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# An exploration of approaches to supporting young people experiencing emotionally based school avoidance (EBSA) in a social, emotional and mental health (SEMH) school

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**ABSTRACT**

School absence is a growing concern, particularly absence related to emotional factors. This small-scale, preliminary research explored perspectives on approaches taken by a social, emotional and mental health (SEMH) school to support young people experiencing emotionally based school avoidance (EBSA). The educational psychology service (EPS) provided a whole school pilot programme consisting of a training webinar and three, termly, bespoke, solution-focused coaching sessions delivered to teachers and teaching assistants. Six staff and one student participated in semi-structured interviews following programme completion to understand the impact of developments in the school's approach. The interview data were analysed using conventional content analysis and the researcher's research journal, a record kept throughout the research process, informed the analysis. Seven overarching themes were identified which highlighted the importance of the shift in whole school attendance culture, a holistic approach and the flexibility of response afforded within this specialist setting. Limitations of the research are discussed; and tentative implications for future research and practice are suggested.

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Attendance difficulties; emotionally based school avoidance; special school; social, emotional and mental health; staff; student

## Introduction

### *School attendance difficulties*

School absence rates, which were already on the rise, have increased since the COVID-19 pandemic (Lester & Michelson, 2024). Persistent (at least 10% of sessions missed) and severe (missing more than 50% of sessions) absence rates (Department for Education [DfE], 2024a) still remain significantly higher than pre-pandemic rates (Lester & Michelson, 2024). Although there has been a downward trajectory in persistent absence rates across mainstream and specialist settings between 2021/22 and 2023/24 (DfE, 2025), severe absences have continued to rise and remain highest in specialist settings (DfE, 2025). Absence rates are also higher amongst vulnerable groups, including those with special educational needs and disabilities and mental health needs (Bond et al., 2024). Absence

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rates were already high for children with education, health and care plans (EHCPs) prior to COVID-19 but continue to be high and, concerningly, persistent absence rates have continued to increase (DfE, 2025).

Emotionally based school avoidance (EBSA) is a term used to describe school attendance difficulties due to a range of factors across bioecological systems interacting with emotional factors (Melvin et al., 2019). EBSA is thought to affect approximately 1–5% of the school-aged population; however, many continue to attend school despite high levels of distress (Elliott & Place, 2019; Lester & Michelson, 2024), thus accurate rates are difficult to establish. Secondary school students are more likely to experience attendance difficulties (Havik & Ingul, 2021; Nuttall & Woods, 2013). Contributing factors include an uninspiring curriculum, limited focus on the future, poor patterns of sleep, and anxiety (Kljakovic et al., 2021). In addition, experiencing bullying and limited social relationships are also linked to increased risk of EBSA (Bond et al., 2024; Brouwer-Borghuis et al., 2019). Therefore, a holistic approach is important to addressing attendance concerns, rather than considering them in isolation.

School-related anxiety has increased amongst both children and young people (CYP) and parents/carers in the post-COVID climate (McDonald et al., 2022). Terminology related to school attendance difficulties, particularly emotional factors, continues to be the subject of much debate (Finning et al., 2018). Terms such as "emotionally based school avoidance" (EBSA; Halligan & Cryer, 2022) and "emotionally based school non-attendance" (EBSNA; Corcoran et al., 2023), whilst focusing on the emotional element of non-attendance, have been criticised as adopting a within-child perspective (Corcoran & Kelly, 2022). Recently, broader terms such as "barriers to education" (BtE; Salford City Council, 2025) or "barriers to school attendance" (BtSA; Want & Gulliford, 2024) have been used within practice and the literature to move away from the within-child perspective of previous terms, and to encourage consideration of the multi-systemic factors affecting attendance and engagement (Want & Gulliford, 2024). The current study used the term EBSA due to its emphasis on the emotional factors (Bond et al., 2024; Chian et al., 2024), common use of the term in current literature and for consistency across the research school and local authority (LA). However, it should be noted that, in England, absence recording is complex (DfE, 2024b) and there is no specific absence code for EBSA. Mental and physical health concerns can be recorded under the same authorised absence code unless schools suspect the child is not unwell, leading to unauthorised absence codes to be applied (Not Fine in School, 2024).

