to the request for participation than if this research had been carried out under more “normal” circumstances.

Thus, it was decided that the distribution strategy needed to be adapted to gain the desired minimum number of participants. This involved sharing participant recruitment information online through social media and an online forum. The sampling strategy here was non-probability volunteer sampling, wherein the sample was obtained through posts on these platforms. Recruitment posts were posted on the researcher’s Facebook and Twitter accounts, which included a link to the survey (see Appendix 7.9.). The sharing of the research on Twitter led to an encouraging yet unexpected interest in the research which led to around 200 individuals “retweeting” the post, meaning that the survey was then exposed to “followers” of other individuals more widely. This led to some individuals contacting the researcher to declare they had completed the survey and were based outside of the UK, in Australia, as one example. The researcher had not included any questions within the demographic information of the survey to account for participant location, therefore it is not possible to put an exact figure upon the number of participants from other countries who completed the survey. However, as the majority of the recruitment was carried out in the UK, it would be reasonable to state that at least 50% of the participants were based within the UK. A recruitment email was also sent to the forum EPNET, an email discussion forum intended for EPs to discuss practice and is often used as a forum for recruitment for TEP research. This email asked EPs to share information about the study with managers at their link schools (see Appendix 7.10.).

Advantages in sharing surveys through the internet include: reaching a larger sample enabling greater generalisability; the reduced time needed to distribute measures; fewer spatial and temporal constraints; increased access to difficult to reach populations; and, increased accuracy in responses due to response checking software (Cohen et al., 2018).

3.4.3.3. Procedure for survey completion

Participants accessed the survey through a hyperlink to the questionnaire on the Qualtrics platform. They were presented with a study information sheet and consent form (see Appendix 7.11). Following giving consent, participants were presented with some demographic questions and the West Sussex EPS (2018) definition of EBSA,

followed by the 77-item survey. Once the survey was completed, participants were presented with debriefing information (see Appendix 7.12).

3.4.3.3. Characteristics of participants

Ultimately, 215 fully completed questionnaires were submitted through Qualtrics. Throughout the process, partially completed questionnaires were automatically deleted by Qualtrics after seven days of inaction. Of the completed questionnaires, 14 respondents indicated they were not currently employed as teachers of 11–16-year-olds. As the criteria for inclusion was that participants were current teachers of secondary-aged children, these 14 responses were discarded. Thus, in total there were 201 teacher respondents included in the final sample. Demographic data were collected for the length of time respondents had been employed as teachers and an estimate of how many pupils experiencing EBSA with whom they had worked (see Table 3.5). Information on gender and location of participants was not collected, the implications of this will be explored in Chapter 5.

Table 3.5. Table to show the number of years survey respondents have been employed as teachers of secondary-aged pupils and how many pupils they estimate to have worked with who have experienced EBSA (N = 201)

Number of years employed as a teacher	*Estimated number of EBSA pupils worked with*					
	0-5	*6-10*	*11-20*	*> 20*	*Unsure/prefer not to say*	*Total*
0-2 years	9	6	3	2	2	22
3-5 years	6	20	2	2	3	33
6-8 years	4	8	6	5	3	26
> 8 years	13	20	14	56	17	120
Total	32	54	25	65	25	201

3.4.3.5. Analysis of survey data

Factor analysis is commonly used to analyse attributional data. Its broad purpose is to summarise data to aid in the interpretation of relationships within the data. This is normally by regrouping variables into a limited set of clusters based on shared variance, thus helping to isolate constructs and concepts (Yong & Pearce, 2013). There are two main factor analysis techniques: exploratory factor analysis (EFA) and

confirmatory factor analysis (CFA). CFA attempts to confirm hypotheses from pre-established theories, whereas EFA explores previously unknown groupings of variables to seek underlying patterns or clusters (Cohen et al., 2018; Yong & Pearce, 2013). Thus, as there was not a pre-established theory around teachers' attributions for the causes of EBSA, EFA was the most appropriate factor analysis technique for this research.

Cohen et al. (2018) describe key stages to carrying out EFA that were followed in the data analysis here. Firstly, data gathered through the survey were exported from Qualtrics to the IBM SPSS Statistics (Version 27) software for analysis. Then "safety checks" were conducted to ensure the data was suitable for EFA, including ensuring that the minimum sample size criteria were met for conducting factor analysis. The Kaiser-Mayer-Olkin (KMO) measure was used as a measure of sampling adequacy. If the KMO index is high (1.0), then principal components analysis (PCA) can be conducted (Cohen et al., 2018). PCA is used to extract factors by reducing a large number of variables into a smaller number of components (Tabachnick & Fidell, 2013). There is some disagreement within the literature around whether PCA is the most appropriate method of factor analysis as it is not "true" factor analysis, rather a data reduction method. Some authors argue that PCA does not give regard to the structure caused by underlying variables which can lead to the inflation of the estimates of variance (Costello & Osborne, 2005). However, it is also argued that PCA is a psychometrically sound procedure, conceptually less complex than factor analysis and derives solutions that generally differ little from those of factor analysis, making it an attractive option for researchers (Field, 2013). Additionally, PCA is used as the method of factor analysis in previous published attributional studies (Lambert & Miller, 2010; A. Miller et al., 2000, 2002), thus it was deemed an appropriate method for the current study.

A detailed explanation of the stages of analysis undertaken will be given in the next chapter.

3.5. Evaluating the quality of this research

It is important to transparently evaluate the quality of any research project, and acknowledge any threats to quality to establish the trustworthiness of the findings

(Robson & McCartan, 2016). Here, reliability, validity, and threats to these within the current research are discussed.

3.5.1. Reliability

Reliability is the stability or consistency with which something is measured (Robson & McCartan, 2016). For research to be deemed reliable it must demonstrate that if it were carried out with a similar group of respondents in a similar context then similar results would be found (Cohen et al., 2018).

In the case of the present study, this relates to the reliability of the interview and analysis technique in eliciting a representative list of possible causes of EBSA within Stage One of the study. Within Stage Two, the accuracy with which the survey measures the attributions of teachers for the causes of EBSA impacts the reliability of the data obtained.

Robson and McCartan (2016) identify a series of threats to reliability within real-world research. These are explored alongside the measures taken to reduce the impact of these in Table 3.6.

3.5.2. Validity

Broadly, validity refers to the accuracy of a result (Robson & McCartan, 2016). Within quantitative research, validity can be described as the demonstration that a particular instrument is measuring what it intends to measure (Cohen et al., 2018). Validity issues for the current study can be organised into the categories of internal validity, external validity, and construct validity. Table 3.7 explores the threats to validity in the current research and methods taken to reduce the impact of these.

Table 3.6. A table to show threats to reliability as described by Robson and McCartan (2016) and measures taken to reduce their impact in the current study

Threat to reliability	*Description*	*Measures taken to reduce impact*
Participant error	Factors unrelated to the research process affect how the participant responds (e.g., illness, tiredness)	• Taking part in the research was entirely voluntary, individuals did not have to take part in an interview or complete the survey if they did not feel it was within their capacity to do so. • The survey was published online, so participants could complete it at a time convenient to them. • Clear instructions were given both at the outset of the interviews and at the beginning of the survey to reduce participant error based on a misunderstanding.
Participant bias	The extent to which participant responses are affected by their understanding of the purposes of the research. Participants may consciously or unconsciously respond in a way they feel is desired by the researcher or the reverse.	• Within Stage One, vignettes were used during interviews to lessen the impact of participants feeling pressured to respond in a socially desirable way. • Within Stage Two, as the survey was completed anonymously online, therefore the pressure to respond in a socially desirable way was lessened. • Hypotheses for the outcomes of the research were not shared with participants to minimise participants' aiming to influence the outcomes of the results.

Threat to reliability	*Description*	*Measures taken to reduce impact*
Observer error	Factors unrelated to the research process that impact the researcher's accuracy in carrying out research tasks.	• During Stage One, interview schedules were scripted and remained consistent between participants. • During Stage One, inter-rater reliability was sought for content analysis coding and categorisation to minimise researcher error. • During Stage Two, transferring data to statistical software was completed using the "export" function on Qualtrics, thus reducing possible errors that can occur when manually inputting data.
Observer bias	The researcher consciously or unconsciously biases how data is interpreted.	• Within Stage One, vignettes were used during interviews to lessen the impact of participants feeling as if they need to respond in a socially desirable way.

Table 3.7. A table to show the threats to validity as described by Mertens (2015) and measures taken to reduce their impact in the current study.

Type of validity	*Threats to validity*	*Measures taken to reduce impact*
Internal validity	• The data collection instrument or the researcher themselves has an impact on how participants respond to the measure.	• Pilot testing of both the interview schedule and survey explored how participants reacted to both instruments. • During interviews in Stage One, it was made clear to participants that they could terminate the interview without giving a reason at any point. • Those completing the online survey did not meet the researcher so the threat to validity was reduced here.
External validity	• Lack of representative sample • Unreliability of the instrument • The extent to which results can be generalised	• The sampling strategy undertaken in Stage Two attempted to gain as wide a range of teacher respondents as possible. It is acknowledged that sampling through social media platforms introduces an unavoidable bias to users of those platforms (Loewenthal & Lewis, 2021). • This study is testing the use of a new instrument for which there are no existing instruments to compare results to. Its reliability in terms of published EBSA research and attribution research will be discussed in later chapters. • Demographic questions in the survey attempted to confirm that those completing the survey belonged to the target participant group. It is

Type of validity	*Threats to validity*	*Measures taken to reduce impact*
		possible that participants could be untruthful about their occupation to complete the survey or could have taken it more than once. Implications of this will be discussed in Chapter 5. • The researcher followed advice on improving response rates for internet surveys in avoiding asking for identifying information (Cohen et al., 2018). • To maintain participants' anonymity in Stage Two, location information was not recorded. Sharing the survey on social media platforms opened the possibility of any person in any location with access to Twitter or Facebook completing the survey. This has implications for the population to which the results are generalisable. This will be explored further in Chapter 5.
Construct validity	• The construct is not correctly or adequately defined. • The construct is not operationalised fairly. The data collection instrument does not cover the construct or is affected by other constructs.	• The construct was defined through the initial extensive literature review around the concept of school refusal, EBSA and attribution theory. Interviews with individuals with experience of EBSA supported understanding of the concept of EBSA and helped to define a list of possible causes that were reflective of what has previously been defined in the literature. • To ensure the construct was operationalised fairly, the data collection instrument of the survey was developed directly from interview data.

Type of validity	*Threats to validity*	*Measures taken to reduce impact*
		Piloting of the survey allowed for exploration and review around how well the instrument represented the construct.

3.6. Ethical considerations

Ethical considerations concern what researchers ought to do and ought not to do within their research. Researchers have a responsibility to preserve the well-being and dignity of their participants and must take into account the effects of the research on their participants (Cohen et al., 2018). The British Psychological Society (BPS) emphasise the importance of conducting psychological research in a way that respects participants, is socially responsible, minimises harm to participants, and maintains scientific integrity (BPS, 2014). The documents listed below were consulted to inform the planning and undertaking of this research:

- The BPS Code of Ethics and Conduct (2018)
- The BPS Code of Human Research Ethics (2014)
- The University of Nottingham Code of Research Conduct and Research Ethics (2015)
- The BPS Ethics Guidelines for Internet-mediated Research (2017)

An additional consideration here was the context in which this research was conducted. The COVID-19 pandemic resulted in unprecedented changes across society and as such conducting research during these times resulted in increased ethical challenges around maintaining the health and safety of both participants and researchers (BPS, 2020). The following documents were used to inform ethical decision making in the context of the pandemic:

- Association of Educational Psychologists (AEP) guidance on working remotely with children, young people and their families (AEP, 2020)
- The BPS Ethics best practice guidance on conducting research with human participants during Covid-19 (2020)

Prior to the commencement of any data gathering activity, a risk assessment was carried out and an ethics application made to the University of Nottingham Research Ethics Committee, which received approval in May 2020 (Appendix 7.13).

Table 3.8 details the most relevant ethical considerations to this study.

Table 3.8. A table to show ethical considerations within this study in terms of the BPS ethical principles (BPS, 2014).

Ethical principle	*Considerations*	*Measures taken*
Respect for the autonomy, privacy and dignity of individuals and communities	• Informed consent • Withdrawal • Confidentiality and anonymity • Debriefing	• All adult participants in Stage One gave written consent to take part in an online interview, and for the interview data to be used in the context of this project. • All participants aged 11-16 years in Stage One were asked to give written "willingness to participate" in addition to written consent from a parent. • Before and during interviews, all participants in Stage One had the opportunity to ask questions about the research and their participation, and it was made clear that they were free to withdraw at any time. • During Stage Two, participants were asked to read information sheets and a consent form before giving their consent by clicking to agree to take part. It was made clear that participants were free to withdraw at any point during the survey. Where partial survey responses were recorded by Qualtrics, it was presumed that the participant had withdrawn, and responses were deleted within one week. • Confidentiality was maintained in Stage One interviews by not recording any identifying information of participants within data

Ethical principle	*Considerations*	*Measures taken*
		collection. Participants consented to share their email addresses to facilitate organising the interview and so that the researcher could send an email invite via Microsoft Teams for the interview to take place. Email addresses were stored in password-protected folders. • Anonymity was ensured during Stage Two as within the survey, no identifying information was recorded. • After each interview in Stage One, participants were emailed a debrief information form with direction to further information if required as well as the researcher's contact details. • In Stage Two, after completing the survey, participants were directed to a page with debriefing information like that in Stage One.
Scientific integrity	• Levels of control over and knowledge of participant behaviours, characteristics, and research procedures.	• Reduced levels of control when carrying out internet-mediated research can impact the validity and scientific value of a study, increasing the risk of harm arising from the dissemination of inaccurate or misleading information (BPS, 2017). To acknowledge this, threats to validity within this study have been outlined transparently in Table 3.7. Results

Ethical principle	*Considerations*	*Measures taken*
		are interpreted cautiously within the context of their limitations.
Social responsibility	• Disruption to social structures	• The topic of EBSA is frequently discussed in society. The content of this research was not of a sensitive or controversial nature so the risk of disrupting social structures is low. • The researcher received frequent supervision throughout the research process from professionals who had experience with completing research of a similar nature to ensure that relevant guidelines were followed.
Maximising benefits and minimising harm	• Risks to health associated with face-to-face contact in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. • Risks of emotional distress arising from taking part in the research. • Risk of individuals outside of the target sample accessing the survey in Stage Two (e.g., those aged under 16 years).	• All data collection was completed online to avoid face-to-face contact with participants. • Interviewees in Stage One had personal experiences with EBSA that may have provoked an emotional response during interviews. Measures were taken to account for this possibility and reduce the possibility of harm. The development of vignettes removed the need for participants to discuss their own experiences. Participants were aware of their right to withdraw. The researcher could provide some immediate emotional support during the interview if required. The debrief

Ethical principle	*Considerations*	*Measures taken*
		form indicated where participants could seek emotional support following the interview if needed. • Information within the survey was not deemed to be sensitive, so the risk of harm to a non-target individual accessing it was low.

3.7. Chapter summary

This chapter began by outlining the methodological issues around the nature and context of this research and the philosophical standpoint of the study. This was followed by a detailed description of the research design and procedures for sampling, data collection and analysis for each stage of the research. Issues of validity, reliability and ethical considerations were discussed in terms of potential threats. Also described were the measures taken to maximise the quality and trustworthiness of the research within the constraints of the context in which it was conducted. The following chapter details the analysis of data within each stage of the research and presents the results obtained.

Chapter 4 Results

This chapter details the results of the present study following the procedures outlined in the previous chapter. The steps taken to carry out the factor analysis of teachers' survey data are explained. The results of the factor analysis are presented, followed by an exploration of correlations between the factors and relative importance of each factor as a cause of EBSA according to the teacher sample.

4.1. Analysis of teachers' survey responses

Here, the data collected through the survey procedure described in the previous chapter is analysed to explore the attributions the teacher sample hold for the causes of EBSA. This is explored through exploratory factor analysis, which is followed by an exploration of the strength of the relationship between the identified factors and analysis of how teachers perceived the relative importance of each factor in causing EBSA. Finally, the relationship between factor scores and two independent variables (years of teaching experience and the number of pupils with EBSA with whom teachers have worked) is explored.

4.1.1. Teacher attribution data

As described in the previous chapter, 215 completed surveys were submitted to Qualtrics. Within that number, 14 respondents indicated that they were not currently employed as teachers of secondary-aged children, so their responses were excluded from the final analysis. Ultimately, 201 participant responses were included within the data analysis. The number of years of teaching experience and an estimated number of pupils experiencing EBSA with whom participants had worked were recorded for each participant, as detailed in the previous chapter.

4.1.2. Exploratory factor analysis procedure

Ferguson and Cox (1993) describe a three-stage process for exploratory factor analysis that was followed for this research:

- Pre-analysis checks: This ensures that a stable population factor structure can emerge from the sample, that items are properly scaled and free from biases, and, that the dataset is appropriate for the application of exploratory factor analysis.
- Factor extraction: The purpose of this stage is to identify and retain factors.

- Factor rotation: This stage simplifies the structure of the factors by highlighting items that have high loadings on a particular factor and zero or small loadings onto the others.

Following the stages of factor analysis, a further important consideration remains in the naming of the factors. This is important to the validation of the model and measure (Ferguson & Cox, 1993) and for the identification of how teachers attribute the causes of EBSA.

The full dataset comprised of 201 responses to the 77-item survey. For the analysis, Likert responses were given numeric values from one to five, in order of increasing importance, for example, the response “not at all important” was valued at one and “extremely important” at five.

4.1.2.1. Pre-analysis checks

Respondent to variable ratio was 201:77 (approximately 2.6:1) which met the minimum ratio aim of 2:1 (Kline, 2015). Additionally, 201 respondents met the requirements to be considered a “fair” sample size (Tabachnick & Fidell, 2013).

Initially, a correlation matrix was created to examine the intercorrelations between variables. If variables are very poorly correlated, this suggests a lack of patterned relationships between variables, thus they may not be measuring the same phenomenon, in this case, attributions for the causes of EBSA (Field, 2013; Yong & Pearce, 2013). Advice is to remove from the analysis items that have a large number of low correlation coefficients (r < +/- .30) (Yong & Pearce, 2013). Within the dataset, one item did not have any correlation coefficients larger than +/- .30. Consequently, this item was removed from the next stage of the analysis. The item removed from analysis at this stage was Item 23, “The pupil prefers the safety, comfort and activities available at home in comparison to school”. Equally, very high correlations between variables (r > +/- .90) indicates problems of multicollinearity, wherein dependent variables are highly intercorrelated, producing a less reliable factor analysis result (Cohen et al., 2018). No variables within the dataset had correlations above this cut-off, suggesting multicollinearity was not a risk here.

With Item 23 removed, further preliminary analyses were undertaken on the remaining 76 variables. Bartlett’s Test of Sphericity was significant χ^2 (2850) = 8827.687, p < .000, indicating that there was a suitable patterned relationship amongst the variables

(Field, 2013). The Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) measure of sampling adequacy was above the suggested .60 cut-off at .887, which is the range considered “great” according to Field (2013), indicating the sample size was adequate for the application of factor analysis.

