

**INVESTIGATING THE FACTORS ASSOCIATED WITH  
EMOTIONALLY-BASED NON-ATTENDANCE AT SCHOOL  
FROM YOUNG PEOPLE'S PERSPECTIVE**

**by**

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To Mum, Dad and Ian

for making this possible

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## CHAPTER 1

### VOLUME 1: INTRODUCTION

During my second and third year of the Applied Educational and Child Psychology Doctoral programme at the University of Birmingham, I have been employed as a trainee educational psychologist by a West Midland Local Authority (LA). The current volume of work represents the first part of a two volume thesis, which consists of a critical literature review and a small scale research study, both of which are related to the topic of emotionally-based school non-attendance.

#### ***1. Reasons for choosing research area***

The reasons I selected emotionally-based school non-attendance as an area of research are two-fold. Firstly, in the early stages of the Applied Educational and Child Psychology Doctoral programme I took an active interest in the topic of school refusal, which was prompted by a case I was involved with on my first fieldwork placement. Through reading around the topic, I appreciated that there are significant gaps in the literature, which is predominantly written from psychiatric perspectives, with the majority of research focussing on the clinical characteristics of school refusers. Additionally, much of this research has focussed on young people with severe and persistent forms of school refusal (usually resulting in years of absence), with very little attempt to elicit the views of the young people themselves. Consequently, there is potentially a 'hidden' group of school-aged young people, who are characterised by intermittent and less severe patterns of absence from school, albeit with

elevated levels of anxiety (West Sussex County Council Educational Psychology Service, 2004). It appeared to me that, without the identification of these young people, and timely, appropriately targeted intervention, this vulnerable group is potentially 'at risk' of developing chronic absence in the future.

Secondly, my employing local authority was influential in my choice of school refusal as an area of research, since 'emotionally-based non-attendance' (EBNA) is currently a high priority, and the educational psychology team has taken an active role in developing a referral pathway for schools to use when an emerging pattern of school refusal is noted. This was developed to promote earlier stages of intervention for school refusers, and to prevent reactive referrals of young people to the Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service (CAMHS). Therefore, the Principal Educational Psychologist considered this topic a relevant area of research for the County, and supported my interest in seeking the views of young people who are 'at risk' of developing severe forms of emotionally-based non-attendance. However, as Chapter 2 (the critical literature review) will discuss in more detail, several authors adopt various terminology other than emotionally-based non-attendance, which include '*school refusal*' (Berg et al, 1969) '*school refusal behaviour*' (Kearney and Silverman, 1990), '*emotionally-based school refusal*' (West Sussex Educational Psychology Service, 2004) '*extended school non-attendance*' (Pellegrini, 2007) and '*chronic non-attendance*' (Lauchlan, 2003).

## ***2. My identity as a researcher***

My identity as a trainee educational psychologist, as well as my previous employment as a teaching assistant, has had a significant influence on my epistemological assumptions underpinning the methodology of my research study. In my previous role as teaching assistant, I was in a privileged position to develop trusting relationships with children, and I found it extremely insightful and enlightening to listen to their views about their learning, social environment, and emotional needs. To date in my position as a trainee educational psychologist, I believe that eliciting the views of young people is a fundamental part of any assessment and intervention. Consequently, I align myself with a constructivist epistemology and idiographic methodology, which assumes that young people's views are subjectively truthful and valid in their own right (Gadamer, 1975).

## ***3. Overview of Volume 1***

The first part of Volume 1 consists of a critical literature review of published research into school refusal. In this review, four main areas will be discussed that explore the principal risk and protective factors associated with school refusal, and the extent to which the research considers the role of school-based factors and the voice of the child. This review considers the challenges associated with the conceptualisation of school refusal. There is wide variation in the way researchers and practitioners understand the heterogeneous nature of school refusal, and a range of alternative terminologies is used within the literature. This is a pertinent consideration in terms of the relationship between Parts One and Two of this thesis (Chapters

2 and 3). The general term, 'school refusal' will be referred to throughout the critical literature review (Chapter 2), whereas the research report (Chapter 3) will adopt my employing LA's term: emotionally-based non-attendance.

The second part of the volume (Chapter 3) comprises a small scale research study, which is positioned within the interpretive paradigm. In this study, I sought the views of a 'hidden' cohort of young people, who had been identified as 'at risk' of developing chronic forms of emotionally-based non-attendance in the future. I used personal construct psychology (PCP) to elicit and support the elaboration and interpretation of the young people's views. PCP emphasises that events are uniquely meaningful in the ways that are constructed by individuals (Kelly, 1955).

The literature review (Part 1/Chapter 2) and the empirical study (Part 2/Chapter 3) are written as 'stand alone' papers. However, it is recognised that there is a natural overlap in content between the two, as the introduction to the research study makes reference to some key elements from the literature that is critically discussed in Part 1.

#### **4. The target journals for Volume 1**

Both parts of this volume have been written to journal specification. The target journal for the critical literature review is *Psychology in the Schools*. This is a peer-reviewed journal that welcomes both theoretical and applied manuscripts, and has previously included articles on the topic of school refusal (Doobay, 2008; Lyon and Cotler, 2007; Pilkington & Piersel 1991). The

scope of the journal includes topics that confront educational psychologists, teachers, counsellors and other professionals working in or with schools.

The small scale research report has been written for *Pastoral Care in Education*. This journal is directed primarily toward teachers and researchers interested in the personal and social development, education and care of students. The journal explores an extension of contemporary issues, relevant to the emotional health, wellbeing and social development of children and young people, and the role of schools' pastoral provisions in meeting social, behavioural and emotional needs. In focussing on the contribution of pastoral provisions in education (e.g. citizenship, health, social and moral education; managing behaviour; whole school approaches; school structures, school exclusion, bullying and emotional development), a variety of contributions are accommodated, ranging from articles of a theoretical nature, research reports, scholarly debates and practical articles for school improvement.

In searching the journal over the last 5 years (2005-2010), there were a variety of reasons why *Pastoral Care in Education* was chosen as the target journal for my empirical study. Firstly, although two separate articles explored the topic of school absenteeism, this was solely focused on truancy and written from an education welfare perspective (Sheppard, 2005; Zhang, 2007). Considering that the journal has no articles featuring the specific nature of emotionally-based non-attendance, I considered that my study would contribute towards the filling of this gap. Secondly, the journal appears to have an affinity for articles that explore the views and perceptions of young

people, which is a key focus of this volume. Finally, an article similar to my own study demonstrating the practical utility of personal construct psychology by exploring the views of primary school children's views about school (Maxwell, 2006), has featured in this journal.

***5. Constraints relevant to meeting requirements for a postgraduate research thesis.***

Although my target journal has influenced the write-up of the empirical study, there are certain features of doctoral writing that are not compatible with writing for this journal. Therefore, in order to meet the doctoral requirements of the University of Birmingham, Chapter 4 of this volume extends upon the methodological specification and critique presented in the (Chapter 3) research report, affording an opportunity to reflect critically upon the research methodology and ethics of working with vulnerable young people, to consider the scope for further research, and elaborate suggested implications for practice, with a more specific focus on educational psychology practice than would be the norm within Pastoral Care in Education. In this chapter, I also assert what I consider to be the original contribution to theory development, that can be claimed for my empirical study.

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**PART 1/CHAPTER 2**

**SCHOOL REFUSAL: A CRITICAL LITERATURE REVIEW**

## SCHOOL REFUSAL: A CRITICAL LITERATURE REVIEW

### Aims and objectives

The purpose of the current paper is critically to review existing research on 'school refusal', in terms of conceptualisation, prevalence, and associated risk and protective factors. Additionally, there has been a significantly limited amount of research into the 'school factors' associated with school refusal. Furthermore, the current review will demonstrate that the voice of the child has been insufficiently represented, and there appears to be a bias towards adult discourses in the school refusal research. The current literature review will address the broad questions presented in Box 1.

### Box 1. Questions for the current literature review

- 1) What are the challenges associated with the *conceptualisation* of school refusal, and determining prevalence levels?
- 2) In what way can the research be categorised in order to gain an overview of the *risk and protective factors* associated with school refusal?
- 3) What does the research say about school influences on school refusal?
- 4) To what extent is the *voice of the child* represented in school refusal research?

## **Methodology**

From conducting a search using *school refusal and school-non-attendance* in November 2008 from a range of educational/health and psychological databases (namely ASSIA: Applied Social Sciences Index and Abstracts, Education: A SAGE Full-Text Collection, ERIC, MEDLINE, Health Sciences: A SAGE Full-Text Collection, and Psychology: A SAGE Full-Text Collection) a total of 168 references was produced since 1968 to the present. The same search was conducted in May 2010 to provide an update account of research in the field

## **Background: School Non-Attendance**

School attendance is a high priority for government and schools. Every year, the Department for Education (which name has recently been changed from the Department for Children Schools and Families, DCSF) publishes national figures summarising the percentage of school non-attendance, and is currently engaged in the most recent (2008/2009) National Attendance Strategy. The strategy is based on the premise that reducing school absences is a vital part of schools' and local authorities' plan to:

- promote children's welfare and safeguarding;
- ensure every pupil has access to their entitled full time education;
- ensure that pupils succeed whilst at school; and
- ensure that pupils have access to the widest possible range of opportunities when they leave school.

(DCSF, 2008)

The national statistics from DfES (2006), for school absences between 2005 and 2006, highlight a discrepancy between authorised absences (absence from school with permission from school, e.g. child illness) and unauthorised absences (absence from school without permission from school, e.g. truancy). In surveys such as this, data are collected from school attendance records, based upon attendance registers which are taken twice a day in the morning and afternoon. In the 2005/2006 statistics, the percentage of missed half days represented 5.89% authorised absences and 0.79% unauthorised absences, yielding a total of 6.68% absences. This average figure represented 7.92% absences from secondary schools and 5.72% from primary schools.

At the time of writing this paper, the most recent figures for school absences are from DCSF (2008), representing absences from primary and secondary schools between Autumn term 2007 and Spring term 2008. Compared to the 2005/2006 statistics, there appears to be a reduction of 0.42% in the overall absence level, but an increase of 0.18% in unauthorised absences. However, it must be noted that DCSF (2008) has presented solely descriptive statistics, and not analysed the data further; therefore the significance of the difference between the 2007/2008 data sets cannot be confirmed.

Although the National Attendance Strategy implies that efforts are being made to ensure a reduction in school absences at a government, local authority and school level, the official statistics represent the wide bracket of 'school non-attendance'. Although the official statistics specify the two separate sets of 'authorised' and unauthorised' absence, it has been argued that the statistics

fail to acknowledge a small subgroup of non-attenders commonly known as 'school refusers' (Thambirajah, Grandison and De-Hayes, 2008). School refusal is characterised by a child's severe emotional distress (e.g. fear and anxiety) at the thought of attending school, and at times, reflects a clinically diagnosed emotional disorder. Thambirajah and colleagues argue that school refusers are often misclassified as truants or even as medically-based absences. Hence, the subgroup remains hidden and unidentified within the official statistics. There remains the challenge of conceptualising the term 'school refusal', which will be discussed further in the following section.

## **1. What are the challenges associated with the conceptualisation of school refusal?**

The subject of school refusal is one that is complex, and fraught with definitional inconsistencies. One of the major difficulties of understanding the term school refusal is the variety of terms that are used to describe school non-attendance. Thambirajah et al (2008) demonstrate the wide range of terminology that is commonly adopted to describe school non-attenders, and their overlapping definitions. The wide range of terms illustrated below in Table 1, demonstrates the inconsistencies and confusion that is often created when conceptualising school refusal.

**Table 1. The range of terminology used to describe school non-attendance. Developed from Thambirajah et al, 2008.**

<b>Terminology</b>	<b>Description</b>
<b>Truancy</b>	Student absence from school without the permission or knowledge of parents, guardians or teachers. Students often use the terms 'wagging' and 'skiving'.
<b>Parentally condoned absence</b>	The parent keeps their child at home for their own reasons/need. This might be for emotional/social support or running errands.
<b>School Phobia</b>	This is an out-dated psychological term that is used to describe an irrational and specific fear of a school situation. This term is misleading, as it implies that the child has a phobia of a stimulus that is always situated in school. As with many school refusers, school itself is rarely the object of fear. It is generally accepted that school refusal can result from a range of factors.
<b>Separation anxiety</b>	An unrealistic fear of separation from the child's primary attachment figure. It is argued that the child does not fear being in school, but rather fears leaving home and the attachment figure. This may be one of the reasons for children refusing to go to school, but cannot be considered the same as SR.
<b>School Refusal (SR)</b>	School refusal refers to a situation where children fail or find it difficult to attend school. This is associated with severe emotional distress, particularly anxiety. School refusal is now widely accepted in the literature, and has replaced the term school phobia (King and Bernstein, 2001; Le Heuzey, 2008; Mouren, Delorme; 2006).

The inconsistency in conceptualising school non-attendance has not only hindered the growth of research into school refusal (Thambirajah et al, 2008), but has also created practical difficulties for the researcher, such as identifying relevant samples (Wilkins, 2008). Additionally, terms in Table 1 have been criticised in the past, for being unable to reflect the heterogeneity of school refusal (Witts et al, 2007). In relation to this, few data exist about the exact percentage of school refusal in children and young people (Lyon and Cotler, 2007). In some cases school refusal has been estimated to occur in 1-5% of all children (Sewell, 2008); however it is widely acknowledged that

reported prevalence rates vary considerably (Elliot, 1999; Kearney and Bensaheb, 2006). For instance, estimates by Kearney (2001) suggest that the problem affects between 5% and 28% of all school aged children, which suggests that the studies based on this large variation reflect the inconsistent criteria used by researchers to define school refusal. The definitional imprecision and large variability of estimates demonstrates the assessment challenges associated with school refusal (Lyon and Cotler, 2007). Explicitly with regard to prevalence levels in the UK, there are no official estimates of school refusal as the term is not specifically identified in the non-attendance statistics.

A recent review of school refusal that was conducted over the last ten years by King and Bernstein (2001) has shown that the term 'school refusal' has gained wide-spread acceptance over the term 'school phobia'. School phobia is considered to be a dated and often invalid psychological term that encapsulates specific fears relating to specific situations in school. School refusal on the other hand, is a more inclusive term, and allows for a multiplicity of factors contributing towards a child's emotional distress and refusal behaviour (King and Bernstein, 2001; Le Heuzey, 2008; Mouren & Delorme, 2006). King and Bernstein (2001) note however, that debates related to definitions continue in the literature, which questions whether or not the concept of school refusal should include truancy, school attendance problems, and anti-social behaviour in schools. Therefore, it is suggested that the existing definitional ambiguity should be taken into account when interpreting any published work on the topic of school refusal.

### **1.1. Early attempts to conceptualise school refusal**

By searching the literature from 1968, Berg, Nichols and Pritchard (1969) were the first researchers to circumvent the difficulties described above, by providing criteria to conceptualise the term school refusal and distinguish it from truancy. While Berg et al's paper was written 40 years ago, it remains a highly referenced paper in the current research. Berg and colleagues selected a sample of 29 children (mean age of 12years, 10 months) who had been admitted to psychiatric hospital with a diagnosis of 'school phobia'. The authors carefully selected the subjects in their study in order to establish explicit criteria relating to school refusal alone, and exclude any extraneous variables. The excluded variables included parent authorised absences, child psychosis, chronic or acute physical illness, truancy, and neurotic disturbances. After taking a history from at least one parent (usually the mother), interviewing the child and looking at previous case records, Berg and colleagues considered that school refusal entailed the criteria summarised in Box 2.

#### **Box 2. The characteristics of school refusal, according to Berg et al (1969)**

- 1) **severe difficulty in attending school**- often amounting in prolonged absence
- 2) **severe emotional upset**- shown by symptoms such as excessive fearfulness; undue tempers, misery or complaints of feeling ill without obvious organic cause, on being faced with the prospect of going to school
- 3) **staying at home with the knowledge of parents**, when the child should be at school
- 4) **absence of significant antisocial disorders** such as stealing, lying, wandering, destructiveness and sexual misbehaviour



Berg et al's operational definition has provided valuable criteria for most of the recent literature on school refusal e.g. Berg et al (1993), Elliot, (1999), Lyon and Cotler, (2007), Place et al, (2000), West Sussex County Council Educational Psychology Service (2004). Additionally, it offers a significant contrast to truancy, which is more likely to entail a lack of interest in school and a child's choice to engage in more appealing activities. Instead, Berg et al's criteria accentuate a young person's excessive anxiety and emotional upset about attending school. Despite the credibility and popularity of Berg et al's operational definition, as well as the fact that most of the recent research has adopted the above criteria, the limitations of the study cannot be ignored. The sample of children represented extreme cases of school refusal, with all children being admitted into a regional adolescent psychiatric unit, and 23 out of the 29 children having previously been referred to child and adolescent psychiatrists. The extent to which these cases can be considered representative of the majority of school refusers who do not have a clinical diagnosis and may only be mildly-moderately affected by their fear and anxiety, is open to question. The limitations of Berg et al's 'one size fits all' medicalised approach must be acknowledged when applying their clinical criteria to the heterogeneous school refusal population.

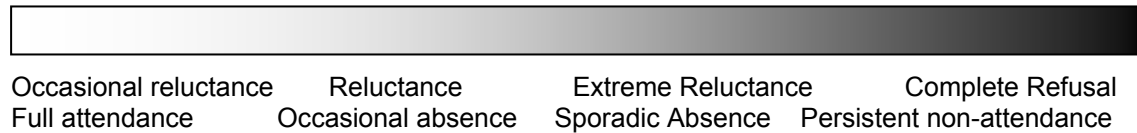
### ***1.2. The heterogeneity of school refusal***

Essentially, the most striking feature of school refusal that can be drawn from Berg et al's classification is the severe emotional distress that is experienced by the child at the prospect of attending school. Additionally, the level of emotional distress that is experienced by these children can vary significantly,

and the school refusal behaviour can exist with varying degrees of severity.

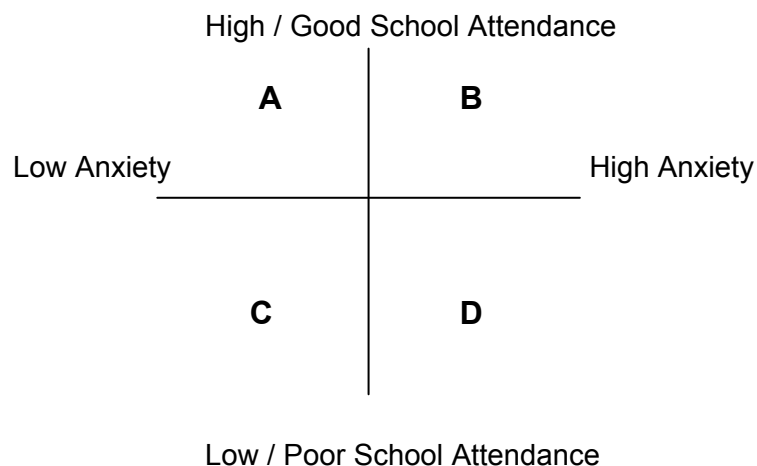
Figure 1 below illustrates this wide spectrum.

**Figure 1. The varying degrees of school refusal behaviour. From Thambirajah et al (2008)**



The West Sussex Educational Psychology Service (2004) adopt the term 'Emotionally-Based School Refusal', and concur with Berg et al's (1969) operational definition (four characteristic symptoms of school refusal). They too emphasize that school refusal is fundamentally characterised by the presence of anxiety, which can greatly impact on a young person's non-attendance and behaviour at school. The authors illustrate the relationships between anxiety and non-attendance within the following matrix.

**Figure 2. Emotionally Based School Refusal: The relationship between anxiety and non-attendance (from West Sussex County Council Educational Psychology Service (2004)).**



- A-**The majority of the school population in that they are not anxious.
- B-** Children who are very anxious but do manage to maintain school attendance.
- C-** Children who may be considered as truants in as much as they have low school attendance but do not show anxiety as the major factor leading to their non-attendance.
- D-** Children who are highly anxious and feel unable to attend school. These are the children considered to be anxious school refusers.

The final category (group D) represents a number of children who can be identified by parents, schools and professionals, by their high levels of absence from school and show high levels of anxiety (which presents itself as excessive fearfulness, undue tempers, psychosomatic symptoms or complaints of feeling ill, on being faced with the prospect of going to school, as characterised by Berg et al, 1969). This group, often characterised by young people known to Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS), represents those who are likely to access specialised provisions or units for persistent absence. Category C are commonly classified as truants (low school attendance with low anxiety), and captured within official statistics as 'unauthorised absences'. The majority of literature has focussed on these two groups of young people, as they tend to represent the severe end of the truancy/school refusal continuum and are easily identified for sampling purposes. Conversely, Category B represents a group of children who successfully manage to attend school, despite their high level of anxiety. It is argued here that young people within this category remain largely hidden in the school population, and thus represents an 'unresearched gap in the literature. Similarly, the young people that display intermittent patterns of attendance and high anxiety (individuals who fall between categories B and D), run the risk of chronic non-attendance in the future (category D, West Sussex Educational Psychology Service,2004). It is essential that this group of young people are identified early, and that further research is conducted in this area.

The heterogeneous nature of school refusal has been acknowledged in a widely referenced paper by Elliot (1999), who argues that school refusal takes diverse forms and is multi-causal; it is now widely accepted by researchers in the field that it should not be defined as a unitary disorder. For instance, Kearney and Bensaheb (2006) suggest that the substantial heterogeneity of symptoms in school refusal can result in a complex presentation of both internalizing and externalising behaviours. Elliot (1999) suggests that there should be a decreased emphasis on the *symptoms* of school refusal, and a greater focus upon the *functions* served by school refusal.

### **1.3. School refusal behaviour: a functional approach**

As opposed to conceptualising school refusal as a constellation of symptoms (Berg et al, 1969), a behavioural perspective has been advocated by a lead researcher and writer in the field, Christopher Kearney. In his extensive work, Kearney focuses specifically on *school refusal behaviour*, and examines the underlying functions of that behaviour/non-attendance. Hence, here school refusal is based upon a model of functional analysis. Kearney and Silverman (1996) claim that school refusal encompasses '*child-motivated refusal to attend school or difficulties remaining in school for an entire day*' (p. 345). Therefore, rather than focussing on a distinction between school refusal and truancy (pioneered by Berg et al, 1969, and illustrated by West Sussex EPS, 2004), Kearney emphasises the importance of examining the reasons why children and young people are not going to school (Lauchlan, 2003). It is important to acknowledge however, that Kearney's work includes populations of children who do not want to go to school for a variety of reasons, which

includes truants. Therefore, his work is not simply restricted to a specific population of school refusers.

In an attempt to identify the maintaining variables surrounding school refusal behaviour, Kearney and Silverman (1990) assessed seven persistent non-attenders (mean age 12.5 years) using semi-structured child and parent interviews, and a range of child self-report measures designed to assess school refusal behaviour (i.e. Fear Survey Schedule for Children-Revised, FSSC-R, Ollendick, 1983; Children's Manifest Anxiety Scale-Revised, CMAS-R, Reynolds and Richmond, 1978; State-Trait Anxiety Inventories for Children, STAIC, Spielberger, 1973; Social Anxiety Scale for Children, SCAS, La Greca, Dandes, Wick, Shaw & Stone, 1998; and the School Refusal Assessment Scale for Children, SRAS-C, Kearney and Silverman, 1988). It must be acknowledged that these measures predominantly collect quantitative data and may be criticised for not obtaining more rich and subjective accounts of a child's school refusal (indicative of qualitative data). Additionally, the use of self report measures are sometimes considered unreliable, due to the possibility of demand characteristics (Dadds et al, 2004). In order to demonstrate good inter-rater reliability and test-retest reliability, the authors also asked parents and class teachers to complete a series of questionnaires. The authors suggested that children fell within one of four categories, based upon the function served by school refusal behaviour (Box 3).

**Box 3. The functions of school refusal behaviour. Developed from Kearney and Silverman (1990)**

- 1) *avoidance of specific fearfulness or general over-anxiousness*** related to the school setting;
- 2) *escape from aversive social situations***, e.g. concerning problems based upon negative relationships with others in school;
- 3) *attention-getting or separation anxious behaviour***, which may be related to somatic complaints or tantrums; and/or
- 4) *rewarding experiences provided out of school***, e.g. the child gains opportunities to engage in preferred activities. This group are usually called truants.

Treatment was prescribed to children based upon the results of the functional analysis, and within which of the four categories they mostly fell (it is critically acknowledged that Kearney and Silverman specifically adopt medically based language such as ‘treatment’, as opposed to ‘intervention’). In order to measure treatment effectiveness, the researchers examined the results via school attendance, pre-and post treatment questionnaire data, and child and parent daily ratings. Six out of the seven children returned to school full time, without any significant emotional distress, when treatment was assigned in accordance with the assessed function of their school refusal behaviour. Kearney and Silverman concluded from these findings, that the four motivating factors surrounding school refusal behaviour (illustrated above in Box 3) can be identified and modified, thus creating an effective assessment and treatment model. More recent studies, such as Kearney and Albano (2004), provide continued support for the functional model of school refusal classification. However, the authors acknowledge that children might display mixed functional conditions; thus, the complexities involved in understanding

a child's school refusal behaviour are increased. For example, a child may initially avoid school due to a specifically aversive situation (category 1), but then later refuse school due to the rewards gained from staying at home (category 4). Thus, the complex and multi-faceted nature of school refusal, highlights a need for sensitively attuned multi-modal intervention (Kearney and Albano, 2004). Overall, Kearney and Silverman (1990) argue that their study demonstrates the benefits of functional analysis. Despite this, several limitations remain, as noted in Table 2.

**Table 2. Proposed limitations of Kearney and Silverman's (1990) functional analysis of school refusal behaviour.**

<b>Limitation</b>	<b>Description</b>
<i>Sample Size</i>	Lauchlan (2003) acknowledges that the small sample size of 7 young people implies that a certain amount of caution should be made when interpreting the authors' conclusions.
<i>Child centred approach</i>	In considering the more practical implications of assessing school refusal, Thambirajah et al (2008) acknowledge that ' <i>Kearney's work does not factor in issues such as family dynamics, school environment and individual parental difficulties</i> ' (p.136). In practice, professionals are not solely restricted to school refusal behaviour alone, and take into consideration the holistic factors which contribute to it (e.g. child, family, school factors). Therefore, the functional approach remains largely child centred.
<i>Approach is not specific to school refusal</i>	Kearney's classification of school refusal adopts a behavioural model of assessment and intervention. This functional approach is based upon the positive and negative reinforcement, which some may consider to ignore psychodynamic or cognitive aspects of a child's refusal behaviour. Furthermore, because Kearney's approach includes the wider and more general population of school non-attendance, there is less emphasis upon the severe emotional distress and disabling anxiety that is subjectively experienced by the young person at the prospect of attending school.
<i>Methodology</i>	Like most of the research into school refusal, Kearney and Silverman (1990) adopt a methodology that is largely based upon child self-report assessment. In looking at the diagnostic challenges surrounding children and adolescents with anxiety disorders, Dadds et al (2004) argue that self-report measures are quick and easy to administer, and are helpful in informing appropriate therapeutic treatments and providing normative data. However, the reliability of self report measures is by no means assured, particularly in terms of the demand characteristics associated with such questionnaires, but also the extent to which children have the ability to reason, communicate and comprehend their emotions and cognitions (Harter, 1990). For example, Dadds et al (2004) claim that in order for self report assessment measures to be reliable and accurate, ' <i>children must have developed a concept of the self, have an understanding of emotion, and have some insights into processes within themselves</i> ' (p.26).