## *Review of the literature*

Research suggests that EBSA does not occur in isolation, rather it is caused by a range of interacting school, family and parent factors across the micro and meso levels, such as academic support, family dynamics and parental mental health with increased risks amongst disadvantaged CYP (Melvin et al., 2019). Support often focuses beyond the individual CYP due to the complexity of interacting factors leading to EBSA (Lester & Michelson, 2024). Involving parents/carers has been highlighted as important in guidance (DfE, 2023) as it increases motivation (Chian et al., 2024) and, as difficulties are often considered on a continuum, parents/carers are often the first to observe signs (Havik & Ingul, 2021). However, working with families has presented some challenges (Ward &

Kelly, 2024); relationships between schools and families appear to have deteriorated since the COVID-19 pandemic (Lester & Michelson, 2024) and less successful home–school relationships can be considered a barrier to gaining support (Sawyer & Collingwood, 2023).

Whole school approaches to support are important (Nuttall & Woods, 2013; Ward & Kelly, 2024) and training should involve all staff, including support staff, to develop understanding and skills to address EBSA. Current guidance (DfE, 2024b) also highlights the importance of staff training to develop a shared responsibility to improve school attendance. The DfE recognises that attendance challenges often occur for CYP with SEMH needs (DfE, 2023) and that the importance of regular school attendance facilitates safeguarding processes (DfE, 2024b). Support is more likely to be successful if the senior leadership team (SLT) (Ward & Kelly, 2024) lead on attendance systems (Department for Education, 2024b) and support staff, particularly those working closely with these CYP, to ensure referral mechanisms and interventions are in place.

Research has highlighted a variety of approaches to support with EBSA. Relational approaches and belonging featured widely in recent literature (Boaler & Bond, 2023; Corcoran & Kelly, 2022). Positive relationships with key adults, notably specialist support staff and form tutors, are important to foster a sense of belonging (Sawyer & Collingwood, 2023). These relationships may be easier to establish in smaller settings (Wilkins, 2008). In contrast, negative relationships with staff can have a detrimental impact on attendance (Melvin et al., 2019; Want & Gulliford, 2024). Peer relationships are also important to belonging and can be facilitated by schools (Chian et al., 2024). Consistent adult approaches promote feelings of trust (Sawyer & Collingwood, 2023) and a sense of safety (Chian et al., 2024). Using person-centred approaches to inform provision (Lester & Michelson, 2024) allows CYP some autonomy regarding provision (Neilson & Bond, 2023).

Early identification of need and intervention are crucial. Screening tools have been developed to identify at-risk individuals (Bond et al., 2024) and interventions have been more successful with younger children (Elliott & Place, 2019), reinforcing the importance of early intervention. Home visits have also been beneficial to support reintegration and build relationships with families (Finning et al., 2018).

For some CYP with more entrenched needs, off-site provisions can provide an opportunity to engage in personalised programmes on an individual basis (Finning et al., 2018). Moreover, the reintegration process often takes time, particularly for CYP experiencing more entrenched challenges (Neilson & Bond, 2023). Research acknowledges the high levels of resources and time required for more personalised approaches (Boaler & Bond, 2023). For higher-risk individuals, targeted and individualised mentoring programmes, which often aim to build confidence and relationships or increase aspirations (Education Endowment Foundation, 2022), have demonstrated promising results, notably when delivered by teachers who received appropriate training and supervision (Boaler & Bond, 2023).

Schools cannot be expected to operate in isolation. External services such as educational psychologists (EPs), health and local authorities can contribute to support; however, they are often considered difficult to access (Sawyer & Collingwood, 2023). EPs' roles in supporting EBSA vary; often including individual casework, supporting change (Corcoran et al., 2022), providing more systemic work and delivering training (Corcoran et al., 2023;

Sawyer & Collingwood, 2023). The latter aims to build capacity and avoid over-reliance on external services (Ward & Kelly, 2024).