4.1.2.2. Factor extraction

Factors were extracted using principal components analysis. Several heuristics are suggested by Tabachnick & Fidell (2013) to assess the adequacy of extraction and the number of factors selected. The following were applied in this analysis:

- Extraction of factors with Eigenvalues greater than 1: Eigenvalues are calculated for each factor to indicate the proportion of the dataset variance accounted for by that factor. Thus, they indicate the substantive importance of each factor (Field, 2013). There is a risk this approach can overestimate the number of factors in a dataset (Tabachnick & Fidell, 2013).
- Scree test (Cattell, 1966): Eigenvalues are plotted against factors graphically and the researcher judges where there is a noticeable change in slope of the graph and retains the number of factors above the change in slope. This is less reliable with smaller samples (Tabachnick & Fidell, 2013).
- Parallel analysis (Horn, 1965): A randomly generated dataset with the same number of cases and variables as the current study is generated. Average Eigenvalues for the random data are generated and compared with those generated by the real data. Factors are retained only if Eigenvalues from the real data exceed those of the averaged Eigenvalues of the random data. This is a more objective measure to determine the number of factors to retain than the scree test.

The initial analysis identified 17 factors with Eigenvalues greater than 1, which seemed too great to create a coherent model, and may also be indicative of overestimation as suggested by Tabachnick and Fidell (2013). The scree plot was then observed (see Appendix 7.14), which seemed to suggest a five-factor model, though this was not clear. To increase the reliability of the factor extraction, parallel analysis was carried out. It is not possible to carry out this calculation on SPSS statistical software, thus an online application developed by Vivek, Singh, Mishra and Donovan (2017) was used to generate a random dataset and Eigenvalues. There were five Eigenvalues within

the real dataset with values above those generated in the random dataset, suggesting the data had produced a five-factor model. Agreement between the scree test and parallel analysis was encouraging and increased the confidence that this dataset was represented by a five-factor model.

4.1.2.3. Factor rotation

Following extraction, factor rotation was used to improve the interpretability and scientific utility of the factor solution. Factor models were explored using both oblique rotation (direct oblimin) and orthogonal rotation (varimax). Orthogonal rotation appeared to produce the clearest factor model, as is typical for this type of rotation (Cohen et al., 2018), so was selected as the preferred method here.

The initial five-factor varimax rotated matrix accounted for 45.47% of the total variance of the data. Factor loadings of variables of less than .40 were suppressed and thus were excluded from the factor model. This value is suggested as a cut-off as it increases confidence in variables being a purer measure of the factor than lower cut-off points, with a minimum loading of .364 suggested for sample sizes of 200 (Field, 2013).

Within the initial matrix, 10 variables were excluded due to factor loadings below .40. These items were removed from the analysis and principal components analysis undertaken with the remaining 66 variables. The variables removed at this stage of the analysis were as follows:

- “The pupil feels pressure to not let others down” (item 41)
- “The pupil had poor attendance in primary school” (item 76)
- “Parents want to protect the pupil from negative experiences at school” (item 8)
- “The pupil is going through puberty and associated hormone changes” (item 30)
- “Transition from primary to secondary school” (item 77)
- “The pupil feels anxious about their academic ability” (item 40)
- “Pressure from school to make decisions for the future” (item 66)
- “The pupil has low self-esteem” (item 44)
- “Workload in school is too high for the pupil to keep up with” (item 50)
- “The pupil compares themselves to others, and feels “different”” (item 35)

Principal components analysis with varimax rotation of the remaining 66 variables produced a five-factor model that accounted for 47.99% of the total variance (see Table 4.1). The KMO score verified sampling adequacy for the analysis at .885 and Bartlett's test of sphericity was significant χ^2 (2145) = 7451.562, p < .000. A total of nine items showed cross-loadings onto one other factor. Ferguson and Cox (1993) suggest that for a psychologically pure measure, cross-loaded items where the difference in factor loading is ≤ 0.2 should be removed. However, where the nature of the analysis is exploratory, cross-loadings can be of theoretical interest as they may indicate an overlap in concepts (Ferguson & Cox, 1993). Thus, it was decided that cross-loaded items would be retained for further exploration. As a measure of internal consistency, Cronbach's alpha was calculated for each of the five factors, with all scores above 0.80 (see Table 4.1) which suggests a high level of reliability of each factor (Field, 2013; Loewenthal & Lewis, 2021).

Table 4.1. Summary of exploratory factor analysis results for the questionnaire measuring teachers' attributions for the causes of EBSA (N = 201)

	Factor				
Item	1	2	3	4	5
Teachers do not understand the pupil's needs	**.785**	.175	.024	.058	.235
Teachers seem unapproachable or dismissive to the pupil	**.761**	.122	.123	.185	.240
The school does not accept or adapt to diversity	**.708**	.283	.044	.062	.145
Schoolwork is not differentiated to meet individual needs	**.674**	.196	.107	.148	.085
Teachers not knowing the pupil as an individual	**.670**	.049	.056	.319	.072
Lack of pastoral and mental health support in school	**.642**	.209	.088	.075	.303
Teachers focus on attainment over wellbeing	**.634**	.110	.094	.182	.350
Lack of trusting and positive relationships between pupils and school staff	**.612**	.144	.173	.178	.226
Lack of communication between teachers about pupils	**.567**	.139	.172	.328	.161
The pupil does not feel able to ask for support	**.522**	.003	.116	.186	.305
Lack of a 'safe space' in school for the pupil to access	**.475**	.259	-.229	.222	.304
The pupil is of a minority ethnicity or religion	**.470**	.378	.092	.113	-.097
Parental pressure for academic achievement	**.441**	.125	.077	.161	.125
Teachers put the pupil on the spot in front of peers	**.428**	.094	.004	.316	**.428**
The pupil is fearful of teachers and getting into trouble	**.428**	.110	-.042	.234	.339
The school has very strict behaviour policies	**.413**	.122	.011	.345	.192

Item	Factor 1	2	3	4	5
Witnessing or experiencing domestic violence	.192	**.761**	.218	.062	.064
The pupil is involved in substance abuse	.162	**.682**	.231	-.100	.131
Parental substance addiction or abuse	.169	**.667**	.362	.041	.014
Parent(s) have physical health needs	-.005	**.644**	.168	.240	.107
Parental conflict	.082	**.606**	.348	.146	.101
The pupil has special educational needs	.255	**.573**	.111	.232	.050
The pupil has an un-diagnosed medical need	.307	**.547**	.185	.151	.188
The pupil has experienced a traumatic event	.323	**.532**	.186	-.002	.196
Parent(s) have mental health difficulties	-.027	**.522**	.348	.363	.087
Parent(s) are experiencing financial hardship	.221	**.515**	.286	.305	-.053
The pupil wants to hide events at home from school	.218	**.505**	.372	-.020	.172
The pupil is experiencing difficulties expressing their sexuality or gender	.315	**.497**	-.107	.093	.347
The pupil has a diagnosed mental health condition	.081	**.474**	.058	.152	.166
The pupil feels they have caring duties at home	.278	**.466**	.055	-.099	.241
Parental separation	.049	**.446**	.228	.321	.072
Parent(s) are intimidated by the pupil	-.033	**.419**	.392	.202	.096
Parent(s) are not effective in encouraging attendance	.044	.126	**.771**	-.175	.043
Parent(s) do not put enough boundaries in place at home	-.045	.204	**.756**	.023	-.013
Parents do not value education	.126	.201	**.752**	-.107	.110
The pupil does not see the value of school	.090	.100	**.687**	-.052	.211
Parent(s) do not offer the pupil enough or appropriate support	.370	.224	**.620**	-.037	-.108

	Factor				
Item	1	2	3	4	5
Home life is chaotic and unsettled	.113	**.420**	**.612**	.093	.002
Parents had negative experiences at school themselves	-.080	.260	**.560**	.298	.070
Parents have low academic ability	.028	.245	**.545**	.156	.074
The pupil does not have many hobbies or interests outside of school	.079	.112	**.471**	**.412**	.163
The pupil does not get enough sleep	.150	.139	**.466**	.255	.048
The pupil spends a long time online e.g., gaming or on social media	-.083	.207	**.466**	.254	.196
Non-collaborative home-school relationships	.327	.184	**.451**	.247	-.029
The pupil does not have effective coping strategies	.194	-.104	**.449**	.144	.300
Working with multiple teachers each school day	.134	.072	-.010	**.694**	.108
Long and tiring school days	.318	.084	.041	**.637**	.036
Navigating large school sites	.283	.183	-.001	**.598**	.154
The pupil finds a particular lesson challenging	.225	-.013	.122	**.563**	.227
Sensory factors in school e.g. noise, busy corridors, strong smells	.243	.173	-.105	**.560**	.323
School expect a high level of independence from pupils	**.479**	.109	.128	**.532**	.043
The pupil finds it difficult to recognise and express emotions	.069	.141	.203	**.492**	.202
Physical changes to the school environment	.377	.134	.073	**.484**	.173
Lack of protected time in school to form relationships with staff or peers	**.442**	.269	.031	**.474**	.199
The school places high importance on academic attainment	**.433**	-.127	.074	**.450**	.156

Item	Factor 1	2	3	4	5
The pupil feels anxious about life after leaving school	.102	.120	.111	**.449**	-.024
Lack of friendship group in school	.121	.099	.249	.158	**.656**
Peer conflict in school	.275	.132	.115	-.070	**.654**
Perceived pressure from peers	.215	.092	.102	.107	**.641**
The pupil fears judgement from peers	.166	.007	.065	.162	**.606**
Peers have a negative attitude towards the pupil	**.403**	.207	.183	-.012	**.578**
Being in classes with unfamiliar or disliked peers	.153	.074	.021	.244	**.527**
The pupil is bullied	.332	**.412**	-.036	-.178	**.525**
The pupil finds social interaction difficult	.082	.090	.084	**.405**	**.511**
The pupil feels self-conscious about their appearance	.099	.149	.187	.191	**.497**
Physical symptoms of anxiety e.g., feeling sick, panic attacks	.179	.218	-.022	.119	**.457**
Eigenvalues	18.04	5.70	3.07	2.58	2.29
% variance	12.36	10.16	9.29	8.34	7.84
Cronbach's alpha	.920	.907	.878	.869	.846

4.1.3. Factor naming

Factor naming can be a challenging task as the factor name must capture the concept that is addressed by all of the variables within each factor (Cohen et al., 2018). When conducted by the researcher alone, this increases subjectivity and there is the risk that the factor name does not accurately represent the concepts within the factor. To increase objectivity within the process of factor naming, Ferguson and Cox (1993) suggest two techniques that can be employed. First, prior to analysis, the researcher identifies a factor they hope to identify and creates a set of marker variables they believe tap into these constructs and a set of judges select variables they feel represent each factor. Variables with the highest inter-rater agreement for each factor

name are selected as representative of the construct. As no predictions were made for the types of factors that would emerge in the current research, this technique was not appropriate. The second factor naming technique discussed by Ferguson and Cox (1993), and ultimately used in the current study, is the recaptured item technique (RIT: Meehl, Lykken, Schofield, & Tellegen, 1971). This technique is employed post-analysis and involves three stages:

1. The items within each factor are split into two halves.
2. A number of judges, first separately, then in conference give a name to each factor based on half of the variables. Factors are split in half by first ordering the items based upon their factor loadings, highest to lowest, then removing every other item in rank order. For example, the judges may receive item 1, item 3, item 5, item 7, et cetera.
3. Finally, a second set of judges are given the proposed factor names and the other half of the variables and asked to match them. If the judgements made by the second set of judges are in agreement with the first, the factor name is retained and Meehl et al. (1971) argue that some of the subjectivity in factor naming has been reduced.

For the present study, based on half of the items in each factor, the researcher, alongside five university colleagues worked independently, then in conference to name the five factors. The second set of judges were 10 EPs from the researcher's EPS. These judges were presented with the factor names agreed upon by the first group of judges and lists of the other half of the items from each factor. They were then asked to independently match each list of items to the factor name they felt best represented the items.

Table 4.2 shows how accurate the second set of judges were in matching the half-set of items to the factor names decided by the initial judges. For three of the factors, there was complete agreement between matchings of factor name to item set. However, for Factor 1 and Factor 4, two judges deemed the proposed name for Factor 1 to belong to the Factor 4 item set and vice versa. There is a strong intercorrelation between these factors which could somewhat account for similarities between their names and item sets. The relationships between factors will be explored later in the chapter. Ultimately, as there was a high level of agreement that the proposed factor names

represented the items within each recapture set, all proposed factor names were retained. These names are outlined below.

Table 4.2. Factor number, number of items in the recapture set for each factor and the number of judges who successfully matched the factor name to the set of items (N = 10).

Factor number	*Number of items in recapture set*	*Number of judges successfully recapturing*
1	8	8
2	8	10
3	6	10
4	5	8
5	5	10

4.1.3.1. Factor 1 (SchoolAdapt)

The full name decided for Factor 1 was:

"Lack of understanding and adaptation to individual needs within school, with excessive pressure for academic attainment to the detriment of individual pupil wellbeing."

For brevity in referencing this factor in text, the key element of *school adaptation* was taken to create a shorter reference that will be used henceforth when referring to Factor 1: *SchoolAdapt.*

This factor was made up of 16 items and appeared to attribute causes of EBSA to a lack of understanding within schools to individual pupil needs (e.g., "Teachers do not understand the pupil's needs", "Schoolwork is not differentiated to meet individual needs", "Teachers not knowing the pupil as an individual") with a high pressure for attainment that can come from both school and home (e.g., "Teachers focus on attainment over wellbeing", "Parental pressure for academic attainment"). Items within the factor also appear to relate to the presence of attitudes and culture within schools that can be perceived as being detrimental to wellbeing, particularly for pupils who are in a minority population (e.g., "The school does not accept or adapt to diversity", "Lack of communication between teachers about pupils", "The school has very strict behaviour policies", "The pupil is of a minority ethnicity or religion", "Teachers put the pupil on the spot in front of peers", "The pupil is fearful of teachers and getting into

trouble") and a lack of structures within a school to support pupil wellbeing (e.g., "Lack of pastoral and mental health support in school", "Lack of a 'safe space' in school for the pupil to access", "Teachers seem unapproachable or dismissive to the pupil", "Lack of trusting and positive relationships between pupils and school staff", "The pupil does not feel able to ask for support").

4.1.3.2. Factor 2 (AdverseExp)

The full descriptive name decided for Factor 2 was:

"Adverse and challenging experiences outside of the school context that increase pupil vulnerability."

For brevity in referencing this factor in text, the key element of *adverse experiences* was taken to create a shorter reference that will be used henceforth when referring to Factor 2: *AdverseExp.*

AdverseExp consists of 16 items and appears to attribute causes of EBSA to experiences outside of the school context, such as issues related to the circumstances of pupils' parents (e.g., "Parental substance addiction or abuse", "Parent(s) have physical health needs", "Parental conflict", "Parent(s) have mental health difficulties", "Parent(s) are experiencing financial hardship", "Parental separation", "Parent(s) are intimidated by the pupil"), reactions of pupils to events at home that may impact attendance (e.g., "The pupil feels they have caring duties at home", "The pupil wants to hide events at home from school") and the experiences of pupils outside of the school context that would deem them "vulnerable" (e.g., "Witnessing or experiencing domestic violence", "The pupil has experienced a traumatic event", "The pupil is involved in substance abuse", "The pupil has special educational needs", "The pupil has an undiagnosed medical need", "The pupil is experiencing difficulties expressing their sexuality or gender", "The pupil has a diagnosed mental health condition").

4.1.3.3. Factor 3 (ParentVal)

The full descriptive name decided for this factor was:

"Parental transmission of norms, values, lifestyle and belief systems that are not conducive to school attendance, engagement or success."

For the sake of brevity in referencing this factor in text, the key element of *parental values* was taken to create a shorter reference that will be used henceforth when referring to Factor 3: *ParentVal.*

ParentVal consists of 13 items and appears to attribute the causes of EBSA to parenting approaches that do not promote good attendance (e.g., “Parent(s) are not effective in encouraging attendance”, “Parent(s) do not put enough boundaries in place at home”, “Parent(s) do not offer the pupil enough or appropriate support”), circumstances that may have an impact upon parenting effectiveness (e.g., “Home life is chaotic and unsettled”, “Parents have low academic ability”) and negative parental experiences and belief systems in relation to school (e.g., “Parents do not value education”, “Parents had negative experiences at school themselves”, “Non-collaborative home-school relationships”), all of which may impact upon development of pupil behaviour and beliefs that are not conducive to good attendance, engagement or success in school (e.g., “The pupil does not see the value of school”, “The pupil does not have many hobbies or interests outside of school”, “The pupil does not get enough sleep”, “The pupil spends a long time online e.g., gaming or on social media”, “The pupil does not have effective coping strategies”).

4.1.3.4. Factor 4 (SchoolEnv)

The full descriptive name decided for this factor was:

“The stressful and unpredictable school environment is daunting to pupils whose sense of security is challenged by a diminished sense of control.”

For the sake of brevity in referencing this factor in text, the key element of *school environment* was taken to create a shorter reference that will be used henceforth when referring to Factor 4: *SchoolEnv.*

SchoolEnv consists of 11 items and appears to attribute the causes of EBSA to aspects of school life that may be stressful, unpredictable, and outside the control of pupils (e.g., “Working with multiple teachers each school day”, “Long and tiring school days”, “Navigating large school sites”, “Sensory factors in school e.g., noise, busy corridors, strong smells”, “Physical changes to the school environment”, “Lack of protected time in school to form relationships with staff or peers”, “The pupil finds a particular lesson challenging”, “The pupil feels anxious about life after leaving school”),

expectations within a school that increase feelings of stress (e.g., “School expect a high level of independence from pupils”, “The school place high importance on academic attainment”) and one item that is pupil-related that could make it difficult for them to engage in these kinds of learning environments (e.g., “The pupil finds it difficult to recognise and express emotions”).

4.1.3.5. Factor 5 (PeerRel)

The full descriptive name decided for this factor was:

“Negative experiences of peer relationships impacting on sense of self and feelings of anxiety.”

For the sake of brevity in referencing this factor in text, the key elements of *peer relationships* were taken to create a shorter reference that will be used henceforth when referring to Factor 5: *PeerRel.*

This factor consists of 10 items and appears to attribute the causes of EBSA to negative experiences of peer relationships in school (e.g., “Lack of friendship group in school”, “Peer conflict in school”, “Peers have a negative attitude towards the pupil”, “The pupil is bullied”, “Being in classes with unfamiliar or disliked peers”), a low sense of self, negatively influenced by perceived peer judgement (e.g., “Perceived pressure from peers”, “The pupil fears judgement from peers”, “The pupil feels self-conscious about their appearance”), and factors that can make forming relationships with peers challenging (e.g., “The pupil finds social interaction challenging”, “Physical symptoms of anxiety e.g., feeling sick, panic attacks”).

4.1.4. Intercorrelations between factors

For each factor, the *percentage of the maximum possible score* was calculated for each participant’s rating for each item within a factor as in Miller, Ferguson, and Byrne (2000) and Miller, Ferguson and Moore (2002). This process standardises scores for factors as they were of different lengths of items. This process involved calculating the sum of the scores for all the items within a factor, and then calculating this as a percentage of the score obtained if all items were rated “Extremely important”. These values were then used to calculate the intercorrelations between each factor, which demonstrated significant correlations between all factors (see Table 4.3). This

suggests that the concepts captured within each factor are related to one another, which is encouraging as all factors should represent possible causes of EBSA.

SchoolAdapt ("Lack of understanding and adaptation to individual needs within school, with excessive pressure for academic attainment to the detriment of individual pupil wellbeing") was particularly strongly correlated with both SchoolEnv ("The stressful and unpredictable school environment is daunting to pupils whose sense of security is challenged by a diminished sense of control") and PeerRel ("Negative experiences of peer relationships impacting on sense of self and feelings of anxiety") (both greater than 0.6). These three factors all seem to represent possible causes within the school context.