#### **1.4. Alternative terminologies**

Some authors, such as Pellegrini (2007) and Lauchlan (2003), have advocated a functional approach to school refusal, which has resulted in suggesting alternative terminology to best represent the heterogeneous nature of the population. Two of these articles have been published in *Educational Psychology in Practice*. Firstly, Pellegrini (2007) argues that the 'school refusal' label is problematic as it suggests a 'within-child' explanation of the behaviour (as noted by Kearney and Silverman, 1990), which deflects attention away from the school environment as a contributory factor. Therefore, the author suggests that it is crucial to understand the functions of the non-attendance behaviour, and adopting the term '*extended school non-attendance*' (Pellegrini, 2007, p.64) is a more suitable classification. Pellegrini (2007) claims that this preferred term '*describes the visible behaviour neutrally, without attempting to suggest what underpins it, which requires careful assessment and analysis*' (p65). Additionally it stresses the importance of the school environment as a major factor in understanding the behaviour, as well as the 'extended' and persistent nature of the behaviour.

Secondly, Lauchlan (2003) adopts the term '*Chronic Non-Attendance*', and argues that it is not necessarily useful to distinguish school refusal from truancy when responding to severe absenteeism, and that 'school refusal' is a largely unhelpful term due to the variety of reasons for young people's non-attendance. Therefore, considering to the journal in which Lauchlan's (2003) article is published (*Educational Psychology in Practice*), the author advocates a functional approach to assessment as the most productive

method for educational psychologists, particularly for planning effective interventions.

### ***1.5. Practitioner understandings of school refusal***

Research commissioned by the Local Government Association in 2003 also suggested that a vague understanding of school refusal then existed amongst practitioners in LEAs and schools. Archer and colleagues (2003) conducted the most recent recognised large scale study that has investigated widespread professional understanding of school refusal. The aims of the research were to:

- explore different perceptions of school refusal and school phobia;
- describe the range of profiles which represent pupils identified as school refusers or phobics;
- describe the approaches and action taken by LEAs and schools to support school refusing pupils and their families;
- identify training and staff development needs; and
- identify preventative measures and good practice in this area.

The study adopted a mixed method approach across three strands: a survey of LEAs, a survey of schools, and case studies in a sample of schools. Although Archer and colleagues adopt a mixed methods approach (using both qualitative and quantitative methodology) and include a range of stakeholders in their sample (including parents), no mention is made about the views of the children and young people in the case study element of the research (Strand 3). Table 3 below illustrates the methodology in greater detail.

**Table 3- Archer et al's (2003) methodology across three stands.**

<b>Strand</b>	<b>Methodology</b>	<b>Targeted sample</b>	<b>Purposes</b>
<b>Strand 1</b>	<b>LEA survey</b> - an eight page questionnaire.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- The survey was directed to the principal educational psychologists across all 150 LEAs in England.</li> <li>- 60 questionnaires were returned (40% response rate)</li> </ul>	<p>The questionnaire sought the following information:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- LEAs definition of school refusal and school phobia</li> <li>- Policies relating to the issue</li> <li>- Numbers of pupils regarded as school refusers/phobics</li> <li>- Evidence of the causes of the school refusal within the school</li> <li>- School-based strategies</li> <li>- Support available to pupils, families and schools</li> <li>- Collaboration with outside agencies to support these pupils.</li> </ul>
<b>Strand 2</b>	<b>School survey</b> - a nine page questionnaire	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-The survey was sent to a sample of 600 schools in England (randomly sampled 175 primary and 175 secondary, and 250 special schools and PRUs) (280 questionnaires were returned (47% response rate)</li> </ul>	<p>The questionnaire sought the following information:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-whether schools had a definition of school refusal/phobia</li> <li>-the numbers of pupils identified as school refusers</li> <li>-schools' experience of the causes of school refusal,</li> <li>-approaches to dealing with the problem,</li> <li>-the schools' collaboration with outside agencies.</li> </ul>
<b>Strand 3</b>	<b>Interviews</b> - case studies	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-16 schools, which were willing to engage in further case work, were identified (seven secondary schools, two middle schools, two primary schools, three special schools and two PRUs)</li> <li>-The schools were geographically varied and also varied in size</li> <li>-Those interviewed included class teachers, SENCOs, pastoral support teachers, learning support assistants, EWOs, and other outside agency representatives of social services and/or the health authority</li> <li>-Finally interviews were conducted with parents and carers</li> </ul>	<p>The interviews were carried out in an eight week period and focussed on four main areas</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- identification and assessment</li> <li>-factors precipitating school refusal</li> <li>-Provision for school refusal</li> <li>-Monitoring and evaluation structures</li> </ul>

Over half of the LEAs which responded to the survey indicated that they did not distinguish school refusers and/or school phobics as a separate group from other non-attenders. Additionally, no clear definitions among practitioners in LEAs and schools distinguished between the terms school phobia and school refusal. Many schools noted that they did not have a formally documented definition of school refusal or school phobia, but would use phrases such as *'persistently refusing to attend school'*, *'pupils who can't face school'*, *'acute anxiety about attending school'* (p.6). Overall, questionnaire and interview data provided firm evidence that there was little common understanding amongst practitioners about school refusal and school phobia, and more specifically, very few schools had any written guidance on the topic.

It appears that researchers in the field of school refusal have a clearer conceptualisation of the term than professionals in LEA and schools. As frontline practitioners, education professionals might be expected to have secure understanding of school refusal; however this does not appear to be the case. It is likely that reasons for this include a limited amount of educational and school related literature on the subject (the majority of publications are within psychological and psychiatric literature), but also, as noted above, the official School Non Attendance (SNA) figures do not recognise school refusers as a separate group (Thambirajah et al, 2008).

## **2. In what way can the research be categorised in order to gain an overview of the risk and protective factors associated with school refusal?**

Within the literature, it is widely accepted that school refusal is associated with a combination of interrelated factors. This was emphasised in a recent guidance report on emotionally-based school refusal, produced by a working party of educational psychologists from West Sussex County Council (West Sussex County Council Educational Psychology Service, 2004). This guidance suggested that school refusal can be related to both *predisposing* and *precipitating* factors. Predisposing factors are those which might be present in the nature of the school, the child's family or a child her/himself, which will vary according to an individual child's unique set of characteristics and circumstances. Precipitating factors refers to immediate triggers: often a particular event or change of circumstances, which interacts with predisposing vulnerabilities, and lead to a child's school refusal. However, it must be acknowledged that the majority of the research disproportionately focuses on the predisposing factors.

Despite the multi-causal nature of school refusal, the majority of the literature has focussed on the *clinical characteristics* of children and adolescents with school refusal. Additionally, there has been a large volume of research into the influence of *family and home context* in school refusal, which will be reviewed. It is acknowledged that school factors play an important role as risk and protective factors associated with school refusal, but for the purposes of

the current paper, school influences will be discussed separately in greater detail in Section 3.

## **2.1 Clinical characteristics of the child**

School refusal is not a specific psychiatric diagnosis; rather, it is a set of interrelated symptoms or behaviours that could be associated with an array of possible diagnoses or underlying causes (Elliot, 1999). Numerous diagnostic studies have examined the relationship between mental health disorders and school refusal, using diagnostic systems such as the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders: DSM-IV* (American Psychiatric Association, 1994) and the *International Statistical Classification of Diseases and Related Health Problems: ICD-10* (World Health Organisation, 1992-1994). The majority of this research has suggested that young people with school refusal commonly have psychiatric conditions, which help precipitate their absenteeism or result from their extended non-attendance (Kearney, 2008). Such conditions are often characterised by high levels of anxiety and depressive symptoms, many of which meet the criteria for mental health disorders.

### **2.1.1 Limitations of diagnostic studies**

Some limitations of the research into the clinical characteristics of children with school refusal must initially be acknowledged. Firstly, in a review of the literature, Lyon and Cotler (2007) recognised the existing biases in the research related to the populations most commonly studied. For instance, the majority of child participants from clinical studies had previously been

admitted to child psychiatric units and undergone clinical assessment. These children represent severe cases of school refusal, and therefore do not offer an accurate representation of the whole school refusal population. Consequently, caution in interpreting the research findings is necessary, as the skewed samples used in clinical studies may not be generalisable to the broad spectrum of school refusal.

Secondly, and in addition to the issue of sampling, Berg (1992) argued that developments in the classification of childhood psychiatric disorders have produced '*a state of confusion*' (p.159) in understanding the emotional difficulties that may contribute to school refusal. The predominant use of classification systems (such as the current and earlier editions of ICD-10 and DSM-IV) in clinical studies also raises some critical questions regarding the reliability of the research. For instance, assessment that is based upon diagnostic classification adopts a bio-medical position on mental illness, assuming that the concept of 'normal' differs from 'pathological', and that there are clear distinctions between different types of disorder (Werry, 1994). Clinical studies which use these classification systems suggest that the symptoms of anxiety and depression can often overlap; thus, problems of co-morbidity with several disorders are frequently found. It has been argued that high levels of co-morbidity may be due to a lack of discriminate validity in diagnostic systems (such as DSM-IV and ICD-10), which suggests that symptoms may not actually cluster into separate groups (as defined by the classification systems), and consequently discrete psychiatric disorders may not be distinct (Dadds et al, 2004; Spence, 1997). The validity of diagnosis of

co-morbidity in clinical studies needs to be weighed when interpreting the findings of the school refusal research.

Thirdly, the identity of the researchers must be taken into consideration, as the majority are clinical psychologists or psychiatrists, who most commonly adopt a biomedical approach to assessment and intervention. Such professionals have a limited knowledge of the child's education context, which may hinder the reliability of their judgments, and reflect a tendency to position young people's distress into clinical categories of illness.

Finally, the nature of the structure and conceptual orientation of classification systems such as DSM-IV raises questions regarding its relevance and reliability as an assessment framework. As mentioned above, adopting a biomedical approach to assessing anxiety in children and using diagnostic classifications places an over-reliance on formulating mental distress as an 'illness'. Tew (2005) argues that an overly medicalised model fails to acknowledge more holistic and interactionist factors such as a child's social context (e.g. in the case of school refusal, this could be family or school factors). Tew (2005) argues against individuals being 'categorised', and claims that there needs to be a process of *'reclaiming the whole person as a social being from the partiality of a purely medical definition'* (p.15). Particularly within the complex and diverse context of school refusal, macro-systemic factors (e.g. social norms, the policy context, school culture) must be included, alongside bio-medical explanations. In relation to this, King et al (2001) acknowledge that;



*'Diagnostic evaluation is useful in focusing our attention on the specific clinical disorder(s) associated with school refusal behaviour, but needs to be supplemented by additional assessment procedures in order to obtain a more complete picture of the child, family and school.'* (p. 353)

### **2.1.2 School refusal and anxiety disorders**

A highly referenced study that looked at school refusal in anxiety disordered children and adolescents is reported by Last and Strauss (1990). Sixty-three school refusing children referred to an outpatient anxiety disorder clinic were assessed on socio-demographic, diagnostic, and personality variables, as well as family history of school refusal. Out of all the specific anxiety disorders, separation anxiety disorder was found to be the most common diagnosis amongst school refusers (38%), with social phobia a close second (30%), followed by simple phobia (22%). More generally, following use of diagnostic interview techniques, it was concluded that school refusal is prevalent among clinically referred anxiety-disordered children and adolescents, with one half of the sample showing anxiety-based school refusal (Last and Strauss, 1990). Additionally, high levels of anxiety in school refusers have been found in both clinical samples (Bools et al, 1990) and the normal school population (Berg et al, 1993). Bools et al's interviewed parents of 100 children with persistent failure to attend school, which were categorised into separate groups of 'school refusers' (N=24), 'truants' (N=53), 'both refusers and truants' (N=9) or as neither (N=14). By identifying ICD-9 (World Health Organization, 1977) psychiatric disorders, it was found that half met the criteria for a psychiatric disorder, and truants were more likely to have conduct disorder and the school refusers were more likely to have anxiety disorders.

However, this is not to suggest that all children with school refusal will necessarily have anxiety disorders. Additionally, the direction of causality remains unclear. For instance, it should not be inferred that anxiety disorders cause school refusal, nor that school refusal causes anxiety disorders.

In general, a high level of consistency has been found between recent and earlier studies, with respect to the conditions most commonly diagnosed in school refusers, which fundamentally involves anxiety, depression and disruptive behaviour (Kearney, 2008). McShane et al (2001) conducted a diagnostic study of 192 school refusers (aged 10-17) who attended a child and adolescent psychiatric facility in Australia, and found that school refusers had a high prevalence of anxiety disorders, as well as mood and disruptive behaviour disorders. However, by reviewing all patients' medical records and DSM-IV diagnoses, it was found that the onset of patients' school refusal was associated with a wide range of difficulties (not simply restricted to a psychiatric diagnosis), which included both home and school related factors.

More recently, Kearney and Albano (2004) examined a similarly large clinical sample of 143 youths with school refusal behaviour. A different methodology was adopted compared to McShane's case review approach, whereby the Anxiety Disorders Interview Schedule for Children (Silverman and Albano, 1996) was used to assign diagnoses, and the School Refusal Assessment scale (Kearney and Silverman, 1993) was used to determine the form and function of the behaviour. One third met the criteria for no diagnosis; a much higher prevalence compared to earlier studies. In general however, it was

found that the most common anxiety-related diagnoses were related to negatively reinforced school refusal behaviour (categories 1 and 2, Kearney and Silverman, 1990); anxiety disorder was specifically associated with attention seeking behaviours (category 3, Kearney and Silverman, 1990); and oppositional defiant disorder/conduct disorder were associated with the tangible reinforcement outside of school (category 4, Kearney and Silverman, 1990). This suggests that the range of functional categories are associated with differing clinical outcomes, which may be of some use in determining a clearer understanding of the most appropriate intervention.

### **2.1.3. Community based samples**

Several authors have considered the importance of looking at studies carried out in the community in order to gain a more reliable understanding of the prevalence of child mental health problems in school refusers (Lyon and Cutler, 2007; Thambirajah et al, 2008). Egger et al (2003) also argues that *'community studies are needed to understand the associations prior to referral to mental health providers'* (p.798).

Berg and colleagues (1993) were the first researchers to demonstrate the virtue of overcoming the heavy reliance on clinically based investigations, by examining eighty 13-15 year old children from the normal school population with a 40% or more record of absence rate. A Child and Adolescent Psychiatric Assessment (CAPA) Scale (Angold et al, 1995) was used as a systematic schedule to interview parents and children. Despite the differences in sampling, interview methods and the systems of classifying

disorders, Berg et al (1993) reached the same conclusions as Bools et al (1990), with half of the sample found to have either a disruptive behaviour disorder (associated with truancy) or an anxiety/mood disorder (associated with school refusal).

Egger et al (2003) have conducted the most recent large scale study using a community sample of 4,500 children with school non attendance difficulties. By interviewing children and their carers (using the CAPA scale, Angold et al, 1995) it was found that anxious school refusers were associated with depression and separation anxiety, with truancy related to oppositional defiant disorder, conduct disorder and depression. These findings were consistent with previous studies (Berg et al, 1993: Bools, et al, 1990) Interestingly, only one quarter of young people classified as 'anxious school refusal' and 'truants' met the DSM-IV criteria for psychiatric disorders, which is significantly less than Bools et al and Berg et al studies (50% in each). Egger et al argued that this disparity is due to previous studies' samples representing more severe manifestations of school refusal, with the current study representing 'milder' forms.

#### ***2.1.4. School refusal and separation anxiety***

Separation anxiety has also been found to be a critical element of school refusal, which has been described as an excessive and unrealistic anxiety about a real or anticipated separation from important attachment figures (American Psychiatric Association, 2000). It has been suggested that many children with Separation Anxiety Disorder (SAD) attempt to avoid school

(Heyne et al, 2004), and Kearney and Silverman (1990) include separation anxiety as one major function of school refusal behaviour. Recently, Doobay (2008) discussed the relationship between SAD and school refusal behaviour. By using cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT) to treat children with SAD and school refusal behaviour, the author suggests that this can '*effectively assist children to return to school, reduce their anxiety, change their maladaptive cognitions, and help them effectively cope with their situation*' (p. 270).

Pilkington and Piersel (1991) argued against an over-simplistic view of the relationship between separation anxiety and school refusal (limitations presented in Table 4). The overly common assumption that school refusal is caused by separation anxiety is partly reflected in historical influences that emphasised mother-child relationships in school refusal (Heyne et al, 2004). However, an added complication is that, although school refusal is not a psychiatric diagnosis, a 'persistent unwillingness to attend school because of fear of separation' is one criterion in DSM-IV that may contribute to a diagnosis of Separation Anxiety Disorder (Elliot, 1999).

**Table 4. The three limitations of the classic separation anxiety model of school refusal. From Pilkington and Piersel (1991)**

Limitation	Rationale
<i>i) Methodological Problems</i>	Clinical cases do not adequately represent the school refusal population. Many studies tend to be retrospective in nature, and information gained from interviewing is typically based on memory. Additionally, many of the studies do not provide detailed information regarding the basis for authors' clinical judgments of case studies, which precludes independent and external assessment of their findings.
<i>ii) Lack of generalisability regarding mother-child relationships</i>	Separation anxiety theory emphasises the mother-child relationship in the etiology of school refusal. As the theory suggests, the greatest frequency of refusal should occur when the child begins nursery. In actual fact, the peak of incidence of school refusal has been reported to be around 11-13 years old. Additionally, if children have trouble separating from their mothers to go to school, such children should also have trouble separating from their mothers in a range of other situations.
<i>iii) Lack of emphasis on external factors.</i>	A child's fear of attending school could be due to a range of external factors. The extent to which school-related fears have been mentioned in the literature is low.

The authors conclude by emphasising that young people who refuse school are not necessarily suffering from an anxiety related disorder or chronic feelings of separation anxiety. Rather, school refusal behaviour may be a rational and adaptive response by a distressed individual to an aversive school environment. Pilkington and Piersel (1991) conclude that wider contextual factors/external influences may also contribute towards a child's school refusal, and one should not assume an ontogenetic cause.

## **2.2 Family and home factors**

In order to develop improved assessment and treatment strategies for children with school refusal, several authors have investigated the familial variables and parent-child relationships. For instance, as noted above the

most common family problem described in the early research is separation anxiety in the context of hostile-dependent mother-child relationships (Johnson et al, 1941), and mothers have been described as overprotective or dominant (Berg and McGuire, 1974; Davidson, 1960).

### ***2.2.1. Family dynamics***

The nature of particular family dynamics in the school refusal population has been investigated by Kearney and Silverman (1995). From an extensive review of the research, these authors suggest that several familial subtypes are characteristic of the school refusal population. At this point it must be critically noted that a large amount of the literature in this area is psychodynamically oriented, and dependant upon early sources of research. These familial subtypes are illustrated below in the Table 5.

**Table 5. Five familial relationship subtypes associated with children and adolescents with school refusal behaviour. Developed from Kearney and Silverman (1995)**

<b>Familial relationship</b>	<b>Characteristics</b>	<b>Supporting empirical evidence</b>
<b>The enmeshed family</b>	<p>This involves over-dependant parent-child relationship. The child's over dependence on a parent (and visa versa), is associated with separation anxiety, which can lead to school refusal behaviour. Psychodynamically-orientated psychologists suggest that a mother may experience feelings of incompetence and overcompensate with affectionate and overprotective attachment with her child.</p> <p>At present, the notion of enmeshed and over dependant families remains a popular approach to describing families with school refusal behaviour.</p>	<p>York and Kearney (1993) Hersov (1960)</p>
<b>The conflictive family</b>	<p>Researchers have identified hostility and conflict as key characteristics of many families with children with school refusal behaviour.</p> <p>From a family systems perspective, conflict might be due to inadequate boundaries between parents and children. Continuous conflict between family members may therefore maintain a child's school non-attendance.</p>	<p>Makihara et al (1985) York and Kearney (1993)</p>
<b>The detached family</b>	<p>A detached family describes one whose members are not well involved with each other's activities, or attentive to each other's thoughts and feelings.</p> <p>Parents are typically not vigilant about their child's difficulties until they become severe.</p>	<p>Weiss and Cain (1964) Bernstein et al (1990)</p>
<b>The isolated family</b>	<p>An isolated family is characterised by little interaction outside the family grouping.</p> <p>Such families are reluctant to engage in outside interventions and avoid activities outside of the home.</p> <p>Kearney and Silverman (1995) comment on the research on isolated families, recommending that more is required.</p>	<p>York and Kearney (1993)</p>
<b>The healthy family</b>	<p>This is characterised as a family which is 'relationship orientated' and has higher than normal levels of cohesion and low levels of conflict.</p> <p>It is noted that many families with children with school refusal behaviour do not display enmeshed, detached, conflictive or isolated characteristics. Instead, a significant number show adaptive and healthy functioning, but include a child with behavioural difficulties.</p>	<p>York and Kearney (1993) Bernstein et al (1990)</p>



The authors also note: *'it appears that considerable overlap exists among these characteristics, a phenomenon referred to here as 'mixed familial profiles.'* (Kearney and Silverman, 1995, p.64) and comment that many families will commonly display two or more of the family characteristics illustrated above. Professionals should therefore be aware of mixed familial profiles during the assessment and intervention of this population.

Place et al (2000) also sought the views of 17 families and young people with school refusal, using semi-structured interviews and questionnaires. The authors found that families tended to live in deprived areas, and the mothers and fathers of children with school refusal had a long history of marriage difficulties. Additionally, the majority of mothers in Place et al's sample had significant mental health problems, and there were several instances of enmeshed relationships between mother and child. These findings are predominantly based on quantitative data collected from standardized questionnaires and interviews, which may have ignored more subjective and personally meaningful information of a qualitative nature. Additionally, considering that Place et al's findings are based on a small sample of 17 families, the extent to which the authors can make generalisations to the heterogeneous population of school refusal is highly questionable. In particular, the sample of children had been completely out of school for 6 months; therefore, Place et al's (2000) findings may not be generalisable to children with less severe forms of school refusal.

### **2.2.2. Single parent families and child leadership roles**

Bernstein and Borchardt (1996), a study based in the United States of America, assessed one hundred and thirty-four families from a school refusal outpatient clinic, using the Family Assessment Measure (FAM, Skinner et al, 1983). This scale comprises fifty statements about general family relationships and interactions which are categorised into seven FAM subscales (presented in Box 4).

**Box, 4. The seven subscales investigated in the Family Assessment Measure (FAM, Skinner et al, 1983)**

- a) *task accomplishment*: a family's ability to problem solve and respond to crises
- b) *role performance*: role definition and integration in the family
- c) *communication*: mutual understanding and ability to seek clarification in cases of misunderstanding
- d) *affective expression*: the appropriateness, intensity, timing and inhibition of affective communication
- e) *affective involvement*: the quality of family members' involvement with each other
- f) *control*: patterns of flexibility and influence
- g) *values and norms*: the degree of concordance and agreement among components of the family value system

Single parent families were overrepresented amongst the sample, compared to the general population. Mothers of school refusers in single-parent families reported significantly more family problems on the FAM compared to mothers living with fathers, particularly in the two areas of communication and role

performance. In Place et al's (2000) study, it was also found that in over one-third of the families there was no father figure. Bernstein and Borchardt (1996) argue that it may be particularly difficult for single mothers to define family roles and boundaries, although this reasoning is purely hypothetical and not based upon the research findings. Additionally, it was found that submissive communication from mothers lead to dominant communications from sons. Hence, inappropriate child leadership roles were established in family communication, leading to role reversals.

### ***2.2.3. Limitations of the research on family and home factors***

There are several limitations in the above studies that are worth noting. Firstly, in Bernstein and Borchardt's (1996) study and others of this kind, the views of fathers appear to be significantly underrepresented. Only half of the fathers completed the FAM (69 out of 134 families), and therefore the sample does not afford equal weight to fathers' views of family functioning. More recently, research has also discussed the underrepresentation of fathers with children with learning disabilities (Carpenter and Towers, 2008), where fathers have been identified as 'hard to reach' (McConkey, 1994), 'the invisible parent' (Ballard, 1994) and the 'peripheral parent' (Herbert and Carpenter, 1994). This research has argued that the underrepresentation of fathers is likely to be due to researchers' and practitioners' perception that mothers are the primary caregiver, and fathers' roles are regarded as more peripheral (Carpenter and Towers, 2008).

Secondly, although the Family Assessment Measure (FAM) is commended for its internal consistency reliability ratings and validity of subscales (Berstein and Borchardt, 1996; Skinner, 1987), it must be acknowledged that dysfunctional family patterns are identified through comparisons made with 'normative data'. The normative data are based upon 312 individuals in 'normal families', and 2000 family members from clinical settings, which is hardly a balanced standardisation sample. No explanation is provided of what defines a 'normal family', and the extent to which this even exists is highly questionable. Therefore, findings of FAM based upon comparisons with normative data may have little reliability or relevance, and categorising 'dysfunctional' familial characteristics into discrete subgroups may be neither practical nor valid, nor indeed ethical, particularly considering the broad spectrum of familial risk factors that is illustrated in Table 4 (Kearney and Silverman, 1995).

Thirdly, as can be seen from Table 4, Kearney and Silverman identified a whole range of familial relationships associated with school refusal (including the healthy family), which presents a rather pessimistic outlook. With such an extensive range of familial relationships identified as a potential risk for school refusal, the extent to which these findings reveal anything of practical value in informing targeting of preventative strategies is highly questionable.

### **3. What does the research say about school influences on school refusal?**

For the past two decades, researchers have indicated the need for more research into the specific role of school-related factors in school refusal, and that school-related factors are often underrepresented in accounts of the causes of school refusal (Pilkington & Piersel, 1991).

#### ***3.1. Research on 'school effectiveness'***

In the area of school attendance, educational research into the role of school has mainly centred on truancy and non-attendance (e.g. Reynolds, 1996), with studies focussing on 'school effectiveness' more generally. For instance, Reynolds (1996) reflects upon studies from the British literature (Rutter et al, 1979; Reynolds, 1982, Reynolds et al, 1987) that describe some of the factors that are present in schools with high levels of academic achievement and low levels of truancy (Box 5).

#### **Box 5. Factors present in schools with high levels of academic achievement and low levels of truancy. Developed from Reynolds (1996)**

- Headteacher management and leadership that involve a blend of 'top-down' motivation, and high levels of staff involvement
- A climate of high expectation of what pupils could achieve
- Behaviour management systems which offer rewards for good behaviour rather than reactive punishment for poor behaviour
- Pupil involvement in school (e.g. leadership positions, classroom responsibilities)
- Close liaison with parents: early intervention for trancies supported by parents
- A caring and nurturing environment, where pupils feel able to approach staff in regard to their needs
- A controlled, cohesive and consistent environment

Although it is acknowledged that such research focuses on low levels of truancy, some of the positive school factors identified by Reynolds (1996) in Box 5 may be generalisable to school refusal population. For example, some of Reynold's findings share some similarities to studies which have explored the school factors involved in school refusal (Archer et al, 2003; Wilkins, 2008), e.g. relationship with teachers, and behaviour management.

### **3.2. School factors associated with general non-attendance**

In a recent review of school absenteeism, Kearney (2008) acknowledged some of the contextual factors that are related to non-attendance. It was suggested that these ranged from school climate (the degree of support perceived by students regarding academic, social and other needs), boredom in school and bullying.

A DfES-commissioned report by Malcolm et al (2003) investigated the causes and effects of school absence from a range of stakeholder perspectives. As well as obtaining the views of parents and school staff, information on non-attendance problems was gathered from pupils in 27 case study schools. This included data from questionnaires used with a random sample of 662 pupils (Years 5 and 6) and individual interviews with 181 self-identifying 'truants' in secondary schools. Through interviewing secondary aged pupils individually, a range of school factors featured highly as reasons for missing school. Such factors included *boredom; problems with lessons; being bullied; disliking teachers; wanting to avoid tests; peer pressure; and aspects of school life anticipated with fear following weekends, holidays or periods of*

*authorised absence*. Parents also believed that bullying was a dominant factor in school non-attendance, followed by problems with teachers and school work. Despite these insightful findings from the pupils themselves, it must be recognised that the study focussed particularly on truancy and general non-attendance problems. Although the research is commended for taking into account the voice of the child, the school-related influences highlighted above may not generalise to children and adolescents with emotionally-based school refusal.

### **3.3. School factors associated with school refusal**

Lauchlan (2003) suggests that it is Kearney's functional analysis of non-attendance that has led to an increased recognition that school-based factors may be responsible for the child's difficulties (i.e. function 1 describes a child's *avoidance of specific fearfulness or general over-anxiousness* related to the school setting). More simply, if a child is anxious about coming to school, one could legitimately infer that school-related factors are indeed a contributory aspect.