There is limited research exploring the role of specialist provision in relation to EBSA. A small number of studies (Brouwer-Borghuis et al., 2019; Neilson & Bond, 2023; Walter et al., 2010) have looked at alternative provisions or an autism specialist setting (Preece & Howley, 2018), but none have studied SEMH specialist settings. Whilst the difficulty of defining SEMH needs (Booth & Bond, 2025) and local variation in SEMH definitions and provision are acknowledged, the prevalence of mental health needs amongst CYP experiencing EBSA (Bond et al., 2024; Brouwer-Borghuis et al., 2019) warranted research into EBSA in a setting specialising in mental health needs. SEMH settings often include pupils with a broader range of needs compared to those in autism-specific provisions which often require a diagnosis for admission. However, in practice there is frequently an overlap in populations between these settings, particularly given the complex and often changing nature of CYP's EBSA profiles (Bond et al., 2024).

This current study explored the support available in a specialist SEMH school in England, following a training package delivered by the LA EPS. One overarching research question was addressed: *How are developments in school attendance approaches perceived to be working in one SEMH school?*

## Methodology

### *Research context*

The current study, undertaken between September 2023 and July 2024, aimed to explore how a SEMH school in England developed its school attendance approaches. The research school was a small, SEMH specialist provision, consisting of approximately seventy pupils aged 11–16 years old, with a primary area of need in the SEMH category on their education, health and care plan (EHCP; Department for Education, & Department of Health, 2015). The school has an off-site provision with a dedicated team and had approached the LA EPS for support with EBSA. The LA EPS delivered a whole school pilot EBSA programme consisting of an online training webinar and three termly face-to-face, solution-focused coaching sessions. The training took place at the school's convenience, prior to the initial coaching session. Coaching sessions took place in September, January and May. Interviews took place between April and July to ensure most or all of the coaching had taken place. During the research process, the school underwent significant changes, including the appointment of a new senior leadership team (SLT). The school focused on developing attendance policies and procedures which were reflected in the 2024–25 policies. Developments included the introduction of a senior attendance champion, links with most recent national guidance, including penalty notice updates, and an LA part time timetable reporting process.

### *Ethics*

This study received ethical approval from the University of Manchester Research Ethics Committee (University of Manchester, 2024) and adhered to the ethical requirements of the British Psychological Society Code of ethics and conduct (2021) and The Health and

Care Professionals Council Standards of conduct, performance and ethics (2016). Given the potential vulnerability of pupil participants, gaining ongoing consent, right to withdraw and managing any potential distress were carefully considered throughout.

## Design

An exploratory, single case study design (Yin, 2018) (Figure 1) was adopted to explore the school's approaches to support across the continuum of EBSA needs. The case study (Figure 1) explored several sources of information. The researcher observed the EPS-led, whole school coaching to develop an understanding of the school's context. Individual and paired semi-structured interviews explored staff and student perspectives. Staff were offered the choice of individual or paired interviews to help reduce potential anxiety about engagement. Four staff engaged in paired interviews and two participated individually. Interview transcripts were analysed using conventional content analysis. School attendance and behaviour policies and the researcher's journal informed the analysis. The attendance and behaviour policies were relevant to the analysis as they reflected changes to the school's approaches between the academic years 2023–24 and 2024–25.

## Participants

The school was identified for involvement in the research following agreement by the EPS to deliver an EBSA training and coaching pilot programme. Initial contact was made via the EPS and the SLT consented to engage in the current research.

Purposive sampling (Cohen et al., 2017) identified staff and student participants within the school who fulfilled specific criteria. Staff participants had all supported students