A strong correlation was also demonstrated between AdverseExp ("Adverse and challenging experiences outside of the school context that increase pupil vulnerability") and ParentVal ("Parental transmission of norms, values, lifestyle and belief systems that are not conducive to school attendance, engagement or success"). These two factors seem to represent possible causes of EBSA outside of the school context.

Table 4.3. A table to show the intercorrelations between the percentage of the total score for the five extracted factors

	SchoolAdapt	*AdverseExp*	*ParentVal*	*SchoolEnv*	*PeerRel*
SchoolAdapt	--				
AdverseExp	.555**	--			
ParentVal	.360**	.638**	--		
SchoolEnv	.690**	.475**	.358**	--	
PeerRel	.648**	.511**	.378**	.516**	--

***. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).*

4.1.5. Perceived importance of factors

To explore the attributional patterns of teachers, the relative importance placed upon each factor in causing EBSA was calculated as in Lambert (2005). This involved using the percentage of the maximum possible score for each factor, as described in the previous section. For the purposes of interpretation, Table 4.4 gives an overview of the values of the percentage of the maximum possible score relative to item responses on the questionnaire.

Overall, factors were perceived in the following order of importance:

1. PeerRel: “Negative experiences of peer relationships impacting on sense of self and feelings of anxiety” (77.34%)
2. ParentVal: “Parental transmission of norms, values, lifestyle and belief systems that are not conducive to school attendance, engagement or success” (75.79%)
3. AdverseExp: “Adverse and challenging experiences outside of the school context that increase pupil vulnerability” (74.30%)
4. SchoolAdapt: “Lack of understanding and adaptation to individual needs within school, with excessive pressure for academic attainment to the detriment of individual pupil wellbeing” (71.83%)
5. SchoolEnv: “The stressful and unpredictable school environment is daunting to pupils whose sense of security is challenged by a diminished sense of control” (64.98%)

With regard to the figures presented in Table 4.4, all factors seem to have been perceived as relatively important in causing EBSA. The percentage of the maximum possible score for all factors ranges from 77.34% - 64.98%, suggesting that the overall importance of all factors is between “Quite important” and “Very important” with some variance within this.

To examine whether the order of importance of the factors was in fact due to perceptions being different for each factor, and not due to chance, a one-way independent analysis of variance (ANOVA) was carried out which showed there was a significant effect of Factor on the percentage of the maximum score $F(4, 1000) = 31.37$, $p < .01$.

Pairwise comparisons with Bonferonni adjustment for multiple comparisons were made, as in Gibbs and Gardiner (2008), to explore the importance of individual factors relative to each other (see

Table 4.5). Results indicate that, with means significantly lower than all other factors, SchoolEnv was perceived as the least important factor. The remaining factors were not as distinct in their level of importance. The items in PeerRel have the highest mean percentage of the maximum score, though comparisons indicate that this figure is not significantly different from the means of ParentVal or AdverseExp, which suggests that the factors PeerRel, ParentVal and AdverseExp may have been perceived as being similarly important. Means for PeerRel and ParentVal were greater and significantly different to, the mean for SchoolAdapt, suggesting that factors PeerRel and ParentVal are perceived as more important in causing EBSA than SchoolAdapt. There was not a significant difference between factors AdverseExp and SchoolAdapt, which suggests that they were perceived as being similarly important.

Table 4.4. Table showing the percentage of the maximum possible score if all items were rated with the same response

Item response	*% of the maximum possible score if all items were given this response*
Extremely important	100
Very important	80
Quite important	60
Not very important	40
Not at all important	20

Table 4.5. Table showing pairwise comparisons with Bonferroni correction for comparisons made between means of the percentage of the maximum score for items in each extracted factor.

	Factor name	*Mean difference*	*Standard Error*
SchoolAdapt	AdverseExp	-2.47	1.22
	ParentVal	-3.96*	1.22
	SchoolEnv	6.84*	1.22
	PeerRel	-5.51*	1.22
AdverseExp	SchoolAdapt	2.47	1.22
	ParentVal	-1.49	1.22
	SchoolEnv	9.31*	1.22
	PeerRel	-3.05	1.22
ParentVal	SchoolAdapt	3.96*	1.22
	AdverseExp	1.49	1.22
	SchoolEnv	10.81*	1.22
	PeerRel	-1.55	1.22
SchoolEnv	SchoolAdapt	-6.84*	1.22
	AdverseExp	-9.31*	1.22
	ParentVal	-10.81*	1.22
	PeerRel	-12.36*	1.22
PeerRel	SchoolAdapt	5.52*	1.22
	AdverseExp	3.05	1.22
	ParentVal	1.55	1.22
	SchoolEnv	12.36*	1.22

Factor labels: School adaptations (SchoolAdapt); Adverse experiences (AdverseExp); Parental values (ParentVal); School environment (SchoolEnv); Peer relationships (PeerRel)
*Difference was significant at $p < 0.05$

4.1.6. Exploring relationships between factors and demographic variables

To explore the possibility of relationships between demographic variables and how participants responded to the survey, multivariate analyses of variance (MANOVA) were carried out. Independent variables were “years of teaching experience” and “estimated number of young people with EBSA with whom teachers had worked”. Dependent variables were the “percentage of the maximum possible score” for items within each of the five factors.

4.1.6.1. Years of teaching experience

Participants were asked how many years they had been employed as a teacher. Response options were: “0-2 years” (*n = 22*), “3-5 years” (*n = 33*), “6-8 years” (*n = 26*), “more than 8 years” (*n = 120*).

Results from the MANOVA indicate overall there was a statistically significant difference in factor score based on a teacher's years of experience, F (15, 533) = 2.05, p = < 0.05; Wilk's Λ = 0.857, partial η2 = .05.

However, within the MANOVA output, separate univariate ANOVAs on the outcome variables revealed non-significant effects of years of experience on:

- SchoolAdapt, F(3, 197) = 1.00, p > .05
- AdverseExp, F(3, 197) = .65, p > .05
- ParentVal F(3, 197) = 1.44, p > .05
- SchoolEnv, F(3, 197) = 2.21, p > .05
- Or, PeerRel, F(3, 197) = 2.13, p > .05.

Visual analysis of mean scores in Table 4.6 highlight the similarity of scores across years of experience for each factor.

Table 4.6. Table to show mean scores (as a percentage of the maximum) for each factor by years of experience

Factor	*Years of experience*	*Mean*	*Standard deviation*	*N*
SchoolAdapt	0-2	75.28	11.12	22
	3-5	69.17	15.13	33
	6-8	71.11	12.12	26
	> 8	72.08	13.14	120
AdverseExp	0-2	71.31	8.53	22
	3-5	73.67	10.96	33
	6-8	73.94	11.68	26
	> 8	75.09	13.12	120
ParentVal	0-2	70.77	9.46	22
	3-5	75.71	11.33	33
	6-8	75.68	9.94	26
	> 8	76.76	13.56	120
SchoolEnv	0-2	62.48	11.59	22
	3-5	63.47	11.25	33
	6-8	61.05	11.58	26
	> 8	66.71	12.53	120
PeerRel	0-2	75.45	11.75	22
	3-5	74.85	11.64	33
	6-8	74.62	11.02	26
	> 8	78.97	10.90	120

Factor labels: School adaptations (SchoolAdapt); Adverse experiences (AdverseExp); Parental values (ParentVal); School environment (SchoolEnv); Peer relationships (PeerRel)

4.1.6.2. Estimated number of pupils experiencing EBSA

Participants were asked to estimate how many pupils they had worked with who had experienced EBSA. Response options were: “0-5” (*n = 32*), “6-10” (*n = 54*), “11-20” (*n = 25*), “more than 20” (*n = 65*), “unsure or prefer not to say” (*n = 25*).

Results from the MANOVA indicate there was a statistically significant difference in the percentage of the maximum score based on the number of pupils experiencing EBSA teachers had worked with, F (20, 638) = 1.9, $p < 0.05$; Wilk's Λ = 0.825, partial η2 = .05. Within the MANOVA output, ANOVAs on the outcome variables indicated significant effects of number of EBSA pupils worked with on scores of all five factors. Therefore, further analysis was carried out to investigate the nature of this relationship. Individual one-way ANOVAs were carried out with Tukey’s HSD post hoc tests. Comparisons of mean scores based on the number of EBSA pupils worked with were non-significant ($p > 0.05$) for SchoolAdapt, AdverseExp and PeerRel.

Within ParentVal, teachers who estimated they had worked with more than 20 children with EBSA, rated items in this factor significantly higher than those who were unsure of how many EBSA pupils they had worked with ($p < .05$), but scores were not significantly different to those who estimated to have worked with 0-5 ($p = .51$), 6-10 ($p = .06$) or 11-20 ($p = .99$) children with EBSA.

Within SchoolEnv, teachers who estimated they had worked with more than 20 children with EBSA rated items in this factor significantly higher than those who estimated they had worked with 6-10 children with EBSA ($p < .001$), but scores were not significantly different to those who estimated to have worked with 0-5 ($p = .15$) or 11-20 ($p = .99$) children with EBSA or those who were unsure how many they had worked with ($p = .33$).

Visual analysis of the data in

Table 4.7 highlights the differences in means described here.

Table 4.7. Table to show mean scores (as a percentage of the maximum) for each factor by estimated number of EBSA pupils with whom participants have worked.

Factor	*Estimated No. EBSA pupils*	*Mean*	*Standard deviation*	*N*
SchoolAdapt	0-5	71.17	10.36	32
	6-10	68.17	14.51	54
	11-20	76.60	11.87	25
	>20	74.60	13.06	65
	Unsure	68.60	12.62	25
AdverseExp	0-5	70.86	10.02	32
	6-10	73.24	12.43	54
	11-20	77.40	11.23	25
	> 20	77.21	12.86	65
	Unsure	70.30	11.25	25
ParentVal	0-5	75.14	9.88	32
	6-10	73.19	12.45	54
	11-20	78.09	13.10	25
	>20	79.29	12.73	65
	Unsure	70.83	11.80	25
SchoolEnv	0-5	63.35	11.46	32
	6-10	60.24	10.92	54
	11-20	67.27	11.51	25
	>20	69.23	12.68	65
	Unsure	64.00	11.90	25
PeerRel	0-5	74.38	9.56	32
	6-10	75.70	10.85	54
	11-20	80.08	12.08	25
	>20	80.34	11.42	65
	Unsure	74.16	10.89	25

Factor labels: School adaptations (SchoolAdapt); Adverse experiences (AdverseExp); Parental values (ParentVal); School environment (SchoolEnv); Peer relationships (PeerRel)

4.2. Chapter summary

This chapter presented the findings of this study in response to the research question "What are the attributions of teachers for the causes of emotionally based school avoidance?" A sample of 201 teachers of 11-16-year-olds completed the 77-item survey measuring attributions for the causes of EBSA. Factor analysis using principal components analysis was conducted on the survey responses, resulting in a five-factor model for how the teacher sample attributed the causes of EBSA. Based upon the percentage of the maximum score obtained for each item, intercorrelations between factors were calculated and the relative importance attributed to each factor. Finally,

the factor model was explored with the demographic variables collected within the survey.

The following chapter discusses the findings here in terms of previous literature, the methodological strengths and limitations of this study and explores the implications of the findings for practice in the fields of teaching and educational psychology.

Chapter 5 Discussion

5.1. Chapter aim and overview

The purpose of the current study was to identify and explore attributions made by teachers for the causes of EBSA. It was hoped that this research would contribute to the limited research that explores teachers' perceptions of the causes of EBSA and offer novel findings on teachers' perceptions of the causes of EBSA through the lens of attribution theory. It was also hoped that this research could contribute to informing practice for educational psychologists (EPs) and within school systems in addition to identifying areas for future research.

This chapter explores the findings of this study in terms of prior literature and theory that were explored in the literature review presented in Chapter 2 of this thesis. This is achieved through a discussion of the factor model in terms of EBSA literature and what this model represents relative to previous attribution theory literature. The methodological limitations and their implication on the interpretability of findings are then addressed. Then follows a discussion of the implications of this study for practice and future research.

5.2. Findings in response to the research question: "What are the attributions of teachers for the causes of EBSA?"

Content analysis of data from ten interviews with three agent groups (school staff, parents, secondary-aged children) produced a 77-item list of possible causes of EBSA. This list was used to form a questionnaire for teachers of secondary-aged young people to measure their attributions for the causes of EBSA. A sample of 201 teachers was recruited through contacts within the researcher's placement Local Authority (LA) and social media. Responses were collected through an online survey and analysed using factor analysis. The analysis produced a five-factor model of how the teacher sample attributed the causes of EBSA, which was as follows:

- School adaptations (SchoolAdapt): "Lack of understanding and adaptation to individual needs within school, with excessive pressure for academic attainment to the detriment of individual pupil wellbeing"
- Adverse experiences (AdverseExp): "Adverse and challenging experiences outside of the school context that increase pupil vulnerability"

- Parental values (ParentVal): “Parental transmission of norms, values, lifestyle and belief systems that are not conducive to school attendance, engagement or success”
- School environment (SchoolEnv): “The stressful and unpredictable school environment is daunting to pupils whose sense of security is challenged by a diminished sense of control”
- Peer relationships (PeerRel): “Negative experiences of peer relationships impacting on sense of self and feelings of anxiety”

The factor model revealed that teacher participants attributed causes of attendance into two broad domains: within-school factors; and factors outside of the school setting. This differs slightly from prior non-attendance research (Dannow et al., 2020; Gren-Landell, 2021; Thambirajah et al., 2008), and attribution research (Mavropoulou & Padeliadu, 2002; Savina et al., 2014; Wang & Hall, 2018), which suggests that perceived causes of student behaviour are usually organised across three domains; school, parent and individual. The factor model produced in the current study does not contain a factor that is solely within-child related causes of EBSA. Rather, there are items related to the individual child interspersed across all five factors. This suggests that how teachers attributed the causes of EBSA was nuanced, reflecting a perceived interplay of issues across different domains that interact to cause EBSA.

The interacting nature of issues across domains in causing attendance difficulties has been evidenced in previous studies with young people (Baker & Bishop, 2015; Gregory & Purcell, 2014). In Melvin et al. (2019), it is also acknowledged that it is important for practitioners to understand the interaction of factors across domains so as to support young people who struggle to attend school. Therefore, it is encouraging that in the current study, teachers’ responses indicate their awareness of the interactions of factors in causing EBSA. This may be, in part, due to the utilisation of the term “emotionally based school avoidance”, which was chosen to avoid within-child conceptualisations of attendance difficulties that sometimes are associated with the use of other terms, such as “school refusal” (Baker & Bishop, 2015). Should this be the case, this has important implications for both research and practice in the area, which are addressed later in this chapter.

To further explore how each causal domain is represented in the factor model generated in this study, below, factors are explored in terms of how they relate to findings of previous school non-attendance research.

5.2.1. Discussion of the content of the factor model

5.2.1.1. SchoolAdapt

This factor appeared to encompass elements within the school system that worked to the detriment of individual pupil wellbeing. Several items seemed to encompass elements of teachers' attitudes and behaviour that could be perceived by pupils as unfriendly or frightening. This is in line with findings from previous research with young people and parents, suggesting a lack of teacher support and a fear of teachers were contributing factors towards school refusal (Baker & Bishop, 2015; Dannow et al., 2020; Gregory & Purcell, 2014; Havik et al., 2014). Research has also indicated that transition to secondary school is associated with students' perceptions of teacher support becoming increasingly negative, which has been linked to the point at which school becomes more academically and socially demanding (Havik et al., 2015b).

This factor also brings together elements of teacher practice and a lack of adaptation to individual needs as causes of EBSA, which are elements that have been acknowledged in other research with school personnel. For example, in Devenney and O'toole (2021) participants recognise that many of the support strategies they adopt to promote attendance seem ineffective. Also, teacher participants in Gren-Landell et al. (2015) place a lack of curriculum adaptation to learning difficulties as sixth out of sixteen items in its importance in contributing to absenteeism. In the same study, participants comment upon organisational deficiencies within schools that lead to a lack of mental health support for pupils, which is also represented within this factor.

Within SchoolAdapt, some items relate to parent and pupil behaviour, though these seem to have clear links with the school-based nature of this factor. One item relates to parental pressure for academic attainment, which is a notion also explored by school personnel in Devenney and O'toole (2021). Participants felt that the education system and societal expectations have created a narrow view that academic attainment is considered the quintessential purpose of schooling. Due to this, participants posed that parents feel pressure for their child to achieve and teachers feel pressure for students to achieve (Devenney & O'toole, 2021). This creates

external pressure for pupils to achieve, which school personnel perceive as causing distress and harm to young peoples' mental health (Devenney & O'toole, 2021; Gren-Landell et al., 2015).

5.2.1.2. AdverseExp

All items within this factor were unrelated to school contexts but could impact how a young person functions within school. Many of the items within this factor are in line with experiences that would be considered as *adverse childhood experiences* (ACEs). Research has shown that experiencing multiple ACEs is a risk factor for higher rates of chronic absenteeism (Stempel et al., 2017). Other items within the factor are related to pupils, such as mental health needs, special educational needs (SEN), or undiagnosed health needs. These pupil-related factors may be also linked to ACEs as research has indicated that the more ACEs a child has experienced, the more likely they are to experience poor mental health, chronic health conditions and poorer social development than those who have experienced fewer or no ACEs (Kerker et al., 2015). Two large-scale North American studies have also indicated that children who had experienced ACEs were less likely to have had medical referrals for potential illnesses and experienced a higher prevalence of SEN and mental health concerns (Bethell, Newacheck, Hawes, & Halfon, 2014; Stempel et al., 2017).

Aside from having experienced ACEs, diagnosed mental health conditions such as anxiety or depression are reported as risk factors for EBSA (Ingul et al., 2019). In terms of SEN, this is not usually identified as a risk factor for EBSA, and literature reports average intellectual functioning of school refusing youth (Ingul et al., 2019). However, when in the presence of other risk factors such as a lack of adaptation to needs in school, or experiencing ACEs, having SEN may become an indirect risk factor for EBSA.

This factor also encompasses pupils feeling that they must stay home to help with the care of a family member or to hide events at home from school, which were also listed as risk factors in one study with school personnel (Archer et al., 2003). School personnel expressed these could be causal factors for school refusal for pupils from homes where there is more conflict (Archer et al., 2003), which links to other items within this factor.

One item in this factor links to pupil difficulties with expressing sexuality or gender as a possible cause of EBSA. This is a link that is not well established within published literature. A Japanese study found that the rate of school refusal for youth experiencing gender identity disorder was significantly higher than the national average of 1.55% at 29.2% (Terada et al., 2012), indicating that young people experiencing challenges with expressing their gender identity may be at higher risk of EBSA. However, further research is needed to establish this link. Although there does not seem to be an established link in the literature between EBSA and being part of the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer or questioning (LGBTQ) community, research has shown LGBTQ youth experience more bullying and victimisation in school than heterosexual youth and are at increased risk of negative mental health outcomes (Day, Ioverno, & Russell, 2019; McConnell, Birkett, & Mustanski, 2015). Bullying and mental health difficulties are established risk factors for EBSA. Therefore, it could be that pupils experiencing challenge expressing their sexuality or gender may be at higher risk of EBSA if they are also experiencing related bullying or mental health difficulties.

5.2.1.3. ParentVal

Like the AdverseExp factor, this factor is entirely made up of elements from outside of the school setting. This factor appears to have two strands, the first is parent and family functioning-related, and other items seem more related to pupil attitudes, though links could perhaps be drawn between the influence of parental attitudes on the types of pupil behaviour represented.