The most recent large UK-based scale study by Archer and colleagues (2003) questioned teachers and other professionals about their perceptions of the specific school factors involved in school refusal. The following were identified as possible contributors (see Box 6).

**Box 6. Possible school factors associated with school refusal, identified from teachers and professionals. Developed from Archer et al (2003)**

- The size and layout of the school
- The structure of the school day
- Conflict with teachers
- Transition periods
- Fear of specific subjects
- Academic pressures
- Bullying or perceived bullying
- Friendship problems
- Inappropriate provision

Despite this, most interviewees from LEAs generally adopted the view *'that while school factors could trigger or exacerbate the problems of school refusal, the origins of the problem usually lay in the home'* (Archer et al, 2003, p.15). In determining the reliability of this conclusion, the identity of the interviewees (school staff, SENCos and head teachers etc) must be taken into consideration. For instance, school staff and head teachers may have had an element of bias in their interview responses, and have been more willing to attribute the reasons of school refusal to external influences, as opposed to suggesting school-related factors directly. The systemic school-related factors identified above suggest that schools have a fundamental role to play in tackling the precipitating factors and strengthening protective factors surrounding school refusal, in parallel to facilitating the re-integration of persistent non-attenders (Pelegrini, 2007), e.g. implementing peer support systems for returning pupils, a gradual or 'phased' return to school, alterations to the pupil's timetable, appropriate support for academic tasks (in light of the large proportion of absence from lessons).



Wilkins (2008) recognised that whilst Kearney and Silverman's (1990) functional approach indicated general school and personal causes of a student's non-attendance, it does not capture the essence of students' experiences within particular school settings. The author interviewed four high school students who attended alternative provision for students with special needs and school related anxiety. The students were reported to be thriving in their alternative provision, compared to their previous mainstream high school, which allowed Wilkins to investigate the specific factors which motivated the students to attend their new school. Themes which emerged are summarised in Table 6.

**Table 6. An illustrative example of school-based themes contributing to school-related anxiety, from Wilkins (2008)**

School-based Theme	Description
1) <i>School climate.</i>	Students described feeling comfortable and accepted by others, and being involved in trusting, interpersonal relationships.
2) <i>Academic environment.</i>	Compared to students' previous schools, academic work at the specialist provision was seen as easier with a calmer atmosphere in the classroom. Teachers were also thought to show more interest in students' academic progress.
3) <i>Discipline</i>	The disciplinary procedures in the alternative setting were considered to be non-punitive and fairer than the previous mainstream school.
4) <i>Relationships with teachers</i>	Students preferred the teachers with whom they could talk on an informal basis outside of the academic context. Students valued teachers who treated students as individuals and fulfilled their emotional and academic needs.

It must be noted that this research was conducted with a sample of children with special educational needs, additional to their severe emotionally based school refusal that had warranted alternative specialist provision, which may not be representative of the heterogeneous population. The author also concluded that, *'the fact that students willingly attended (the alternative setting) after extended periods of non-attendance from their regular schools*

*demonstrates that positive school characteristics can motivate students to attend'* (p.22).

Additionally, whilst Wilkins' (2008) research emphasises the importance of investigating the positive school factors which motivate students to attend school, the detrimental school factors that contributed towards these young people's school refusal remain unclear and require justification.

#### **4. To what extent is the voice of the child represented in school refusal research?**

With the exception of some studies (Malcolm et al, 2003; Wilkins, 2008), the views of school refusers appear largely invisible and unheard in the school refusal research.

##### ***4.1. The dominance of clinical and adult discourses***

Pellegrini (2007) acknowledges that articles and research on school non attendance are predominantly published in journals that focus on pathology such as *Journal of Anxiety Disorders, Clinical Psychology and Psychiatry, Journal of the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry, British Journal of Psychiatry, Australian and New Zealand Journal of Psychiatry*. In exploring alternative discourses, Pellegrini acknowledges a need to elicit young people's subjective accounts of their school refusal experiences, as opposed to depending on professional and/or adult based discourses.

A widely referenced paper by Yoneyama, (2000) elicited the autobiographical accounts of *tôkôkyohi* (school refusal/phobia in Japan). However, before Yoneyama discusses the young people's subjective accounts in great detail (see section 4.3) he provides a critical analysis of competing discourses about school refusal, which offers an alternative to the clinical discourses that are dominant in Western society. Table 7 illustrates four separate adult discourses on Japanese school refusal, which Pellegrini (2007) claims to be 'polarised in two main camps, competing over "within child" vs. "systemic constructions" of the issue.' (p. 68)

**Table 7. Adult discourses of *tôkôkyohi*, proposed by Yoneyama (2000)**

<b>Adult Discourse</b>	<b>Description</b>	<b>Classification (proposed by Pellegrini, 2007)</b>
<b>Psychiatric discourse</b>	<i>Tôkôkyohi</i> as a mental illness. This is seen as a matter of the child's maladjustment and maladaptation to society	'Within-child construction'
<b>Behavioural discourse</b>	<i>Tôkôkyohi</i> as laziness. This is regarded as a fault of the student, within underlying socially-deviant behaviour. The intervention lies in behaviour training and increased discipline.	'Within-child construction'
<b>Citizens' discourse</b>	<i>Tôkôkyohi</i> as resistance to school. The problem lies not within the child, but in the school system. The solution to <i>tôkôkyohi</i> will be found by changing the schools and the society of which school is a part.	'Systemic construction'
<b>Socio-medical discourse</b>	<i>Tôkôkyohi</i> as school burnout. As above, the socio-medical discourse claims that the cause of <i>tôkôkyohi</i> lies in the social structure of schools, not in the individual student. Students have real health problems as an outcome of the social environment of school. <i>Tôkôkyohi</i> is a social illness.	'Systemic construction'

## **4.2. School refusal: a negative child identity?**

Taking this argument further, an article by Stroobant and Jones (2006) critiques the dominant psychological narratives which position school refusal as a 'negative child identity'. Alternatively, the authors adopt a social constructionist stance, and raise critical questions regarding the dominant construction that school refusal is a problematic and maladaptive behavioural response.

*'School non-attendance, understood as abnormal, irrational, pathological behaviour, assumes its flip side: the assumption that going willingly to school is normal, rational and healthy behaviour. It is against this latter, socially constructed norm that school refusers are measured and identified as individuals possessing various "problem behaviours" and "psychiatric disorders" which require treatment' (Stroobant and Jones, 2006, p.213).*

In an attempt to acknowledge the voice of the child, Stroobant and Jones (2006) explore former school refusers' self-understandings. Seven female university students, all of whom were previously school refusers, were interviewed in an attempt to identify the meanings and interpretations they used to explain their school refusal. Before discussing the studies' findings, it is acknowledged that the study adopts a retrospective methodology that requires adults to reflect on their childhood emotional experiences, which over time may have lead to an element of distortion. Despite the authors' efforts to include the students' subjective representations, questions are raised regarding the extent to which adult discourses can provide an accurate representation of childhood school refusal. The authors found that the women had developed counter discourses (alongside the dominant psychological views), that provided thought-provoking explanations for their school refusal. Firstly, most of the women saw their 'difference' or 'sensitivity' as an indication

that they were 'insightful non-conformists' and legitimately realistic and more open minded than the 'normal' individual. Secondly, some of the women rejected the dominant view that school attendance was beneficial or necessary. Instead, they claimed that '*school actually constituted a dangerous or harmful environment*' (p, 220). Although controversial, the comments made by the young women contest the commonly held view that school is a vital social agency that plays a critical role in instilling societal and cultural values, in addition to the teaching of essential skills that enable children and young people to function in their environment (Pellegrini, 2007).

#### **4.3. School refusal: a highly individual process**

Yoneyama (2000) also discussed the autobiographical accounts given by students which offer an insight into how they construct their own behaviour, which provides a unique contrast to the adult discourses in Table 7. Interviews with students revealed that their experiences of school refusal can be conceptualised around two different questions; 1) whether they experience somatic symptoms; and 2) whether they want to go to school. The author argues that from student accounts, *tôkôkyôhi* is not a static experience, but a process whereby physical changes and perceptions of the self and school develop and evolve in a very individualised manner. According to the student discourse, *tôkôkyôhi* is described as a process whereby students tire and eventually 'burn out' in an extremely demanding and conformist school system, which eventually leads them to search for empowerment and subjectivity (illustrated in Table 8). Other recent studies in Japan have also acknowledged the problems of school non-attendance, and the high level of

stress this population experience that can lead to eventual 'burn out' or other mental health difficulties (Kano and Arisaka, 2006).

**Table 8. A student discourse of *tôkôkyohi*. Developed from Yoneyama (2000)**

Process of <i>tôkôkyohi</i>	Student discourse
<p><b>Stage 1</b> <i>'I just cannot go'</i></p> <p style="text-align: center;">↓</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Student may be confused and troubled by their feelings, and unable to explain why they cannot go to school</li> <li>-Complaints of excessive tiredness</li> <li>-Feeling tired is considered a weak and illegitimate excuse in Japanese society</li> <li>-There is a long 'grey' stage when students have intermittent attendance at school</li> </ul>
<p><b>Stage 2</b> <i>'I want to go but cannot'</i></p> <p style="text-align: center;">↓</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Clear somatic symptoms manifest themselves</li> <li>- This is triggered by additional pressure upon students or by a separate incident</li> <li>- This serves to detach the student from school almost completely</li> <li>- Students undergo physical and psychological pain (anxiety and somatic complaints) at this stage, and need rest</li> </ul>
<p><b>Stage 3</b> shift from <i>'I cannot go to school'</i> to <i>'I do not go to school'</i></p> <p style="text-align: center;">↓</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Whilst taking time off school, students go through a long process of self doubt and self questioning</li> <li>- Reevaluate who they are and how they understand school</li> <li>- Students begin to understand their <i>tôkôkyohi</i> as a matter of choice (as opposed to ill health)</li> <li>- Students come to terms with their school absence and themselves</li> </ul>
<p><b>Stage 4</b> discovery of selfhood and critical reappraisal of school</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Final stage is the discovery of the self and critical appraisal of school</li> <li>- A sense of empowerment is created, whereby the student has a clear sense of subjectivity in their social environment</li> <li>- The concept of conformity and 'normality' in the Japanese culture is questioned</li> <li>- Many <i>tôkôkyohi</i> students see school as an 'abnormal' place, and often hold a critical view of Japanese society</li> </ul>

Whilst it is acknowledged that the Japanese education system and culture differs significantly from British societies, several important conclusions can be made from this thought-provoking article. Firstly, student discourse on *tôkôkyohi* emphasises the importance of attending to young people's

perceptions, which illustrate their personal journeys of self questioning and critical reflection (Pellegrini, 2007). Secondly, it questions the dominant notion in both Western and Japanese societies that schooling offers important lessons about conformity and effective adaptation in society (Pellegrini, 2007). Thirdly, Yoneyama's work challenges the assumption that school refusal is necessarily a negative phenomenon; rather, it might be that a child's refusal is an adaptive response to *'sometimes dehumanising, hostile and demanding institutions which compulsorily constrain and regulate all children'*. (Stroobant and Jones, 2006, p. 221)

Although many will reject the more controversial student held discourses around school refusal (that school may be damaging to some children, and attendance is simply a socially constructed 'norm'), the current paper strongly emphasises the need for more research that investigates students' perceptions of their own school refusal experiences.

## **Conclusions**

School refusal is a topic which is complex in its conceptualisation and aetiology, and comprises a heterogeneous population. Although the term 'school refusal' has received widespread acceptance (King and Bernstein (2001), it has yet to attain a universal shared meaning and there remains considerable recourse to alternative terminologies which represent symptomatic approaches (Berg et al, 1969) and reflect outcomes of functional behaviour analysis (Kearney and Silverman, 1990).

In considering how extant research can be categorised in order to inform a coherent account of the *risk and protective factors* associated with school refusal, the clinical characteristics of young people with school refusal have been extensively researched. This research suggests that school refusers commonly have psychiatric conditions which are characterised by high levels of anxiety and depressive symptoms (Berg et al, 1993; Bools et al, 1990; Egger et al, 2003; Kearney and Albano, 2004; Last and Strauss, 1990; McShane et al, 2001). However, the majority of this research has adopted a biomedical approach to assessment, which has often failed to acknowledge the holistic and interactionist dynamics of influences operating within a child's social context (Tew, 2005). This has risked placing emphasis on pathologising this vulnerable group of young people, and confining their school refusal to 'within-child' explanations. It is also evident that the majority of the research literature has focused on young people with severe and persistent forms of school refusal; therefore, findings are unlikely to be representative of the heterogeneous population of children and young people who may be deterred from attending school on a regular basis.

Additionally, the familial characteristics associated with school refusal have shown prominence in the literature, which has suggested that there is an over-representation of single parent mothers; mothers with mental health difficulties; enmeshed mother-child relationships and inappropriate child leadership roles (Bernstein and Borchardt, 1996; Kearney and Silverman, 1995; Place et al, 2000).



However, neither explanations that foreground individual psychopathology nor to dysfunctional family dynamics are wholly convincing. There is a significant gap in the literature regarding the school factors associated with school refusal, and in representing the views of the young people themselves. A small number of studies do suggest, however, that school refusal may be associated with school factors including *boredom; academic difficulties; difficulties with peers and teachers; avoidance of specific subjects and tests; academic pressures; the physical environment of the school; inappropriate support or provision; and aspects of school life anticipated with fear following weekends, holidays or periods of authorised absence* (Archer et al, 2003; Malcome et al, 2003; Wilkins, 2008). Additionally, young people have expressed the view that school refusal develops in an individual and subjective manner that changes over time (Yoneyama, 2000), and should not necessarily be ascribed a negative child identity (Stroobant and Jones, 2006).

Table 9 below provides a synthesis of this critical literature review, which addresses the four questions presented in Box 1. There are as follows:

- 1) What are the challenges associated with the *conceptualisation* of school refusal, and determining prevalence levels?
- 2) In what way can the research be categorised in order to gain an overview of the *risk and protective factors* associated with school refusal?
- 3) What does the research say about school influences on school refusal?
- 4) To what extent is the *voice of the child* represented in school refusal research?

Table 9. A synthesis of the literature review.

Question of the literature review	Findings and conclusions
<p><b>1) What are the challenges associated with the <i>conceptualisation</i> of school refusal, and determining prevalence levels?</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- There exists a number of definitional inconsistencies in the conceptualisation of school refusal.</li> <li>- The most common conceptualisations of school refusal include a symptomatic approach (Berg et al, 1969) and a functional approach (Kearney and Silverman, 1995).</li> <li>- The population of school refusers is heterogeneous, and is characterised by varying degrees of anxiety and varying patterns of attendance (Thambirajah et al, 2008; West Sussex, 2004).</li> <li>- There is wide variation in the way educational practitioners understand the term school refusal (Archer et al, 2003).</li> </ul>
<p><b>2) In what way can the research be categorised in order to gain an overview of the <i>risk and protective factors</i> associated with school refusal?</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- There is an over-representation of research concerning the <i>clinical characteristics</i> and the <i>family and home</i> factors associated with school refusal.</li> <li>- Many children with school refusal meet the criteria for psychiatric conditions such as anxiety-related disorders (around half to three-quarters of children in clinical samples).</li> <li>- The prevalence of psychiatric conditions is less for community based samples (Egger et al, 2003), as the latter sample reflects milder forms of school refusal.</li> <li>- Although school refusal has been most commonly associated with separation anxiety disorder, the research based on this assumption has methodological limitations and may ignore wider contextual factors/external influences (Pilkington and Piersel, 1991).</li> <li>- Families of school refusers have been variously described as enmeshed, conflictive, detached, isolated and healthy (Kearney and Silverman, 1995).</li> <li>- Families of children with school refusal are often single parent families; mothers commonly have mental health difficulties; the young people often adopt inappropriate child leadership roles in enmeshed mother: child relationships (Bernstein and Borchardt's, 1996; Place et al, 2000)</li> <li>- There is an under-representation of fathers' views in this research, and categorising 'dysfunctional' familial characteristics into discrete subgroups may be neither practical nor valid nor ethical.</li> </ul>

<p><b>3) What does the research say about school influences on school refusal?</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- School-related factors are under-represented in the (anxiety-based) school refusal research.</li> <li>- Research has predominantly focussed on the school factors related to non-attendance more generally (Malcolm et al; 2003; Kearney, 2008) and therefore may not be generalisable to school refusal.</li> <li>-Some research has investigated the school factors involved in school refusal, from parents' and professionals' perspectives (Archer et al, 2003), which covers a range of factors related to the <i>school's physical environment, adult and peer relationships and academic factors</i>.</li> <li>- Research which sought the views of chronic school refusers with learning difficulties found that <i>school climate, academic environment, discipline, and relationships with teachers</i> were associated with their school avoidance (Wilkins, 2008).</li> </ul>
<p><b>4) To what extent is the voice of the child represented in school refusal research?</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- The views of school refusers appear largely invisible and unheard in the school refusal research.</li> <li>- The research has predominantly been written within adult and clinical discourses (Pellegrini, 2007; Yoneyama, 2000) and is retrospective.</li> <li>- The research that <i>has</i> sought the views of school refusers suggests that school refusal develops in a subjective and highly individualised manner (Yoneyama, 2000) and should not necessarily be associated with a 'negative child identity' (Stroobant and Jones, 2006).</li> <li>- There is a need for more research into young people's perceptions of their own school refusal experiences, to contribute to the limited extant research corpus</li> </ul>

This critical literature review suggests that there remains a need for further research with community-based samples, and with a greater emphasis on eliciting the subjective views of the young people. Additionally, the review has cited a variety of separate theoretical accounts of school refusal, including biomedical, psychodynamic, and family systems approaches, all of which are helpful in their own right. The biopsychosocial perspective described by proponents such as Tew (2005) provides a conceptual framework capable of accommodating these differing accounts, and rendering their contribution to knowledge complementary rather than contradictory.

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## Appendix 1

### Public Domain Briefing paper: School Refusal literature Review

School Attendance is a high priority for government and schools. However, the official statistics specify the two separate sets of 'authorised' and unauthorised' absence, it has been argued that the statistics fail to acknowledge a small subgroup of non-attenders commonly known as 'school refusers' (Thambirajah, Grandison and De-Hayes, 2008).

#### 1. The challenges associated with the defining 'school refusal'?

School refusal is characterised by a child's severe emotional distress (e.g. fear and anxiety) at the thought of attending school, and at times, reflects a clinically diagnosed emotional disorder. However, 'school refusal' is a subject that is complex and fraught with definitional inconsistencies. In a recent review of school refusal that was conducted over the last ten years by King and Bernstein (2001), it was shown that the term 'school refusal' has gained wide spread acceptability over the term 'school phobia'. School phobia is considered to be a dated psychological term that encapsulates specific fears relating to specific situations in school. School refusal on the other hand, is a more inclusive term, and allows for a multiplicity of factors that contribute towards a child's emotional distress and refusal behaviour (King and Bernstein, 2001).

Berg, Nichols and Pritchard (1969) were the first researchers that provided criteria to conceptualise the term school refusal and distinguish it from truancy. They argued that school refusal is characterised by the following four symptoms:

- 1) **severe difficulty in attending school**- often amounting in prolonged absence,
- 2) **severe emotional upset**- shown by symptoms such as excessive fearfulness; undue tempers, misery or complaints of feeling ill without obvious organic cause on being faced with the prospect of going to school,
- 3) **staying at home with the knowledge of parents**, when the child should be at school, and
- 4) **absence of significant antisocial disorders** such as stealing, lying, wandering, destructiveness and sexual misbehaviour.

Some authors, however, feel that there should be a decreased emphasis on the *symptoms* of school refusal, and a move towards a focus upon the *functions* served by school refusal (Elliot, 1999; Kearney and Bensaheb, 2006). Therefore, a behavioural perspective has also been advocated by a lead researcher and writer in the field, Christopher Kearney. In his extensive work, Kearney focuses specifically on *school refusal behaviour*, and examines the underlying functions of that behaviour/non-attendance. It is important to acknowledge however, that Kearney's work includes populations of children who do not want to go to school for a variety of reasons, which includes truants. Therefore, his work is not simply restricted to the specific population



of school refusers. The authors suggested that children fell within one of four categories, based upon the function served by school refusal behaviour:

- 1) **avoidance of specific fearfulness or general over-anxiousness** related to the school setting,
- 2) **escape from aversive social situations**, e.g. concerning problems based upon negative relationships with other in school,
- 3) **attention-getting or separation anxious behaviour**, which may be related to somatic complaints or tantrums, and/or
- 4) **rewarding experiences provided out of school**, e.g. the child gains opportunities to engage in preferred activities. This group are usually called truants.

Although 'school refusal' has gained wide spread acceptability over the dated psychological term 'school phobia', other authors have chosen to adopt alternative terminologies. These include '*school refusal behaviour*' (Kearney and Silverman, 1990), '*emotionally-based school refusal*' (West Sussex Educational Psychology Service, 2004) '*extended school non-attendance*' (Pellegrini, 2007) and '*chronic non-attendance*' (Lauchlan, 2003).

Definitional inconsistencies are not simply restricted to researchers. Archer et al (2003) found that there is little common understanding amongst practitioners about school refusal and school phobia, and more specifically, very few schools had any written guidance on the topic. Interview and questionnaire data revealed that many schools noted that they did not have a formally documented definition of school refusal or school phobia.

## **2. In what way can the research be categorised in order to gain an overview of the risk and protective factors associated with school refusal?**

Amongst the literature, it is widely accepted that school refusal is associated with a combination of interrelated factors. A working party of educational psychologists from West Sussex County Council (West Sussex County Council Educational Psychology Service, 2004) suggested that school refusal can be related to both of the following:

- *Predisposing factors*. Factors which might be present in the nature of the school, the child's family or the child themselves, which can vary according to an individual child's unique set of characteristics and circumstances.
- *Precipitating factors*. Factors related to a particular event or change of circumstances, which interact with predisposing vulnerabilities, and lead to a child's school refusal.

### *Clinical characteristics*

Despite the multi-causal nature of school refusal, the largest proportion of the literature has focussed on the *clinical characteristics* of children and adolescents with school refusal, which has primarily been written from psychiatric and psychological perspectives (Pellegrini, 2007). The majority of this research has suggested that young people with school refusal commonly have psychiatric conditions (Kearney, 2008). Such conditions are often characterised by high levels of anxiety and depressive symptoms, many of

which meet the criteria for mental health disorders (Berg et al, 1993; Bools et al, 1990; Egger et al, 2003; Kearney and Albano, 2004; Last and Strauss, 1990; McShane et al, 2001). Additionally, it has been suggested that separation anxiety disorder, which is described as an excessive and unrealistic anxiety about a real or anticipated separation from important attachment figures (American Psychiatric Association, 2000), has a significant role to play in school refusal (Doobay, 2008; Heyne et al, 2004). However, Lyon and Cotler (2007) recognised the existing biases in the research related to the populations most commonly studied, e.g. the majority of child participants from clinical studies had previously been admitted to child psychiatric units, therefore, these children represent severe cases of school refusal and many not reflect accurate representation of the heterogeneous school refusal population.

#### *Family and home factors*

The family dynamics in the school refusal population has been investigated by Kearney and Silverman (1995). However, it must be noted that a large amount of the literature in this area is psychodynamically oriented, and dependant upon early sources of research. The authors found that the following familial relationship subtypes are associated with school refusal behaviour:

- *The enmeshed family.* This involves over-dependant parent-child relationship
- *The conflictive family.* Researchers have identified hostility and conflict as key characteristics of many families with children with school refusal behaviour.
- *The detached family.* A detached family describes one whose members are not well involved with each other's activities, or attentive to each other's thoughts and feelings.
- *The isolated family* An isolated family is characterised by little interaction outside of the family grouping. These families are reluctant to engage in outside interventions.
- *The healthy family.* a significant number show adaptive and healthy functioning, but include a child with individualized behavioural difficulties.

Additionally, Bernstein and Borchardt (1996) assessed one hundred and thirty four families, from a school refusal outpatient clinic. Single parent families were overrepresented amongst the sample, compared to the general population. Additionally, inappropriate child leadership roles were established in family communication, leading to associated role reversals. Place et al (2000) found that families tended to live in deprived areas, there was a long history of marital difficulties, there was no father figure in the family, and the majority of mothers had significant mental health problems.

### **3. What does the research say about the associated school factors in school refusal?**

A relatively limited amount of research has investigated the specific role of school related factors in school refusal. Lauchlan (2003) argues that the

contributory role of school-related factors are often de-emphasised by school staff, and clinically based and home related explanations are over-represented.

Malcolm et al (2003) investigated the causes and effects of school absence from a range of stakeholder perspectives. Such factors included *boredom; problems with lessons; being bullied; disliking teachers; wanting to avoid tests; laziness; peer pressure; and fear of returning to school.*

The most recent large UK-based scale study by Archer and colleagues (2003) questioned teachers and other professionals about their perceptions of the specific school factors involved in school refusal. These included a range of possible factors including the *size and layout of the school, the structure of the school day, conflicts with teachers, transition periods, fear of specific subjects, academic pressures, bullying or perceived bullying, friendship problems, and inappropriate provision.*

Wilkins (2008) interviewed students who were previous non-attenders, who now attended alternative provision (Brookfield Park) for students with special needs and school related anxiety. The students were reported to be thriving in their alternative provision, which they felt was due to the following reasons; *a positive, accepting and trusting school climate, academic work is more accessible, disciplinary procedures is non-punitive, good relationships with teachers.*

#### **4. How is the voice of the child represented in school refusal research?**

The views of school refusers appear largely invisible and unheard in the school refusal research. However, some authors have actively sought the views of school refusers. By interviewing seven former school refusers, Stroobant and Jones (2006) found that they gave some alternative explanations for their school refusal behaviour. The women saw their 'difference' or 'sensitivity' as an indication that they were 'insightful non-conformists' and more open minded than the 'normal' individual. Secondly, some of the women did not agree with the dominant view that school attendance was beneficial or necessary. Instead, they claimed that '*school actually constituted a dangerous or harmful environment*' (p, 220)

Yoneyama (2000) discussed the autobiographical accounts given by school refusers in Japan. These young people argued that school refusal is not a static experience, but a process whereby physical changes and perceptions of the self and school develop in an individual way. They also argued that school refusal is a process whereby students tire and eventually 'burn out' in an extremely demanding and conformist school system.

Pelegrini (2007) acknowledged a need to listen to young people's perceptions about their subjective school refusal experiences, as opposed to depending upon the views of adults and clinical professionals.

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**PART 2/CHAPTER 3**

**INVESTIGATING THE FACTORS ASSOCIATED WITH  
EMOTIONALLY-BASED NON-ATTENDANCE AT SCHOOL  
FROM YOUNG PEOPLE'S PERSPECTIVE**

**Abstract**

Previous research has investigated severe and persistent forms of emotionally-based non-attendance at school from clinical populations, which has rarely sought the views of the young people. This study adopted a constructivist epistemology, and elicited the subjective views and lived experiences of three girls with emotionally-based non attendance. The girls were from a non-clinical sample, and were identified as 'at risk' of developing more severe and persistent forms of emotionally-based non-attendance in the future.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with the girls; using techniques that are congruent with personal construct psychology (Kelly, 1995). Using thematic analysis (Braun and Clark, 2006), four main themes were identified in the data. Personal construct psychology was used as a framework for interpreting and discussing the results. Firstly, the young carer role was found to be a contributory factor in the girls' attendance difficulties, aligned to difficult circumstances in their families. Secondly, the ambivalence experienced in deciding between staying at home to support their mothers/families, or attending school to fulfil their role as a student, resulted in varying degrees of anxiety for the girls. Thirdly, the girls also gave insight into the tensions that needed to be resolved as they sought to return to school after an extended period of absence. The uncertainties surrounding returning to school were anxiety-provoking for some of the girls. Finally, the girls identified a number of risk and protective factors related to school, which particularly emphasised the value of friendships and contact with peers.