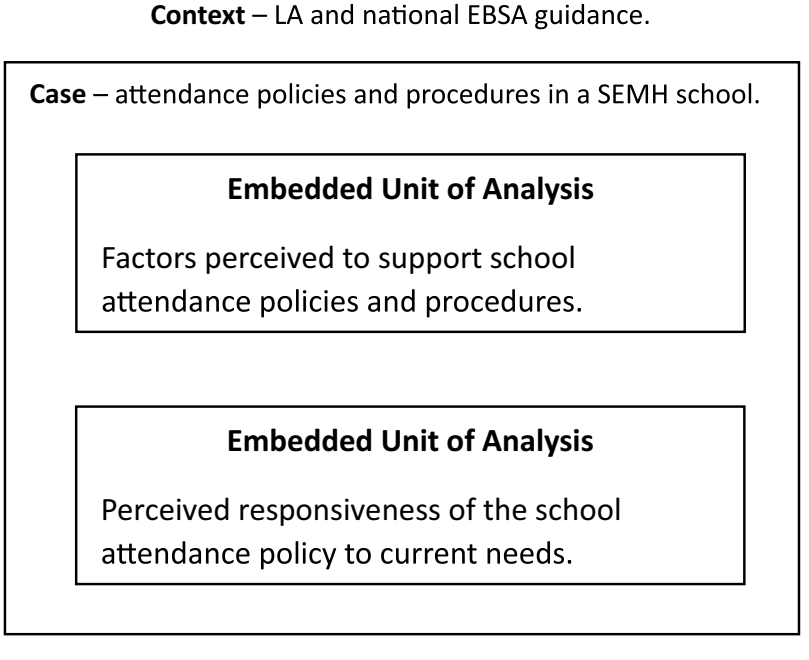


**Figure 1.** Case study design.

**Table 1.** Pseudonymised participant information.

| Interview | Pseudonym | Role |
|---|---|---|
| 1 | Melanie | Attendance officer |
| | John | Assistant headteacher; maths teacher |
| 2 | Emily | Level 3 teaching assistant |
| 3 | Victoria | Higher level teaching assistant |
| | Lisa | Forest school/outdoor education teacher |
| 4 | Cameron | Year 8 student |
| | John | Providing support for Cameron |
| 5 | Abigail | Off-site provision tutor |

experiencing attendance difficulties. Identified student participants had engaged in attendance intervention and progressed towards reintegration.

Six staff, holding a range of roles, and three student participants were initially identified. All identified staff participated (Table 1). One young person (Cameron) engaged in a semi-structured interview, supported by a key adult (John) who attended the interview with her. Two further potential student participants withdrew consent prior to interview or chose not to participate. Ethical approval was granted for alternative data gathering methods; however it was not possible to gain additional student views. Ultimately, the barriers to gaining additional student perspectives were indicative of the vulnerability of the cohort (Neilson & Bond, 2023), and the impact of this on the research data is discussed in the limitations section.

### *Data gathering and analysis*

The interview transcripts were analysed using conventional content analysis on account of its inductive approach and limited previous research in this area, enabling the codes to be derived from the dataset (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). The process involved data immersion, coding and categorising codes into clusters (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). Coding was predominantly manifest with limited latent coding. Therefore, codes adhered closely to the explicit meaning of the data (Vears & Gillam, 2022). The researcher's journal also informed analysis. Relevant sections from the attendance and behaviour policies were used to supplement the primary data analysis.

## Findings

### *Developing understanding of EBSA*

The factors involved in developing staff understanding of EBSA (Figure 2) featured frequently during the staff interviews through creating "a whole school approach", encouraging staff to "reflect and understand what challenges some of these students face" (John). Staff perceived the training and coaching delivered by the EPS to have improved not only their individual knowledge but also "driving understanding throughout the entire school team" (John). Moreover, staff considered that it "opens you up to new strategies" (Emily) and that they were "more in tune with it now" (Lisa). Staff benefitted from the face-to-face, problem-solving approach used throughout the coaching.

Staff reflected on the different perspectives held amongst the team depending on their roles. "I see things differently because I go into their homes" (Abigail). Personal experiences supported some approaches, with Victoria recognising the need to "just slow down". To further support the whole school approach to EBSA, in the future a bespoke training offer dependent on staff roles was suggested, such as more enhanced training for specialist staff.

## *Facilitating factors and barriers*

Multiple facilitating factors (Figure 2) occurred through the interviews and coaching sessions. An engaging curriculum including food technology and forest school was felt to support reengagement. Boredom was another factor which may have facilitated reengagement, as Cameron felt "bored sitting in bed all day, just collecting dust! Catching flies" following a long period of school absence.

Communication between staff was identified as a facilitator across the dataset. The introduction of a daily EBSA meeting and the planned implementation of approaches to "share work that is going on around EBSA" (research journal) aimed to support this area; for example, holding regular staff meetings aimed at supporting collaboration to improve recognition and identification of CYP's needs. Although communication was often a facilitator, a lack of communication was also considered a barrier to progress at times, particularly if the wider staff were unaware of individual timetables.