Teachers' perceptions of behaviour, attitudes, and beliefs within the home that are not conducive to good attendance is an important element of this factor. This echoes views expressed by school personnel in Devenney and O'toole (2021) that interestingly seemed to be influenced by families' socio-economic status. Participants expressed perceptions that parents from higher-income families were more motivated and effective in supporting their child than those from lower socioeconomic status. Parents from lower-income households were also perceived as perhaps having more negative experiences at school, which is an additional element within this factor.

Permissive parenting and a lack of support from parents were rated as important factors in causing school refusal in Gren-Landell et al. (2015) which reflects elements present within this factor. Similarly, lower family cohesion and expressiveness of

emotion have, in a recent study, been shown to be related to high levels of absenteeism (Fornander & Kearney, 2019). In the same study, low levels of “control”, defined as having set rules to structure family life, were predictive of higher levels of absenteeism. Additionally, higher levels of school absence were associated with low levels of familial physical and social activity, and greater time spent at home (Fornander & Kearney, 2019). This could link the home environment to the pupil-related items in this factor, which included pupils spending long periods online and lacking in hobbies and interests outside of school.

5.2.1.4. SchoolEnv

Like the factor, SchoolAdapt, this factor also encompasses school-related elements that could cause EBSA. Though, for this factor, they seem more closely related to environmental factors within schools that could make attendance difficult for pupils who find coping with change particularly challenging. In line with this, studies with parents and young people experiencing EBSA have indicated that unpredictability within the learning environment and structural organisation of schools can be significant contributors to EBSA (Dannow et al., 2020; Havik et al., 2014). Interviews with teachers have also indicated that they recognise environmental factors as challenging and possibly contributing to school refusal for some pupils, including the size and layout of schools; the structure of the school day; fear of specific subjects; and, academic pressures (Archer et al., 2003). All of which are elements within this factor.

There is one item that is more pupil-related than others within the factor and refers to pupils finding emotional expression and recognition a challenge. Difficulties with emotional recognition and expression, and with coping and adapting to change are traits associated with autism (Frederickson & Cline, 2015). School personnel have suggested that neurodevelopmental conditions like autism could be a risk factor for EBSA (Devenney & O’toole, 2021). A study has also identified that children with autism are more likely to experience EBSA than neurotypical students (Munkhaugen et al., 2017). The clustering of items within this factor could suggest that teachers perceive young people with difficulties with emotional regulation and coping with change, such as children with autism, will experience more difficulty with environmental factors within the school in comparison to neurotypical children.

5.2.1.5. PeerRel

This factor is the only factor that represents peer-related difficulties as perceived causes of EBSA. Again, this factor seems to have two distinct but connected elements. Firstly, factors related to peers that are not in the control of the pupil, and secondly, elements that are related to the pupil themselves and perhaps their difficulties with social interaction that pose challenges in forming relationships with peers.

The relationship between school refusal behaviour, bullying and victimisation is well-evidenced and recognised as significant by teachers, parents and pupils alike (Baker & Bishop, 2015; Gregory & Purcell, 2014; Gren-Landell et al., 2015; Torrens Armstrong et al., 2011). At greater risk of bullying, and therefore possibly EBSA as a result, are young people with autism (McClemont et al., 2020; Ochi et al., 2020), and young people who are part of the LGBTQ community (Day et al., 2019; McConnell et al., 2015).

Beyond bullying, social isolation and lack of a friendship group are also perceived as risk factors for EBSA by school personnel (Pritchard & Butler, 1978; Torrens Armstrong et al., 2011), and by parents and young people (Dannow et al., 2020; Havik et al., 2015a). These elements are present within this factor. Also present, is the more within-child aspect of experiencing difficulties with social interaction, though it is unsurprising that this is present within the same factor as peer difficulties. Links between lack of friendship group, social interaction difficulties, and school refusal have been established within the literature (Egger et al., 2003).

This factor also includes pupil-related elements that seem independent of peer relationships (physical symptoms of anxiety and feeling self-conscious) but would likely have an impact upon social interaction, as indicated by research highlighting links between experiencing social anxiety and poorer social functioning, lower levels of peer acceptance and fewer friendships (La Greca & Lopez, 1998; Tillfors, Persson, Willén, & Burk, 2012). Furthermore, social anxiety, somatic complaints, social withdrawal and self-consciousness are also grouped as internalising problems common within school refusing populations (Fornander & Kearney, 2020), supporting the clustering of these items within this factor.

5.2.2. Findings relative to attribution theory

The purpose of this research was to explore how teachers attribute the causes of EBSA. Above, the contents of each factor are described in terms of EBSA and school refusal research, highlighting the perceived interplay of issues across different domains in causing EBSA. Here, the focus now shifts to the weight of importance placed on individual factors by the sample, and what this implies in terms of attribution theory and how this relates to previous attributional research.

5.2.2.1. Teachers' dimensions of causality related to EBSA

Considering the factor model derived in this study in terms of Weiner's (1979, 1985, 2010) dimensions of causality, within all factors, teachers attributed the locus of causality as both internal and external to the pupil to varying degrees, though with a tendency to attribute more to external than internal causes. This suggests that this sample of teachers perceive that factors external to the pupil, such as school-related or home and parent-related factors were more important causes of EBSA than internal pupil-related factors. However, as Weiner (1979) argues, interpretation of behaviours as merely caused by internal or external factors is context-dependent, and perhaps over-simplifies the issue. For example, in the factor, SchoolAdapt, the item "The pupil is fearful of teachers and getting into trouble" could be attributed to being an internal cause of EBSA if a child is believed to be of an anxious disposition generally. However, in the context of the factor in which this item is placed, this could also be an external cause if teachers are unapproachable and behaviour policies very strict, causing fearfulness in pupils. The nuanced nature of the factor model here highlights the importance of looking beyond simply interpreting causes as internal or external to pupils.

Thus, it is then important to consider the next dimension of causality, *controllability*, the extent to which an individual is perceived to have control over the behaviour that is being observed (Weiner, 1979). This can be considered both in terms of how much control teachers perceive that pupils have over their behaviour, but also how much control teachers perceive that they have over a pupils' actions and school avoidance behaviour, which will be addressed in turn.

As all five factors in this study consist predominantly of causes that are external to the pupil, this suggests that the teacher sample perceived that the causes of EBSA are

largely out of pupils' control. Where there are internal causes present within factors, these can also be considered through the lens of controllability. For example, in the factor, ParentVal, the item "The pupil does not see the value of school" is attributable as internal to the pupil. However, in the context of ParentVal, it could be perceived that the pupil has less *control* of this belief as it may be a product of transmission of parental values and beliefs unconducive to school attendance. Thus, teachers may perceive this factor as controllable by parents.

It is important to also consider the controllability teachers perceive they have over the causes of EBSA in terms of the dimensions of causality. Three factors (SchoolAdapt, SchoolEnv, PeerRel) consist predominantly of items related to the school context, including teacher-related, environment-related, and peer-related issues. These are factors wherein teachers may be able to attribute that they have a certain degree of control, particularly over items related to teacher behaviour. Motivation to act upon these will be somewhat determined by the level of importance teachers place upon these factors compared to other factors that cause EBSA. If they attribute higher importance to causes that are not controllable to teachers, such as within-child or home and family-related factors, which are also perceived to have high *stability,* Weiner (2010) argues that this leads to a sense of hopelessness in changing outcomes for the future. This reduces the motivation for teachers to change their behaviour or practice. The perceived importance of each factor is discussed in the following section.

5.2.2.2 Teachers' attributions for the importance of the causes of EBSA

Following the development of the factor model through factor analysis, the percentage of the overall possible maximum score was calculated for each factor to explore which factors were perceived as the most and least important in causing EBSA. This is presented visually alongside the names of each factor in Figure 5.1. It should be noted that all factors were attributed some importance as causes of EBSA, with scores indicating each factor as in the range of "Quite important" to "Very important".

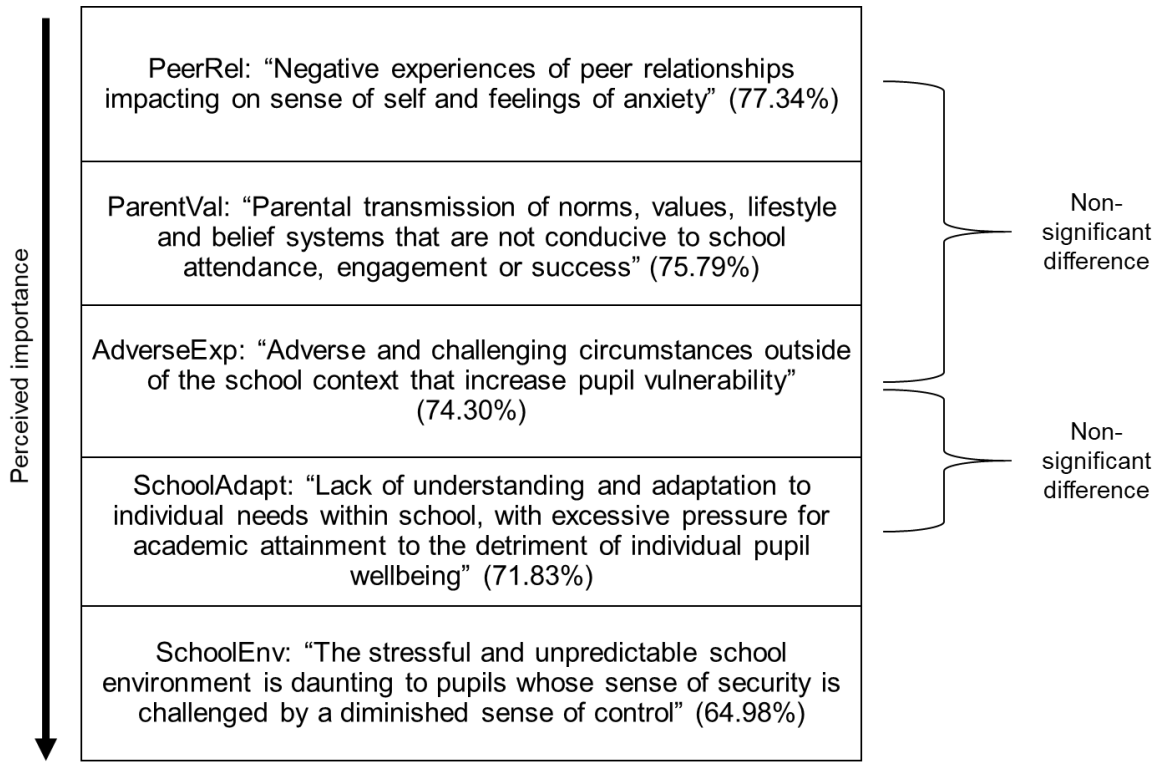

Figure 5.1. Visual representation of the perceived order of importance of factors derived through factor analysis

Factors PeerRel, ParentVal and AdverseExp were collectively perceived as the most important causes of EBSA by participants in this research. AdverseExp and ParentVal address issues outside of the school context, and interestingly seem to group within-child and parent- and home-related causes. The distinction between the two factors seems to be the experiences a child has at home, versus, attitudes and beliefs they are exposed to at home. On the other hand, PeerRel exclusively encompasses peer and interaction related issues, which could be considered as a school-related factor, as these issues would mainly arise in school, though would also have important implications outside of the school context.

Of less perceived importance to PeerRel, ParentVal and AdverseExp were factors SchoolAdapt and SchoolEnv. Though of a lower score than AdverseExp, scores for SchoolAdapt were not statistically significantly different. Scores for SchoolEnv were significantly different and lower than those of any other factor, so was attributed the least important in causing EBSA in this study. There are similarities between factors SchoolAdapt and SchoolEnv. They could both be seen as school-related factors, though SchoolAdapt clusters together teacher behaviour, attitude, and school culture, whereas SchoolEnv addresses more environmental factors in school.

Attributed importance of factors in terms of school refusal literature

As discussed previously, there is a scarcity of quantitative research that explores teachers' attributions for the causes of EBSA and their relative importance, thus, the comparisons drawn here are tentative. One study that bears similarity to the current study is that of Gren-Landell et al. (2015) wherein authors organised teachers' perceptions for school attendance problems into the domains of "family", "individual", "school" and "peers". Similarly to the current study, participants in Gren-Landell et al. (2015) perceived that family-related issues were of higher importance than school-related issues, with an "adverse home situation" being ranked as the most important cause of attendance issues, which could be closely aligned to items in AdverseExp. "Parental permissive style" was ranked as the second most important cause in Gren-Landell et al. (2015), which seems in line with items addressing parenting styles and behaviour within ParentVal. Other qualitative and mixed methods studies have also indicated that school personnel attribute home- and family-related issues as more important in causing school attendance difficulties than school-related issues (Archer et al., 2003; Reid, 2008).

Where significant differences lie between this study and previous school refusal research with teachers, is in the relative importance that teachers placed upon peer-related factors as causes of EBSA in this study. In the current study, PeerRel, which was predominantly comprised of peer interaction-related items, received the highest score of all the factors produced and was seen as the most important, alongside factors AdverseExp and ParentVal. Peer-related issues such as friendship difficulties and bullying are certainly acknowledged as causal factors in school refusal research with teachers, though generally, it seems less importance is placed on these issues than issues within the home (Archer et al., 2003; Gren-Landell et al., 2015). As highlighted by the systematic literature review in Section 2.3 of this study, within the studies included with school personnel participants, there were fewer references to peer-related causes of school refusal than there were pupil-, home- or school-related causes and were not mentioned at all as a causal factor in one study (Devenney & O'toole, 2021). In contrast, all studies with parent and child participants included for review in Section 2.3 mentioned the importance of peer-related factors in causing attendance difficulties (Baker & Bishop, 2015; Dannow et al., 2020; Gregory & Purcell, 2014; Havik et al., 2014). Thus, it seems that in the current study, teachers' attributions

for the importance of peer-related issues in causing EBSA are more in line with the perceptions of parents and young people than those of teacher participants in previous research.

However, in other aspects, the findings of this study highlight differences between teachers', parents' and pupils' perceptions, in that, teachers here placed relatively less importance upon school-related factors than parents and pupils have done in previous research. Teachers in this study attributed less importance to the SchoolAdapt factor, with items related to school culture and teacher practice, than they did to factors concerning home-related issues. In contrast, several studies with parents and young people highlight the perceived importance of teacher behaviour in influencing how young people felt about attending school, both positively and negatively (Baker & Bishop, 2015; Dannow et al., 2020; Havik et al., 2014). A large-scale study of students in Norway has also indicated that perceived poor support from teachers could increase the risk of school refusal (Havik et al., 2015b).

Additionally, teachers in the current study attributed the least importance to the factor, SchoolEnv, comprised of items predominantly related to the school environment and internal school structures. This is in contrast to the views of parent and child participants in Dannow et al. (2020) who cited several aspects of the school environment that made school attendance difficult, including the length of school days, unpredictability within the environment and challenges with particular lessons, all of which are captured in SchoolEnv.

Attributed importance of factors in terms of attribution literature

To examine why teachers' attributions for the causes of EBSA in this study may differ somewhat to perceptions of parents and pupils as presented in the literature, comparisons are now drawn between the findings of the current study and those from previous studies examining the attributions of teachers. As there is a lack of research exploring attributions for the causes of EBSA, tentative links are made here to previous research on the attributions of teachers for pupil behaviour that would share features with EBSA, such as, anxiety, depression, somatic complaints, and social withdrawal.

In Kleftaras and Didaskalou (2006), teachers most frequently attributed problems within families and adverse family backgrounds as causing pupils' emotional problems, which is in line with items in the factor, AdverseExp, in this study, and seems

to replicate findings from school refusal research with teachers (Archer et al., 2003; Gren-Landell et al., 2015). The next most frequently referenced causal attribution was “inappropriate parenting skills”, which seems in line with items within ParentVal in this study. The least reported cause of pupil emotional difficulties was “issues within the school context”, which again reflects the lower perceived importance of school-related factors in the current study. Similarly, within Savina et al. (2014), teachers attributed family and personality factors as the most important causes of internalising problems, followed by peer issues and genetics, and attributed the least importance to teacher behaviour. Like the current study, and unlike other studies within school refusal research, teachers in Savina et al. (2014) attribute some importance to peer issues, though possibly still not to the extent of the current study.

To understand why teachers may attribute less importance to school and teaching factors than they do parent and child factors as causes of EBSA than parents and pupils do, one can consider the notion of *fundamental attribution error* (Ross, 1977) (described in Section 2.2.3). This relates to the tendency for attributors to underestimate the impact of situational factors on the causes of behaviour and suggests that observers of behaviour are more inclined to make attributions implicating the actor’s ability, attitude or disposition. In attributing in this way, it has been argued that the observer protects themselves against potential threats to their ego and perceptions of their abilities thereby enhancing self-esteem and minimising negative affect (Heider, 1958; Jones & Davis, 1965; Ross, 1977). In the case of teachers’ attributions for EBSA in the current study, by attributing more importance to factors outside of the school context, teachers may protect themselves from threats to their perceptions of themselves and their skills that would arise if more importance were placed on school-related factors.

It is interesting then, that peer-related factors were attributed as one of the most important causal factors of EBSA within the current study. Within both school refusal and attributional research, peer-related issues are typically considered as school-related factors. In this study, high intercorrelations between the factors PeerRel, SchoolAdapt and SchoolEnv also suggest the concepts within these factors are strongly related and could be considered within the overarching domain of “school-related”. Thus, by attributing the highest importance to peer-related issues in this study, teachers may implicate their own practice in causing EBSA, which is in

contradiction to the notion of fundamental attribution error. However, it should be also noted, that within the factor, PeerRel, several items could be considered as intrinsic to pupils, such as interaction difficulties, feeling self-conscious and experiencing somatic complaints related to anxiety. Considering this, PeerRel may also be considered as somewhat a within-child factor, where peer issues may arise from factors intrinsic to the pupil. If this is the case, teachers may consider this as outside of their control. This interpretation of the factor is more in line with the attributional patterns of teachers within the literature and the notion of fundamental attribution error. Alternatively, if teachers perceive peer issues as external to the pupil, another way to interpret this factor could be to hypothesise that teachers do not consider mediating peer interactions in the classroom as within their control. In this study, teachers attributed significantly more importance to peer-related factors than they did to other school-related factors, suggesting that these teachers may perceive peer interactions as separate to factors that are explicitly linked to the school such as teacher practice and environmental factors. Again, this interpretation would be in line with the notion of fundamental attribution error as teachers do not implicate their own practice if they do not perceive peer issues as school-related.

The findings here have important implications for understanding how teachers perceive and support pupils at risk of EBSA. Although teachers in this study have acknowledged the importance of peer-related issues in causing EBSA, if they consider it as a factor outside of their control, attributional research suggests they are less likely to seek to change their practice to address the issue (Soodak & Podell, 1994). This is important to consider alongside evidence that teacher practice and classroom management can have a significant impact upon peer relations and can be a protective factor against school refusal (Havik et al., 2015b). Similarly, if teachers do not perceive that school factors, teacher behaviour or teacher attitudes are important in causing EBSA, then they may be less likely to change their practice to support children who experience attendance difficulties. This is an important finding, as research suggests that a lack of adaptation to practice from teachers can inadvertently increase the risk of attendance difficulties for pupils who do not feel understood or supported by teachers (Baker & Bishop, 2015; Dannow et al., 2020; McKay-Brown et al., 2019). Moreover, when teachers attribute more importance to factors outside of the school context, research suggests that teachers experience lower levels of motivation to deal

with pupils' challenging behaviour themselves, and are more likely to seek out parental assistance (Soodak & Podell, 1994). Conversely, research indicates that when teachers attribute challenging classroom behaviour to teaching or school factors, they show greater sympathy for students and a greater willingness to improve teaching strategies (Soodak & Podell, 1994).