# **Investigating the factors associated with emotionally-based non-attendance at school from young people's perspective**

## **1. Introduction**

School Non-Attendance (SNA) is a high priority for government and schools (DFCS, 2008). Despite this, official statistics only specify two separate sets of absence, 'authorised' and unauthorised', and fail to acknowledge a small subgroup of non-attenders commonly known as 'school refusers' (Thambirajah et al, 2008). The term school refusal describes a child's severe emotional distress (e.g. fear and anxiety) at the prospect of attending school, and is characteristically differentiated from truancy (Berg et al, 1969).

The remit of the paper is to introduce some of the literature on school refusal, which recognises some current gaps in the research. Following this, a small-scale research study will be presented, which aims to investigate the factors associated with emotionally-based non-attendance from young people's perspectives. This study adopts a constructivist approach to inquiry, and uses personal construct psychology as a primary conceptual framework.

### ***1.1 The conceptualisation of school refusal***

Young people with school refusal represent a highly heterogeneous population who are characterised by a varied and complex array of symptoms (Elliot, 1999). Consequently, there is still considerable variation in the way that researchers conceptualise and use the term. For instance, Pellegrini argues that "*school refusal*" is often used as an umbrella term' (p.65), to encapsulate

all aspects of a child's motivation and/or difficulties in attending school. Furthermore, a large scale UK-based study commissioned by the Local Government Association in 2003 suggested that a vague understanding of school refusal then existed amongst practitioners in LEAs and schools (Archer et al, 2003). A number of alternative terminologies are used throughout the literature, which include '*school refusal behaviour*' (Kearney and Silverman, 1990), '*emotionally-based school refusal*' (West Sussex Educational Psychology Service, 2004), '*extended school non-attendance*' (Pellegrini, 2007) and '*chronic non-attendance*' (Lauchlan, 2003).

Several authors adopt different perspectives in providing operational criteria for school refusal. For instance, Berg, Nichols and Pritchard (1969) were the first researchers to provide specific descriptive criteria to conceptualise school refusal and differentiate it from truancy. The main characteristic of school refusal that can be drawn from Berg et al's classification (summarised in Box 1) is the emotional distress that is experienced by the child, albeit in varying degrees, at the prospect of attending school (Thambirajah et al, 2008).

**Box 1. The characteristics of school refusal, according to Berg et al (1969)**

- 1) ***severe difficulty in attending school***- often amounting in prolonged absence.
- 2) ***severe emotional upset***- shown by symptoms such as excessive fearfulness, undue tempers, misery or complaints of feeling ill without obvious organic cause on being faced with the prospect of going to school.
- 3) ***staying at home with the knowledge of parents***, when the child should be at school.
- 4) ***absence of significant antisocial disorders*** such as stealing, lying, wandering, destructiveness and sexual misbehaviour.

Alternatively, Christopher Kearney has dominated the literature by specifically examining the underlying functions of *school refusal behaviour* (Kearney, 2001; Kearney & Albano, 2004; Kearney and Bensaheb, 2006; Kearney and Silverman, 1988, 1990, 1996), whereby children fall within one of four categories, based upon the function served by school refusal behaviour (Box 2).

**Box 2. The functions of school refusal behaviour, from Kearney and Silverman (1990)**

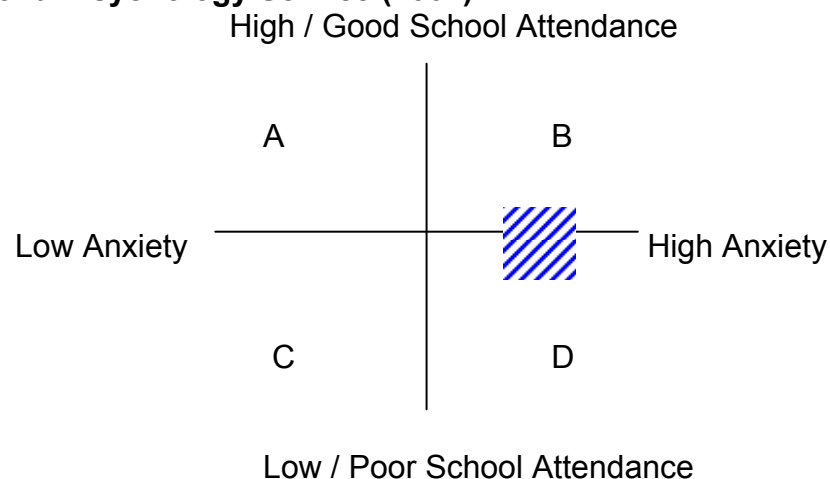
- 1) ***avoidance of specific fearfulness or general over-anxiousness*** related to the school setting.
- 2) ***escape from aversive social situations***, e.g. concerning problems based upon negative relationships with others in school.
- 3) ***attention-getting or separation-anxious behaviour***, which may be related to somatic complaints or tantrums.
- 4) ***rewarding experiences provided out of school***, e.g. the child gains opportunities to engage in preferred activities. This group are usually called 'truants'.

Although Kearney and Silverman's (1990) approach has considerable value in examining the factors that contribute to the school refusal behaviour through positive and negative reinforcement (Kearney, 2001, 2007, 2008; Kearney and Albano, 2004; Lauchlan, 2003), its limitations are acknowledged. Firstly, the functional approach is largely child-centred, and neglects to factor in other important influences on the problem, e.g. home context, school setting and parental difficulties (Thambirajah et al, 2008). Secondly, Kearney's functional approach is applicable to the more general population of school non-attendance (including truancy), and not specific to school refusal (as characterised by Berg et al, 1969). Finally, in comparison to Berg et al's descriptive criteria, Kearney's functional approach appears to detract from the


emotional distress experienced by the school refusal population (as conceptualised by Berg et al, 1969).

West Sussex County Council (West Sussex County Council Educational Psychology Service, 2004), concur with Berg et al's (1969) operational definition, but choose to adopt the term 'Emotionally-Based School Refusal' (EBSR) to represent the varying degrees of anxiety experienced by this specific population. Figure 1 below demonstrates their suggested matrix of school non attendance and anxiety.

**Figure 1. Emotionally Based School Refusal: The relationship between anxiety and non-attendance (from West Sussex County Council Educational Psychology Service (2004)).**



A – The sample of the school population who do not suffer from incapacitating levels of anxiety  
 B – Children who are very anxious but do manage to maintain school attendance  
 C – Children who may be considered as truants in as much as they have low school attendance but do not show anxiety as a major factor **leading** to their non-attendance.  
 D – Children who are highly anxious and feel unable to attend school. These are the children considered to be anxious school refusers

 - The shaded area represents young people who display intermittent patterns of attendance, who may be experiencing a certain degree of anxiety.

From this matrix, it is recognised that young people in category B remain largely hidden in the school population, and thus represent a largely unresearched group, reflecting a 'gap' in the literature. Similarly, it is argued that the young people that display intermittent patterns of attendance and higher levels of anxiety (the shaded area in Figure 2 that represents individuals who fall between categories B and D), may run the risk of chronic non-attendance and complete refusal in the future (category D). In order to take a pro-active and preventative approach, it is considered essential that this group of young people is identified early, and that further research is conducted in this area.

Overall therefore, there remains a problem that a single term does not have shared meaning amongst the authors who use it, and that alternative terminology overlaps in ways which are not fully acknowledged. Such semantic confusion renders challenging the task of comparing the reported findings of different authors within this broad topic domain. The current paper argues that 'school refusal' implies a motivated non-compliance of the young person, and fails to encapsulate the emotional distress experienced at the prospect of attending school. Therefore the phrase 'emotionally-based non-attendance' (EBNA) will be used throughout this study instead of school refusal (a term which will only be used in reference to the literature that employs it).

### **1.2 The dominance of the clinical and familial characteristics**

Within the literature, it is widely accepted that emotionally-based non-attendance is associated with a combination of interrelated factors. Despite this, the largest proportion of the literature, which has primarily been written from a biomedical perspective (Pellegrini, 2007), has focussed on the *clinical characteristics* of children and adolescents with EBNA (Shilvock, 2010). This research suggests that young people with EBNA commonly have psychiatric conditions characterised by high levels of general anxiety, separation anxiety, and depressive symptoms (Bools et al, 1990; Last and Strauss, 1990; Berg et al, 1993; McShane et al, 2001; Egger et al, 2003; Heyne et al, 2004; Kearney and Albano, 2004; Doobay, 2008; Kearney, 2008), which reinforces an individualised and pathologised view of these young people (Shilvock, 2010).

Research has also indicated that children with EBNA are also more likely to have mothers with significant mental health difficulties (Egger et al, 2003; Place et al, 2000). Additionally, the associated role of certain home and familial factors has also been emphasised, such as enmeshed relationships between mother and child, single-parent families, and inappropriate child leadership roles (Bernstein and Borchard, 1996; Kearney and Silverman, 1995; Place et al, 2000).

The contribution of these clinical studies, and the identification of the personal and family characteristics that are likely to contribute to EBNA, is indeed helpful. However, these studies fail to acknowledge the additional factors that might be involved in a child's non-attendance (e.g. social context, home/family factors, school environment), and the findings may not be representative of

less severe forms of the EBNA spectrum (Lyon and Cotler, 2007; Shilvock, 2010; Tew, 2005, Thambirajah et al, 2008).

### ***1.3. School factors and the voice of the child?***

The views of emotionally-based non-attenders appear largely invisible and unheard in the wider research on 'school refusal', and there have been few attempts to investigate the specific role of school-related factors (Shilvock, 2010).

Some researchers have suggested that school-related factors may be related to non-attendance (Archer et al, 2003; Malcolm et al, 2003; Wilkins 2008).

Such influences include:

- boredom,
- problems with lessons,
- bullying or perceived bullying,
- disliking teachers,
- wanting to avoid tests,
- peer pressure,
- aspects of school life anticipated with fear following weekends, holidays or periods of authorised absence,
- size and layout of the school,
- structure of the school day,
- transition periods,
- fear of specific subjects,
- academic pressures,

- friendship problems, and
- inappropriate provision.

However, studies of this kind are sparse and are associated with non-attendance more generally (including truancy), fail to represent the views of the young person, or represent clinical samples of chronic/persistent school refusers (Shilvock, 2010).

Few studies have specifically sought the views of emotionally-based non-attenders. For example, through retrospectively interviewing former 'school refusers' (seven female university students), Stroobant and Jones (2006) found that young women identified their 'school refusal' as legitimately realistic, and rejected the dominant psychological view that school attendance was beneficial or necessary. Yoneyama, (2000) interviewed students who have experienced *tôkôkyohi* (school refusal/phobia in Japan), suggesting that *tôkôkyohi* is not simply a static experience, but a process whereby physical changes and perceptions of the self and school develop and evolve in an idiosyncratic, personally meaningful manner. According to student discourse, *tôkôkyohi* is described as process whereby students tire and eventually 'burn out' in an extremely demanding and conformist school system, which eventually leads to a search for empowerment and subjectivity.

Such findings suggest that there is a need for further research of this kind, which specifically elicits the subjective accounts and lived experiences of



emotionally based non-attenders themselves (Pellegrini, 2007; Shilvock, 2010, Tew, 2005).

#### **1.4. Context for the current study**

In order to get a more reliable and comprehensive picture of the wider spectrum of EBNA, the current study aims to obtain the views of a non-clinical sample of young people with emotionally-based non-attendance. These young people have intermittent patterns of attendance, as well as experiencing emotional distress in attending school or in anticipation of attending school (quadrants B-D of Figure 1), and may be considered by educational professionals as 'at risk' of developing more severe and extended forms EBNA in the future. I believe that this exploratory research will be beneficial in informing appropriate interventions in young people, families and schools, and contribute to the extant body of research that has focussed on clinical populations of chronic non-attenders.

The research question for the current study is as follows:

*What are the views and subjective experiences of young people who have been identified as at risk of emotionally-based non attendance?*

Sub-questions:

- To what extent do the young people agree with the adult (education professionals and parent) perceptions that their non-attendance has an emotional basis?
- What do the young people identify as some of the barriers and facilitators to attending school?
- To what extent are school factors associated with the young people's emotionally-based non-attendance?

## **2. Method**

### **2.1. Epistemology**

The study adopts a constructivist epistemological stance (Robson, 2002), which is sometimes referred to as an interpretive/hermeneutic approach (Cohen et al, 2003). This approach rejects the view that knowledge is concerned with generalisation, prediction and control. Instead, this study aims to explore the knowledge of young people that is unique to each child and rich in subjective interpretation and meaning (Usher, 1996).

Hermeneutic or interpretive epistemology assumes human action is understood and interpreted within the context of social practices. In adopting this position, research is viewed as a subjective undertaking, concerned with interpreting the experiences of people in specific contexts (Cohen et al, 2003).

Furthermore, I have adopted a 'double hermeneutic', which focuses on the assumption that researchers who are engaged in social practices of research, make sense of what they are researching through their own interpretive frameworks (Usher, 1996).

*'Research involves interpreting the actions of those who are themselves interpreters: it involves interpretations of interpretations-the double hermeneutics at work' (p. 20).*

The social constructivist perspective assumes new knowledge is constructed in ways which are dependant upon subjects' pre-understood knowledge and interpretive framework (Usher, 1996). Feyerabend (1978) assumes that there can be no objective reality, as each individual has a different conceptual system and understanding of the world in which s/he lives. It is recognised that there are multiple interpretations of events and situations (Gadamer, 1975), each of which is unique and subjectively truthful or authentic in its own right. In subscribing to a constructivist epistemology, this study is concerned with understanding the subjective reality that is represented and constructed through the eyes of the young people, by eliciting rich, contextually-grounded descriptions.

## **2.2. Methodology**

In accordance with an interpretive epistemological stance, the study adopts qualitative or 'idiographic' methodology, in order to explore young people's subjective views and the way they construct their experiences. In accordance with the research's assumptions that reality is subjective and individually constructed, personal construct psychology (PCP) techniques were used throughout the interviews with the young people.

*Rationale for using personal construct psychology (PCP)*

The interpretivist epistemology is congruent with Kelly's (1955) view that there is no objective, absolute truth, and that events are only meaningful in relation to the ways that are constructed by individuals. For instance, Kelly's fundamental postulate of PCP stipulates that "*a person's processes are psychologically channelized by the ways in which he anticipates events*" (Kelly, 1955, p.32). This argues that an individual's experiences are determined by the way s/he *predict* events in their world, based on the learning derived from previous similar experiences. PCP is a psychology of individual differences, which argues the only truth we have access to is constructed by each individual person (Fransella and Dalton 1990). Kelly's fundamental postulate is organised into eleven corollaries (Table 1).

**Table 1. Kelly's fundamental postulate and 11 corollaries. Developed from Kelly (1991)**

<b>Corollary</b>	<b>Definition according to Kelly (1991)</b>
<b>1. The construction corollary</b>	"A person anticipates events by construing their replications" (1991, Vol. 2, p. 4)
<b>2. The experience corollary</b>	"A person's construction system varies as he successively construes the replication of events" (1991, Vol. 2, p. 5)
<b>3. The dichotomy corollary</b>	"A person's construction system is composed of a finite number of dichotomous constructs" (1991, Vol. 2, p. 5)
<b>4. The organization corollary</b>	"Each person characteristically evolves for his convenience in anticipating events, a construction system embracing ordinal relationships between constructs" (1991, Vol. 2, p. 5)
<b>5. The range corollary</b>	"A construct is convenient for the anticipation of a finite range of events only" (1955/1991, Vol. 2, p. 5/1991)
<b>6. The modulation corollary</b>	"The variation in a person's construction system is limited by the permeability of the constructs within whose ranges of convenience the variants lie" (1991, Vol. 2, p. 5)
<b>7. The choice corollary</b>	"A person chooses for him- or her self that alternative in a dichotomized construct through which he or she anticipates the greater possibility for extension and definition of his or her system" (1991, Vol. 2, p. 5) This corollary replaces the concept of <i>motivation</i> in PCP
<b>8. The individuality corollary</b>	"Persons differ from each other in their construction of events" (1991, Vol. 2, p. 4)
<b>9. The commonality corollary</b>	"To the extent that one person employs a construction of experience which is similar to that employed by another, his psychological processes are similar to those of the other person" (1991, Vol. 2, p. 5)
<b>10. The fragmentation corollary</b>	"A person may successively employ a variety of construction subsystems which are inferentially incompatible with each other" (1991, Vol. 2, p. 5)
<b>11. The sociality corollary</b>	"To the extent that one person construes the construction processes of another he may play a role in a social process involving the other person" (1991, Vol. 2, p. 5)

A central concept of Kelly's theory is the formulation of the 'construct'. Kelly (1955) proposed that each individual has access to a number of personal constructs, which drive their unique prediction, interpretation and understanding of events. This relates to Kelly's (1995) construction corollary (Table 1, corollary 1). Butt (2004) suggests that '*clients' descriptions of their experience will be couched in terms of their construct systems; the relationships between their dimensions of meaning*' (p.25). Dalton and Dunnnett (1992) state that there are several types of construct that range from a low to high level of cognitive awareness (congruent with the organization corollary), some of which are reported below in Table 2.

**Table 2. Types of construct. Developed from Dalton and Dunnnett (1992)**

Type of construct	Description
<i>Core construct</i>	An individual's core constructs maintain their identity. ' <i>Core constructs are the construct which are to do with the definition of you on one hand, and the practical needs you have in order to continue to exist on the other</i> ' (Dalton and Dunnnett, 1992, p. 54). Core constructs are difficult to change.
<i>Peripheral construct</i>	These are more to do with general events and can be changed or altered more easily, without serious modification to core constructs. Changing one's peripheral constructs have little effect on one's identity/existence.
<i>Tight construct/ construing</i>	An individual with tight constructs views the world as organised, habitual, without trying anything new. This leads to clear and unambiguous predictions of events (these can be related to core constructs, and are more difficult to change).
<i>Loose construct/ construing</i>	An individual with loose constructs make varying and ambiguous predictions (these can be related to peripheral constructs).
<i>Constructs of transition</i>	These constructs describe the process that occurs when construct systems are put under some pressure to change (or for the person to see his/herself differently).

Kelly also discussed the role of 'bipolarity', which argues that all constructs are bipolar and have a specific contrast. This relates to the dichotomy corollary (Table 1, corollary 3), in which our perception of experiences falls into simple dichotomies, and constructs have two ends or poles (Burnham, 2008), e.g. boring/funny, worried/confident, popular/unfriendly etc.

A fundamental principle of personal construct psychology is Kelly's philosophical position of constructive alternativism. This epistemological stance argues against a positivist philosophy, and proposes that one has the power to change one's experience by changing the way one construes it (Burnham, 2008). Ravenette (1999), argues that there is always a different way of construing events, and simply describes constructive alternativism as '*whatever view of things might currently be held it is always possible to construct an alternative*' (p.157). Kelly (1955) himself states that,

*'All of our present interpretations of the universe are subject to revision or replacement...there are always some alternative constructions available to choose among in dealing with the world'* (p.15)

It is the fundamental principles of constructive alternativism, and the formulation of individual constructs that drives the focus for the current study's methodology.

Beaver (1996) argues that personal construct psychology provides a useful structure for exploring individuals' models and interpretations of the world: their subjective versions of reality. Taking into account the hypothesised anxious/emotional state likely to characterise the young people whose poor

school attendance had led to their nomination as prospective subjects of this study, I considered that the young people may have perceived direct questioning as invasive and potentially overwhelming. When interviewing children Arksey and Knight (1999) stress the importance of making interviews enjoyable and non-threatening, through combining a variety of activities and methods (e.g. drawing pictures, writing and/or speaking). Therefore, I believed that the application of PCP techniques to obtain young people's views would be relatively unthreatening and accessible (Burnam, 2008) to my target population, and an appropriate methodology to explore this sensitive topic.

### **2.3. Procedure**

Individual semi-structured interviews were conducted with the young people, using techniques that are congruent with personal construct psychology. There are a variety of methods that can be used with young people to explore their constructions of the world, which allow for visual modalities as well as oral communication (Beaver, 1996). The purpose of the activities was to elicit constructs from each young person and endeavour to support the his/her elaboration of his/her constructs through the techniques of 'laddering' (Hinkle, 1965) and 'pyramiding' (Landfield, 1971), (section 2.3.4. and Appendix 3 describes this process in far greater detail). I used a variety of construct elicitation and elaboration techniques throughout the semi-structured interviews with the young people, which included the following:

- Open-ended question.
- Q-Sort and Salmon line activity.
- Sentence completion task.



These techniques will be described in more detail below.

### *2.3.1. Open ended question*

The young people's emotionally-based non-attendance was identified through adult discourses (from the pastoral lead teacher and education welfare officer in the young people's school, and the young people's parents). Therefore, this question aimed to focus the young people into the topic under investigation, and 'check out' the extent to which the child-based discourses matched those of the adults. By suspending my own constructs as the researcher (Kelly, 1955), this open-ended question aimed to elicit and explore each child's own construing of their non-attendance. I orally presented the question as follows,

*'Your mum and your school have mentioned that you sometimes find it difficult to come to school, or might not want to come to school or get upset/worried about coming to school...I'm interested in finding out whether **you** think this is true?'*

This question also aimed to facilitate an initial dialogue between myself and the young person, as well as providing a context as to why they had been selected for this study.

### *2.3.2. Q-Sort and Salmon line activity*

Q methodology was pioneered by physicist-psychologist William Stephenson (1953), as a way of obtaining people's subjective views. Brown (1996) argues that Q-sort methodology combines the advantages of both qualitative and quantitative methods. The instrumental basis of Q-methodology is the Q-sort

technique, which conventionally involves the rank-ordering of a set of statements from agree to disagree. Within personal construct psychology, the Q-sort technique is congruent with Salmon lines (Salmon, 1988), a method which explores children's understanding of their situation using donated constructs. Rating and scaling questions are then used with each of these donated constructs, along a scale of yes/no, like me/not like me etc.

A set of 22 statements was compiled from the published research concerning variables involved in school refusal and non attendance, which included within-child, home/family, and school influences. I asked the young person to rank these statements along the continuum of most like me and least like me (a Salmon line, Appendix 1). I read each individual statement to the young person, in order to accommodate any literacy difficulties they may have had. Additionally, I checked that the young people understood all the language written in the statements (e.g. by regularly asking the young person questions such as, 'Do you understand what this sentence means?', 'Would you like me to explain any words that you don't understand?', 'Tell me if you do not understand, and I will try and explain it to you another way'). Once each young person had ranked all the statements, a range of statements was selected for the focus of construct elaboration. I asked the young person to select statements that she felt were most pertinent to her (these usually included the top five statements that were 'most like me'). However, I also noted recurring themes throughout the activity which focussed discussion further (e.g. recurring home/parent factors or certain personality factors that the young person rated as most like them). In this respect, it is important to

acknowledge that researchers can never fully separate themselves from their own constructs and identity as a researcher; ‘researcher bias’ cannot therefore be fully eliminated and is likely to influence the content of discussion.

**Table 3. The 22 statements donated to the young people in the Q-sort/Salmon line activity.**

<b>Factors associated with EBNA</b>	<b>Statement</b>	<b>Empirical evidence</b>
<i>Within-child</i>	I worry about most things in my life. I worry that I might fail. I have low confidence. I feel depressed. I feel sad or unhappy.	- Egger et al (2003) - Berg et al, (1993) - Bools, et al (1990) - McShane et al (2001)
<i>School</i>	I’m bored at school. I find the work in lessons hard. I worry about being around other students. I have friendship problems/being bullied. I don’t like teachers or having arguments with them. I want to avoid tests/exams. I don’t like returning to school. I don’t like the size or layout of the school. I don’t like moving from lesson to lesson. I fear specific subjects.	- Malcolm et al (2003) - Archer et al (2003) - Wilkins (2008) - West Sussex Educational Psychology Service (2004) - Kearney and Silverman (1990)
<i>Home/Family</i>	There has been recent loss or changes in my family. I worry about my parents’ wellbeing. I find it hard or upsetting to be away from my family. I live with just one parent. I argue with my parent(s). My family and I do activities outside of home. My family is a close family	- Kearney and Silverman (1990) - Kearney and Silverman (1995). - Bernstein and Borchardt (1996) - Egger et al (2003) - Doobay (2008)

### 2.3.3. Sentence completion task

Another construct elicitation technique is a sentence completion task. Grice et al (2004) propose the advantages of the sentence completion method for eliciting personal constructs, as individuals are likely to consider it more meaningful to respond to methods that emulate the narrative aspect of the self. Additionally, this activity generates idiographic information in a highly

efficient manner, which is akin to Kelly's (1955) self-characterization technique in psychotherapy.

The more prominent method of this kind is the Rotter Incomplete Sentences Blank test (Rotter & Rafferty, 1950). This technique generates idiographic information by inviting the young person to complete unfinished sentences, which aim to '*cull the "essential" verbal statements from his or her larger narrative response*' (Grice et al, 2004, p. 61). The young people were provided with a range of incomplete sentences to elicit some of their thoughts, feelings and experiences associated with school, e.g. 'When I wake up in the morning and think about coming to school, I feel...' 'When I leave my house to come to school, I feel...', 'I like/do not like coming to school because...' (see Appendix 2). The design of these sentences were based on Grice et al's (2004) methods in their empirical research that explored the use of sentence completion tasks for eliciting personal constructs. My research knowledge of school refusal also influenced the content of the sentences (e.g. thoughts and feelings related to leaving home/family, risk and protective factors in school, returning to school after periods of absence, Shilvock, 2010). However, these sentences were purposely left general and open ended, to allow for the young person's subjective views. The constructs elicited from this task were explored further through laddering and pyramiding of bipolar constructs (described in more detail below).

#### *2.3.4. Laddering and pyramiding of constructs*

Laddering and pyramiding techniques (Hinkle, 1965; Landfield, 1971) were used with the young people throughout the interview, in order to explore their emergent constructs in greater depth. Firstly, once bipolar constructs were established (the identification of two contrasting poles, see Appendix 3), the young people were asked to indicate their preferred pole. Following this, a variety of laddering and pyramiding questions were asked, in order to explore their values and beliefs further (see examples of Laddering and pyramiding process in Appendix 3).

Laddering is related to the organisation corollary (Table 1, corollary 4), whereby discussions with the young person promote movement from their peripheral constructs to their core constructs. Pyramiding relates to the individuality corollary (Table 1, corollary 8) which promotes specificity by encouraging the young person to describe concrete examples of their constructs. My aim was to develop a shared understanding of what the young person means, which enables me as the researcher to establish the commonality corollary (Table 1, corollary 9).

#### **2.4. Sample**

My target population of young people is based on three specific criteria in Box 3. Therefore, I adopted a two strand 'purposive' sampling method.

'In purposive sample...researchers handpick the cases to be included in the sample on the basis on their judgments of their typicality or possession of the particular characteristics being sought.'

(Cohen et al, 2003, p. 114-115)

In the first strand, a middle school in my employing local authority was selected as a setting for the research to take place. I considered this an appropriate setting for the study, due to the local authority's concerns related to the school's poor behaviour and attendance figures.

Secondly, in my capacity as the school's named trainee educational psychologist, I engaged in collaborative discussions on the school site with the education welfare officer (EWO) and pastoral lead regarding particular students with intermittent patterns of attendance and emotional difficulties. This initial meeting took the following format.

Firstly, I presented three criteria (listed below) that served to represent the proposed target sample of participants for the study. Secondly, I provided a succinct synopsis of the school refusal literature, in order to give the professionals a greater understanding of the projected target sample for the study. Thirdly, these criteria were used as a source of reference for the pastoral lead and EWO, to reflect upon certain children in the school who presented concerns within this domain. Based on professional judgements and prior knowledge of the children, potential participants were identified. The following criteria in Box 3 were used to identify the sample.

**Box 3. Three criteria used to identify the sample of young people.**

- i) Berg et al's (1969) operational definition of school refusal. This was used to emphasise the emotional difficulties some young people encounter when they attend school.
- ii) The West Sussex emotionally-based school refusal matrix. This was used to highlight a target group of young people in between category B and D (illustrated in Figure 2); and
- iii) Between 15-25% authorised absence. This rate of absence is a concern for school staff, and Education Welfare Officers are usually involved to try and increase the young person's attendance.