Involvement of the senior leadership team (SLT) within the development and implementation of EBSA processes was considered essential by some participants. SLT presence

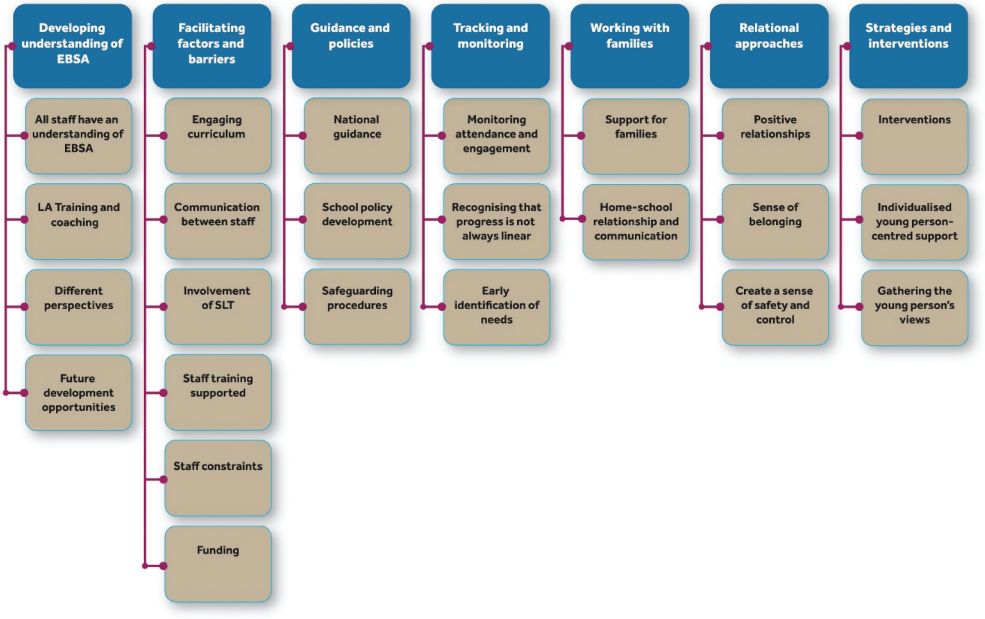


**Figure 2.** Perceptions of attendance approaches in one SEMH school.

on the corridors significantly improved attendance tracking, monitoring, and engagement via identification of students not attending lessons. Staff considered that if SLT "show you that it's important, you get more people on board" (Victoria), thus impacting positively on the support available for students. Recent attendance policy developments, including the creation of a "senior attendance champion" role, a senior leader to monitor attendance alongside the head of school, emphasised the importance of addressing attendance concerns.

Staff reported feeling supported through teamwork, joint problem-solving and consideration of their wellbeing. Feeling supported related to knowing other staff would be available to provide assistance for key students if "something does happen and I can't attend work" (Emily) and knowing how to seek advice and support from more experienced colleagues.

Constraints linked to staff availability and time were reported as barriers across the data. Teaching commitments impacted on some staff members' flexibility compared to other people's availability. Staff self-efficacy might also have impacted on support offered, particularly if staff felt, "I should know that, but I don't" (Lisa) or that training was not implemented effectively. The latter related to previous efforts to support students experiencing difficulties attending school, an initiative which may have stalled due to low self-efficacy amongst trained staff.

John raised funding as one of the "biggest barriers" to addressing increased attendance concerns since the COVID-19 pandemic, the impact of which he considered would be evident "for a number of years to come".

### *Guidance and policies*

The development of school policies and procedures (Figure 2) to address attendance difficulties were influenced by the national guidance. As attendance officer, Melanie, expressed concerns about the apparent lack of "link between the guidance" and "their expectation of attendance of schools and actually, all of this work that's been done". Changes to the school attendance and behaviour policies for the academic year 2024–2025 reflected developments in the school's approach to attendance, including emphasising that "absence is a symptom of other issues impacting a pupil's welfare and can be a warning sign of safeguarding concerns".

Changes to the safeguarding procedures and SLT currently regarding "attendance [as] a safeguarding issue" (Lisa) meant non-attendance triggered safeguarding processes linked to the attendance policy (2024–25). The current attendance policy was compliant with the updated School Attendance (Pupil Registration) (England) Regulations 2024 (DfE, 2024b) and linked with the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNICEF, 1989).