5.2.3. Influence of demographics on teachers' attributions

Two demographic areas were explored to examine their impact upon teachers' attributions; years of teaching experience, and the estimated number of EBSA pupils with whom teachers had worked.

Within this research, scores within individual factors were not significantly different based upon teachers' years of experience. This contrasts somewhat with one finding in Gren-Landell et al. (2015); when exploring teachers perceptions of the causes of absenteeism, teachers with less experience (< 5 years) rated peer factors as more important in causing absenteeism than those who had been working between 11 and 15 years. However, in the areas of "family", "individual" and "school", participants did not differ significantly based upon their years of experience, which is in line with the results of the current study.

Attribution literature reports mixed findings of the impact of teacher experience on attributions for pupil behaviour. Georgiou (2008) found that teachers with greater experience were more likely to attribute student success or failure as due to stable and uncontrollable factors to themselves, such as family issues. The same research indicated that novice teachers perceived themselves as having a greater impact on their students' performance. However, Pirrone (2012) found that teachers with over 30 years' experience were more likely to attribute student failure to uncontrollable, within-child factors, and those with less than 10 years' experience were more likely to place importance on parental factors in causing student failure. Georgiou (2008) and Pirrone (2012) were based in Greece and Italy, respectively, therefore it may be that differences in attributions here are due to cultural differences between the two countries. However, this could also be indicative that years of teaching experience is not a reliable predictor of attributions, as is indicated in the current study.

Rather than *years* of experience, the *nature* of experience could be a predictor of some teachers' attributions. In Gren-Landell et al. (2015), teachers who worked in special

education reported a higher estimate of the number of pupils they had supported with problematic school absenteeism (median estimate of 19), than teachers in mainstream education (median estimate of 9). The results of the study indicated that teachers in special education rated the individual domain and school domain significantly higher in causing absenteeism than mainstream teachers did. The authors pose that the teachers in special education have more experience working more closely with individuals, thus better understand individual reasons for absenteeism (Gren-Landell et al., 2015). In the current research, the median estimate of the number of pupils with EBSA teachers had worked with was between 11 and 20, like both the mainstream and special education teacher sample in Gren-Landell et al. (2015). Also like the special education teacher sample in Gren-Landell et al. (2015), in the current study, within the SchoolEnv factor, teachers who estimated they had worked with over 20 young people with EBSA attributed significantly more importance to the factor than teachers who estimated they had worked with 6-10 EBSA pupils. This is pertinent, particularly as SchoolEnv was attributed the least importance overall in the factor model. This finding perhaps suggests that having worked with a wider range of young people with EBSA leads to a greater appreciation of the risk factors within the school environment. This perception is also reflective of the perspectives of parents and pupils who considered environmental factors as important in causing EBSA (Dannow et al., 2020; Havik et al., 2014).

Further to this, in the ParentVal factor, teachers who estimated to have worked with more than 20 EBSA pupils attributed significantly more importance to the factor than those who selected that they were unsure or did not wish to disclose how many EBSA pupils they had worked with. Teachers who were unsure of how many EBSA pupils with whom they had worked may perhaps not be familiar with the phenomenon and its risk factors, therefore may take a more neutral stance on some factors than those with more experience working with EBSA pupils.

5.2.4. Summary: the attributions of teachers for the causes of EBSA

The factors produced following factor analysis of responses of 201 teachers to the attributional questionnaire reflect risk factors for EBSA that have been recorded in previous literature. The clustering of items in factors produced a nuanced pattern, highlighting the interaction of issues across the domains of home and school. In exploring these further, it seems that within the context of their factors, most within-

child-related items, could be closely related to, or caused by other issues outside of the control of the pupil. As such, in terms of Weiner's (1988) dimensions of causality, it seems that the teachers in this sample perceived the causes of EBSA as broadly outside the control of individual pupils.

In considering the relative importance attributed to each factor by teachers in this research, there are some similarities with school refusal research exploring the perceptions of teachers, suggesting that teachers place higher importance upon home-, parent-, and pupil-related factors than they do on school-related factors. This is in contradiction to research with parents and pupils, who are more likely to name school- and teacher-related causes than home- and parent-related issues. Where there were similarities with this research and parent and pupil research was in the relative importance placed upon peer-related issues in causing EBSA.

In terms of previous research on teachers' attributions for pupils' internalising behaviours, the results of the current study were, for the most part, in line with the attributional patterns of teachers, in attributing higher importance to parent and home-related factors than school-related factors. It is possible that in attributing in this way, teachers may preserve their perceptions of their skills and abilities. A contradiction to this is the importance teachers attributed to a factor containing mainly peer-related items, which are usually considered within the context of a school-related factor. It is possible that teachers perceive items within this factor as intrinsic to pupils, thus out of the control of teachers, which would be more in line with usual teacher attribution patterns. The results of this study also indicate that teachers who have greater experience working with pupils experiencing EBSA attribute greater importance to the school environment than those who have worked with fewer EBSA pupils.

The attributional patterns of teachers for the causes of EBSA in this research has important implications for school systems and EP practice that will be explored in further detail later in this chapter.

5.3. Methodological considerations

This study sought to elucidate the attributions of teachers of secondary-aged young people for the causes of EBSA. However, the findings of this study must be taken within the context of its methodological limitations and strengths. Identified strengths

and limitations and the impact of these upon the interpretability of the findings here are discussed below.

5.3.1. Research design

This research employed two distinct methods to answer the research question, firstly the undertaking of interviews to develop an attributional questionnaire, followed by the survey strategy employed to gather attributional data. The limitations of each method will be discussed in turn.

5.3.1.2. Stage One: questionnaire development

Representation of possible causes of EBSA

To develop the attributional questionnaire, semi-structured interviews, focused on vignettes, were undertaken with individuals from key agent groups who had experience with EBSA. A limitation of this interview method is that important topics may have been inadvertently missed if they were not covered by the researcher within the interview schedule or were not represented within the vignettes. Additionally, recruitment of young people who had experienced EBSA was unsuccessful. Thus, alternative data was included from interviews with two secondary-aged young people who had not experienced EBSA. As such, the data generated may not fully represent the views of key stakeholder groups for the causes of EBSA. This then has an inevitable impact upon the validity of the questionnaire developed to measure teachers' attributions. Should the questionnaire not comprehensively cover the most important possible causes of EBSA, this limits the conclusions that can be drawn about teachers' attributions from the questionnaire responses.

A further limitation to the interview methodology here was unavoidable due to the restrictions in place at the time due to the COVID-19 pandemic. All interviews took place online over a video call, which limited participant recruitment to individuals who have access to the internet, who felt competent in using video call software, and who felt comfortable communicating via video call. Thus, this limits how representative the data is of the potential eligible participant group for this study.

Additionally, in the development of the questionnaire items through content analysis, measures were taken to reduce researcher subjectivity in the use of inter-raters, though due to time restraints, only two trainee EPs acted as inter-raters. These

individuals may hold similar views to the researcher as they are in similar roles. Seeking inter-raters from the teaching profession may have increased the validity of the measure. In the same way, the piloting stage of the questionnaire was limited in its scope and length. Seeking a broader representation of pilot testers would support confidence in the validity of the measure.

A strength of developing the questionnaire in this way is its intended inclusivity in representing key stakeholder groups within the measure. Artino et al. (2014) suggest this supports creating a measure that is representative of the population of interest and reflects their use of language and terminology to ensure the measure is accessible to this population. Also, by developing a novel measure of attributions through interviews with individuals, a discussion of the definition of the term “EBSA” could take place with each participant. This increases the reliability that responses were in terms of the concept of EBSA rather than other definitions or terminology.

5.3.1.3. Stage Two: survey strategy

A limitation of any online survey research is the issue of participant honesty, in that the respondents may not be whom they report being in the survey or could choose to respond dishonestly, which was an unavoidable risk to reliability within this study. Related to this, also impacting the reliability of results, is the impact that each participants’ interpretation of the term “emotionally based school avoidance” had upon their responses. Although the term was defined for each participant at the beginning of the survey, as research has shown, this is a complex phenomenon that can be conceptualised in many ways (Heyne et al., 2019; Pellegrini, 2007). Thus, if some participants had pre-existing understandings of EBSA that differed from the definition given, or perhaps had not come across this terminology before, their interpretation of the survey questions and how they responded may not truly reflect attributions for causes of EBSA in the way in which it has been defined in this study.

A further limitation of survey designs is that the results generated are a snapshot of the views of the respondent population at one point in time, thus generalisation of results must be with caution. The nature of the sampling and questionnaire design for this research resulted in a diverse and international sample of teachers. It is likely that most of the participants were based in the United Kingdom (UK), as this is where the study recruitment took place. However, the sharing of the survey on the social media

platform Twitter led to an encouraging yet surprising level of interest in the study internationally that was not accounted for within the survey demographic questions. Therefore, it is not possible to generalise findings for this study solely to teachers from the UK. However, research has demonstrated that EBSA is an international issue (Dannow et al., 2020; Gren-Landell, 2021; Kearney, 2008b), and it is argued that a wider and more diverse participant sample supports the generalisation of results (Cohen et al., 2018), thus, the broad sample within this study could serve to enhance its external validity overall.

Similarly, the organisations within which respondents were employed were not accounted for within the survey beyond respondents confirming they were employed as teachers of 11–16-year-olds. The sample could be derived from a range of organisations including mainstream, specialist, hospital schools and alternative provisions. Research has suggested that teachers from mainstream and special schools generally perceive the causes of EBSA quite similarly, though teachers in specialist settings may view school factors as more influential than mainstream teachers (Gren-Landell et al., 2015). Therefore, again, these results may be tentatively generalisable to teachers in the broadest sense. However, different populations of teachers may hold differing perceptions that future research would benefit from exploring.

5.3.2. Data analysis

The survey responses in this study were analysed using factor analysis, the reliability of which is influenced by sample size. Although literature was consulted and several heuristics employed to ensure the data was adequate for factor analysis, some authors would argue that much larger samples than that of this study would be required to produce a reliable factor model (Field, 2013). A further limitation of this analysis is that the validity of the factor model produced is reliant on the theoretical underpinning of the items posed to participants within the survey (Cohen et al., 2018). If the items within the survey are not representative of the causes of EBSA nor are the results of the factor analysis.

Additionally, throughout the process of undertaking factor analysis, there are several methodological decision points for the researcher that are subjective in nature. Within this study, this included: the decision to exclude a poorly correlated variable from

analysis; the decision of how many factors to extract from the dataset; deciding upon the method of factor rotation; and the naming of individual factors. Although these decisions were informed by reference to factor analysis literature, and measures were taken to reduce subjectivity, such as the use of parallel analysis and the recaptured item technique, there remains the influence of the researcher's decisions on the results derived. This should be considered a limitation within the post-positivist epistemology of the current research, as this subjectivity conflicts with the objectivity that post-positivism seeks to maximise.

5.4. Implications of this research

5.4.1. Implications for schools

As noted earlier in this chapter, how teachers attribute the causes of pupil behaviour and the element of controllability they have upon this can influence their actions in response. The results of this research suggest that teachers attribute a high level of importance to peer-related factors in causing EBSA. Research has shown that in secondary settings, teachers' classroom management has an important influence on managing peer interactions that can indirectly be a protective or causal factor for EBSA (Havik et al., 2015b). This then presents implications for school policy in highlighting the important role that teachers play in the classroom in supporting pupil interactions. Increased understanding from teachers in the role of peer factors in EBSA and classroom management strategies to support peer interactions can serve as a protective factor against EBSA.

Teachers in this sample also considered home- and family-related issues as important causes of EBSA. When teachers attribute in this way, research suggests that they seek increased support from parents and outside agencies (Soodak & Podell, 1994). There are then implications here for structures within schools that support good parent-teacher relationships and improve teachers' access to outside support agencies, such as educational psychology services. Without such support, teachers may continue to see important causes of EBSA as out of their sphere of control, increasing feelings of helplessness and frustration, as suggested in previous research with school personnel (Devenney & O'toole, 2021).

Furthermore, the present study suggests that teachers place less importance on their practice and other school-related factors as causes of EBSA than they do home-

related factors. This is a typical pattern of attribution for teachers in prior research and may be an example of fundamental attribution bias. Research with parents and pupils suggests that teacher and school factors can play an important role in causing EBSA and a perceived lack of understanding from teachers can act as a barrier to returning to school (Baker & Bishop, 2015; McKay-Brown et al., 2019). There is an important role here for schools to support teachers in understanding the risk factors for EBSA, increasing understanding of mental health needs and ways in which adaptations can be made to support pupils who experience attendance difficulties in class.

5.4.2. Implications for educational psychologists

The findings from this study have important implications for EP practice. As noted above, school staff may benefit from additional support and training to increase understanding of, and adaptation to, risk factors for EBSA. EPs are well-placed to deliver training on a whole-school level that can support staff to identify and support those at risk of EBSA.

Results of this study indicate that teachers perceived that within-child factors as being related to the school or home domain, rather than a separate domain of its own. This pattern of attribution may be linked to the influence of using the term “emotionally based school avoidance” rather than terms that may lead to perceptions of within-child origins of school non-attendance. In their interactions in schools, EPs may consider utilising and promoting the use of the term “EBSA” and perhaps avoid terms like “school refusal”. This can serve to support a broader and more systemic view of risk factors for EBSA, and direct teachers away from focusing upon within-child causes, which are more likely to be attributed as stable and not controllable to teachers (Wang & Hall, 2018).

EPs can encourage consideration of interacting systemic factors through consultation with an eco-systemic framework, as suggested by Melvin et al. (2019). This can support teachers to identify and understand risk factors for EBSA that may be within their control. EPs can then also support problem-solving and development of practice to remove barriers for children at risk of EBSA. Figure 5.2 shows a worked example of the application of the eco-systemic model proposed by Melvin et al. (2019) with a selection of items from each factor produced in this research. The diagram highlights the complex and interacting nature of the factors produced in this research across

systems. As previously described, the diagram demonstrates that there are items within each factor that could be considered child related. Considering how this can be applied in EP practice; this research indicates that teachers consider teacher practice and school environment (highlighted in blue and green on Figure 5.2, respectively) as the least important causes of EBSA and so may not acknowledge these as areas for development when supporting young people experiencing EBSA as much as they may consider factors within the home. This could inadvertently perpetuate EBSA, for example, if a young person is experiencing significant difficulty coping with environmental issues within school. EPs can use frameworks such as this to highlight to school staff the interacting nature of each system, emphasising the importance of addressing all areas and systems to be able to effectively support young people to return to school.

Factor key: PeerRel ParentVal AdverseExp SchoolAdapt SchoolEnv

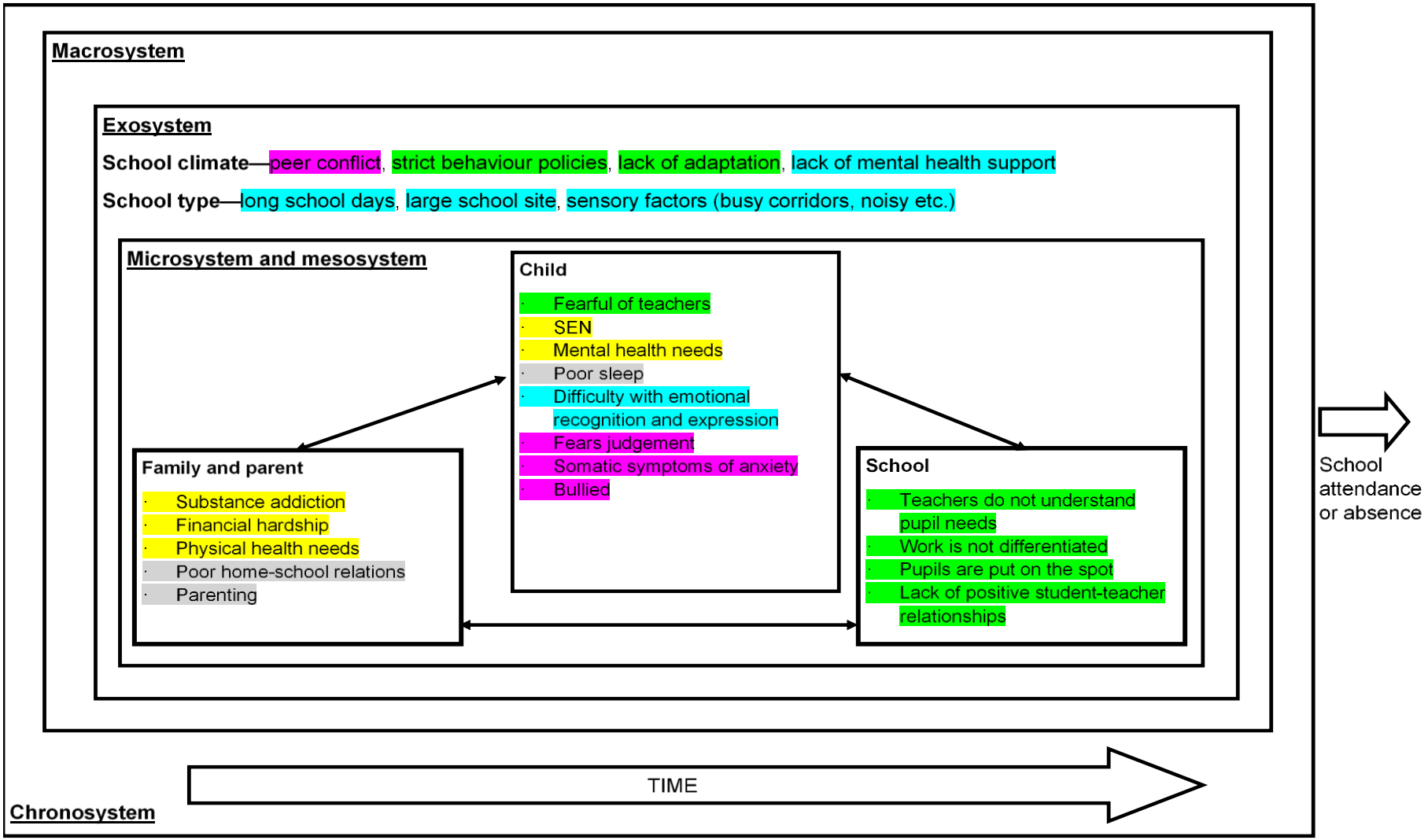

Figure 5.2 Depiction of a worked example of interactions between factors produced in this research within the eco-systemic framework proposed by Melvin et al. (2019).

In working in an eco-systemic way, EPs can also support school staff to understand the challenges that parents have in supporting a child experiencing EBSA, which is important as parents can sometimes feel blamed and unsupported by schools (Dannow et al., 2020). In eliciting empathy and understanding from teachers for young people and their families, EPs can indirectly facilitate effective communication and collaboration between schools, parents and pupils that could previously have been strained due to differing attribution patterns for the causes of EBSA. Establishing and supporting good home-school communication can be a powerful factor in supporting children to return to school following EBSA (McKay-Brown et al., 2019).