**2.5. Participants**

Five young people were identified as meeting these criteria. One child did not wish to take part, and one was considered inappropriate due to current child protection concerns, which created heightened anxiety in this young person's life. Therefore, three young people in total took part in the study. The students were in Year 7 and 8 of middle school, were all female, and of white ethnic origin. The table below provides further details about the young people.

**Table 4. Details of the three participants in the study.**

	'L'	'E'	'S'
<b>Sex</b>	Female	Female	Female
<b>Age</b>	11years	12years	12years
<b>Year group</b>	7	8	8
<b>Attendance rate (over 1year period)</b>	84%	72%	79%
<b>Ethnic origin</b>	White, British	White, British	White, British
<b>One or two parent family</b>	One (single mother)	Two	Two
<b>SEN code of practice</b>	No	Yes (School action, area of need in literacy)	No
<b>Other external agencies involved</b>	Educational Welfare	Educational Welfare	Educational Welfare Young Carers Association

My original intention was to use between ten-twelve participants for the study (see Parent consent form in Appendix 7). However, through consultation with the pastoral lead teacher and the EWO, it became evident that only five young people met the criteria for the sample (three girls and two boys), as the other young people were either classified as truants (unauthorised absences) or the professionals were not convinced that their non-attendance had an emotional basis. Although this process resulted in a smaller number of participants to interview, I considered it essential that the specific criteria used to identify the sample were adhered to closely. Consequently, this allowed me to exactly identify this vulnerable and 'hidden' cohort of emotionally-based non-attenders.

Additionally, it is acknowledged that the sample size then reduced from five to three young people, which co-incidentally excluded the two boys from the sample. However, three females were still considered an appropriate sample size to use in the study, as each interview provided an opportunity for an in-depth examination of meanings (by the use of PCP techniques), which would allow for analytical generalisations to be made (Yin, 2003).

## **2.6. Ethical considerations**

Throughout the research, I was mindful of ethical challenges in working with this particular sample of children, as well as within my dual role as a researcher and employee of the local authority. For a more comprehensive account of the study's general ethical considerations, refer to Appendix 5. Both child and parental consent forms are included as Appendices 6 and 7.



Ethical challenges were inherent in interviewing young and vulnerable people: In asking them about potentially distressing experiences related to their non attendance, there was a risk that this may have consolidated their negative feelings even further (Gott, 2003). However, Morrow and Richards (2002) suggest that adopting an overprotective stance towards children may reduce their potential to act as participants in research, and so prevent their representation in research, and a contingent lack of appreciation of their perspectives. As noted in form EC2 for postgraduate researchers, I ensured that all discussions were emotionally contained and that the young people were not pressurised into answering any questions. Additionally, I also adhered to advice from The Division of Counselling Psychology (2005), which suggests that;

*'when personally sensitive information is disclosed, the practitioner has a responsibility to ensure that support and aftercare be made available to the participants. Similarly, debriefing and support should be provided for all participants when the research topic is of a potentially distressing nature.'*

(Division of Counselling Psychology, 2005, p.6)

## **2.7. Reliability and validity**

In quantitative research, validity represents the extent to which what is measured in one instance corresponds to other independent measures obtained by another research tool. Reliability is the extent to which the same findings will be gathered if the research is repeated. As qualitative research does not concern itself with methods of quantification or objectivity, concepts of reliability and validity are considered to be of limited relevance.

Parker (1994) proposes three ways in which qualitative research can improve the trustworthiness or fidelity of research findings and work through the '*methodological horrors and transform them into methodological virtues*' (p. 10). Whereas quantitative research attempts to control these 'methodological horrors' by a range of strategies (e.g. larger sample sizes, controlling confounding variables and demand characteristics), qualitative research engages in an interpretative enterprise and works closely *with* the problem as opposed to against it.

**Table 5. Three factors which improve the fidelity of qualitative research. (Developed from Parker, 1994).**

<b>Improving the trustworthiness of qualitative research</b>	<b>Parker's (1994) description within the context of the current study</b>
<p><b>Indexicality</b>  <i>'an explanation is always tied to a particular occasion...and will change as the occasion changes'</i> (Parker, 1994, p. 3)</p>	<p>Validity and reliability are thought to safeguard the quality of quantitative research, and are achieved when a piece of research can be effectively <i>replicated</i>. Although replicability is seen as strength in quantitative research, qualitative research views human behaviour as dynamic and ever changing. Therefore, qualitative research cannot yield itself to replicability and/or generalisability (in terms of quantitative research); rather, it is more about <i>specificity</i>. Any generalisation will be analytic rather than statistical (Yin, 2003).            Although the current study has a small sample size of three students, sample size is not considered to be important in qualitative research. Larger samples in quantitative research lose specificity. Smaller sample sizes provide an opportunity for in-depth examination of meanings. Therefore, this qualitative research is concerned with studying the experiences and views of the three students, which endeavours to obtain the unique and authentic real life accounts.</p>
<p><b>Inconcludability</b>  <i>'an account can always be supplemented further and will continually mutate as more is added to it'</i> (Parker, 1994, p. 4)</p>	<p>Positivist/quantitative research capture facts that are quantifiable and open to statistical analyses will assume inconcludability to be problematic. Whereas in qualitative research, there will always be a gap between the meaning in a research setting and the account written on the reports. This gap is a space for the reader to bring his or her own understanding and interpretation of the text.</p>
<p><b>Reflexivity</b>  <i>'the way we characterise a phenomenon will change the way it operates for us, and that will then change out perception of it.'</i> (Parker, 1994, p. 4)</p>	<p>The ways in which one explores a problem will affect the explanations one gives. Quantitative research assumes that the removal of subjectivity will lead to an increase in objectivity. On the other hand, qualitative research views the relationship between objectivity and subjectivity quite differently. Subjectivity is seen as a resource and not a problem.            It is useful to consider the 'position of the researcher' in a reflexive analysis:  <i>'when researchers, whether quantitative or qualitative, believe that they are being most objective by keeping a distance between themselves and their objects of study, they are actually themselves producing a subjective account.'</i> (Parker, 1994, p.13)            A reflexive analysis respects the different meanings (or constructs) brought to the research by the researcher and the participant in the interviews, and these are considered to be valuable resources (as opposed to factors that should be controlled/screened out).</p>

## 2.8. Data Analysis

Thematic analysis was selected as a method to analyse the qualitative data. Thematic analysis does not subscribe to any particular pre-existing theoretical framework, yet it is important that the manner in which it is applied is made explicit and transparent (Braun and Clarke, 2006).

An inductive or 'bottom up' thematic analysis was predominantly adopted (Boyatzis, 1998). The analysis of themes was driven by the data themselves, and coded without fitting the data into pre-existing coding frames (Braun and Clarke, 2006). Despite this, it is recognised that I could not entirely separate myself from my own analytic preconceptions, due to my knowledge of the existing literature on school refusal. Therefore, it must be acknowledged that deductive or 'top down' forms of analysis may have inadvertently influenced the identification of themes.

*'it is important to note...that researchers cannot free themselves of their theoretical and epistemological commitments, and data are not coded in an epistemological vacuum'* (Braun and Clark, 2006, p.84)

Themes were identified in part through their prevalence within and between the strands of the data corpus. The level at which the themes were identified was at a 'latent level' (Boyatzis, 1998), which is in line with the constructivist paradigm. Data were analysed above the level of semantic content, and aimed to *'identify or examine the underlying ideas, assumptions and conceptualisations'* (Braun and Clarke, 2006, p. 84). Personal construct psychology was used as a theoretical framework for analysis at the latent level. Table 6 illustrates the steps that were adopted for the thematic analysis, based on Braun and Clarke (2006).

**Table 6. Phases of thematic analysis. Developed from Braun and Clarke (2006)**

<b>Phase</b>	<b>Description of the process</b>
<b>1. Familiarising with the data</b>	Transcribing data. Reading and re-reading, listening and re-listening to the three interviews, noting down initial ideas.
<b>2. Generating initial codes</b>	Systematically coding interesting features of the data across the whole data set. Collating data relevant to each code
<b>3. Searching for themes</b>	Collating codes into potential themes, and gathering all data relevant to each potential theme
<b>4. Reviewing themes</b>	Checking if the themes work in relation to coded extracts and data set. Generate a thematic map of analysis
<b>5. Defining and naming themes</b>	Refine the specifics of each theme, and the overall story. Generate clear definitions and names for each themes
<b>6. Producing the report</b>	Selection of vivid, compelling extract examples, relating back of the analysis to the research question and literature. Produce a scholarly report of the analysis

In order to demonstrate the thematic analysis process in the context of this study, a number of exemplars are presented in the Appendices e.g. i) a summary of the key points in the three case studies (Appendix 4) which are highlighted to represent the key themes, ii) an example of one transcript with highlighted themes (Appendix 9), and iii) a general illustration of the main thematic process between Phase 2 and 6 (Braun and Clark, 2006, Appendix 8).

### 3. Results and Discussion

In order to present a clear and detailed account of the latent analysis of themes, the results and discussion will be integrated within one section of this paper. Four major themes were identified in the analysis, which have been named: *'the young carer role'*, *'ambivalence'*, *'returning to school'*, and *'school factors'*. These themes will be discussed separately, and personal construct psychology (Kelly, 1995) will be used as a psychological framework for understanding each theme in greater detail. For a summary of the three separate case studies, see Appendix 4.

#### 3.1. *The young carer role*

In all three cases, the girls reported several difficulties associated with home and familial factors, especially in regard to their mothers. All three girls reported that their mothers experienced emotional and/or physical difficulties, albeit in varying degrees, which required additional care from either themselves or other family members. Two girls also reported that they were required to mediate difficult family circumstances and conflicts.

*'I worry if mum's going to be alright...she's not very well sometimes...'*  
(S)

*'My mum's got arthritis and I help her around the house...because my brother that's got autism won't do anything himself and is always asking my mum to do stuff'* (E)

*'I have to just try and calm him down somewhere, tell him to just be quiet because it really all goes down onto my mum...sometimes it gets me worried and then it's worrying for my mum... my brother just starts flipping and then he starts punching the walls and everything'* (L)

One of the girls reflected upon a time in her life when her non-attendance initially began. L experienced a traumatic incident in her family, which resulted in her preference to stay at home, in order to ensure her family's safety and mediate any conflicts that may occur. Although her siblings no longer live at home, L reported that she still finds it difficult to attend school and be away from her family.

*'...they were outside they started fighting; my brother...stabbed my other brother... I was just really worried that they were going to start again....and it scared me...but ever since then I've always worried about what's going on at home'. (L)*

*'but even though they're not there any more because they live in xxxx, it's still hard for me to come to school because I just want to know what's happening in my family'. (L)*

Such personal and emotive accounts of her non-attendance reflected the findings of Yoneyama's (2000) study in Japan, which states that young people's autobiographical accounts of school refusal (or 'tôkôkyohi') develop as a process over time, rather than as a static response. Yoneyama argued that young people with school refusal go through several stages of not wanting to attend school, which may originate from a particular starting point in their lives. Although student discourses of school refusal in Japan may not be representative of this current UK-based sample (due to socio-cultural differences between the Japanese and UK education systems), they highlight the view that emotionally-based non-attendance is characterised by the

subjective experiences of the young people as an *'extremely individualistic and personal quest'* (Yoneyama, 2000, p.92).

The girls discussed the roles they have adopted at home, either by supporting their single mothers, physically disabled and/or mentally ill parents. Discussions focussed on their responsibilities at home, which ranged from helping with chores around the house to ensuring that their 'mums' were safe. The girls appeared to ascribe to themselves a 'duty of care' for their families, specifically their mothers, which was associated with a variety of factors; a mother with arthritis, a mother with mental health difficulties, physically violent siblings at home, and a mother with relationship difficulties.

*'say if you started saying no to your mum when she asked you to do a chore, then she would have to do it herself because she's a single mum; they'll be struggling because they've got a load of stuff to handle.'* (L)

The most significant factor within this theme was the anxiety reported by the girls when they were at school, if they knew that their mothers were alone at home. In these circumstances, the girls reported that they would rather be at home than school, especially if they knew that other members of their family were not available to care for their mothers.



*'sometimes no-one's in, like if my dad goes out and my sister and everyone, and they're not in...I want to go home to make sure she's alright' (S)*

*'... the other day I went home from school and everyone was out and my mum said she fell over when no-one was in and she had to wait for someone to come back to help her' (S)*

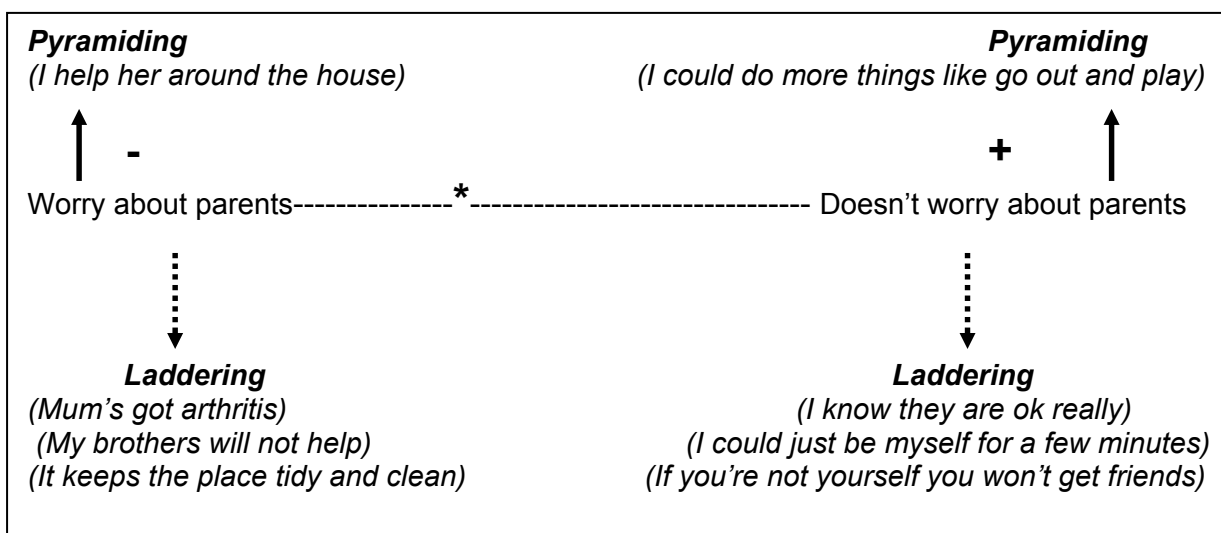
*'I'm sad when you know that no-one's going to be in the house and like my mum's going to be on her own' (S)*

Previous research has commonly referred to this as separation anxiety which is described as an excessive and unrealistic anxiety about a real or anticipated separation from important attachment figures (American Psychiatric Association, 2000). Consequently, this has tended to 'group' young people with emotionally-based non attendance into a generalised category of mental illness, which risks militating against the development of an holistic account of a young person's difficulties (Fransella and Dalton, 1990).

In terms of understanding these data from a PCP framework, it is useful to reflect upon the fundamental postulate, which emphasises the way the girls anticipates future events. Therefore, this provides a basis for a psychology of individual differences (Kelly, 1963), and the data can be organised into the *individuality corollary* and the *fragmentation corollary*.

The individuality corollary (Table 1, corollary 8) suggests that individuals differ from each other in their constructions of events. Although the role of the young carer has been identified as a common theme across the data, it is acknowledged that there were individual differences between the girls in terms of how they anticipated and constructed similar events. For example, two girls reported that when they are at school, they often worry about the well being of their mothers. However, at the same time they also felt assured that their mothers and families would more than likely be fine at home, and they generally felt motivated to come to school. Additionally, these two girls also saw the importance of coming to school to learn and socialise. In this respect, both girls enjoyed attending school, and showed a preference to feel *less worried* about their parents and families. One of E's bipolar constructs are presented below (the \* represents where E is now and the + represents her pole preference).

**Figure 3: Elaboration of E's construct regarding worrying about parents.**



Alternatively, S's construction of these similar circumstances significantly differed. She felt more strongly that she wanted to be at home with her mum, and her identity as a young carer was more greatly elaborated in comparison to her role as a student and attending school. Two of S's bipolar constructs are presented below.

**Figure 4. Two of S's bipolar constructs regarding staying at home and wanting to be with her family.**

+		-
Like staying at home *	-----	Want to come to school
+		-
Want to be with my family*	-----	Want to be out all the time

As illustrated above, S reported that she currently 'liked staying at home' and 'wanted to be with her family', and that she would not prefer to come to school or be out more.

In adopting the assumption that a person's behaviour is based upon the way she anticipates events, one might predict that S is at greater risk of displaying more severe and chronic forms of non-attendance in the future.

However, Kelly (1955) recognised that individual differences in the construction of events do not mean that people cannot find common ground. Therefore, it could be argued that if the three girls were to meet, it is likely that they would relate to each other and show a common understanding for each other's circumstances, in line with the commonality corollary (Table 2, corollary 9).

The role of the young carer may also be understood from the assumptions of the fragmentation corollary (Table 1, corollary 10); that individuals may employ a variety of construction subsystems that are incompatible with each other. For instance, the girls' personal constructs around the importance of remaining at home to look after their mothers or ensure that no conflicts arise between family members, is incompatible with other constructs of attending school as a student. Kelly (1995) argues that a person's construction system is continuously in a state of flux, which is likely to intermittently influence the young person's direction of choice about going to school or staying at home.

### **3.2. Ambivalence**

The second theme has been labelled 'ambivalence', as all three of the girls reported simultaneous or conflicting thoughts and feelings towards home and school.

#### *3.2.1. Stay at home or go to school?*

Two of the girls reported both positive and negative emotions associated with attending school, which they often found confusing and difficult to articulate. For instance, a common trend throughout the data was the difficulties the girls reported in trying to manage their dual role as a student at school and a young carer at home. For instance, when L was trying to explain the reasons she feels 'calm and happy' in school, she reported ambivalent feelings towards home. On the one hand, she acknowledged that school was a

welcome break from difficult incidents with her family, but at the same time, she felt drawn to stay at home.

*'I'm happy to see my friends but I still want to stay at home with my mum' (S)*

*'having to come to school when you don't want to leave home' (S)*

*'(I feel calm and a little happy in school) because I'm away from the horrible things that could happen at home but I still want to be there because...I don't know why?' (L)*

The girls reported that their circumstances at home, whether this involved family conflicts or parental illness, sometimes pre-occupied their thoughts when they were at school. Consequently, the girls reported that these thoughts made them feel worried when they were in school, which reinforced their desire to be at home even more.

*'The odd occasion that I would worry (in school)...if something happened like an argument at home...I feel ok knowing that it's going to be alright, but in a way I feel that I want to be at home more than anything' (L)*

*'Sometimes I don't want to come to school because, like, I prefer to stay at home with my family to know what's going on ... then I go to school and think about my family all the time' (L)*

Despite this, the girls reported individual differences in the way they coped with these thoughts. Some of the coping mechanisms included distraction techniques, whereby the girls would be in lessons they enjoyed or thinking of something else to 'take their mind off' home. However, coping with their dual

role sometimes resulted in uncomfortable feelings of stress or 'pressure', in the attempt to manage thoughts and worries about home as well as concentrate on school work.

*'It sort of pressurises me as well...yeah because like I have a load of stuff going on at home and then when I come to school I have to concentrate so hard on my work... and its really hard.'* (L)

*'I just do something else to get my mind off it and I forget'* (E)

*'If you're in a fun lesson, you don't think about it as much'* (S)

### 3.2.2. *The role of anxiety*

The importance of staying at home to ensure their mothers' and families' wellbeing appeared to represent a key construct for all three girls. It became evident throughout the interviews that these constructs made it difficult for the girls, in varying degrees, to sustain a high level of attendance at school. According to Kelly (1955), *constructs of transition* are when an individual's construct system is placed under pressure to change or to see oneself differently. As a result, a range of negative *emotions* can be experienced, some of which Kelly (1955) describes as *threat, aggression, anxiety, guilt* and *hostility*. Personal construct psychology has a particularised view of *anxiety*, which is described in greater detail below (Box 4).

**Box 4. The emotion of anxiety, based on Kelley's (1955) constructs of transition. Developed from Dalton and Dunnet (1992), Kelly (1955) and Fransella and Dalton (1990)**

***Anxiety***

*"Anxiety is the recognition that the events with which one is confronted lie outside the range of convenience of one's construct system."*

(Kelly, 1955, V. II, p.364)

An individual is faced with an event or set of events where the construct system is unprepared. 'Tight' construers may find this difficult to cope with, and try to apply their current constructs in the hope that they will be effective. 'Loose' and more flexible construers will be more able to adapt their constructs.

Kelly (1955) suggests that anxiety is experienced when we are confronted by events which we find difficult to predict or interpret. Hence, we cannot predict the outcome of our own actions or the actions of others.

The data do suggest that all three of the girls experienced varying degrees of anxiety. The girls' use of language referred to feeling 'worried', generally being a 'worrier', feeling 'paranoid', and 'scared' in response to their thoughts of attending school and leaving home. The relationship between cognition and emotion is a central concept in personal construct theory, which does not support dualism (where feelings and thinking are considered separate), rather they are viewed as connected in the process of construing events (Fransella and Dalton, 1990).

It is argued here that the prospect of attending school appeared to lie outside the range of convenience of the girls' construct systems, and that, therefore, feelings of anxiety were experienced due to feelings of uncertainty and unpredictability. Two of the girls in particular, S and E, (who had mothers with physical and/or mental illness) reported feelings of being 'worried' at school

when they knew their mothers were going to be at home alone. In this case, the girls anticipated that their mothers' wellbeing would be at risk when they are at school, which caused uncomfortable feelings of anxiety, potentially due to their construct system being under elaborated or potentially invalidated.

*'If my mum is at home alone, I feel worried if she's gonna be alright' (S)*

*'I feel better when I'm at home with my mum...to make sure she's alright' (S)*

*'you're sad when you leave your house and your mum because you won't see her for quite a while...when you get to school your know your mum's ok because my sister will be looking after her...if someone wasn't there to look after her I would feel worried'. (E)*

The majority of research has focussed on the clinical characteristics of young people with school refusal, arguing that a high proportion of this population meet the criteria for anxiety disorders (Berg et al, 1993; Bools et al, 1990; Egger et al, 2003; Kearney and Albano, 2004; Last and Strauss, 1990; McShane et al, 2001). Alternatively, Kelly argued strongly against psychiatric classification of psychological disorders, and believed that it is not in clients' interest to have medical diagnoses or labels of their problems, which, in his view, hindered any attempt holistically to understand the individual (Fransella and Dalton (1990). Kelly (1955) viewed psychiatric diagnosis as *'all too frequently an attempt to cram a whole live struggling client into a nosological category'* (p. 775)', and preferred to adopted the term 'transitive diagnosis', to describe the *'avenues of movement'* (Kelly, 1955, p.775) open to the individual.



### 3.3. Returning to school

In one of the cases, E reported on several occasions that she finds it difficult to return to school after an extended period of absence, which was also one of the factors identified by the young people in Malcolm et al's (2003) research.

#### 3.3.1. *Illness, tiredness, and physical complaints*

E's comments had marked similarities to Yoneyama's (2000) staged approach to school refusal, which emphasises the role of 'burn out' and exhaustion in relation to attending school. E reported on several occasions how tired she feels in the mornings and throughout the day, and the related health complaints that trigger extended periods of absence. It appears therefore that somatic complaints, where, for example, young people who are susceptible to illness and excessive tiredness, may have a significant role to play in triggering emotionally-based non attendance.

*'When I'm ill, the doctor says I'm underweight a bit and I get ill easier...my asthma makes me ill when it's cold outside...its just getting up in the morning...I get really tired and I don't want to do nothing.'* (E)

*'It's nothing to do with school, it's just getting up that's hard'* (E)

#### 3.3.2. *'I get used to being at home'*

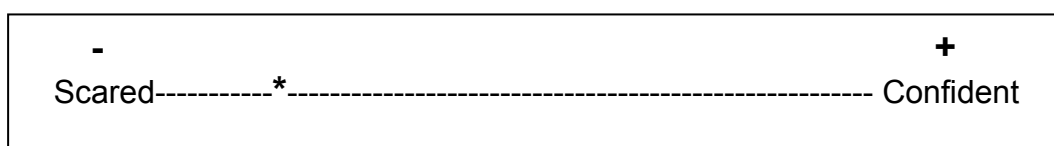
Berg et al (1969) argued that one of the symptoms of school refusal is complaints of feeling ill *without* an obvious organic cause on being faced with the prospect of going to school. Hence, feelings of illness may be more

psychosomatic in nature, and a secondary symptom of fear or anxiety. The current findings argue against this potentially oversimplified assumption. It is acknowledged that E's somatic complaints were indeed organic in origin (later verified by her mother with supporting evidence from the family GP), but that such illness had a significant role to play in later emotional difficulties in attempting to return to school. For instance, E discussed the difficulties she experiences in returning to school after being ill or after school holidays, as she gets accustomed to being at home. Hence, what might begin as a somatic complaint may well develop into more psychologically or emotionally-based difficulties at the prospect of attending school after extended periods of absence. E reported the emotional response of feeling 'scared' in returning to school after her time at home.

*'I don't like returning to school...because I get used to being at home'*  
(E)

*'When I think about coming back to school in September after the summer holidays I feel...scared'* (E)

In exploring this issue in greater detail, a bipolar construct was identified as scared/confident. E identified feeling scared at the prospect of returning, and showed a preference to be more confident in school.



At the prospect of returning to school after a period of time off, E reported the uncertainties she might experience in the school system which contributed to her feeling scared.

*'If I come back to school, I just feel scared because...if you're coming back to school and you might have not been there for a while.....you could be thinking about what lessons have you got and what's happening in the day and stuff...you might not be confident and you might not talk to a lot of people and you might wonder what people think.'* (E)

*'You should be bit more confident...you can do bigger things...you can like stand up and talk in assembly'* (E)

Although E reported that she feels scared to come back to school (after being at home for a period of time), she also acknowledged that she feels more confident once she is settled back into the school system.

*'If you've been off for a month you might feel scared when you're coming back...when you're actually in school you might get a bit more confident because you're back and you feel happy'* (E)

It seems that the anxiety experienced in returning to school after time off results in difficulty re-establishing attendance, which is likely further to exacerbate the non-attendance. Therefore, patterns of attendance and absence may occur in significant blocks of time, as opposed to more proximal fluctuations. This was indeed found to be the case with E, according to her annual school's registration record. In PCP terms, this could be discussed in

terms of the young person's decision making process or the Circumspection-Pre-emption-Control cycle (CPC cycle).

The CPC cycle is the process of making choices, which can often cause people great difficulty (Dalton and Dunnett, 1992). CPC is a three staged decision making cycle, described below, along with illustrative examples of the choices made throughout intermittent patterns of attendance.

**Table 8. The CPC cycle in relation to emotionally-based non-attendance.**

<b>Stage of the CPC cycle</b>	<b>Definition</b>	<b>Example: After an extended period of absence</b>	<b>Example: After an extended period of school attendance</b>
<i>Circumspection</i>	The point at which one considers all possible options amongst the range of constructs held	Remain at home or return to school?	Stay at home or carry on attending school?
<i>Pre-emption</i>	To select the most critical construct and eliminate alternatives	Remain at home	Attend school
<i>Control</i>	When one chooses the preferred action which one anticipates to be the greater possibility of extension of the construct system	Remaining at home avoids anxiety or feeling 'scared' as a short term response	Attending school elaborates and extends alternative constructs such as 'confidence'

The CPC process links with the choice corollary (see Table 1, number 7), which argues that a person chooses between the dichotomous poles of his/her construct in a way which is predicted by their anticipations. Kelly (1963) suggests that,

*'here is where the inner turmoil so frequently manifests itself. Which shall man choose, security or adventure? Shall he choose that which*

*leads to immediate certainty or...that which may eventually give him a wider understanding?' (p.64)*

Reflection on E's comments, suggests that more sustained periods of school attendance result in a greater elaboration of the child's construct system (e.g. 'confident', 'I want to go to school'). If one assumes that the school environment is positive for the young person, this would result in the young person making more positive anticipations about attending school. However, the longer period of time that a young person remains at home, the greater the risk that the contrast pole will be attenuated (e.g. 'scared', 'I want to stay at home'), as a contrast with the more fully elaborated anticipations of home as 'safe'. Such environmental influences, and their impact on the dynamic construct system, are likely to have a significant influence on the young person's decision making process and emotional experiences.