### *Tracking and monitoring*

Monitoring attendance and engagement was identified by staff as being important to the school's EBSA approach. With some of the students, attending school was the first step in their reintegration, before moving the focus to attending and engaging with lessons. This

also related to engagement with other aspects of school life such as "talking to a new student she's never spoken to before" (Emily).

Staff recognised that progress is not always linear and that it might be necessary to "step off the gas a little bit" (Victoria) with setbacks occurring after holidays. "There's a lot of things that won't work because . . . the anxieties can be different day-to-day, it's not just one thing" (Emily). Despite approaches not always proving successful, Emily was keen to frame the situation positively rather than "making it . . . a new anxiety for them" instead "we'll try something new next time".

Early identification of needs featured across the dataset, despite the differing roles. The role of support staff in identifying patterns "far quicker than a classroom teacher or certainly the SLT, identify . . . the students who are at risk" including those not attending specific lessons (John). Experience in working closely with one student had helped Emily to recognise signs with others "you kind of recognise it a little bit more because you've seen it first-hand".

### *Working with families*

Home-school relationships and communication featured heavily across the dataset. Despite differing roles, all staff referred to home-school relationships and communication as being significant. "Attendance concerns" were discussed with students and their parents/carers at an "early stage" (2024–2025 attendance policy). Parent/carer views were captured using the ATTEND Framework (Tobias, 2021). In addition to gathering parent/carer views, staff considered that it was important to "get families on board" (Abigail). "Once you have that trust from the parents . . . it's a lot easier to give and relay information, which is quite critical when you're work in an alternative school like here" (Emily).

To provide support for families, parents/carers were invited for coffee mornings to provide opportunities to meet other parents/carers and discuss concerns. However, it was also considered that the support may have been affected by staff changes and perhaps "needs to be more regular" (Victoria). Staff recognised that some parents/carers may find it difficult to get to school, therefore arrangements were made to facilitate engagement, including collecting them "in the attendance car" (Victoria) or arranging taxis. The impact of EBSA on families was acknowledged. During the coaching sessions, staff identified the need to support families whilst also maintaining boundaries.

### *Relational approaches*

Positive relationships (Figure 2) were widely cited as supportive to improving attendance, particularly relationships developed by the support staff, many of whom spent most of the day with the same class. Staff invested time in building positive relationships with the students to build their trust, provide a safe space and increase engagement. In some cases over the course of a few weeks, students had progressed from "five minutes with me" to "now, I take her out for two hours, every day" (Abigail). Cameron was able to identify key adults who she could approach for support and valued knowing they were available when required. The most appropriate member of staff was selected to support individual

students, taking into account their needs and existing relationships. Students being supported by more than one staff member was also important. Staff also played a role in supporting students to develop relationships with peers, with off-site provision staff taking two students out together to foster peer relationships.

To create a sense of belonging, staff supported the students to return to lessons and become familiar with the environment, staff and other students. Adults also ensured students on reduced timetables had access to the whole school reward system and were aware of any key changes in the school, ensuring consistent application of the behaviour policy across the setting. Cameron described not feeling the need to attend interventions as she was "busy doing what I'm doing in my lesson instead", suggesting she wanted to be in her lessons. The current attendance policy encouraged a welcoming and safe environment, "particularly for those returning to school following a period of absence". During coaching sessions, staff identified next steps, including establishing a student council.

To create a sense of safety and control, staff provided opportunities for students to experience autonomy, offering choices where possible and building on their strengths. Cameron was given some autonomy and control in relation to the reintegration plan and allowed the option of attending interventions and specific aspects of the curriculum, such as enrichment time. Consistent approaches, prior warning and clear communication with young people, including avoiding promising anything in case it was not possible to deliver, were considered critical.

### *Strategies and interventions*

Several interventions were available to support reintegration. Staff facilitated specific timetabled cookery sessions aimed at young people struggling to attend. As a way of integrating the cookery sessions with parent/carer coffee mornings, Victoria suggested students "cook for their parents" which would also allow parents/carers to "come in and see . . . what we do in an actual classroom". Therapeutic sessions with a play therapist, or the newly established pastoral team, were also available. For students who were struggling to access the school environment, online learning was available as well as off-site provision delivered by a small team of staff within the home and community. As many of the young people accessing the off-site provision had been absent from school for prolonged periods, staff took time to develop relationships and increase engagement both at home and in the community. Abigail visited young people daily, arranging activities such as horse riding, café visits or cooking in a family centre; enabling the young people to try new things and challenge themselves. One young person initially did not interact with Abigail, however "now, three weeks in, he walks past the car, smiles at me".