5.4.3. Implications for future research

This is the first study of its kind to explore EBSA in terms of attribution theory and in undertaking this research, further areas for exploration have been highlighted that could serve as valuable additions to the currently limited body of research in the area. For example, previous research with teachers has highlighted differing perceptions of teachers in specialist settings to mainstream for the causes of EBSA, so it would be useful to measure and compare the attributions of different populations of teachers. Expanding upon this, it would also be valuable to measure the attributions of other key stakeholders in EBSA, such as pupils, parents, pastoral staff, and LA personnel. These samples can be compared to teacher populations to examine whether differences in patterns of attribution exist as is evidenced in attribution research for the causes of challenging behaviour in schools.

As evidenced in the literature, the terminology for school attendance problems is complex and lacks consensus and consistency in its application. It would be valuable therefore to explore whether attribution patterns for causes of attendance difficulties differ depending upon the terminology that is employed. The decision to employ the term “EBSA” in the current research was to detract from placing blame and responsibility on pupils for issues outside of their control, which seems to have been reflected in the results here. If results from future studies exploring attributions using other commonly used terms, such as “school refusal”, “extended school non-attendance” or “school attendance problems”, lead to differing attribution patterns, this could give an alternative discourse on the continuing discussion around terminology and hopefully support a move to a wider consensus on the most appropriate term to employ in research and practice.

5.4.5. Unique contribution of the current study

This study aimed to offer a novel perspective on EBSA theory in terms of how teachers attribute its causes. Where this study differs from previous research on teachers' perceptions of EBSA is in the application of attribution theory to conceptualise teachers' views. Using attribution theory as a lens with which to explore EBSA opens the possibility of drawing comparisons between results of this research with previous attributional research with teachers. This is also one of few studies operationalising the term "EBSA" rather than historically more commonly used terms for attendance issues such as "school refusal". This study also offers an insight into how experience working with young people with EBSA can influence how teachers attribute its causes.

Additionally, the undertaking of this study led to the development of a novel measure of attributions for the causes of EBSA. This has been developed with input from key stakeholders in EBSA and would be suitable for use with these agent groups. Although this measure is still novel and would require further assessment of its construct validity with larger samples, it appears to reflect the views of teachers expressed in other studies.

5.5. Conclusions

The aim of this research was primarily to identify and explore the attributions made by teachers of secondary-aged young people for the causes of EBSA. Previous school refusal research suggests that teachers place greater importance upon home- and pupil-related factors in causing school refusal than they do upon school factors. Prior attributional research with teachers similarly suggests that teachers attribute greater importance to home and pupil factors for internalising and challenging behaviour in schools.

Results of this study indicate that teachers attribute greater importance to peer-related and home and parent-related factors than they do to school- and teacher-related factors. Interestingly, the attributional pattern of teachers was nuanced, suggesting a perceived interplay of issues across the domains of pupil, home, and school in causing EBSA. Differences in teachers' attributions for school-related factors and peer-related factors suggest that teachers may not perceive peer interactions as within their control, which may negatively impact their sense of agency to provide support in this area.

Attributing greater importance to home- and parent-related factors over school-related factors in causing EBSA is in line with previous research with school personnel, though the greater importance placed upon peer-related factors in this study is more in line with research with parents and pupils. Attributional patterns such as these have been shown by previous research to impact teachers' motivation and practice in supporting students.

Therefore, the findings of this research have important implications for teacher and EP practice, on both a system-wide and individual level. Equipping teachers with an understanding of their role in mediating the risk factors for EBSA can empower them to support young people at risk of attendance difficulties. Finally, this research has wider implications for the area of school attendance research. This research contributes to the body of research supporting alternative conceptualisations of "school refusal", and also provides evidence of the utility of attribution theory to further understanding of perceptions and practice related to EBSA.

Chapter 6 References

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Chapter 7 Appendix

Literature Review

7.1. Quality assessment: Weight of Evidence scoring criteria

A table detailing the Weight of Evidence scoring that was applied to each paper included in the systematic literature review.

Category	Weight of Evidence scoring		
	High (2)	**Medium (1)**	**Low (0)**
A: Quality of design	• Clearly defined numbers of participants and their characteristics and demographics (e.g., role in school, age of child participants)	• Some participant characteristics defined.	• Little/no information on participant characteristics.
	• Sampling method is detailed with enough information to replicate.	• Sampling method is somewhat described.	• Little/no description of sampling method.
	• For **quantitative** studies: • The measures used are relevant to the research question. • Measures used are named and referenced. • Planned data analysis is made clear and is replicable. • Results are presented clearly.	• For **quantitative** studies: • Measures, data analysis and results are explained, but may be lacking in some detail and clarity.	• For **quantitative** studies: • Information given about the measures, analysis and results are unclear, misleading, and are not replicable from the descriptions given.
	• For **qualitative** studies: • Methods of data collection are relevant to the aims of the research. • Methods of data collection are	• For **qualitative** studies: • Data collection methods, analysis and findings are explained but may be lacking	• For **qualitative** studies: • Information given about the methods of data collection, analysis and results are unclear,

Category	Weight of Evidence scoring		
	High (2)	**Medium (1)**	**Low (0)**
	clearly described and replicable e.g., interview format. • Process of analysis of data is clear and replicable. • Findings are presented clearly.	in some detail or clarity.	misleading, and are not replicable from the descriptions given.
Score	• 5-6 (High)	• 2-4 (Medium)	• 0-1 (low)
B: Relevance of design to review question (quantitative)	• Quantitative design with closed questionnaire or survey with established validity and reliability.	• Design of a closed questionnaire or survey does not have established validity or reliability.	• Validity and reliability of measures is not acknowledged.
	• Factors related to perceived causes are rated on a Likert scale and ranked in order of importance.	• Identified factors are ranked in order of importance.	• It is not possible to establish the importance of factors from the data.
	• Clear statistical analysis appropriate to the type of data collected e.g., factor analysis and inferential statistics.	• Only non-parametric or correlational statistics presented.	• Analysis of the data is not clearly interpretable.
Score	• 5-6 (High)	• 2-4 (Medium)	• 0-1 (low)
B: Relevance of design to review question (qualitative)	• Data collection methods seek to elucidate the perceived causes of non-attendance directly.	• Data collection methods address some causes of non-attendance as part of a broader research aim.	• Data collection methods do not directly address the perceived causes of non-attendance.
	• Data features the voice of the participants.	• Limited qualitative data related to the	• Data is not related to the voice of the

Category	Weight of Evidence scoring		
	High (2)	**Medium (1)**	**Low (0)**
	Interviews, focus groups or questionnaires are utilised. Data is in relation to a number of cases.	voice of the participants. Data is in relation to a limited number of cases.	participants. Data is in relation to a very limited number of participants.
	• Data analysis is appropriate for the design and seeks to identify perceived causes of attendance issues	• Data analysis implies the perceived causes of attendance issues from the data.	• Perceived causes of attendance issues are not addressed through the data analysis.
Score	• 5-6 (High)	• 2-4 (Medium)	• 0-1 (low)
C: Relevance to research question	• Focus of the research is primarily on identifying perceptions of the causes of EBSA or equivalent.	• Focus of the research is jointly between identifying perceptions of the causes of EBSA and other factors.	• Perceptions of the causes of EBSA arise as a by-product of another primary focus.
	• EBSA or an equivalent term is used to describe attendance difficulties with an emotional element. Other forms of non-attendance are not explored in the study.	• Perceived causes of EBSA are collected in conjunction with perception about other forms of non-attendance but are made distinct.	• Perceived causes of a broad range of attendance problems are identified, and the perception that there is a distinct phenomenon of an emotionally based school refusal is implied but not made clear.
	• Participation in the research is by those who have direct experience with EBSA e.g., teacher who has supported a child with EBSA, a	• Participants are a mixture of those who have and have not got direct experience with EBSA.	• Participants' experience with EBSA is unclear or it is clear they have not had experience.

Category	Weight of Evidence scoring		
	High (2)	**Medium (1)**	**Low (0)**
	parent of a child with EBSA, the child.		
	• The setting in which participants are based is a mainstream secondary setting e.g., pupils ages 11-16 years.	• The setting in which participants are based is a mainstream primary setting e.g., pupils ages 4-11 years, or a combination of primary and secondary.	• The setting is not made clear or is a specialist setting e.g., PRU, independent school or special school
Score	• 6-8 (High)	• 3-5 (Medium)	• 0-2 (low)
D: Overall weight of Evidence scores	• 14-20 (High)	• 7-13 (Medium)	• 0-6 (low)

7.2. Summaries of studies excluded upon full-text reading from the systematic literature review

Study	*Summary*	*Reason for exclusion*
Balkıs, Arslan and Duru (2016)	The study aims to examine the relationship between personal factors, family characteristics, absenteeism and academic achievement. Data gathering included demographic information and the School Attitude Assessment Survey-Revised Turkish Version. Data analysed using correlations between variables. ANOVA and structural equation model analysis. Participants are 423 high school students. Correlational data indicated personal factors (academic self-perception, attitudes towards teachers and school, motivation) and parents' educational level were negatively associated with absenteeism. Academic achievement is negatively related to absenteeism. Absenteeism is negatively related to academic self-perception, attitudes towards teacher and school, goal valuation, motivation, and academic performance. Personal and family factors are significant predictors of absenteeism.	Non-attendance with an emotional basis is not made distinct from other forms of non-attendance.
Billington (2018)	Semi-structured interviews were conducted with four secondary school ages children experiencing attendance difficulties. The study aims to understand the individual experiences of the pupils and use this to create a model for EPs to use to support school staff, parents, and professionals in their work with children missing from education. Participants had markedly different perceptions of the causes for their non-attendance though some similarities emerged.	Non-attendance with an emotional basis was not made distinct from other forms of non-attendance.
Cooper (1984)	Groups of school refusers and truants completed questionnaires on their self-perception. Overall, self-esteem was low in school refusers. School refusers also saw themselves as hard-working and well-behaved. Truants saw themselves as lazy, disruptive, and not very truthful. Authors argue that this difference in self-perceptions supports the notion that school refusal and truancy are distinct disorders.	The study is published prior to 2010 and is not focused upon understanding perceptions of the causes of EBSA but on understanding self-perception.

Study	*Summary*	*Reason for exclusion*
Cooper and Mellors (1990)	The study aims to establish how accurately teachers identify school refusers and truants. 26 teachers from special teaching units completed a questionnaire to determine teachers' perceptions towards school refusers and truants. Tentative statistical comparisons are made. Teachers seem to clearly distinguish between school refusers and truants. They see refusers as more emotionally disturbed, more anxious and depressed, lower self-esteem, poorer at sports than truanting students.	The study was published prior to 2010 and is not focused upon understanding of causes of EBSA, but on understanding teachers' perceptions of the children themselves.
Filippello et al. (2019)	The study aims to investigate the mediating role of need satisfaction and need frustration at school in the relationship between student's perception of teacher controls and teacher support, school refusal behaviour, number of absences and impact on academic achievement. 263 students complete measures of the perceived psychological control of teachers, need satisfaction, and school refusal behaviour scale. Results indicate the role of need frustration as a mediator between school refusal and teacher perceived psychological control.	The study is not focused upon gathering perceptions of the causes of EBSA but making links between teacher control as a mediator of the behaviour.
Finning et al. (2018)	Focus of the research is on staff experience with school refusal. 16 educational practitioners took part in focus groups to discuss their experiences. In interviews the term "school refusal" was used but participants not given a definition or asked to agree upon one. Participants state difficulties in identifying causes of school refusal and highlight the importance of making distinctions between truancy and school refusal, but state difficulties in doing so. They perceived attendance problems as resource-intensive and response was restricted by financial restrictions. Perceived that school is rarely the cause of the problem.	Understanding perceptions of the causes of EBSA is not a primary focus of the study, but is implied from other findings.
Hughes, Gaines, and Pryor (2015)	The study explores correlational relationships between perceptions of victimisation and school violence. 15,425 students completed surveys on frequency of crime victimisation and bullying. This was correlated against rate of absence.	The study is exploring the relationship between fear of crime and school avoidance,

Study	*Summary*	*Reason for exclusion*
	Results indicated that past crime victimisation has a bearing upon the security that all students feel in their daily lives. Results were different in different sub-groups. Being hit by a partner elevated school avoidance for females and Hispanic students. Sexual victimisation increases avoidance for White and Black students.	not the perceptions of the causes of EBSA.
Jennings and Cook (2015)	221 parents or adult relatives of secondary-aged children from 9 schools across three sections of Jamaica completed a questionnaire consisting of closed and open-ended questions. It consisted of three sections – the first demographic, the second was 39 Likert scale items to determine the parent/caregiver perceptions of the causes of students' absenteeism. The third consisted of open-ended questions Three main factors emerged as to how parents/caregivers perceived the causes of absenteeism: 'little value for education', 'lack of resources' and 'school environment'	The study explores absenteeism generally and findings and measures are more focused upon truancy-related absenteeism than emotionally related absence.
Klerman, La D, Kayne and Inini (1987)	The study aimed to explore what excessively absent students and their parents thought were the main causes of their non-attendance. 735 parents and 544 students took part in interviews. Interview responses categorised into health-related and non-health related. Within students' main reasons for absence almost half stated health reasons as the main reason. 96% who gave health response stated physical rather than mental health. Around half stated that non-health related were the main reasons, including disliking schools and poor relationships with teachers. Parents reported physical health as main reason 52%. in list responses parents were more likely to state emotional reasons than pupils.	The study is published prior to 2010 and gathers perceptions on excessive absence and does not distinguish absence with an emotional basis from other forms of absence.
Kocourková and Bechyňová (1997)	The paper presents a case study of a child experiencing school phobia.	The study is published prior to 2010 and was not available in English beyond the abstract.

Study	*Summary*	*Reason for exclusion*
Martin et al., (2020)	n = 30 school personnel who reported working with students from transcultural backgrounds were asked open-ended questions focusing on how participants understand school refusal. The practices of school personnel for dealing with school refusal for young people from transcultural backgrounds were captured in four main themes: 'working with young people from transcultural backgrounds: coping with unusual situations', 'families' school culture is different than expected by school personnel', 'profiling students without addressing their culture' and 'overcoming cultural barriers.'	Although mentioned, the main focus of this study was not to gain perspectives of the causes of school refusal but on experiences of reacting to school refusal.
Rosenthal, Moro and Benoit (2020)	The study aims to assess how parents of various cultural backgrounds experience their child's school refusal. 11 parents are interviewed. Results indicated four themes: confronting school and school refusal; school refusal as a family's failure to succeed after migration; idealisation of school followed by mistrust and disappointment; solutions envisaged for school refusal.	Focus of the study is not on gathering perceptions of the causes of EBSA.

Methodology

7.3. Information sheets for Stage One of the study.

School of Psychology

Information Sheet – Teacher and parent

The University of Nottingham
UNITED KINGDOM · CHINA · MALAYSIA

Title of Project: **Exploring the attributions of teachers on the causes of emotionally based school avoidance**

Ethics approval number: ***s1264***

Researchers: **Emma Devine**

Supervisors: **Dr Russell Hounslow**

Contact Details: **emma.devine@nottingham.ac.uk,**

This is an invitation to take part in a research study on emotionally based school avoidance (EBSA). EBSA is a term used to describe a group of children and young people who have severe difficulty in attending school due to emotional factors, often resulting in prolonged absences from school. This research is being conducted by a trainee educational psychologist. Educational psychologists have a role in supporting pupils, parents, and schools in considering ways forward for pupils experiencing EBSA.

Before you decide if you wish to take part, it is important for you to understand why the research is being done and what it will involve. Please take time to read the following information carefully.

The aim of this research is to explore how pupils, parents and teachers perceive the causes of EBSA. Previous research indicates that pupils, parents, and teachers might think about these causes quite differently. It is hoped that this research can clarify how each group thinks about EBSA, which can help educational psychologists to support young people, their parents, and schools more effectively when EBSA is preventing young people from accessing school.

You have been asked to take part in this study as you have experience with EBSA that can provide valuable insight into the reasons it might occur.

If you participate, you will be asked to take part in an interview conducted via video call using either Skype or Microsoft Teams. The interview will be led by the researcher, who is a trainee educational psychologist. She will present you with two vignettes of children who are experiencing EBSA. She will then ask you for your opinions on why the children might be experiencing EBSA. The interview will last around 40 minutes. The researcher will be making hand-written notes on the points discussed during the interview. The researcher will share the points recorded to ensure that you are happy that the information collected is a true reflection of what you have shared.

The information gathered during the interviews will then be used to help build a questionnaire on the causes of EBSA that will be distributed to larger groups of teachers as the second stage of the research. This will help to build a big picture of what teachers think the most important causes of EBSA are. In future, it is hoped that this questionnaire will also be shared with large groups of pupils and parents.

Participation in this study is totally voluntary and you are under no obligation to take part. You are free to withdraw at any point before or during the study. All data collected will be kept confidential and used for research purposes only. It will be stored in compliance with the Data Protection Act.

If you have any questions or concerns, please don't hesitate to ask now. We can also be contacted after your participation at the above address.

If you have any complaints about the study, please contact:
Stephen Jackson (Chair of Ethics Committee)
stephen.jackson@nottingham.ac.uk

School of Psychology

Information Sheet- Parent of a participating young person

The University of Nottingham
UNITED KINGDOM · CHINA · MALAYSIA

Title of Project: **Exploring the attributions of teachers on the causes of emotionally based school avoidance**

Ethics approval number: ***s1264***

Researchers: **Emma Devine**

Supervisors: **Dr Russell Hounslow**

Contact Details: **emma.devine@nottingham.ac.uk,**

This is an invitation for your child to take part in a research study on emotionally based school avoidance (EBSA). EBSA is a term used to describe a group of children and young people who have severe difficulty in attending school due to emotional factors, often resulting in prolonged absences from school. This research is being conducted by a trainee educational psychologist. Educational psychologists have a role in supporting pupils, parents and schools in considering ways forward for pupils experiencing EBSA.

Before you decide if you are willing for your child to take part, it is important for you to understand why the research is being done and what it will involve. Please take time to read the following information carefully.

The aim of this research is to explore how pupils, parents and teachers perceive the causes of EBSA. Previous research indicates that pupils, parents and teachers might think about these causes quite differently. It is hoped that this research can clarify how each group thinks about EBSA, which can help educational psychologists to support young people, their parents and schools more effectively when EBSA is preventing young people accessing school.

Your child is eligible to take part in this study as they have, or are currently, experiencing difficulties attending school. Your child will have unique views on their experiences that will provide valuable insight into the causes of EBSA.

If your child participates, they will be asked to take part in an interview discussing two short scenarios about children who have difficulties attending school. After presenting the scenarios, the researcher will ask your child's opinion about the reasons why the children in the scenarios struggle to attend school. The interview will be led by the researcher, who is a trainee educational psychologist. If your child finds any of the questions difficult to respond to, they are under no obligation to provide an answer. The interview will last around 30 minutes. The researcher will be making hand-written notes on the points discussed during the interview. The researcher will share the points recorded to ensure that your child is happy that the information collected is a true reflection of what they have shared.

The information gathered during the interviews will then be used to help build a questionnaire on the causes of EBSA that will be distributed to larger groups of teachers as the second stage of the research. This will help to build a big picture of what teachers think the most important causes of EBSA are. In future, it is hoped that this questionnaire will also be shared with large groups of pupils and parents to find out what they think the most important causes of EBSA are.

Participation in this study is totally voluntary, and both yourself and your child will be asked to agree to take part before any involvement occurs. You are free to withdraw your child at any point before or during the study. Your child is also free to withdraw themselves at any point. All data collected will be kept confidential and used for research purposes only. It will be stored in compliance with the Data Protection Act. It will be agreed with your child that what they say is confidential, unless they share something that puts themselves or others at risk.