In some cases, young people may exert maximum control, by choosing from a narrow range of possibilities as a way of managing their anxiety or threat in unfamiliar situations. In an impulsive attempt to escape uncomfortable feelings of anxiety related to returning to school, the young person may spend little time on circumspection (weighing alternative options related to attending school), and move to pre-empt the issue and take control (by remaining at home).

### **3.3. School factors**

As already discussed, the factors involved in all three girls' intermittent patterns of attendance were related predominantly to home-based factors.

Although the small sample size must be taken into consideration (limiting legitimate generalisation for the wider heterogeneous population of EBNA), this provides support to the assumptions of previous research by Archer et al (2003) that *'while school factors could trigger or exacerbate the problems of school refusal, the origins of the problem usually lay in the home'* (p.15).

However, another theme that was found in the data was the role of protective and risk factors in school. Previous research has placed less emphasis on the role of school factors in emotionally-based non-attendance, with studies predominantly restricted towards clinical characteristics of children, separation anxiety and home/familial factors (Shilvock, 2010). Table 9 below shows some of the risk and protective factors identified in school within the current study, which served to attract or deter the girls to/from school. This suggests that school comprises multiple dimensions, some of which are more positively experienced or valued than others.

Table 9. The risk and protective school factors involved in Emotionally-Based Non-Attendance.

Risk or Protective Factors	School factors involved in EBNA	Supporting quotes
<p><b>Risk Factors</b> (factors which lead the young person away from school)</p>	<p><b>Boredom</b> Some of the girls reported that some lessons were boring at school, and found it difficult to focus in lessons that they did enjoy.</p>	<p><i>'you don't really, like, want to be there... just find it boring and don't like the lesson they're in or don't like doing the work.'</i>(S)</p> <p><i>'I don't like being bored but I also don't like learning'</i>(S)</p>
	<p><b>Relevance of certain subjects</b> If certain subjects were considered to be irrelevant or uninteresting, some of the girls' motivation and concentration decreased.</p>	<p><i>'like in French, some people won't use French in their life and some people will, if you don't want to use French then you shouldn't really have to do it'</i>(S)</p> <p><i>'If you don't want to do a lesson you don't stay focussed on it'</i>(S)</p>
	<p><b>Finding the work in lessons difficult/inappropriate support</b> One girl in particular (E) found some of the work difficult in lessons. When she got confused or did not understand certain tasks in lessons, she experienced frustration. The girl was on the special educational needs register, which raises questions whether work was appropriately differentiated to address her needs.</p>	<p><i>'I get confused really easily...I would like to do some things on my own but its just the way some people explain it, like, not enough'</i> (E)</p> <p><i>'you get all muddled up and confused, and it can be annoying and stuff, its frustrating'</i>(E)</p> <p><i>'When you're like answering the questions and that, and you don't know what to do, you can't ask your friends because you can't talk or sit with your friends, you have to sit by yourself'</i>(S)</p>

<b>Protective Factors</b> (factors which attract the young people to school)	<b>Friendships and social support</b> A recurring theme throughout the interviews was the importance in seeing friends at school. This may indicate that friendships and social lives are important factors in attracting the young people to school, even though they might prefer to stay at home.	<i>'I like coming to school to see my friends' (S)</i>  <i>'I feel safe because like I'm with my friends, but that's probably one of the reasons that I come to school, my friends make it easier for me, but I still feel a bit worried sometimes' (L)</i>  <i>'I like coming to school because I get to see my friends, some of them I see when it's a weekend and some of them I don't live near by...you haven't spoke to them or seen them... and then you go back to school and you speak to them...about what they did in their summer holiday and stuff like that'(S)</i>
	<b>Enjoying lessons</b> Some of the girls (L and E) enjoyed lessons at school. Enjoyment also distracted some of the girls from thinking or worrying about difficult circumstances at home for some of the time.	<i>'Like, if you are in a fun lesson you don't really think about it (home/mum), but if your in a lesson that you don't really like, you might feel like you want to go home'(E)</i>  <i>'I like the lessons, like art and maths and stuff'(E)</i>  <i>'I said to my mum, I want to go to school tomorrow because we are doing a load of fun things today and I really like it'(L)</i>
	<b>Valuing education and future aspirations</b> One of the girls (E) reported that the most important factor in coming to school was for learning. Some of the girls (L and S) could see the importance of learning in school to fulfil aspirations in the future.	<i>'it's important to get a good job and get money and get a house and that'(S)</i>  <i>'(most important thing about coming to school is) learning...because you can get a good education because then you can go to college or university then get a good job that you really want'(E)</i>  <i>'I wana move on and I want to follow my dream of being a singer when I'm older' (L)</i>
	<b>Extra-curricular activities</b> After school clubs encouraged one girl (L) to come to school.	<i>'Last week when I was really ill I still wanted to come to school so I could go to my club that I go to after'(L)</i>



Some of the factors in Table 9 are congruent with previous research into the school factors related to nonattendance. For instance, in Malcolm et al's (2003) study, *boredom* and *problems with lessons* were identified as contributory factors, as well as Archer et al's (2003) factors including *academic pressures* and *inappropriate provision*. However the extent to which 'being bored' reflects a socially desirable construct amongst young people in school and/or a defensive externalised attribution, need also to be considered. This possible bias may be associated with the sociality corollary (Table 1, corollary 11), whereby young people interact with each other through understanding and coming to share their construing. Although the girls did not perceive bullying (Archer et al, 2003) as a factor in their non-attendance, they did emphasise the importance of *friendships* in attracting them to school.

Whereas Wilkins (2008) and Archer et al (2003) recognised the school's culture and environment as contributory factors to non-attendance (size/layout of school, structure of day, school climate and disciplinary procedures), the girls did not report such influences, although, the academic environment (Wilkins, 2008) and academic pressures (Archer et al, 2003) may relate to E's comments related to *finding the work in lessons difficult*. The relationship between Special Educational Needs (SEN) and emotionally-based non-attendance may warrant further exploration: Academic pressure and inappropriate provision for SEN could potentially place this already vulnerable group of young people at risk of developing more chronic forms of non-attendance in the future, as illustrated in Wilkins' (2008) study. Overall, however, that a narrower range of school based risk factors was cited by the

three girls in this study may indicate either that the girls comprise an atypical sample, or that the culture of the school is supportive.

#### **4. Conclusion**

Thus far, research has predominantly focussed on conceptualising the factors that place young people at risk of emotionally-based non-attendance in terms of their personal attributes. Clinical categories of mental illness have been invoked, resulting in EBNA being understood and studied primarily from psychiatric perspectives, within adult-based discourses (Pellegrini, 2007). Against this dominant discourse, the current study has sought the views of young people themselves by adopting a constructivist approach: personal construct psychology. Although the girls' constructions of the bases for their non-attendance varied, according to their subjective accounts, several commonalities were identified from the data corpus.

The young carer role was found to be a contributory factor in the girls' attendance difficulties, aligned to difficult circumstances in their families. Consequently, the girls ascribed to themselves responsibility for supporting their mothers and families, which sometimes made it difficult for them to leave home and attend school. The ambivalence experienced in deciding between staying at home to support their mothers/families, or attending school to fulfil their role as a student, resulted in varying degrees of anxiety for the girls, especially at the prospect of leaving their mothers alone at home.

Responses by this specific sample of students with intermittent patterns of attendance, also gave insight into the tensions that needed to be resolved as they sought to return to school after an extended period of absence. The uncertainties surrounding returning to school were anxiety-provoking for some of the girls, with important implications for the role of schools in providing improved support for returning students. This may be addressed by harnessing some of the protective factors in school, such as the value of friendships, by mobilising peer support, for example.

Although the girls reported that home-based factors were the primary influence on their attendance difficulties, the role of school-based factors should not be discounted. The girls identified a number of risk factors in school such as *boredom, irrelevant lessons, and finding the work difficult*, which may exacerbate non-attendance. It is important that schools ensure that appropriate provision and support is put in place for emotionally-based school refusers with special educational needs in particular, so that this does not become a further barrier to attendance.

However, protective factors were also discussed, such as the importance of *friendships in school, social support, valuing education, and extra curricular activities*. This too emphasises the role that the school setting has to play in identifying and addressing school-based risks, and harnessing protective influences more systematically in order to engage those at risk of becoming chronic emotionally-based non-attenders (e.g. complete refusal from school resulting in the young person remaining at home at all times).

It must also be acknowledged that the application of PCP is not restricted to assessment purposes, but there is also great potential to use it as a framework for intervention with emotionally-based non-attenders, which forms part of multi-modal interventions that target schools, families and young people.

### **5. Critique of the methodology**

The small and all female sample in the study clearly limits the legitimate generalisation of its findings to the heterogeneous population of emotionally-based non-attenders. However, the research findings are permissive of analytical generalisation (Yin, 2003), and so of contributing to the wider body of research on emotionally-based non-attendance.

The current study adopted a personal construct psychology perspective throughout the interview process and the analysis/interpretation of data, in order to elicit and inform understanding of the rich subjective accounts of the young people. However, it must be acknowledged that throughout the interview process, it was impossible to separate myself from my own constructs and prior knowledge of the school refusal research literature.

Fransella and Dalton (1990) refer to this as *suspension* and argue that,

*'the counsellor (researcher) has to develop the skill of suspending his or her own construing of events so as to subsume the client's reality...this ability to suspend one's own construing...is, for the majority of people the most difficult of all the personal construct skills to acquire' (p.18).*

Therefore, it would be naïve to assume that qualitative research can simply 'give voice' to its participants (Braun and Clarke, 2006). In encouraging the

girls to explore their constructs throughout the interviews, it is unrealistic to assume that I abandoned my own theoretical and epistemological assumptions. For instance, this links to the research's 'double hermeneutic' epistemology, which is a distinguishing feature of the social sciences (Giddens, 1982). The 'double hermeneutic' recognises that researchers interpret through their own conceptual frameworks the interpretations made by those being studied (Scott, 1996).

On a more pragmatic note, I encountered several difficulties in identifying the sample for this study, which was predominantly due to the 'hidden' nature of this population 'at risk' of chronic extended non-attendance. Firstly, I relied on the judgments of professionals (school staff and educational welfare officers), which were based on three criteria that were relatively open to interpretation (see Box 3 in section 2.4). On reflection, it may have been more reliable to obtain a sample from the students themselves, by a system of self nomination, as opposed to relying upon adult interpretations of emotionally-based non-attendance.

Secondly, there is some evidence to suggest that the sensitive nature of the study (described on the child consent form, Appendix 6) may have appeared overwhelming to some of the young people, constituting a significant barrier to conscription of a greater number of participants. For instance, one young person chose not to take part in the study, although his mother had provided her consent. This example may, however, simply have been just a further manifestation of the vulnerable nature of the target population, and their developing habit strength in avoiding potentially stressful situations.

## 6. Concluding comment

This research has affirmed the importance of listening to the views of young people with emotionally-based non-attendance, as this provides a powerful source of evidence which can inform appropriate interventions, and provide a more holistic, ecologically valid understanding of the young person's distress (Tew, 2005). Although home factors were found to afford key influences upon the girls' non-attendance, the identified school factors highlight that the school has an important role to play in supporting intervention to reduce risks and strengthen supportive influences on pupils' circumstances, feelings and behaviour.

Although these young people attend school for the majority of the time, the study has emphasised that they can still experience uncomfortable feelings of anxiety in school, related to their dual role as a young carer and student. Without exploring their views, their subjective experiences would remain hidden and unacknowledged. The study emphasises the value of an interpretative subjectivist approach to understanding emotionally-based non-attendance which stresses a *'commitment to hear and take seriously what people may have to say about their mental distress: the content of their experiences, and the meanings, histories and aspirations that they attach to them'* (Tew, 2005, p.16).

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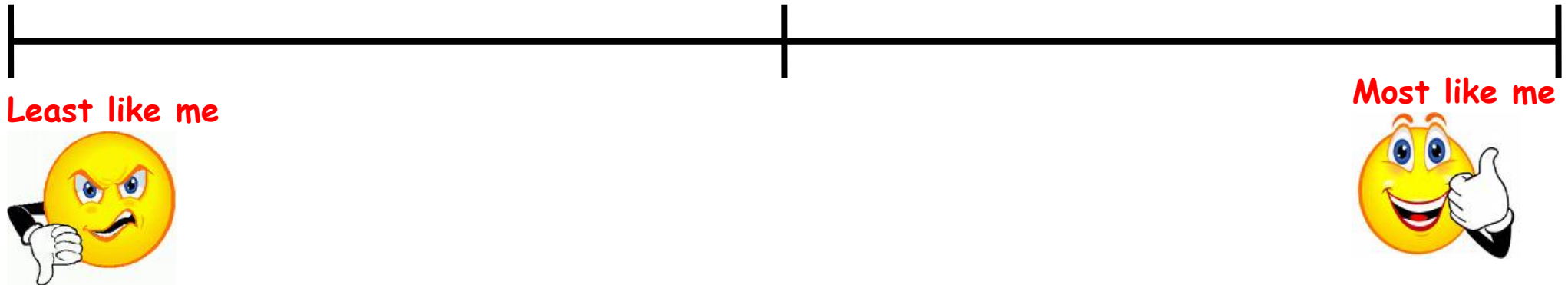
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**Appendix 1: Salmon Line/Q-sort activity**

I presented a range of factors to the young person that have been associated with emotional based non-attendance (according to the school refusal research). This included 22 statements on individual strips of paper (Table 3 in 'procedure'). The child was asked to rank order these along a continuum of most like me and least like me (Salomon line illustrated below). Discussions then focussed on the statements which were most pertinent to the young person or recurring themes that were noted by the interviewer. Laddering and pyramiding techniques were also used to explore the young person's construing (see Appendix 3 for details of interview prompts).





**Appendix 2: Sentence completion task (Grice et al, 2004)**

The girls were given the following incomplete sentences to elicit their constructs in the domain of school and non-attendance. The girls' answers were explored further through laddering and pyramiding of bipolar constructs.

I like coming to school because .....

I do not like coming to school because.....

When I think about coming back to school in September after the summer holidays, I feel.....

When I'm in school, I am.....

When I wake up in the morning and think about coming to school, I feel.....

When I enter the school gates, I feel.....

When I am in my (*favourite lesson*) I feel.....

When I am in my (*least favourite lesson*) I feel.....

When I leave my house to come to school, I think.....

**Appendix 3: Laddering and Pyramiding: A technique to elaborate the girls construing**

The discussions that took place between me and the girls in the interviews were structured by an initial open ended question and PCP activities; the Q-sort/Salmon line activity (Appendix 2) and sentence completion task (Appendix 3). These activities generated several themes related to the girls emotionally-based non-attendance and elicited several constructs which were explored in greater depth through laddering and pyramiding. The following provides an illustrative example of the laddering and pyramiding process, which was characteristic of the interview techniques I used with the girls.

**An example of construct elaboration: using bipolar constructs and laddering/pyramiding.**

- 1) A construct of 'paranoid' has been elicited by a girl when she was discussing her attendance difficulties.
- 2) The contrast pole is explored, in order to obtain a greater understanding of what the girl is experiencing. This is called the bipolarity of construing (Kelley, 1955). E.g. what would you call someone who isn't 'paranoid?' (e.g. the girl construed this to be 'relaxed, see below)

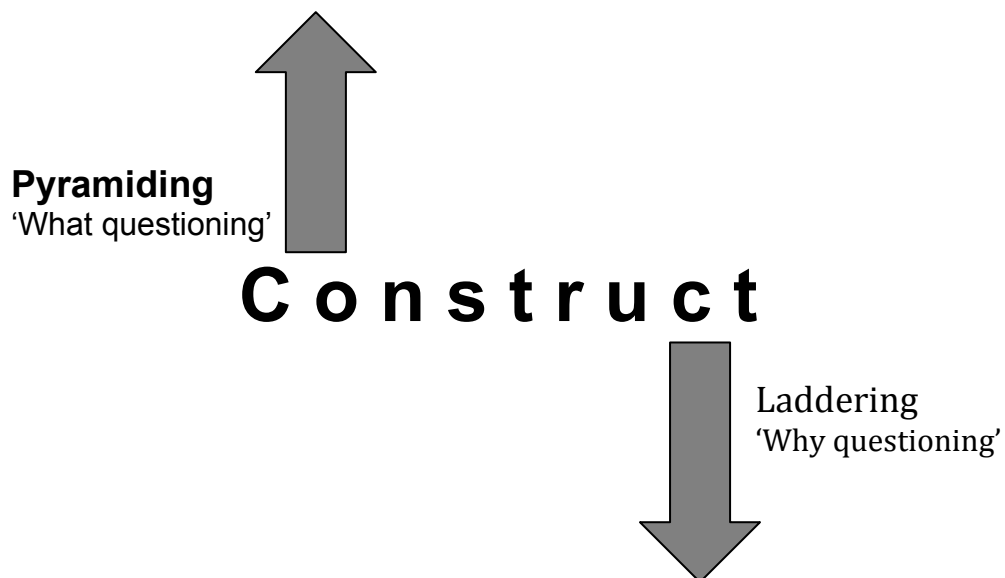
**paranoid-----relaxed**

- 3) Once the bipolar construct is established (e.g. 'relaxed), the girl is asked 'Which pole do you think describes you best' or 'Which is your preferred pole'
- 4) Starting with the pole that the girl would most like to be, a number of laddering and pyramiding questions are presented (see table below)

**Example of ‘Laddering and Pyramiding’ questions Developed from Beaver (1996), Burnham (2008), Ravenette (1999).**

<p><b>Laddering</b></p> <p>Exploring the young people’s core beliefs and basic values.</p>	<p><b>Laddering involves a series of ‘Why’ questions.</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-‘Why is that important?’</li> <li>-‘Why do you feel it is a good thing to be...’?</li> <li>-‘Why would that be important to you’</li> <li>-‘Why does that matter’</li> <li>-‘You mentioned that you would rather be.....than.....Why is that?’</li> <li>-‘What is so bad about being.....’</li> <li>-‘What is so good about being.....’</li> </ul>
<p><b>Pyramiding</b></p> <p>The surface behaviours associated with a bipolar construct</p>	<p><b>Pyramiding involves a series of ‘What’ questions.</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>‘What do .....people do?’</li> <li>‘How would a .....person behave?’</li> <li>‘What would you see them doing?’</li> <li>‘Anything else?’</li> </ul>

An illustration of laddering and pyramiding constructs. From Burnham (2008)



**Appendix 4: Summary of key points in the three interviews****The four themes identified through thematic analysis**

Themes Identified	Colours
<b>Young carer role</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Difficulties at home/with family</li> <li>Supporting mum/supporting family difficulties</li> </ul>	<b>Pink</b>
<b>Ambivalence</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Stay at home or go to school?</li> <li>Role of anxiety</li> </ul>	<b>Green</b>
<b>Returning to School</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Tiredness, physical illness</li> <li>I get used to being at home</li> </ul>	<b>Blue</b>
<b>School Factors</b>	<b>Yellow</b>

**Case Study 1: 'L'****1.1. Background**

L is a girl in Year 7, and had 84% attendance last year (15% were authorised absences, and 1% unauthorised). She is the youngest child, has four older brothers and lives at home with her mother. She no longer sees her father. L's family have received support from the education welfare officer of the school, in order to improve her attendance at school and offer additional support to the family.

**1.2. Open-ended question**

**Aim:** The aim of the initial open ended question provided L with an understanding of why she had been selected to take part in the study, making particular reference to her intermittence attendance. This gave the young person an opportunity to justify her own reasoning about her sporadic attendance, and to verify whether they felt it was due to an emotional basis or anxiety.

**Method:** *'Your mum and your school have mentioned that you sometimes find it difficult to come to school, or might not want to come to school or get*

*upset/worried about coming to school...I'm interested in finding out whether you think this is true?*

*(NOTE: From this initial open ended question, L was able to speak for 15-20minutes with minimal prompts, which generated rich data. This was longer than the other two girls).*

## Findings

- L thought that this was true of her only sometimes, and gave a detailed explanation of the feelings she has when she doesn't want to come.
- L reported that sometimes she prefers to stay at home with her family, in order to make sure she knows what is going on.
- When she goes to school, she worries about the wellbeing of her family. These experiences make her want to stay at home from time to time.
- L reflected on her experiences in year 3, which she believes was the start of her not wanting to attend school. L witnessed a violent fight between her two older brothers at home which 'scared' her, and occupied her thoughts the following day on her school trip. She reported that ever since this time she has 'always worried about what's going on at home'.
- Even though her brothers do not live at home anymore, she still worries about what's happening in her family at home.
- 'I feel ok (at school) knowing that its going to be alright but in a way I feel that I want to be at home more than anything'
- L told me that she feels 'safe' in school because she is with her friends. Her friends are one of the main reasons she comes to school. 'I feel safe because like I'm with my friends, but that's probably one of the reasons that I come to school...its easier for me but I still feel a bit worried sometimes'
- L worries about her brother being at home with her mother, as he can get very angry and physically aggressive. Her brother and mother do not get on very well, and can argue.

- L felt that if she stayed at home, she would be able to calm her brother down and protect her mum. She reflected on another incident at home, which involved an argument between her brother, mother and herself.
- L said that she felt pressure when she is at school because she is required to concentrate on her work, as well as worrying about her home life and well being of her family. *'it's sort of pressurising me as well...I have a load of stuff going on at home and then when I come to school I have to concentrate so hard on my work...and its really hard.'*

### 1.3. Q-Sort/Salmon Line activity

**Aim:** To consider the range of factors associated with the child's non-attendance, ranging from possible psychological factors within the child, home/family based factors and school factors.

**Method:** A range of factors that have been associated with emotional based non-attendance (according to the school refusal research) were presented to the child (22 statements). The child was asked to rank order these along a continuum of most like me and least like me. Discussions then focussed on the statements which were most pertinent to the young person, or recurring themes that were noted by the interviewer.

#### Findings:

##### Top 10 factors that L rated as 'Most like me'

Ranking	Comment/Statement	Category
1	I live with just one parent	Home/family
2	I worry about most things in my life	Within-child
3	I find it hard/upsetting to be away from my family	Home/family
4	I argue with my parent(s)	Home/family
5	I feel depressed, sad, unhappy	Within-child
6	My family and I do activities outside of home.	Home/family
7	My family is a close family	Home/family
8	I worry about my parents' wellbeing	Home/family

9	I have friendship problems	School
10	There have been recent changes in my family	Home/family

- L predominantly rated the home-related factors as ‘most like her’, along side statement related to ‘worrying’ or feeling ‘sad’.
- L chose to talk about ‘**I argue with my parents**’. *Cheeky and calm* were identified as bipolar constructs. L would like to be calm, but identified herself as more cheeky. L felt it was important to be calm because it makes you happier, **and will help parents**. Negatives about being cheeky with your parents, **because it’s important to help them out** and not refuse to do things (e.g. chores), especially if they’re a single parent.
- ‘**I worry about most things in their life**’. *Paranoid and relaxed* were identified as bipolar constructs. L thought it was more important to be relaxed because you think about the future/moving on and not thinking/**worrying about the past**. Not good to be paranoid because her mother feels this due to difficulties with her ex-partner.
- ‘**I feel sad**’. There has been lots of ‘ups and downs’ in L’s life. Depressed and happier were identified as bipolar constructs. L considered it important to be happier because she thought it would make others happier and you feel on top of the world. Difficulties with feeling depressed included thinking too much about the past. **Sometimes L feels depressed because she thinks about her past at home and conflicts with her father.**
- L considered school factors to be a positive factor, which makes her **want to come to school. Lots of fun things in school and friends make her want to come to school.**

#### 1.4. Sentence Completion

**Aim:** This was another construct elicitation technique. It invited the girls to complete unfinished sentences to generate idiographic information regarding their school attendance. This was not done as a stand alone activity, but also

provided a focus for further discussion and construct elaboration (through laddering and pyramiding)

**Method:** The young people were provided with a range of incomplete sentences to elicit their constructs in the domain of school and non-attendance. The constructs elicited were explored further through laddering and pyramiding of bipolar constructs

**Findings:**

- *I like coming to school because I get to see my friends and teachers and I like the lessons I do.*
- *I do not like coming to school because I like being at home*
- *When I think about coming back to school in September after the summer holidays, I feel like it's a new fresh start*
- *When I'm in school, I am calm and a little happy*
- *When I wake up in the morning and think about coming to school, I feel like I want to come and do my lessons then go back home*
- *When I enter the school gates, I feel it's another day but with different lessons and I'm happy*
- *When I am in my (\*\*favourite lesson\*\*) I feel (Did not complete)*
- *When I am in my (\*\*least favourite lesson\*\*) I feel (Did not complete)*
- *When I leave my house to come to school, I think (Did not complete)*
  
- *When L is school, she said that she feels ok but its just the odd occasion she would worry because of an argument that may have happened at home.*
- *Conflict of emotions/feelings. When L in school she describes herself as feeling calm and happy, because she is away from the all the horrible things that could happen at home, but she still wants to be there. L felt confused about these different feelings.*
- *Clubs after school make her want to attend.*



## **2. Case Study 2 'E'**

### **2.1. Background**

E is a girl in Year 8, and had 72% attendance last year (22% were authorised absences, and 6% unauthorised). She lives at home with her mother, father and two brothers, but she also has an older sister who does not live at home. Her mother has arthritis.

### **2.2. Open-ended question**

**Aim:** The aim of the initial open ended question provided E with an understanding of why she had been selected to take part in the study, making particular reference to her intermittent attendance. This gave E an opportunity to justify her own reasoning about her sporadic attendance, and to verify whether she felt it was due to an emotional basis or anxiety.

**Method:** *'Your mum and your school have mentioned that you sometimes find it difficult to come to school, or might not want to come to school or get upset/worried about coming to school...I'm interested in finding out whether you think this is true?'*

#### **Findings:**

- Sometimes it's true but E feels poorly easily, asthma, colds etc.
- Getting up in the morning is difficult. E gets very tired and she doesn't want to go to school.
- Feels both, she feels like she wants to come to school sometimes but doesn't other times
- When I don't want to come to school, there are sometimes things in the school day
- When E does want to come to school because she likes seeing her friends and going to some of her lessons (Art and Maths)
- There are sometimes when E does want to go to home when she is at school but she uses distraction techniques e.g. *'I just do something to get my mind off it and I forget'*
- E found it difficult to explain why she wants to come home from school sometimes.

### 2.3. Q-Sort/Salmon Line activity

**Aim:** To consider the range of factors associated with the child's non-attendance, ranging from possible psychological factors within the child, home/family based factors and school factors.

**Method:** A range of factors that have been associated with emotional based non-attendance (according to the school refusal research) were presented to the child (22 statements). The child was asked to rank order these along a continuum of most like me and least like me. Discussions then focussed on the statements which were most pertinent to the young person, or recurring themes that were noted by the interviewer.