Individualised, young person-centred support was mentioned across the interviews with staff developing "strategies and techniques that work for each individual person" (Emily). One-to-one, small step approaches were described both at school and within the community; ensuring steps were manageable and achievable. Students accessing off-site provision were supported to reintegrate into school when they were ready. Personalised timetables supported reintegration at the young person's pace. Some students engaged in hybrid learning; accessing a combination of online, off-site and in school sessions.

Cameron's time in school "went up and up slowly" which she appreciated as the increased timetable enabled her to spend more time with her friends. Despite being satisfied with her increased timetable, Cameron explained the rationale for continuing to go home on a Friday afternoon "I don't like it because they mix all the year groups together". This occurred during the enrichment curriculum to allow students some autonomy and opportunities to interact with a range of peers.

Staff recognised and celebrated successes through assemblies, points systems and awards; "If I've had a good term, we get to go to McDonalds" (Cameron). Staff spent time trying to understand individual needs to implement personalised plans. When in school, students accessed support for emotional regulation including a therapy dog (research journal). For Abigail, reengagement required careful broaching "it's about spending time with them, engaging, getting to know them and do what we can with them to … hopefully, in time, get them back into school". Staff created opportunities for young people to access individual career sessions to consider their future, an understanding of which aimed to develop their sense of purpose. Abigail's role often involved identifying and referring for external agency support.

Gathering the young person's views and the tools to support information gathering and planning were referred to across the interviews. Changes to Cameron's timetable were discussed with her prior to implementation and amended if required. The ATTEND Framework (Tobias, 2021) appeared to be the most widely used tool. However, some staff reported using other tools such as the ladder (Stallard, 2020) and carefully selecting tools dependent on the young person. Overall there was a clear emphasis on the importance of making the young person the centre of the process and provision.

## Discussion

The purpose of this research was to explore how a specialist SEMH school in England developed approaches to support students experiencing attendance difficulties. Following an EPS-led pilot programme, six staff members and one student were interviewed. The research findings suggest that developments in holistic school attendance approaches were generally perceived to be working well, despite some challenges including time constraints and staff availability.

A whole school approach (Nuttall & Woods, 2013) through which all staff developed an understanding of the complexities of EBSA and the rationale for support was fundamental to the school's attendance approach. The focus on all staff taking responsibility for attendance, leadership from SLT and linking attendance and safeguarding clearly aligns with the new national guidance (DfE, 2024a). Research indicates inconsistent approaches and policy application are negatively perceived by young people (Want & Gulliford, 2024), suggesting the SEMH school staff's consistent application of behaviour policies through whole school reward systems may improve students' sense of fairness. Consistent approaches to policy implementation can be further supported through student engagement in reviews (Want & Gulliford, 2024). The SEMH school staff intended to establish a school council to facilitate student involvement.

Research conducted in a large, mainstream secondary school identified attendance monitoring, the school size and progress setbacks as barriers to effectively identifying and addressing needs (Ward & Kelly, 2024). This is in contrast to the current SEMH school

whose staff acknowledged and accepted the likelihood of setbacks and monitored internal absence closely to support attendance. In addition, the high staff-student ratio and positive relationships were likely to facilitate identification and a flexible approach to addressing needs.

In the current research, home-school communication (Kljakovic et al., 2021; Lester & Michelson, 2024) and supporting families were fundamental to change. Staff recognised the impact that EBSA can have on families (Want & Gulliford, 2024) which encouraged creative approaches to providing support. This contrasts with mainstream secondary settings, where working with families has proved challenging despite acknowledgement of the value of working with families (Ward & Kelly, 2024).

Literature highlights the role of relational approaches to prevent and address EBSA. The current research highlighted how the school were working to facilitate positive relationships with staff and other students (Corcoran et al., 2022), promoting a sense of belonging (Boaler & Bond, 2023) and creating a safe environment (Neilson & Bond, 2023). Relationships can act as a protective factor and reduce the chance of EBSA difficulties (Want & Gulliford, 2024).