If you have any questions or concerns, please don't hesitate to ask now. We can also be contacted after your participation at the above address.

If you have any complaints about the study, please contact:

Stephen Jackson (Chair of Ethics Committee)

stephen.jackson@nottingham.ac.uk

School of Psychology

Information Sheet – Young person

The University of Nottingham
UNITED KINGDOM · CHINA · MALAYSIA

Title of Project: **Exploring the attributions of teachers on the causes of emotionally based school avoidance**

Ethics approval number: ***s1264***

Researchers: **Emma Devine**

Supervisors: **Dr Russell Hounslow**

Contact Details: **emma.devine@nottingham.ac.uk,**

This is an invitation for you to take part in research that is looking at why children sometimes have difficulties attending school.

Many children and young people worry about school. This is normal. Anxieties are part of life and learning to deal with them is part of growing up. However sometimes our feelings can make us not want to attend school. When young people experience high levels of anxiety and worry about attending school, this can be called emotionally based school avoidance (EBSA). You may not have heard of the term EBSA before, as there are lots of other different terms that can be used, such as school anxiety, anxiety-related non-attendance, and others. These terms help adults working with young people understand what is happening for them, so they can support them.

This research project

It is important for you to understand why the research is being done and what you will have to do, before you agree to take part.

You have been asked to take part in this research because I understand that you have experienced difficulties going to school, either now or in the past, so your views will be very valuable to help understand what is happening for young people experiencing EBSA.

This research aims to understand the reasons why some young people experience EBSA. By understanding more about the causes of EBSA, I hope that the adults

supporting young people experiencing EBSA can work together to support them moving forwards to have good school experiences.

What do I have to do?

I would like to discuss two short scenarios that I will share with you. The scenarios are about two people called Jess and Tom, who experience difficulties attending school. After we have read the scenarios, I will ask your opinion on why you think Jess and Tom might struggle to go to school. There aren't any right or wrong answers, I am just interested to hear your views. The discussion should last about 30 minutes.

It is totally up to you whether you take part. If you say "yes" then change your mind, we can stop at any point. The information you give will stay confidential, so no one will know that the views you share are yours. However, if you share information that is worrying or puts anyone in danger, I will have to pass this on to your parents/carers.

Feel free to ask me any questions.

Emma Devine
Trainee Educational Psychologist
University of Nottingham

7.4. Interview schedule for interviews conducted over Microsoft Teams.

Interview schedule: pupil participants

Introduction

- Researcher greets pupil and supervising adult
- Recap information about the research and consent procedure
- State the right to withdraw at any time
- Screen share the PowerPoint presentation
- The researcher informs the participant that she will be making hand-written notes of responses and that these will be recapped with the participant after each answer.

Slide 1

I'm interested in finding out what kind of things make pupils find it difficult to attend school. Your teacher has suggested I talk to you because you have had times when you have found it difficult to attend school.

I will share with you a couple of stories about young people who have found it difficult to attend school. Their experiences might be different to yours, or they might be similar. Either way, it would be helpful if you could give me any ideas you have about what might have caused them to experience this.

Slide 2 – Vignette 1

Jess is a 12-year-old Y8 pupil in a medium-sized secondary school. Since moving from her small primary school, Jess has found it difficult to go to school.

Jess finds it very difficult to sleep if she thinks about going to school the next day. Often the thought of going to school can make her feel sick. Jess feels scared and worried about going to school.

When Jess feels she can't go to school, her mum lets her stay at home. Jess likes being able to stay home with her mum where she feels more comfortable.

Jess sometimes stays home from school for weeks at a time. Even though she would like to be able to go to school, she feels that she can't manage it.

Slide 3 – Vignette 2

Tom is a 15-year-old Y11 pupil in a medium-sized secondary school. For the past few months, Tom has been struggling to go to school every day. In previous years at school, Tom's attendance has always been good.

Tom is finding being at school very stressful, and he sometimes feels he cannot cope with this. Tom finds it hard to explain to people why he feels this way, and sometimes thinks he does not really know himself why he feels like this.

Tom often feels unhappy about going to school and struggles to get out of bed on a school day. When he is feeling like this, Tom's parents let him stay home from school. This seems to happen once or twice a week but is becoming more frequent.

Slide 4

Now I'm going to ask you some questions about the reasons why Jess and Tom might find it difficult to go to school. Should we talk about Jess or Tom first?

Slides 6-18

Individual questions about Jess or Tom – questions are ordered based upon which child the participant chooses to talk about first. Questions are the same with names changed, e.g. the participant completes all 'Jess' questions then all 'Tom' questions. The relevant vignette is displayed alongside each question.

1. What things in school might make it difficult for Jess/Tom to attend?
2. Is there anything her/his teachers may be doing that makes Jess/Tom find it difficult to go to school?
3. Is there anything other pupils might be doing that makes Jess/Tm struggle to go to school?
4. Might there be anything at home that is making Jess/Tom experience difficulty attending school?
5. Is there anything about Jess/Tom herself/himself that might make her/him worry more about going to school?
6. Is there anything else that we haven't already mentioned that might make it difficult for Jess/Tom to go to school?

Slide 19

Thanks and debrief

Thank you for taking part today, your opinions are really valuable and I'm glad you've been able to share them.

Do you have any questions about anything we've talked about?

I'm now going to share an information sheet with you with my contact details and some places to find some more information if you need it.

Ask for adult to return to close the interview.

Email debrief information to parents.

Interview schedule – school staff and parent participants

Greeting

- Greet participant
- Recap information sheet and consent
- Reiterate right to withdrawal
- Opportunity for questions
- Screen share PowerPoint presentation
- Researcher informs participant that she will be making hand-written notes of responses and that these will be recapped with the participant after each answer.

Slide 1

"Emotionally Based School Avoidance (EBSA) is a broad term used to describe a group of children and young people who have difficulty in attending school due to emotional factors, often resulting in prolonged absences from school." (West Sussex Educational Psychology Service, 2018)

I'm now going to present you with two scenarios that briefly describe two pupils that are experiencing EBSA in different ways. You will then be asked some questions about why these pupils might be struggling to attend school.

Slide 2

Jess is a 12-year-old Y8 pupil in a medium-sized secondary school. Since moving from her small primary school, Jess has found it difficult to go to school.

Jess finds it very difficult to sleep if she thinks about going to school the next day. Often the thought of going to school can make her feel sick. Jess feels scared and worried about going to school.

When Jess feels she can't go to school, her mum lets her stay at home. Jess likes being able to stay home with her mum where she feels more comfortable.

Jess sometimes stays home from school for weeks at a time. Even though she would like to be able to go to school, she feels that she can't manage it.

Slide 3

Tom is a 15-year-old Y11 pupil in a medium-sized secondary school. For the past few months, Tom has been struggling to go to school every day. In previous years at school, Tom's attendance has always been good.

Tom is finding being at school very stressful, and he sometimes feels he cannot cope with this. Tom finds it hard to explain to people why he feels this way, and sometimes thinks he does not really know himself why he feels like this.

Tom often feels unhappy about going to school and struggles to get out of bed on a school day. When he is feeling like this, Tom's parents let him stay home from school. This seems to happen once or twice a week but is becoming more frequent.

Slide 4

Now I'm going to ask you some questions about the reasons why Jess and Tom might find it difficult to go to school.

Slides 5-14

Individual questions. The relevant vignette is displayed beside each question.

1. Are there any factors related to the school environment or culture that might make it difficult for Jess to attend?
2. Are there any different factors related to the school environment or culture that might make it difficult for Tom to attend?
3. Is there anything school staff might be doing that causes Jess to find it difficult to go to school?
4. Are there any additional factors related to school staff that could cause Tom to find it difficult to go to school?
5. Are there any factors related to other pupils that might cause Jess to struggle to go to school?
6. Are there additional factors related to other pupils that could cause Tom to struggle to go to school?
7. Might there be any factors related to home life that cause Jess to experience difficulty attending school?
8. Might there be any additional factors related to home life that cause Tom to experience difficulty attending school?
9. Is there anything about Jess herself that might cause her to worry about going to school?
10. Is there anything additional about Tom himself that might cause him to worry about going to school?
11. Is there anything else that we haven't already mentioned that might cause Jess or Tom to find it difficult to go to school?
    This could be related to wider aspects like community, political, cultural or religious factors amongst others.

Slide 16

Debrief and thanks

Thank you for taking part today, your participation is very valuable and much appreciated.

Do you have any questions?

I'm now going to share a Debrief information sheet with you with my contact details and some places to find some more information if you need it.

7.5. A sample of the content analysis of individual interview responses.

Heading and subordinate categories	**Combined school staff responses**	**Combined parent responses**	**Combined pupil responses**
Parenting style Parents do not put enough boundaries in place at home	- Parents allow her to stay home – look to parents for guidance – weak parenting - His social media and TV use at night - Parents might allow late nights – not strict enough - Establish boundaries, clarity of plan and structure - Routine needed – clear and consistent to all - Routine – late nights gaming		
Parents are intimidated by the pupil	- Parents might be intimidated by his physical stature – feel they can't challenge him.		
Parents are not effective in encouraging attendance	- Parents might not recognise that he is persistently absent – if the absence isn't consistent - Mum not trying to find ways into school - Parents can't get children motivated - Mollycoddled at home Parents need to have more conversations with him about going to school	- Parents not strong enough to send to school - Parents in denial - Parents exhausted and give in and let the child stay at home - Parents struggling to cope with the pressure of getting distressed child to school – can't keep fighting and let stay at home	- Parents don't push enough to go to school
Socioeconomic status	- Financial circumstances at home –	- Financial difficulties – can't	

Heading and subordinate categories	Combined school staff responses	Combined parent responses	Combined pupil responses
Parents are experiencing financial hardship	might not be able to pay for transport, might be embarrassed about having to ask - Can't afford a smartphone – missing out - Financial issues - Can't afford the latest technology – peer pressure to have it - Sanitary needs – might have a lack of resources - Issues with children coming out of area to school – might be from low SES, can't afford the same designer clothes – feel like an outsider, can't join in or go on school trips - Transport issue – getting to school - Financial hardship e.g. can't afford bus fare - Jess doesn't have everything she needs – latest stuff - Might not have homework support – no access to PC - Lives in a deprived area – but comes to school in a more affluent area	afford the same as peers	
Parental relationship Parental separation	- Mum might be a single parent – Jess is company - remarriage - Family breakdown - Parental split – difficult break up - Mum is single parent - Issues with split families – competition between parents	- From a broken home	

Heading and subordinate categories	Combined school staff responses	Combined parent responses	Combined pupil responses
	- Splitting up		
Child has witnessed or experienced domestic abuse	- He might have witnessed domestic violence – he may mimic violence - Domestic violence at home – worried about leaving parent	- Abuse at home	- Could be abusive parents
Parental conflict	- Issues between parents' disagreements - Parents having issues - Tom wants to look needy to keep his parents together - Parental arguments	- Difficulty in the family - Relationship difficulties between parents	- Parents arguing - Parents arguing - Parents arguing and not agreeing with each other
Parental support Parents do not offer enough or appropriate support	- Might be a lack of encouragement and support - Culture – lack of acknowledgement of mental health, stigma around mental health - Lack of support at home - Parents don't understand what is expected of Tom – workload and pressure	- Parents not on board with getting help for children - Parents don't understand the change in Tom – reduces feeling of safety for Tom	- Parents work late – less support – needs to be more independent than he wants to be – not supported - Parents might not be talking to him a lot about exams – they don't understand his stress
Parental needs Parent(s) have physical health needs	- Parental physical health - Parental physical health		
Parent(s) had negative experiences in school themselves	- Parents may have had a similar experience - Mum had issues in school		
Parental substance abuse	- Mum has alcohol problem		

Heading and subordinate categories	Combined school staff responses	Combined parent responses	Combined pupil responses
Parent(s) have low academic ability	- Mum's academic ability – can't help with homework, can't access attendance letters		
Parent(s) have mental health difficulties	- Parents struggling - Parental loneliness - Parental mental health issues - Parents' mental health - Mum might be anxious - Mum has mental health difficulties - Mum likes the company	- SEN in child creates stress for the family	
Child's role at home Pupil wants to hide events at home from school	- Wants to hide what is happening at home		
The pupil feels they have caring duties at home	- Might have lots of siblings – Jess feels needed at home - Jess is carer - Company for mum - Tom might want to look after his mum - Tom might be asked to look after younger siblings - Jess is a young carer – concerned about mum - worried about what is happening at home, if domestic violence – wants to protect parent/sibling/pet	- Carer for parents - Comfort with mum – doesn't want to leave her – if something happened at home	
Parental attitudes Parents want to protect the pupil from negative experiences at school	- Protective - Parents not helpful – want to protect - Mum is smothering - Mum is defensive – thinks Jess has done	- Parents struggling to cope with the pressure of getting distressed child to school – can't	

Heading and subordinate categories	Combined school staff responses	Combined parent responses	Combined pupil responses
	nothing wrong if in trouble - Parents afraid for children – want to protect – going out, social media - Mum still sees Jess as a little girl - Encouraged or empowered by mum that staying off is the right thing to do	keep fighting and let stay at home	
Parents do not value education	- Parents don't see the value of education - Attitudes within where you live - Education not valued at home - Community doesn't value education	- Some cultures – don't think education is important for girls, not so much in this country	- Parents aren't encouraging her to go to school
Pressure from parents for academic attainment	- Family tension – clashing desires for the future - Pressure to achieve in exams - Pressure from parents to achieve - Parents compare him to older siblings	- Parental pressure for achievement - Parents push attendance and pressure on future - Pressure from parents for attendance linked to future – you'll have to go to work every day - Pressure from parents for attendance to avoid attendance penalties – you have to go to school or we'll get into trouble	- Older sibling that did or didn't do well - Feels like he needs to perform highly – incidental pressure

7.6. Draft questionnaire.

Note: Demographics questions and the first two questions are displayed with answer options as they were presented on Qualtrics. For all following questions, answer options have been removed to enhance readability.

Start of Block: Demographics

Q80 Are you currently employed as a teacher of secondary aged children (aged 11-16 years)?

- ○ Yes (1)
- ○ No (2)

Q81 For how long have you been employed as a teacher?

- ○ 0-2 years (1)
- ○ 3-5 years (2)
- ○ 6-8 years (3)
- ○ More than 8 years (4)
- ○ Prefer not to say (5)

Q82 Can you estimate how many young people you have taught or supported who have experienced EBSA?

- ○ 0-5 (1)
- ○ 6-10 (2)
- ○ 11-20 (3)
- ○ More than 20 (4)
- ○ Unsure or prefer not to say (5)

End of Block: Demographics

Start of Block: Instructions

Q83 Emotionally based school avoidance is a term used to describe a group of children and young people who have severe difficulty in attending school due to emotional factors, often resulting in prolonged absences from school.
Next, you will be presented with a list of things that some people say are causes of emotionally based school avoidance in secondary school pupils. How important are these in causing emotionally based school avoidance?

End of Block: Instructions

Start of Block: Survey items

Q3 Parental substance addiction or abuse

- Not at all important (1)
- Not very important (2)
- Neither important nor unimportant (3)
- Quite important (4)
- Very important (5)

Q4 The pupil feels they have caring duties at home

- Not at all important (1)
- Not very important (2)
- Neither important nor unimportant (3)
- Quite important (4)
- Very important (5)

Q5 The pupil wants to hide events at home from school

Q6 Parents do not value education

Q7 Home life is chaotic and unsettled

Q8 Parents want to protect pupil from negative experiences at school

Q9 Witnessing or experiencing domestic violence

Q10 Parental pressure for academic achievement

Q11 Parents had negative experiences at school themselves

Q12 Parents have low academic ability

Q13 Parent(s) have mental health difficulties

Q14 Parent(s) have physical health needs

Q15 Parental conflict

Q16 Parental separation

Q17 Parent(s) do not offer the pupil enough or appropriate support

Q18 Parent(s) are intimidated by the pupil

Q19 Parent(s) are not effective in encouraging attendance

Q20 Parent(s) do not put enough boundaries in place at home

Q21 Parent(s) are experiencing financial hardship

Q22 The pupil has experienced a traumatic event

Q23 The pupil prefers the safety, comfort and activities available at home in comparison to school

Q24 The pupil is involved in substance abuse

Q25 The pupil is of a minority ethnicity or religion

Q26 The pupil spends a long time online e.g. gaming or on social media

Q27 The pupil fears judgement from peers

Q28 The pupil finds it difficult to recognise and express emotions

Q29 The pupil finds social interaction difficult

Q30 The pupil is going through puberty and associated hormone changes

Q31 The pupil has an un-diagnosed medical need

Q32 The pupil does not have many hobbies or interests outside of school

Q33 The pupil does not see the value of school

Q34 Physical symptoms of anxiety e.g. feeling sick, panic attacks

Q35 The pupil compares themselves to others, and feels 'different'

Q36 The pupil does not feel able to ask for support

Q37 The pupil does not get enough sleep

Q38 The pupil does not have effective coping strategies

Q39 The pupil feels anxious about life after school

Q40 The pupil feels anxious about their academic ability

Q41 The pupil feels pressure to not let others down

Q42 The pupil feels self-conscious about their appearance

Q43 The pupil has a diagnosed mental health condition

Q44 The pupil has low self-esteem

Q45 The pupil has special educational needs

Q46 The pupil is fearful of teachers and getting into trouble

Q47 The pupil is experiencing difficulties expressing their sexuality or gender

Q48 Schoolwork is not differentiated to meet individual needs

Q49 The pupil finds a particular lesson challenging

Q50 Workload in school is too high for the pupil to keep up with

Q51 Working with multiple teachers each school day

Q52 Lack of a 'safe space' in school for the pupil to access

Q53 Navigating large school sites

Q54 Long and tiring school days

Q55 Sensory factors in school e.g. noise, busy corridors, strong smells

Q56 Changes to the school environment e.g. changes of classroom

Q57 Being in classes with unfamiliar or disliked peers

Q58 Lack of protected time in school to form relationships with staff or peers

Q59 Non-collaborative home-school relationships

Q60 Lack of friendship group in school

Q61 Peer conflict in school

Q62 Peers have a negative attitude towards the pupil

Q63 Perceived pressure from peers

Q64 The pupil is bullied

Q65 Lack of pastoral and mental health support in school

Q66 Pressure from school to make decisions for the future

Q67 School expect a high level of independence from pupils

Q68 The school has very strict behaviour policies

Q69 The school places high importance on academic attainment

Q70 Whole school lack of acceptance and adaptation to diversity

Q71 Lack of communication between teachers about pupils

Q72 Lack of trusting and positive relationships between pupils and school staff

Q73 Teachers put the pupil on the spot in front of peers

Q74 Teachers not knowing the pupil as an individual

Q75 Teachers focus on attainment over wellbeing

Q76 Teachers seem unapproachable or dismissive to the pupil

Q77 Teachers do not understand the pupil's needs

Q78 The pupil had poor attendance in primary school

Q79 Transition from primary to secondary school

End of Block: Survey items

7.7. Final questionnaire.

Note: Demographics questions and the first two questions are displayed with answer options as they were presented on Qualtrics. For all following questions, answer options have been removed to enhance readability.

Q80 Are you currently employed as a teacher of secondary aged children (aged 11-16 years)?

- ○ Yes (1)
- ○ No (2)

Q81 For how long have you been employed as a teacher?

- ○ 0-2 years (1)
- ○ 3-5 years (2)
- ○ 6-8 years (3)
- ○ More than 8 years (4)
- ○ Prefer not to say (5)

Q82 Can you estimate how many young people you have taught or supported who have experienced EBSA?