#### Findings:

##### Top 10 factors that E rated as 'Most like me'

Ranking	Comment/Statement	Category
1	I find it hard or upsetting to be away from my family	Home/family
2	I worry about my parents' wellbeing	Home/family
3	I don't like returning to school	School
4	I have low confidence	Within-child
5	I find the work in lessons hard	School
6	I worry that I might fail	Within-child
7	I worry about most things in my life	Within-child
8	I have friendship problems	School
9	My family is a close family	Home/family
10	I want to avoid tests/exams	School and home/family

- E said that she **doesn't really like returning to school after time off, she gets used to the routine of being at home**

- The top two reasons indicated that home based factors are 'most like E' in relation to her coming to school. E.g. 'I find it hard or upsetting to be away from my family' and 'I worry about my parents' wellbeing'
- E also reported that she worries about most things in her life, has low confidence and worries that she might fail.
- **'My family is a close family'**. *Do stuff together and always arguing/ fighting*. E would like to spend more time with her family. E thought she argued with her family because of difficulties with her siblings e.g. brother has ASD, other brother has ADHD and sister is an alcoholic. Difficulties at home identified such as brothers stealing which E disagreed with. E thought a close family was one that talked to each other and watch movies together.
- **'I find the work in lessons hard'** *Confused and Don't need to ask questions*. E felt that she gets confused in lessons really easily. E thought it was better to do things on your own in lessons and not ask questions. Some teachers don't explain things well enough. E described it as 'frustrating' and 'annoying' when she gets confused in lessons.
- **'I worry about my parents wellbeing'**. *Worry about parents and doesn't worry about parents*. E knows her parents are ok and she doesn't want to worry about her parents so much because she can do other things like go out and play with her friends. E's mum has arthritis and she helps her around the house, with nobody else to help. Responsibilities at home about keeping the house tidy and clean.
- **'I worry about most things in my life'**. *Worrier and relaxed*. E thinks she is a worrier and would like to be more relaxed. It's good to relax when your stressed because E is always worrying (e.g. what is E going to do when she grows up, because she might not get a good job and pay for a house) If your relaxed E thinks you can 'be yourself' for a few minutes.

## 2.4. Sentence Completion

**Aim:** This was another construct elicitation technique. It invited the girls to complete unfinished sentences to generate idiographic information regarding their school attendance. This was not done as a stand alone activity, but also provided a focus for further discussion and construct elaboration (through laddering and pyramiding)

**Method:** The young people were provided with a range of incomplete sentences to elicit their constructs in the domain of school and non-attendance. The constructs elicited were explored further through laddering and pyramiding of bipolar constructs

### Findings:

- I like coming to school because **I like to see my friends and doing lessons**
- I do not like coming to school because **I am tired and have to get up in the morning**
- When I think about coming back to school in September after the summer holidays, I feel **scared**
- When I'm in school, I am **happy**
- When I wake up in the morning and think about coming to school, I feel **tired**
- When I enter the school gates, I feel **happy to see my friends**
- When I am in my (**\*\*\*favourite lesson\*\*\***) I feel...**happy**
- When I am in my (**\*\*\*least favourite lesson\*\*\***) I feel **sad**
- When I leave my house to come to school, I think I am **sad and happy**

### Details

- E felt that **learning was the most important thing to come to school for, as well as friends.** So you **can go to colleague and university** and get a good job.
- E **doesn't like getting up in the morning because it's cold and she is tired.**

- When E thinks about coming back to school after the summer holidays she feels 'scared'. *Scared and confident*. E feels scared and would like to be more confident. She feels scared because she hasn't been to school for a while. E would prefer to be more confident because she could do things like talk in assembly. When E is scared she thinks about everything e.g. which lessons does she have, what's happening in the day, wonder what people think. E struggled to explain why she felt scared.
- I was interested to find out why E felt both '*Scared and happy*'. E thought that when you have time off an extended period of time you feel scared but once settle in you feel more confident and happy.
- E feels *sad and happy* when she leaves your house. E feels sad when she leaves her house and mum because she won't see her for a while. When E is at school she feels happy, because she knows her mum is ok because her older sister is looking after her. E would worry if she knew nobody was looking after her mum.

### **3. Case Study 3 'S'**

#### **3.1. Background**

S lives at home with her mother and father. She has a younger sister, two older sisters and an older brother. S has been identified as a young carer by the local authority as her mother has both physical and mental health difficulties. She is a girl in Year 8, and had 79% attendance last year (20% were authorised absences, and 1% unauthorised).

#### **3.2. Open-ended question**

**Aim:** The aim of the initial open ended question provided S with an understanding of why she had been selected to take part in the study, making particular reference to her intermittence attendance. This gave S an opportunity to justify her own reasoning about her sporadic attendance, and to verify whether she felt it was due to an emotional basis or anxiety.

**Method:** *'Your mum and your school have mentioned that you sometimes find it difficult to come to school, or might not want to come to school or get upset/worried about coming to school...I'm interested in finding out whether you think this is true?*

### **Details**

- S agreed with the statements, and said that she doesn't like coming. She found it difficult to verbally express her reasons.
- She thought that going from home was the difficulty.
- Thoughts and feelings are different at times. Sometimes she wants to come to school to see your friends.
- S said that she likes **staying at home because her mom is there.**
- As soon as S mentioned her mum, she got upset and cried.
- When S is **not with her mum she feels sad.**
- At school, when S is not doing things she wants to be doing (e.g. lessons), she wants to go home.
- **Sometimes worries about her mum when she is at school because she is not very well.**
- **S worries about her mum if nobody at home. S is at school and she is questioning whether her mum is alright. E.g. dad goes shopping, sister takes her baby out, other sisters at school,**
- **The other day S's mum had a fall when she was at home. Nobody was at home and she had to wait a whole day for someone to help her.**
- S said she has a sore throat or doesn't feel very well to keep her at home. Sometimes she does feel poorly but the other times it's because she doesn't want to go to school.

### **3.3. Q-Sort/Salmon Line activity**

**Aim:** To consider the range of factors associated with the child's non-attendance, ranging from possible psychological factors within the child, home/family based factors and school factors.

**Method:** A range of factors that have been associated with emotional based non-attendance (according to the school refusal research) were presented to the child (22 statements). The child was asked to rank order these along a continuum of most like me and least like me. Discussions then focussed on the statements which were most pertinent to the young person, or recurring themes that were noted by the interviewer.

### Findings:

#### Top 10 factors that S rated as 'Most like me'

Ranking	Comment/Statement	Category
1	My family is a close family	Home/family
2	I don't like returning to school	Home/family and School
3	I find it hard or upsetting to be away from my family	Home/family
4	I want to avoid tests/exams	School
5	I'm bored at school	School
6	I worry about my parents' wellbeing	Home/family
7	I find the work in lessons hard	School
8	I feel sad/unhappy	Within-child
9	My family and I do activities outside of home.	Home/family
10	I worry about most things in my life	Within-child

- **'I don't like returning to school'**. *Likes staying at home and Want to come to school* were recognised as bipolar constructs. S identified her self (\*) and preferred self (+) as 'likes staying at home'.

E.g.

*Like staying at home\*+ \_\_\_\_\_ Wants to come to school*

- S felt that it was important to like staying at home because she can stay with her mum, to make sure she's alright and she likes being with her. S would rather stay at home, she does not want to come back to school
- **'My family is a close family'**. 'All get on in the family' and 'argue all the time' were identified as bipolar constructs, Again S identified her self and preferred self as the same construct as 'All get on in family'. S thought this was important to get on in the family because arguing would make the family see each other less. Arguing results in families not talking to each other.
- **'I find it hard or upsetting to be away from my family'**. 'Want to be with their family' and 'Want to be out all the time'. Again, S identified her self and preferred self as the same construct as 'Want to be with the family'. S likes talking to and being with members of her family, and making sure her mum is alright.
- **'I am bored at school'**. S reported that being bored in school means she doesn't want to be in school, find it boring, don't like the lessons or doing the work. Bored and learning were identified as bipolar constructs. S identified her self as 'bored', but placed her preferred self as in between the two constructs of learning and bored.
- S reported that learning means you can know things and get a good job, so that you can have money. S described the 'relevance' of certain subjects determines how bored she gets in school e.g. the relevance of French in later life. She also reported that if she doesn't want to do a lesson, she doesn't stay focussed on the topic.
- **'I feel sad or unhappy'**. S feels this when she knows her mum will be at home alone, with nobody to look after her. This makes her worried

### 3.4. Sentence Completion

**Aim:** This was another construct elicitation technique. It invited the girls to complete unfinished sentences to generate idiographic information regarding their school attendance. This was not done as a stand alone activity, but also



provided a focus for further discussion and construct elaboration (through laddering and pyramiding)

**Method:** The young people were provided with a range of incomplete sentences to elicit their constructs in the domain of school and non-attendance. The constructs elicited were explored further through laddering and pyramiding of bipolar constructs

### **Findings:**

I like coming to school because **I like seeing my friends**

I do not like coming to school because **I like staying at home with my mum**

When I think about coming back to school in September after the summer holidays, I feel **unhappy**

When I'm in school, I am **sometimes happy sometimes unhappy**

When I wake up in the morning and think about coming to school, **I feel unhappy**

When I enter the school gates, I feel happy to see my friends but sad because **I want to be at home**

When I am in my (*\*\*\*favourite lesson\*\*\**) **I feel happy because its fun**

When I am in my (*\*\*\*least favourite lesson\*\*\**) **I feel bored**

When I leave my house to come to school, I think **I am sad because I am leaving my mum**

### **Details**

- S likes seeing her friends at school, especially the ones she hasn't seen in a while after the summer holidays.
- S reported that 'like, if your in a fun lesson you don't really think about it, but if your in a lesson that you don't really like you worry and feel like want to go home'.
- S identified ambivalent feelings about coming to school. For instance, she reported that she is happy to see her friends when she enters the school gates but also sad because she wants to stay at home with her mum.

### **3.5. Reflections**

- There were several occasions when S became upset during the interview when speaking about her mum. On several occasions, I gave her opportunities to terminate the interview and stop the recording. Despite this, S was adamant that she wanted to continue with the discussions, which may have suggested that she valued the process of being listened to and heard.
- Construct elicitation techniques from PCP can be largely dependant upon children being able to articulate their thoughts and feelings (Ravenette, 1999). S found this difficult throughout the interview which made it quite difficult to elaborate her constructs.
- S found it quite difficult to articulate the reasons as to why she found it difficult to be leave her mum or prefer or stay at home.
- On nearly all of the laddering and pyramiding of bipolar constructs, S identified her current self and preferred self as the same pole. The other two participants did not do this. PCP: Individual differences, individual corollary

**Information from Q-Sort activity.****Summary of the Q-sort for all three girls**

<b>Factor associated with school refusal on the Q-Sort</b>	<b>Young Person &amp; Ranking</b>		
	<b>L</b>	<b>E</b>	<b>S</b>
<b>Home/Family</b>			
I find it hard or upsetting to be away from my family	✓ 3	✓ 1	✓ 3
I worry about my parents' wellbeing	✓ 8	✓ 2	✓ 6
My family is a close family	✓ 7	✓ 9	✓ 1
I don't like returning to school		✓ 3	✓ 2
I live with just one parent	✓ 1		
I argue with my parent(s)	✓ 4		
My family and I do activities outside of home.	✓ 6		✓ 9
There have been recent changes in my family	✓ 10		
<b>School</b>			
I have friendship problems	✓ 9	✓ 8	
I find the work in lessons hard		✓ 5	✓ 7
I want to avoid tests/exams		✓ 10	✓ 4
I don't like returning to school		✓ 3	✓ 2
I'm bored at school			✓ 5
<b>Within-child</b>			
I worry about most things in my life	✓ 2	✓ 7	✓ 10
I feel depressed, sad, unhappy	✓ 5		✓ 8
I have low confidence		✓ 4	
I worry that I might fail		✓ 6	

Appendix 5: Form EC2 for POSTGRADUATE RESEARCH (PGR)  
STUDENTS

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Appendix 6: Child Information Sheet and Consent form

Title of my study: Investigating the factors associated with Emotionally Based Non-Attendance from young people's perspective

## Information

- Ⓢ My name is Gemma and I would like you to take part in my University research about why children are sometimes absent from school. I am interested in learning about why some children find it difficult to go to school, and how schools could help or support these children. Your parent(s) have already said that you can take part but I wanted to check if you would like to be in the project.
- Ⓢ If you do want to be in my project, I would like to talk to you at school about your life, and why it's sometimes difficult to attend school. I will be talking to you for about 45 minutes - hour. You won't be the only participant in my study; I will be talking to other children and asking them the same questions.
- Ⓢ Everything that we talk about will be kept confidential. This means that although other people will hear about the views given in all of my interviews, no one will know who said what in the sessions and no names will be given.
- Ⓢ If you decide that you don't want to take part, that's OK. It is your choice and nobody will be upset if you don't want to participate. Also, It's OK if you agree to take part but then change your mind later, or even want to stop half way through the interview. You can also skip some questions if you like; just say 'I don't want to answer that question'.
- Ⓢ You can ask any questions about my project now or at any time. Signing your name at the bottom of the page means that you agree to take part in the interviews.

Consent Form: Please read the statements and tick the boxes if you agree with them.

1. I have read the information about the project.	
2. I have had time to think about the information.	
3. I understand that the views that I give will be shared with others but nobody will know who has said what and no names will be given.	
4. I understand that I am volunteering to be involved and I can leave the project at any time without.	
5. I understand that the interview will be audio taped.	
6. I agree to take part in the project.	

.....  
 (Full Name)

.....  
 (Please Sign your name)

.....  
 (Date)

☺ Thank you for reading and completing this form

**Gemma Shilvock**  
**Trainee Educational Psychologist**  


Appendix 7: Parental Consent Form

Title of Research- Investigating the factors associated with 'Emotional Based Non-Attendance' from young people's perspective

Researcher: Gemma Shilvock  


Information

I would like to ask for your permission for your child to take part in my research on Emotionally Based absences from school. Some children, at some point in their lives, find it difficult to attend school, and in some cases, this can lead to extended periods of absence or simply intermittent patterns of attendance. I am interested in finding out more about this topic, by talking directly to some young people and obtaining their views, as well as looking into the possible school factors involved in their non-attendance. I am hoping to acquire a sample of about 10-12 children who have sometimes experienced some form of emotionally based difficulty attending school. I would like your child to be a part of this sample and take part in the individual interviews to obtain their views.

This research is part of my Doctoral training at the University of Birmingham.

- 1) I have had the opportunity to ask questions about the study and have received satisfactory answers to any questions I have asked. Y/N
  
- 2) I understand that my child's participation in the study is voluntary and that he/she can withdraw from the study at any time, without explanation, by advising the researcher. Y/N
  
- 3) I understand that the researcher will have access to the information my child has provided, that data will be stored securely and used only for researcher purposes. Y/N
  
- 4) I agree for my child to take part in the study. Y/N
  
- 5) I give permission for my child's personal data to be used for transcriptions, analysis and as a part of the researcher's studies at the University of Birmingham. Y/N

Information received as part of this procedure will be treated in confidence. The data obtained through your child's interviews will be analysed and any quotes used from the interviews will remain anonymous.

Name of parent (print)

Signature

Date

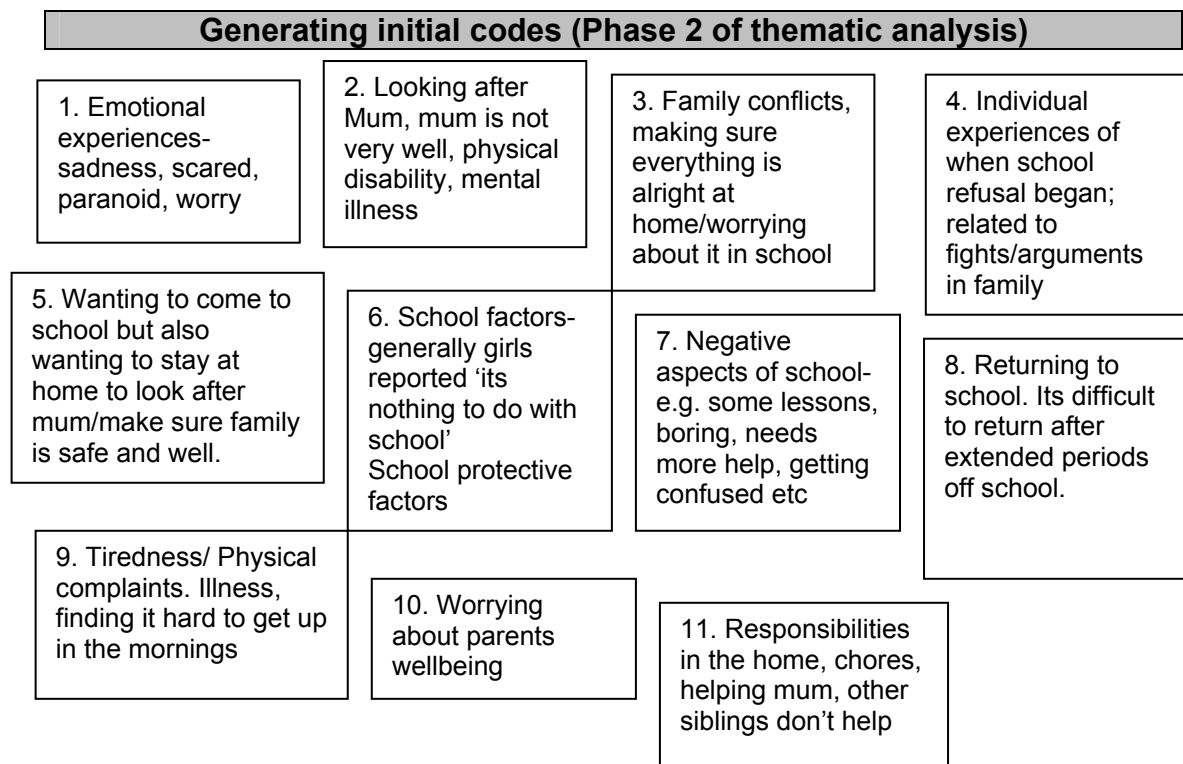
Name of researcher (print)

Signature

Date

## **Appendix 8**

An illustration of the thematic analysis process (Braun and Clarke, 2006)



### Searching for themes (Phase 3)

**Potential Theme A (Emotional, feeling pulled in two directions)**

1 Emotional experiences- sadness, scared, paranoid, worry

5 Related to: wanting to come to school but also wanting to stay at home to look after mum/make sure family is safe and well. Pressured to fulfil two roles

**Potential Theme B (Looking after mum/family)**

10 Worrying about parents' wellbeing

2 Looking after Mum, mum is not very well, physical disability, mental illness

11 Responsibilities in the home, chores, helping mum, other siblings don't help

**Potential Theme C (School)**

6 School factors- generally girls reported 'its nothing to do with school' School protective factors

7 Negative aspects of school- e.g. some lessons, boring, needs more help, getting confused etc

**Potential Theme D (Family difficulties)**

3 Family conflicts, making sure everything is alright at home/worrying about it in school

4 Individual experiences of when school refusal began; related to fights/arguments in family

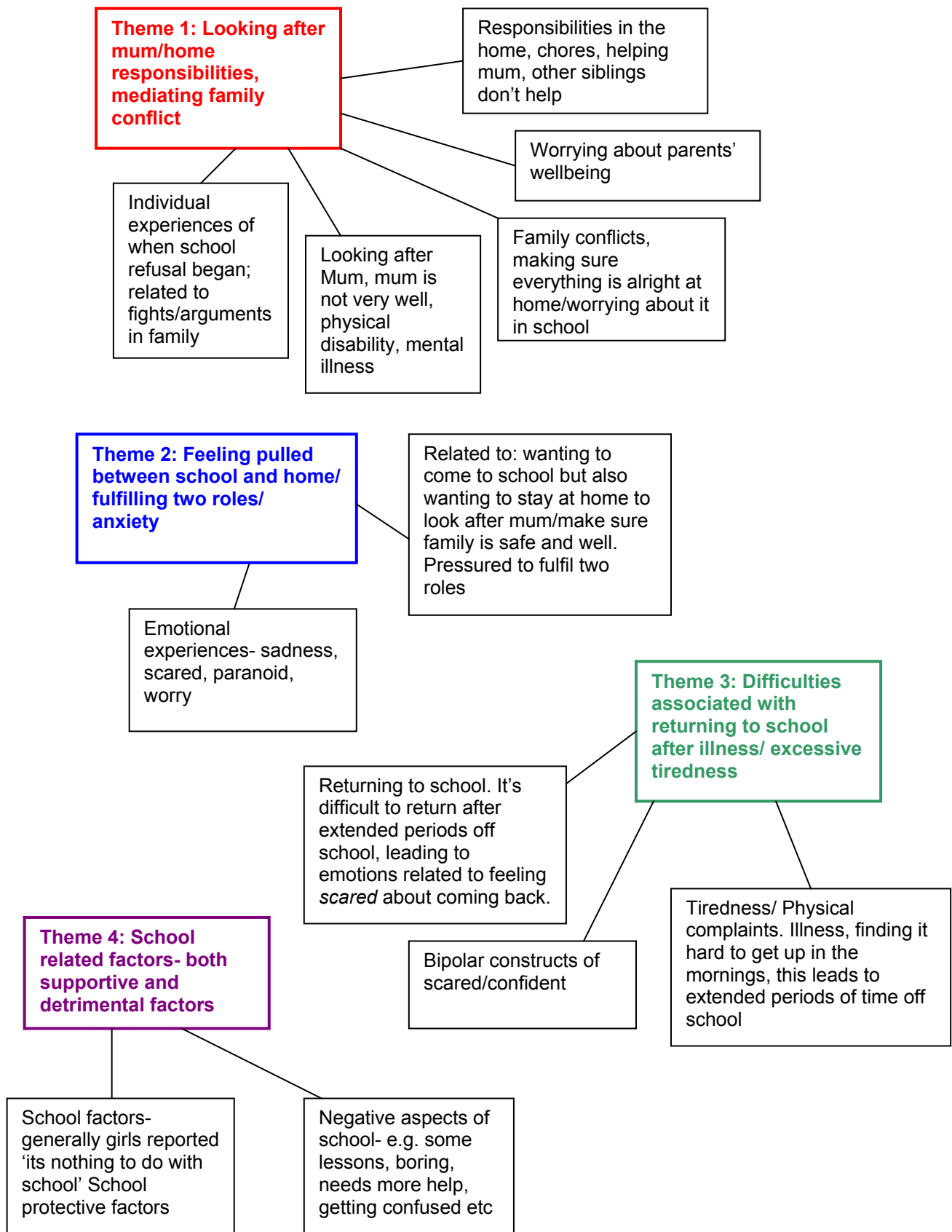
**Potential Theme E (Returning to school after being poorly/tired)**

8 Returning to school. It's difficult to return after extended periods off school, leading to emotions related to feeling scared about coming back.

9 Tiredness/ Physical complaints. Illness, finding it hard to get up in the mornings, this leads to extended periods of time off school



### Reviewing themes: The thematic map (Phase 4)





	<p><i>'you're sad when you leave your house and your mum because you won't see her for quite a while...when you get to school you know your mum's ok because my sister will be looking after her...if someone wasn't there to look after her I would feel worried'. (E)</i></p>
<p><b>3. Returning to school</b></p> <p><i>3.1. Illness, tiredness, and physical complaints</i></p> <p><i>3.2. 'I get used the being at home'</i></p>	<p><i>'When I'm ill, the doctor says I'm underweight a bit and I get ill easier...my asthma makes me ill when it's cold outside...its just getting up in the morning...I get really tired and I don't want to do nothing.' (E)</i></p> <p><i>'It's nothing to do with school, it's just getting up that's hard' (E)</i></p> <p><i>'If I come back to school, I just feel scared because...if you're coming back to school and you might have not been there for a while.....you could be thinking about what lessons have you got and what's happening in the day and stuff...you might not be confident and you might not talk to a lot of people and you might wonder what people think.' (E)</i></p> <p><i>'If you've been off for a month you might feel scared when you're coming back...when you're actually in school you might get a bit more confident because you're back and you feel happy' (E)</i></p>
<p><b>4. School Factors</b></p> <p><i>Protective factors and risk factors</i></p>	<p><i>'you don't really, like, want to be there... just find it boring and don't like the lesson they're in or don't like doing the work.'(S)</i></p> <p><i>'If you don't want to do a lesson you don't stay focussed on it'(S)</i></p> <p><i>'I get confused really easily...I would like to do some things on my own but its just the way some people explain it, like, not enough' (E)</i></p> <p><i>'I like coming to school to see my friends' (S)</i></p> <p><i>'I feel safe because like I'm with my friends, but that's probably one of the reasons that I come to school, my friends make it easier for me, but I still feel a bit worried sometimes' (L)</i></p> <p><i>'Like, if you in a fun lesson you don't really think about it (home/mum), but if your in a lesson that you don't really like, you might feel like you want to go home'(E)</i></p> <p><i>'I want to fulfil be dream of being a singer when I'm older'(L)</i></p> <p><i>'(most important thing about coming to school is) learning...because you can get a good education because then you can go to college or university then get a good job that you really want'(E)</i></p>

**Appendix 9: Exemplar of Transcript: 'L' and highlighted themes**

Researcher: Your mum and your school have had a few concerns that sometimes you find it difficult to come to school, and sometimes you might not want to come to school or sometimes you might get upset about coming to school...do you think that's true?

Young person (L): Well... I wouldn't say it's all true, Sometimes I don't want to come to school because, like, **I prefer to stay at home with my family to know what's going on ...**

(right)

then I go to school **think about my family all the time at school**

(right, ok, so do you want to talk a little bit about that? Whats?)

yeah....cos before when... **I remember when I was in year 3** I think it was or year 4 and....erm...we was, cos my brother wouldn't get up for school early in the morning....cos iv got 4 brothers

(4 brothers, gosh that's a lot of brothers)

yes and I'm the only girl as the youngest as well

(Ahh),

and err..... one of my brothers M was telling my brother N to get up and like.... He was saying no he didn't want to get up so my brother got really wound up cos he didn't want erm my brother N to end up where he was cos he never used to ever go to school that much

(right)

and err...they started arguing and then when my brother got out something I forgot what it was, and he was fighting with him and then...err...when they were **outside they started fighting, my brother had a knife** what you use for carpets

(yes)

and **he stabbed my other brother**

(right)

in the nose and it sort of scared me in a way because my brother had blood all over his face and I saw it...and on that day when I had to go to school cos my older brother P had to take me...and...erm...**I went to school and on the trip that we went to, I was thinking about my brothers all the time and I wouldn't stop and I, I, I, was really sad** when I was on the trip so

(so you said you were sad, what did that feel like for you?)

**I felt really scared**, and when I got back home saw my 2 bros that were fighting cos my brother got a hospital cos he had to have stitches, my other brother got out of like in er cos he had to go to prison, well not actual prison really

(yeah).....

I saw them both together and **I was just really worried that they were going to start again** and there were ok, and it scared me and err...**but ever since then I've always worried about what's going on at home**

(at home)

yeah

(and does that make it difficult for you to come to school you think?)

yeah... but even though they're not there any more because they live in xxxx, **it's still hard for me to come to school because I just want to know what's happening in my family**.

(right, and how does that feel when you do come to school?)

I feel ok knowing that its gona be aright but in a way I feel that I wana be at home more than anything

(yeah....yeah... and what do you think your mum thinks about that, does your mum know about that?)

no she doesn't really, but err...she has to got to college so I have to come to school sometimes, otherwise she'll end up shout at me cos iv took a day off and she really needs to get to college otherwise she's kicked out the course (yeah, and when your in school, how do you feel when your in school?)

I feel safe because like I'm with my friends, but that's probably one of the reasons that I come to school...err....my friends make it easier for me... but I still feel a bit worried sometimes.

(bit worried? You use the word worried? That's a good word isn't it so what do you think erm what does it feel like when your w)

err it feels really like, cos my other brother D.....he has anger issues and he has to like, cos he don't go to school, he goes to Acadamy, if you've ever heard of it?, and he has a mentor that comes out to see him, and the reason why I get worried is because...I know my bro D...if my mum winds him up too much then... he would like punch to wall or something like he's done before...he's dented the wall... and he dented his door and stuff and its not good

.....(and what do you think the benefits of staying at home would be if you stayed?)