The strategies and interventions identified in the findings reflect recent research including allowing students some control over their provision (Neilson & Bond, 2023), adjustments to the school day and person-centred approaches (Lester & Michelson, 2024). Hybrid learning models have become increasingly popular to facilitate reintegration to the classroom setting (2024). School staff found off-site provision for more severe needs and access to an engaging curriculum facilitated reintegration (Finning et al., 2018).

Selecting the approaches used based on the young person and their parents/carer's communication preferences may prevent parent engagement barriers identified in the literature (Ward & Kelly, 2024). The focus on examinations and fulltime attendance in mainstream schools (Ward & Kelly, 2024) might act as barriers when compared to the flexible, person-centred approaches adopted by the SEMH school which included engaging in shared activities with key adults prior to gradual reintegration to lessons. Whilst a gradual reintegration may also be favoured in larger settings, staff may be constrained by the academic pressures. Moreover, smaller settings might also offer more flexible deadlines reducing the academic pressure and a behaviour policy which students considered fairer (Wilkins, 2008).

### *Limitations*

There are some limitations to this study which must be considered: although the research findings suggest that a range of factors contributed to attendance approach development, the small scale nature of the research suggests that firm conclusions cannot be drawn regarding the impact of the LA training and coaching. Further, in relation to the programme and research sample, although the programme aimed to support the whole school approach, some staff missed the initial training and/or first coaching session. This may have impacted the process, although all staff contributed fully when present. Additionally, as noted in the methodology, although the researcher had intended to gather at least three students' views, this was not possible, suggesting that the barriers to gaining student perspectives were indicative of the vulnerability of the cohort (Neilson & Bond, 2023). Although the one student who was interviewed offered their first person

account, the absence of other student perspectives nonetheless may have had an impact on data that might have been gathered from other students regarding their differing, or similar, perspectives. However, due to the time limitations and the small, specialist setting, it was not feasible to gather sufficient student views to identify patterns or themes and some of the challenges identified here may inform planning for additional research. Moreover, the researcher intended to evaluate anonymised attendance data over time to explore changes, however, it was not possible to access these data.

Despite the small sample size (Halligan & Cryer, 2022) localisation (Chian et al., 2024) and limitations outlined above, it is expected that there may be many aspects from the current case study which might help inform provision in other similar settings (Yin, 2018) and be utilised to inform additional research.

## *Implications for practice*

### *Educational psychologists*

This research highlighted ways EPs could support all schools with their EBSA approaches. Alongside whole school training/coaching, EPs could provide role-specific training and approaches such as solution circles to facilitate group problem-solving (Brown & Henderson, 2012). This support could be delivered across LAs or clusters of schools to maximise reach, develop skills and self-efficacy and hence build capacity within settings. Staff within the current study reported learning more effectively through face-to-face coaching which provided opportunities for shared learning and problem-solving. Moreover, the termly coaching sessions provided opportunities for staff to try approaches and discuss their success in subsequent sessions. Follow-up opportunities may have also increased the likelihood of staff trying out new strategies. Therefore, EPs should consider the most appropriate delivery model.

### *Schools*

School staff, particularly support and classroom staff, provide fundamental input into early identification of needs. It is therefore important for all staff to access training and opportunities to revisit prior learning to ensure implementation. Drawing on students' strengths and interests facilitates personalised intervention (Preece & Howley, 2018) which SEMH staff identified supported a sense of safety. Schools require clear processes and systems for staff to raise concerns or seek additional guidance such as linking with SLT. Schools also play a role in recognising when to refer to external services such as mental health, social care or EPs.

Given the success of alternative activities to re-engage students found in this research, an additional consideration might be the use of blended learning packages where face-to-face learning is supplemented by online learning (2024) or vice versa. Within school environments where staff resources are stretched, a blended learning model, particularly one conducted in designated areas on-site, may allow students more independence and autonomy whilst also building staff capacity to provide pastoral support and fulfil their safeguarding roles.

### *Future research*

This preliminary study highlighted potential for school level action research projects or detailed case studies to explore and evaluate EBSA policy development across specialist settings. The identified limitations prevented a detailed evaluation of potential medium and long-term changes to approaches and their positive impact on attendance. However, future research could seek to gather a wider range of views from this and other SEMH settings.

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