- ○ 0-5 (1)
- ○ 6-10 (2)
- ○ 11-20 (3)
- ○ More than 20 (4)
- ○ Unsure or prefer not to say (5)

End of Block: Demographics

Start of Block: Instructions

Q83 **Emotionally based school avoidance is a term used to describe a group of children and young people who have severe difficulty in attending school due to emotional factors, often resulting in prolonged absences from school.**

Next, you will be presented with a list of things that some people say are causes of emotionally based school avoidance in secondary school pupils. Please can you rate how important you think each statement is as a cause of emotionally based school avoidance?

For each statement, you will be presented with five options: 'not at all important,' 'not very important,' 'quite important,' 'very important' and 'extremely important.' Please choose **one** rating for **each** statement.

End of Block: Instructions

Start of Block: Survey items

Q87 How important are the following statements as causes of emotionally based school avoidance?

Q3 Parental substance addiction or abuse

- Not at all important (1)
- Not very important (2)
- Quite important (3)
- Very important (4)
- Extremely important (5)

Q4 The pupil feels they have caring duties at home

- Not at all important (1)
- Not very important (2)
- Quite important (3)
- Very important (4)
- Extremely important (5)

Q5 The pupil wants to hide events at home from school

Q6 Parents do not value education

Q7 Home life is chaotic and unsettled

Q8 Parents want to protect pupil from negative experiences at school

Q9 Witnessing or experiencing domestic violence

Q10 Parental pressure for academic achievement

Q11 Parents had negative experiences at school themselves

Q88 How important are the following statements as causes of emotionally based school avoidance?

Q12 Parents have low academic ability

Q13 Parent(s) have mental health difficulties

Q14 Parent(s) have physical health needs

Q15 Parental conflict

Q16 Parental separation

Q17 Parent(s) do not offer the pupil enough or appropriate support

Q18 Parent(s) are intimidated by the pupil

Q19 Parent(s) are not effective in encouraging attendance

Q20 Parent(s) do not put enough boundaries in place at home

Q21 Parent(s) are experiencing financial hardship

Q89 How important are the following statements as causes of emotionally based school avoidance?

Q22 The pupil has experienced a traumatic event

Q23 The pupil prefers the safety, comfort and activities available at home in comparison to school

Q24 The pupil is involved in substance abuse

Q25 The pupil is of a minority ethnicity or religion

Q26 The pupil spends a long time online e.g. gaming or on social media

Q27 The pupil fears judgement from peers

Q28 The pupil finds it difficult to recognise and express emotions

Q29 The pupil finds social interaction difficult

Q30 The pupil is going through puberty and associated hormone changes

Q31 The pupil has an un-diagnosed medical need

Q90 How important are the following statements as causes of emotionally based school avoidance?

Q32 The pupil does not have many hobbies or interests outside of school

Q33 The pupil does not see the value of school

Q34 Physical symptoms of anxiety e.g. feeling sick, panic attacks

Q35 The pupil compares themselves to others, and feels 'different'

Q36 The pupil does not feel able to ask for support

Q37 The pupil does not get enough sleep

Q38 The pupil does not have effective coping strategies

Q39 The pupil feels anxious about life after leaving school

Q40 The pupil feels anxious about their academic ability

Q41 The pupil feels pressure to not let others down

Q91 How important are the following statements as causes of emotionally based school avoidance?

Q42 The pupil feels self-conscious about their appearance

Q43 The pupil has a diagnosed mental health condition

Q44 The pupil has low self-esteem

Q45 The pupil has special educational needs

Q46 The pupil is fearful of teachers and getting into trouble

Q47 The pupil is experiencing difficulties expressing their sexuality or gender

Q48 Schoolwork is not differentiated to meet individual needs

Q49 The pupil finds a particular lesson challenging

Q50 Workload in school is too high for the pupil to keep up with

Q51 Working with multiple teachers each school day

Q92 How important are the following statements as causes of emotionally based school avoidance?

Q52 Lack of a 'safe space' in school for the pupil to access

Q53 Navigating large school sites

Q54 Long and tiring school days

Q55 Sensory factors in school e.g. noise, busy corridors, strong smells

Q56 Physical changes to the school environment

Q57 Being in classes with unfamiliar or disliked peers

Q58 Lack of protected time in school to form relationships with staff or peers

Q59 Non-collaborative home-school relationships

Q60 Lack of friendship group in school

Q61 Peer conflict in school

Q93 How important are the following statements as causes of emotionally based school avoidance?

Q62 Peers have a negative attitude towards the pupil

Q63 Perceived pressure from peers

Q64 The pupil is bullied

Q65 Lack of pastoral and mental health support in school

Q66 Pressure from school to make decisions for the future

Q67 School expect a high level of independence from pupils

Q68 The school has very strict behaviour policies

Q69 The school places high importance on academic attainment

Q70 The school does not accept or adapt to diversity

Q71 Lack of communication between teachers about pupils

Q94 How important are the following statements as causes of emotionally based school avoidance?

Q72 Lack of trusting and positive relationships between pupils and school staff

Q73 Teachers put the pupil on the spot in front of peers

Q74 Teachers not knowing the pupil as an individual

Q75 Teachers focus on attainment over wellbeing

Q76 Teachers seem unapproachable or dismissive to the pupil

Q77 Teachers do not understand the pupil's needs

Q78 The pupil had poor attendance in primary school

Q79 Transition from primary to secondary school

7.8. Recruitment email sent out to schools for Stage Two.

A request for teachers to take part in a 10-15min survey for trainee educational psychologist research

Dear Colleague,

My name is Emma Devine, a third-year trainee educational psychologist at the University of Nottingham. I am writing to invite you to take part in my thesis research exploring the perceptions of teachers on the causes of emotionally based school avoidance (EBSA). EBSA is the name given to the challenges that some pupils face in attending school regularly, usually due to anxiety-related difficulties.

I have shared this email with you as the main point of contact with the educational psychology service. I'm hoping that as well as your participation, that you will share this with other teachers in school as I'm trying to gain a broad range of views from as many teachers as possible.

Participation would involve the completion of a survey asking you to rate possible causes of EBSA. **It should take no longer than 10-15 mins to complete**. It is **not** necessary to have had experience working with pupils experiencing EBSA to take part in the research.

The questionnaire is completely anonymous, and your personal details will not be recorded.

Please follow this link for the questionnaire and more information about the research: https://nottinghampsych.eu.qualtrics.com/jfe/form/SV_0J4LfiifYQwtFGd

I appreciate that we are currently experiencing highly challenging times for the teaching profession, so I am very thankful that you have taken the time to read this information. Your participation is a highly valuable contribution to developing an understanding of the complex nature of EBSA.

Many thanks,
Emma Devine
Trainee educational psychologist

7.9. Facebook and Twitter posts for participant recruitment in Stage Two.

Facebook

Secondary Teachers – I need your help
I know this is a very stressful time, so thanks for reading this.
As part of my educational psychologist training, I'm completing my thesis on exploring the perceptions of teachers on the causes of emotionally based school avoidance, where pupils might struggle to attend due to factors like anxiety.
Throughout last year, I developed a questionnaire for teachers to measure how the causes of school avoidance are perceived. And now, I'm sharing this with you all as I'd like as many teachers to complete it as possible
The questionnaire is all anonymous, should take no longer than 15mins to complete and it does not matter whether or not you have worked with children experiencing school avoidance before.
If you're interested in taking part, please follow this link for more information and to complete the questionnaire https://nottinghampsych.eu.qualtrics.com/.../SV...
I would also be grateful if you could share this post with any teaching colleagues/friends/family.
Thank you in advance!

Twitter

Can anyone help share my thesis research? I'm looking for teachers of secondary aged young people to complete a 10-15min survey on their perceptions of the causes of emotionally based school avoidance - the survey and more information can be found here
https://nottinghampsych.eu.qualtrics.com/jfe/form/SV_0J4LfiifYQwtFGd…

7.10. Recruitment post shared on the EPNET forum for Stage Two.

Hi all,

I'm Emma, a third-year TEP at the University of Nottingham. For my thesis research, I'm exploring the attributions of teachers on the causes of emotionally based school avoidance (EBSA). For the first stage of my research, I interviewed parents, young people and school staff on their perceptions of the causes of EBSA. From the interview responses, I've developed a short survey for teachers of 11-16-year-olds to measure their attributions on the causes of EBSA.

I'm writing today with a request that you might share my research with link secondary education providers, with encouragement that they share it with teaching colleagues. I'm hoping to get a broad range of responses, so the survey is open to all teachers of 11-16-year-olds, in any setting, and they do not need to have had experience of supporting young people experiencing EBSA.

Here's the link to the survey and more information to share - **https://nottinghampsych.eu.qualtrics.com/jfe/form/SV_0J4LfiifYQwtFGd**

I'm happy to share findings with schools if they email me through my contact details linked in the survey (emma.devine@nottingham.ac.uk)

I've also had a huge amount of support from EPs on Twitter which has been fantastic. If there is anyone that is able to support me on this platform too, I'd be hugely appreciative – **https://twitter.com/EmmaDevine3/status/1349430043399905280?s=20**

Many thanks for your support,

Emma

Emma Devine

Trainee Educational Psychologist

University of Nottingham

7.11. Participant information sheet and consent form for Stage Two.

Research title: Exploring the attributions of secondary school teachers on the causes of emotionally based school avoidance
Participant information form

The study
This is an invitation to take part in a research study on emotionally based school avoidance (EBSA). EBSA is a term used to describe a group of children and young people who have severe difficulty in attending school due to emotional factors, often resulting in prolonged absences from school. This research is being conducted by a trainee educational psychologist. Educational psychologists have a role in supporting pupils, parents and schools in considering ways forward for pupils experiencing EBSA.

The aim of this research is to explore how pupils, parents and teachers perceive the causes of EBSA. It is hoped that this research can clarify how each group thinks about EBSA, which can help educational psychologists to support young people, their parents and schools more effectively when EBSA is preventing young people accessing school.

Your participation
You have been asked to take part in this study as you are a secondary school teacher, whose views would be a highly valuable contribution to this area of research.
If you participate, you will be asked to complete a questionnaire on the causes of EBSA. You will be presented with a list of possible causes of EBSA, and you will be asked to rate each item on the questionnaire from "not at all important" to "extremely important".
No identifying information will be collected from you to ensure your confidentiality.
The questionnaire should take no longer than 15 minutes to complete.
All data collected will be kept confidential and used for research purposes only. It will be stored in compliance with the UK Data Protection Act 2018.

What do I do now?
Please read the consent form below. If you consent to take part in the questionnaire, please click 'I agree' and continue onto the questionnaire. If you do not want to take part, please click 'I disagree'. If you have any questions about the research, please contact the researcher, Emma Devine at emma.devine@nottingham.ac.uk

This research has been approved by the University of Nottingham Ethics Committee. If you have any complaints about the study, please contact: Stephen Jackson (Chair of Ethics Committee) stephen.jackson@nottingham.ac.uk

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Consent form

Title of Project: Exploring the attributions of teachers on the causes of emotionally based school avoidance
Ethics approval number: s1264
Researcher: Emma Devine (emma.devine@nottingham.ac.uk)

Supervisor: Dr Russell Hounslow (russell.hounslow@nottingham.ac.uk)

- I confirm that I have read and understood the information sheet I have had the opportunity to ask questions about the study (as detailed above) and any questions I had have been answered satisfactorily.
- I understand that I am free to withdraw from the study at any time without giving any reason. Please note that withdrawal is only possible up to the time of questionnaire submission, as after submission, all information is anonymised.
- I understand that completed questionnaires (and any documents created using their data) will be stored securely in accordance with the UK Data Protection Act 2018 and only the researchers named above will be able to access them. Any reports and publications generated from the data will not have any identifying information in them.
- I am happy for the anonymous questionnaire data to be shared with future researchers in this topic area. If you consent to the above, please click 'I agree' and begin the questionnaire. If you do not, please click 'I disagree'.

7.12. Survey debrief.

Thank you for taking the time to take part in this survey. Below you will find a debrief information sheet with information about the study and links to further reading if you should want to access it.

Name of Experimenter:
Emma Devine

Email of Experimenter:
Emma.devine@nottingham.ac.uk

Name of Supervisor:
Dr Russell Hounslow

Email of Supervisor:
Russell.hounslow@nottingham.ac.uk

Title of Experiment:
Exploring the attributions of teachers on the causes of emotionally based school avoidance

Background/Hypothesis:
Emotionally based school avoidance (EBSA) is a term used to describe a group of children and young people who have severe difficulty in attending school due to emotional factors, often resulting in prolonged absences from school. This research is being conducted by a trainee educational psychologist. Educational psychologists have a role in supporting pupils, parents and schools in considering ways forward for pupils experiencing EBSA.

The aim of this research is to explore how pupils, parents and teachers perceive the causes of EBSA. Previous research indicates that pupils, parents and teachers might think about these causes quite differently. It is hoped that this research can clarify how each group thinks about EBSA, which can help educational psychologists to support young people, their parents and schools more effectively when EBSA is preventing young people accessing school.

Design and Dependent Measures:

This research involves two stages:

- Stage one; interviews with groups of teachers, individual pupils and groups of parents, to find out what they believe are the causes of EBSA
- Stage two; the responses from the interview stage will be used to create a questionnaire that will be distributed to teachers to gather more information on what they feel are the most important causes of EBSA.

It is hoped that in future, further studies will be conducted that distributes the questionnaire more widely to parents and pupils, to find out what they perceive the most important causes of EBSA to be.

Intended Analysis:

- Stage one; the interview data will be analysed through *content analysis* to group the responses of the participants into categories that will be used to form the questionnaire.

- Stage two; the questionnaire data will be analysed through *exploratory factor analysis,* which will group the responses into overarching factors that the participating teachers perceive are the causes of EBSA.

Useful Reading:

EBSA can be termed in a variety of ways, so information regarding school refusal, emotionally-based school refusal, school phobia and anxiety-based non-attendance can all be helpful to understand the concept and seek support. Some useful links to explore are:

- West Sussex Educational Psychology Service's resources to understand and support emotionally based school avoidance; http://schools.westsussex.gov.uk/Page/10483
- Derbyshire County Council's Emotional and Mental Health Toolkit; https://www.derbyshire.gov.uk/site-elements/documents/pdf/social-health/children-and-families/mental-health-and-wellbeing/emotional-and-mental-health-toolkit.pdf
- Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS) information on school refusal; https://www.camhsnorthderbyshire.nhs.uk/school-refusal
- Nottinghamshire County Council Educational Psychology Service's guide for Anxious learners and anxiety-related non-attendance; http://www.em-edsupport.org.uk/Pages/Download/c7cc9ac4-c69d-41ab-84e8-a1a188a184cf

7.13. Ethical approval letter from the University of Nottingham Ethics Committee.

The University of Nottingham
UNITED KINGDOM · CHINA · MALAYSIA

School of Psychology
The University of Nottingham
University Park
Nottingham
NG7 2RD

SJ/tp Ref:s1264

Thursday 28th May 2020

Dear Victoria and Emma,

Ethics Committee Review

Thank you for submitting an account of your proposed research ***"*Exploring the attributions of teachers towards the causes of emotionally based school avoidance.*"*.**

That proposal has now been reviewed and we are pleased to tell you it has met with the

Committee's approval.

However:

Please note the following comments from our reviewers; Reviewer One:

Minor revisions (without further submission)

The "Willingness to Participate form – participating young person" states that "I understand that my interview with the researcher will be recorded in writing, but anything I say will be confidential, unless it raises concerns about mine or anyone else's safety". It is not clear from the ethics submission form what the researcher would do when the interview with the young person raises concerns about the young person or anyone else's safety. Would be good to make clear what the researcher would do in the ethics submission as well as in the information sheets.

Final responsibility for ethical conduct of your research rests with you or your supervisor. The Codes of Practice setting out these responsibilities have been published by the British Psychological Society and the University Research Ethics Committee. If you have any concerns whatever during the conduct of your research then you should consult those Codes of Practice. The Committee should be informed immediately should any participant complaints or adverse events arise during the study.

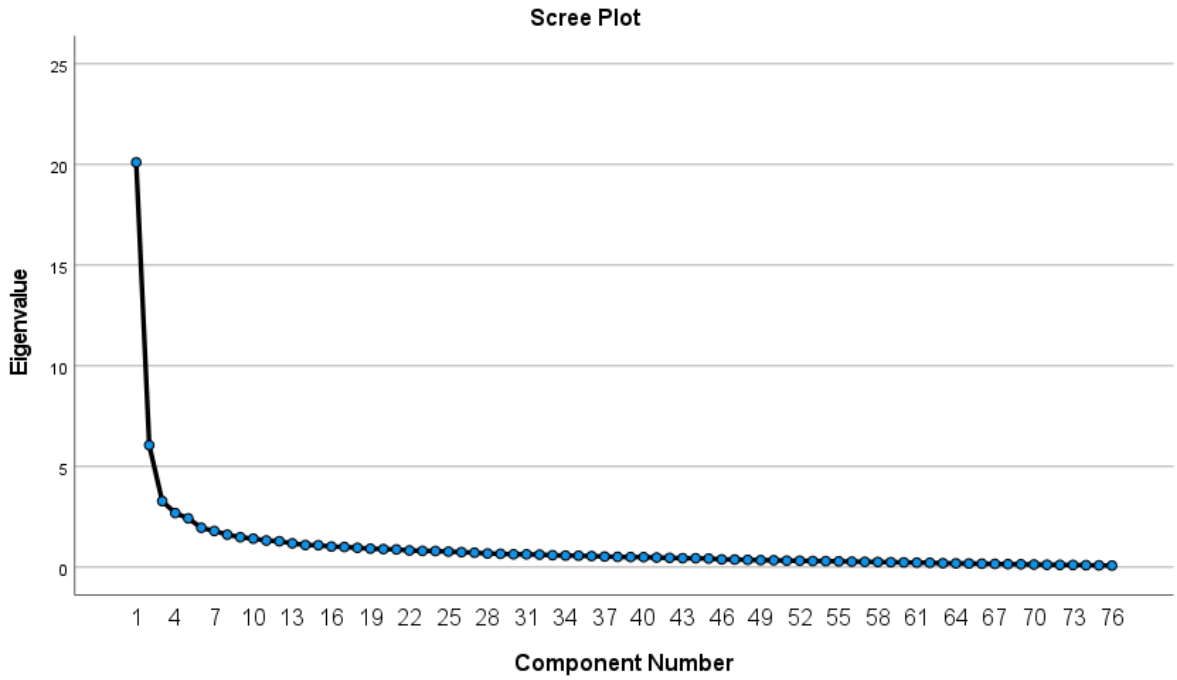
Independently of the Ethics Committee procedures, supervisors also have responsibilities for the risk assessment of projects as detailed in the safety pages of the University web site. Ethics Committee approval does not alter, replace, or remove those responsibilities, nor does it certify that they have been met.

Yours sincerely

Professor Stephen Jackson Chair, Ethics Committee

Results

7.14. Scree plot derived from exploratory factor analysis of 76 variables.



7.15. Research timeline

Stage of research	**Date**
Initial research and literature review	July 2019 – July 2020
Interview development	May 2020 – June 2020
Interview participant recruitment	July 2020 – October 2020
Interviews completed	October 2020
Questionnaire development	October 2020 – December 2020
Questionnaire pilot	December 2020
Participant recruitment/questionnaire dissemination	January 2021 – March 2021
Data clean-up	March 2021
Data analysis	March 2021 – April 2021
Results and discussion write-up	April 2021 – May 2021
Thesis submission	May 2021