I don't know, ...I have to just try and calm him down somewhere, tell him to just be quiet because it really all goes down onto my mum, cos she either winds us all up and they we get too wound up and then we end up shouting at her when we don't mean it, or...she just goes on and on at me...like sort of gets on my nerves a bit and like by brother D sometimes he'll go really red... and then start telling me to shut up and stuff, cos it gets me worried and then it gets worrying for my mum... like before when I wanted to play on my game, on the Wii, and D wanted to watch TV, errr...and he started making up stuff saying I was eating and I wasn't supposed to be, and err...my...erm my mum was saying 'be quiet' to both of us and then my brother just started flipping... and then err... he starts punching the wall and everything and I went upstairs crying cos he hurt me

(yeah, so it really difficult for you then, sound like its really hard for you to come to school sometimes?)

yeah and it sort of pressurises me as well

(pressurising?)

yeah because like I have a load of stuff going on at home and then when I come to school I have to concentrate so hard on my work... and its really hard.

(yeah...I understand, I understand, that must be difficult, yeah...I think you've explained that really well L, really well, I wonder this might me a nice place for us to do a little activity actually),

ok.

This is, I've got a lot of comments here that I've written out on little bits of paper, this is a scale that says least like me and most like me....so...its sort of

like a line from 1-10 and in the middle we've got 5...and these comments erm...we'll read together...I want you to place them on the line and rate them how much you think they're like you...so for instance...if I was to say....I'm bored at school where would you put that...?

Well I would say about there...(L points to a place on the scale)

(so if we pop that there are we can move them around, ok let take all of these piece of paper

out)..... I worry that I might fail

Erm...I would put that there...

About there...I find the work in lessons hard

Errr...middle

I have friendship problems

I would put that there

Ok, I fear specific subjects

Erm, I don't know, cos I don't really like French, I don't know...

I have low confidence , do you know what confidence means>

Yeah

Yeah

I would put that about there cos I'm going on Britain's Got Talent, I've auditioned for my first one but I'm getting the phone call saying if I have got through or not...it was only in front of two people...I think it's quite low.

I am being bullied

(points)

I don't like teachers or having conflicts with them

I like teachers but I hate conflicts with them

So where do you think you would be on the scale then? Most or least?

Least like me

Whereabouts?

About there

I want to avoid tests/exams

There

Ok, My family and I do activities outside of home

Yeah I would but that most like me

Whereabouts?

There, yeah

I worry about most things in my life

Put that there

I don't like moving from lesson to lesson

I would put that there

I don't like the size or layout of school

(points)

I don't like returning to school, that means if you've had a break from school you don't want to come back

(points) there

I argue with my parent or parents

There

There have been recent changes in my family

(points)

I live with just one parent

Put that at the top

I have had a recent loss in my family  
 I would put that there  
 My family is a close family  
 Err... I would put that there  
 I feel depressed sad or unhappy  
 I'm gonna put that there  
 I worry about being around other students  
 About there  
 I worry about my parents wellbeing  
 What's wellbeing?  
 Wellbeing is, that when you come to school, you worry if your mum is going to be ok  
 About there then  
 I find it hard or upsetting to be away from my family  
 There  
 When I find work difficult there is nobody their to help me  
 I'd put that about there

Shall we have a look at this, are you happy with this, do you think that's about right, do you think?

Errrm

In the right order?

I like to move that one. I have low confidence...I reckon down there

A bit further down?

Yeah

Ok about there?

Yeah

Is there anything else?

No

Is there any here that you've picked out as being a lot like you that you might want to take about. Or things that

**I argue with me parents**

Ok, Is that how you would normally say that I argue with me parents, to use the word argue...?

yeah

Shall I explain that another way> what might you call somebody who argues with their parents

Cheeky

What would you call someone who doesn't argue with their parents

I don't know... I would say..... calm

Calm...ok so we've got cheeky and calm at two opposite ends, which one do you think you are most like?

Points at cheeky

Cheeky, and do you think that your

I would say that I'm about a half calm

Which one would you like to be?

Calm

Why do you think it's important to be calm

Cos you don't like get into a load of trouble and it would be more better for everyone if you were more calm

Ok so you said it doesn't get you into a load of trouble, why does that matter?

Like...you feel more happier

And what's so good about being happy?

Cos, I don't know, cos like then..i don't know how to explain it?

Ok, how would a person look if they were calm?

They would be more like...say if you mum asks you to do something for her them you'll do it, more than be cheeky and say ahhh do I have to!

So you said that you are more cheeky and did you say that that's not a good thing to be

Yeah

So what's wrong with being cheeky?

say if you started saying no to your mum when she asked you to do a chore, then she would have to do it herself because she's a single mum... they'll be struggling because they've got a load of stuff to handle' ...its helping them and stuff

Yeah, So what do you think some one would look like when they're being cheeky?

They cause trouble and look bored and not bothered...they don't help their mum

Alright then, shall we pick another one?

That one, worry about most things in my life

How woul you describe someone who worries about most thinks in their life

i don't know...paranoid

Ok, let's write that one down...and what would you call someone who wasn't paranoid?

Relaxed

Ok, where about are you, which one are you most like

Im about In the middle

Ok, which one do you think is the best one to be

Relaxed

Ok, why is it important o be relaxed?

Cos you feel more...

What do you think it's a good thing?

Cos then your more laid back and you do thins and you do that, you think about what you wana be in your life and don't worry about what's happened in the past, like in your family

Right, ok so whays it important to think about what you wana be rather than think about ur past

Cos your moving on from...say if you had a terrible life and your still worrying about that...like me say Iv always been worried, and I wana move on and I want to follow my dream of being a singer when I'm older

And paranoid? Did you say this was...?

Not a good thing

What the problem with being paranoid

It drives you mental and you'd lock yourself in the house...my mums ex boyfriend always said that my brothers dad will come back to my house and sort of try and cause trouble and start a fight and stuff...and he suddenly



brainwashed my mum and she's got a key chain on the door,...making her paranoid...it really upset me....but he's out of my mum's life now.

Right, ok, Anything else on here? What else jumps out at you?

This one...cos in my life there's been a load of ups and downs

What would you call someone who's sad or unhappy?

Depressed, definitely

Who would you call someone who wasn't depressed?

Errrm... like...happier

Ok, so what's a good think about being happier?

Cos u feel more good about yourself and really you feel top of the world

And why do you think it's good to feel top of the world...you feel great

What do you think that bad things about being depressed are?

When you think too much about what's going on at home... in the past and worry about what going on.

I think we've spoke a lots about these, you put these quite low down haven't you? Things about school, I don't like the size or layout, im being bullied...So you don't think they're like you at al...so does that mean generally school, when your hear...is quite a good thing? Or is it a bad thing

Yeah...cos last night when my mum said that iv got a bad cough...which I have sort of but its wearing off...and then I said to her well if you think iv got so much of a bad caught...why cant I take a day off school then...then she said why do you wana...and I said to her I want to go to school tomorrow because we are doing a load of fun things today and I really like it

Ok, alright then...lv got one last thing to do, this is called the sentence completion task...so all that is it that I want you to finish off the sentence, it can be anything, absolutely anything you want...then we're going to talk a little bit about them...ok...so do you want to lean on this, you can borrow my pen...

Ok

How are you with reading?

I'm good

Ok great, well let me know if you want help with any of the words

(100

L takes time to complete the sentences)

Ok, can I have look what you've done. I like coming to school because I get to see my friends and teachers and?

And I like getting on with my lessons...I like the lessons I do

I do not like coming to school because I like being at home

What I think about coming back to school In spet after the summer holiday

I feel like its new fresh start

When I'm school I am calm and a little happy

Ok, when I wake up in the morning and think about coming to school I feel?

Like I want to come and do my lessons then go back home

When enter the school gates I feel

Its another day but with different lessons and I'm happy

Ok what does that mean about how you feel when your actually in school?

I feel ok...its just the odd occasions that I would worry

Ok, why do you think it is the odd occasions you would worry

if something happened like an argument at home...I feel like I wana be at home to make sure everything is ok

And when you're in school and you feel cam and a little happy, what do you think it is about school that makes u feel like that

because I'm away from the horrible things that could happen at home but I still want to be there because...I don't know why?

Like...last week when I was really ill I still wanted to come to school so I could go to my club that I go to after...im going there tonight.

**Interview closed**

#### The four themes identified through thematic analysis

Themes Identified	Colours
Young carer role <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Difficulties at home/with family</li> <li>Supporting mum/supporting family difficulties</li> </ul>	<b>Pink</b>
Ambivalence <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Stay at home or go to school?</li> <li>Role of anxiety</li> </ul>	<b>Green</b>
Returning to School <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Tiredness, physical illness</li> <li>I get used to being at home</li> </ul>	<b>Blue</b>
School Factors	<b>Yellow</b>

## Appendix 10

### PUBLIC DOMAIN BRIEFING PAPER Investigating the factors associated with 'emotionally-based non-attendance' from young people's perspective.

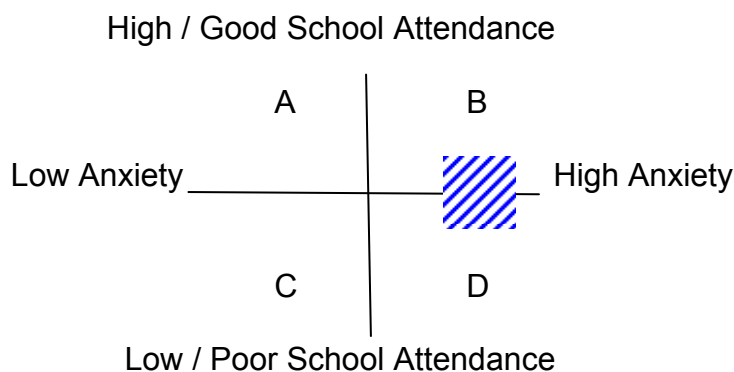
The audience of this paper is for the local authority's educational psychology service and the school where the research took place.

#### 1. Introduction

The term school refusal describes a child's severe emotional distress (e.g. fear and anxiety) at the prospect of attending school, and is characteristically separate from truancy (Berg et al, 1969). There is remarkable variation in the way that professionals and researchers conceptualise and use the term. A number of alternative terminologies are used throughout the literature, which include 'school refusal behaviour' (Kearney and Silverman, 1990), 'emotionally-based school refusal' (West Sussex Educational Psychology Service, 2004) 'extended school non-attendance' (Pelligrini, 2007) and 'chronic non-attendance' (Lauchlan, 2003). The local authority adopt the term 'emotionally-based non-attendance'

West Sussex County Council (West Sussex County Council Educational Psychology Service, 2004) has drawn up a matrix to represent the varying degrees of anxiety experienced by this population of emotionally-based non-attenders (Figure 1).

**Figure 1. The relationship between anxiety and non-attendance (from West Sussex County Council Educational Psychology Service (2004)).**



- A – The sample of the school population who do not suffer from incapacitating levels of anxiety  
 B – Children who are very anxious but do manage to maintain school attendance.  
 C – Children who may be considered as truants in as much as they have low school attendance but do not show anxiety as a major **factor leading to** their non-attendance.  
 D– Children who are highly anxious and feel unable to attend school. These are the children considered to be anxious school refusers.



- The shaded area represents young people who display intermittent patterns of attendance, who may be experiencing a certain degree of anxiety.

Young people that display intermittent patterns of attendance and higher levels of anxiety (the shaded area in Figure 2 that represents individuals who fall between categories B and D), may run the risk of chronic non-attendance and complete refusal in the future (category D). In order to take a pro-active and preventative approach, it is considered essential that this group of young people are identified early, and further research is conducted in this area.

Previous literature has predominantly focussed on the clinical characteristics of the young people with emotionally-based non-attendance, which is characterised by high levels of anxiety, separation anxiety, and depressive symptoms (Berg et al, 1993; Bools et al, 1990; Doobay, 2008; Egger et al, 2003; Heyne et al, 2004; Kearney, 2008; Kearney and Albano, 2004; Last and Strauss, 1990; McShane et al, 2001). Similarly, the literature has family and home factors associated with children with EBNA, such as mothers with significant mental health difficulties (Egger et al, 2003; Place et al, 2000) enmeshed relationships between mother and child, single-parent families, and inappropriate child leadership roles (Bernstein and Borchard, 1996; Kearny and Silverman, 1995; Place et al, 2000).

Whilst it is acknowledged that the identification of the personal and family characteristics that are likely to contribute to EBNA, is indeed helpful, it is not the full story. The school factors that may be related to EBNA are important to take into account, and the views of young people with EBNA must also be investigated. Consequently, this study elicited the views of a non-clinical sample of young people with emotionally-based non-attendance. These young people have intermittent patterns of attendance, as well as experiencing emotional distress in attending school or in anticipation of attending (quadrants B-D of Figure 1), who may be 'at risk' of developing more severe and extended forms EBNA in the future

## 2. Method

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with three girls in a local middle school, aged between 11-12 years old. The following criteria were used to identify the girls in this specific sample (Box 1)

### **Box 1. Three criteria used to identify the sample of young people.**

- |     |                                                                                                                                                                                                |
|-----|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| iv) | Berg et al's (1969) operational definition of school refusal. This was used to emphasise the emotional difficulties some young people encounter when they attend school.                       |
| v)  | The West Sussex emotionally-based school refusal matrix. This was used to highlight a target group of young people in between category B and D (illustrated in Figure 2); and                  |
| vi) | Between 20-30% authorised absence. This rate of absence does not yet warrant education welfare involvement, nor is it classed as persistent non-attendance, but is still a concern for school. |

The interview used techniques that are congruent with personal construct psychology (Kelly, 1955), which entailed variety of methods that can be used with children to explore their constructions of the world. These included the following

- i) an initial open ended question to 'check out' with the young girls whether or not they agreed that they found it emotionally difficult to attend school
- ii) a Q-sort activity with a salmon line. The girls were given 22 statements that were factors related to EBNA (based on previous literature. They sorted these factors along a continuum (or Salmon line) of most like me and least like me. This provided a focus for further discussion.
- iii) Sentence completion task. The girls were required to complete unfinished sentences about attending school. Again these were elaborated upon via further discussion
- iv) 'Laddering and pyramiding', these are techniques derived by personal construct psychology to explore individuals construction of reality (Kelly, 1955). They are 'why' and 'what questions'

### **3. Outcomes of the study**

The girls identified a number of factors that they felt was related to their attendance difficulties, and also some protective factors in school which made them want to attend.

#### **3.1. The young carer role**

- In all three cases, the girls reported several difficulties associated with home and familial factors. All three girls reported that their mothers experienced emotional and/or physical difficulties, albeit in varying degrees, which required additional care from either themselves or other family members. Some family conflicts were also noted.
- Due to this, the girls reported their responsibilities at home, which ranged from helping with chores around the house to ensuring that their 'mums' were safe.
- Feelings of anxiety were reported by the girls when they were at school, if they knew that their mothers were alone at home.
- In terms of PCP, the girls personal constructs centred around the importance of remaining at home to look after their mothers or ensure that no conflicts arise between family members, is incompatible with other constructs of attending school as a student.

#### **3.2. Ambivalence**

- Two of the girls reported both positive and negative emotions associated with attending school in trying to manage their dual role as a student at school and a young carer at home.
- Family conflicts or parental illness would sometimes pre-occupied their thoughts when they were at school
- The girls anticipated that their mothers' wellbeing would be at risk when they are at school, which caused uncomfortable feelings of anxiety.

This sometimes made it difficult for the girls to sustain a high level of attendance at school.

### 3.3. *Retuning to school*

- When some of the girls had extended periods of time of school (which may have been due to genuine or psychosomatic illness/tiredness), one girl in particular reported that she found it 'scary' to return back to school.
- This girl reported that she '*gets used to being at home*', and returning to school is anxiety provoking.
- It seems that the anxiety experienced in returning to school after time off results in difficulty re-establishing attendance, which is likely further to exacerbate the non-attendance.

### 3.4. *School factors*

- The girls identified a number of risk and protective factors in school. Table 1 illustrates these factors.

**Table 1. School-related risk and protective factors identified by the girls**

<b>Protective factors</b> (factors which attract the young people to school)	<b>Risk factors</b> (factors which lead the young person away from school)
<p><b><i>Friendships and social support</i></b>            A recurring theme throughout the interviews was the importance in seeing friends at school. This may indicate that friendships and social lives are important factors in attracting the young people to school, even though they might prefer to stay at home.</p> <p><b><i>Enjoying lessons</i></b>            Some of the girls enjoyed lessons at school. Enjoyment also distracted some of the girls from thinking or worrying about difficult circumstances at home for some of the time.</p> <p><b><i>Valuing education and future aspirations</i></b>            One of the girls reported that the most important factor in coming to school was for learning. Some of the girls could see the importance of learning in school to fulfil aspirations in the future</p> <p><b><i>Extra-curricular activities</i></b>            After school clubs encouraged one girl (L) to come to school.</p>	<p><b><i>Boredom</i></b>            Some of the girls reported that some lessons were boring at school, and found it difficult to focus in lessons that they did enjoy.</p> <p><b><i>Relevance of certain subjects</i></b>            If certain subjects were considered to be irrelevant or uninteresting, some of the girls' motivation and concentration decreased.</p> <p><b><i>Finding the work in lessons difficult/inappropriate support</i></b>            One girl in particular found some of the work difficult in lessons. When she got confused or did not understand certain tasks in lessons, she experienced frustration.</p>

#### 4. Conclusions and Implications for practice

The current study has shown the importance of eliciting the views of young people with EBNA, in order to obtain an understanding, from their perspective, as to why they find it emotionally difficult to attend school.

The young carer role was found to be a contributory factor in the girls' attendance difficulties, in addition to some difficult circumstances in their families. Consequently, this sometimes made it difficult for the girls to leave home and attend school. The ambivalence experienced in deciding between staying at home to support their mothers/families, or attending school to fulfil their role as a student, resulted in varying degrees of anxiety for the girls, especially at the thought of leaving their mothers alone at home.

The study also gave insight into the tensions that needed to be resolved as they sought to return school after an extended period of absence. In addition, although school based factors were not primarily related to the girls' EBNA, a number of school-related risk and protective factors were identified.

The findings of this study have implications for educational psychologists and schools, which are demonstrated in Table 2.

**Table 2. Implications for schools and educational psychologists.**

<b>Implications for practice</b>	
<b>Schools</b>	<b>Educational Psychologists</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Provide support for returning student after extended periods of time off, being aware of their heightened anxiety levels. Provide predictability and consistency to contain anxiety.</li> <li>-The girls valued the importance of friendships in school. Therefore support for returning student could be more fully harnessed in the form of peer support</li> <li>- Within this specific population of young people, the protective factors in school could be encouraged to allow school to become a positive experience for the young people (elaborating their constructs that school is valuable and enjoyable).</li> <li>- For young people with SEN and EBNA, ensure that the most appropriate academic support is available, so that their learning difficulties do not become a further barrier to sustained attendance.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-The benefits of using PCP as a primary conceptual framework for understanding EBNA.</li> <li>-Collaborative working with schools and Education Welfare officers is encouraged to share distinct psychological knowledge in understanding a young person's attendance difficulties, and the complexities of anxiety from a PCP framework.</li> <li>-As well as obtaining the views of parents and professionals, it is valuable to elicit the views of the young person to obtain a holistic understanding of their difficulties, from the perspective of their personal construct systems.</li> <li>-There is a potential to undertake therapeutic work with these young people, using personal construct psychology as a framework for intervention.</li> </ul>

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## CHAPTER 4

### CONCLUDING REFLECTIONS ON THE EMPIRICAL STUDY

The purpose of this chapter is to discuss some final conclusions and implications for practice in relation to the research study in part 2 on this thesis. It was not appropriate to include such discussions in the research report, due to the requirement that it should be written to journal specification.

#### 1. Reflections on the research methodology

##### 1.1. Kelly's philosophical assumptions

I have aligned myself with the epistemological assumptions of constructivism and adopted an idiographic/subjective methodology, which is congruent with Kelly's (1955) view that events are only meaningful in relation to the ways they are construed by individuals. Despite this, it must be noted that Kelly's philosophical position of constructive alternativism falls within the epistemology called *gnosiology*:

*'systematic analysis of the conceptions employed by ordinary and scientific thought in interpreting the world, and including an investigation of the art of knowledge, of the nature of knowledge as such.'* (Kelly, 1963, p. 16).

In this respect, and Kelly's (1955) emphasis upon the testing of constructs and 'man as a scientist', suggests the epistemological assumptions of positivism.

Kelly's repertory grid, a construct elicitation and elaboration technique, uses statistical methods to determine idiographic measures. Similarly, Q-sort

techniques use both qualitative and quantitative methods to elicit subjective data; therefore, it could be argued that this employs a mixed method approach. However, in my research, it was primarily used for qualitative data collection purposes, concerned with exploring the extent to which dimensions described in the wider research literature held meaning and were congruent with the subjective experiences of my interview respondents; statistical methods were not used to analyse ranked statements.

### *1.2. Ethical considerations of the research*

I consider it necessary to elaborate upon some of the principal ethical challenges of the study, which were briefly touched upon in the research report (Chapter 3). Firstly, in one particular interview 'S' became upset and cried whilst discussing a particular topic, and I gave her several opportunities to terminate the interview and stop the recording. Despite this, S was adamant that she wanted to continue with the discussions, which may have suggested that she valued the process of being listened to and heard.

At the time of the interview I informed S about the availability of the pastoral lead in school, if she felt that she needed to talk further about the process. My personal (professional) contact details were also left with the pastoral lead, if she required any further support. Additionally, I visited S again, as well as the other two participants, to do a 'member check', which entailed offering informant feedback about the interview process and findings. This meeting also, from an ethical perspective offered a 'closure' on the participants' involvement of the study.

Secondly, I recognised that each of my overlapping roles as the target school's named educational psychologist (employed by the local authority) and independent postgraduate researcher for the University of Birmingham had distinctive ethical implications. There were occasions where school staff asked me specific questions regarding the interviews with the girls, albeit with the best intentions to support these young people. I informed the staff about the process of confidentiality, and that general feedback would be given to school staff in the form of a public domain briefing paper (See Appendix 10).

Thirdly, the young people shared sensitive issues in the interviews, which were potentially emotionally distressing in nature. Therefore, the knowledge that I obtained from the interviews with the young people, left me with a certain degree of *vicarious responsibility* (Scaife, 2001). Although I adhered to the principles of confidentiality, I recognised that I held a degree of professional and personal responsibility through having acquired knowledge that was particularly sensitive in nature.

Finally, in order to provide sufficient ethical closure to the three participants and their consenting families, coherent feedback about the research outcomes and implications will be provided. It is considered that the content and style of the public domain briefing (Appendix 10) is neither appropriate nor accessible for the families to receive, as there is a risk that this will heighten potential feelings of anxiety even further. Therefore, a sensitively worded letter will be written to each family, which will thank them for providing their parental consent, and positively frame the outcomes and implications of

the study. My contact details will also be provided should they wish to contact me at a later date. A 'child friendly' version of this letter will also be sent to each of the girls who took part.

## **2. The challenges of real world research**

There were several challenges associated with researching this vulnerable and 'hidden' sample of emotionally-based school-refusers. Firstly, the nature of the young people's intermittent patterns of attendance made it difficult for me as a researcher to adhere to a definite time line. For instance, there were several occasions where I had to re-arrange several appointments to interview the girls, as they were often absent from school.

Secondly, it was necessary to consider the implications of selecting the most appropriate setting to interview the young people. For example, it was difficult to determine where the girls would feel most comfortable; at home or at school. The school was selected as the most appropriate setting, as a designated room was available which ensured complete privacy. On reflection, it may have been more ethical to ask the girls where they would like the interview to take place, to ensure that they felt comfortable in their surroundings.

## **3. To what extent did PCP help or constrain the research?**

The paper has asserted to the value of personal construct psychology as a primary conceptual framework for collecting, analysing and interpreting data

from girls with emotionally based school refusal. Table 1 demonstrates my reflections on the process.

**Table 1. The constraints and benefits of using PCP as a primary conceptual framework.**

<b>Using PCP as a data collection tool</b>	
<b>Benefits</b>	<b>Constraints</b>
<p>-The PCP activities provided a non-threatening and visual way for the girls to express their views. It also provided a medium to generate discussion.</p> <p>-The laddering and pyramiding questions provided useful prompts to help the girls elaborate their construing.</p> <p>-By 'exploring constructs', this provided a 'deeper' understanding as to why the girls experienced anxiety in relation to attending school/leaving home.</p> <p>-Interpreting the data from the particular perspective of anxiety in PCP terms, did not reduce the young persons' emotional experiences to pathological explanations, but rather to 'constructs of transition'</p> <p>-Some of the girls experienced difficulty in expressive their views. The Salmon line activity and sentence completion task sufficiently cued in their thinking about their attendance difficulties, while containing risks inherent in more structured (and potentially leading) questions.</p> <p>-Using PCP as framework for interpretation allowed me to extract themes that may otherwise have been missed. (e.g. exploring the construct poles of 'scared', 'confident', or deeper reasons as to why it is important to 'worry about parents', 'want to stay at home')</p> <p>-PCP is a psychology of individual differences, which accepts that all of the three girls' experiences have commonalities, yet remain unique to each girl (individuality corollary).</p>	<p>-The girls sometimes experienced difficulty in answering laddering and pyramiding questioning (e.g. the why/what questions). This may reflect the level of language development. This acted as a constraint to data collection, particularly considering that PCP relies on language as an important medium for communication (Burnham, 2008).</p> <p>- One girl (L) was better able to respond to the open ended question, than to the PCP activities. This section of the interview generated the greatest amount of information, which may have reflected her preference for an interview technique that was a more 'relaxed and unstructured' conventional approach.</p>

#### 4. Future research

It may be beneficial to conduct further research into the benefits and experiences other key people involved in a young person's emotionally-based non attendance, using PCP to inform the investigative approach. This might entail exploring teachers' constructs regarding young people's emotionally based non-attendance, and particularly their views about what they could do within the school to identify and contain risks, and support these young people to attend more consistently.

Another interesting area of research would be to explore the constructs of these young people's parents, particularly considering the primary influences on the girls' non-attendance was identified as home/family based. Kelly's (1955) sociality corollary suggests that *'to the extent that one person construes the construction processes of another he may play a role in a social process involving the other person'* (Kelly, 1991, Vol. 2, p. 5). Parents' construction systems are thus likely to subsume the construction systems of their children, which may inadvertently reinforce the child's desire to remain at home to support their mothers and families. *'Understanding does not have to be a one-way proposition; it can be mutual'* (Kelly, 1963, p.96).

Consequently, exploring family based factors and the interactions of the child-parent 'dyad' may help to inform possible family based interventions within a multi-modal intervention framework.

## **5. Implications for practice**

### *5.1. Implications for schools*

Although home and family-based factors constituted the primary influences on the girls' emotionally-based non-attendance, the results indicate that the school has an important role to play in supporting these young people.

Firstly, in regards to the difficulties associated with 'returning to school' after extended periods of absence, the school can provide appropriate support for returning pupils, to contain their anxiety. This might include providing consistency and predictability in the school environment, and ensuring that the necessary support is available in lessons and around school. In considering a holistic perspective to understanding mental distress, Tew (2005) argues that it is important to '*focus on what has not broken down: both people's strengths and capabilities, and the aspects of their family and social networks that are (or could be) supportive and empowering*' (p. 219). Therefore, considering that the girls emphasised the beneficial effects of contact with peers in school, this offers a practical opportunity for schools to strengthen structures through which peer support could be more fully harnessed.

Secondly, only one of the girls was known to the external support agency, the 'young carer's association', despite the fact that this study has highlighted the young carer roles adopted, perhaps quite coincidentally, by each of the girls. This may reflect a need for the school to become more active in signposting the families of these young people to the young carer's association, and indeed, perhaps becoming more familiar with and acting upon the good



practice guidelines published by Frank (2002) on behalf of the Children's Society and the Princess Royal Trust for Young Carers. These make recommendations for the role of schools in, for example, using the Personal, Social and Health Education Curriculum to address the topic of young carers, in addition to advocating training and education of school staff about identification, and appropriate mechanisms of support for this 'hidden' population.

Thirdly, although it is acknowledged that the girls' constructions of events were unique and individual to them, it is recognised that there were similarities in the way they constructed their experiences, which Kelly (1995) argues is indicative of the commonality corollary. Therefore, the school may be able to play an important role in bringing these girls (and others alike) together, as they may find it beneficial to share their common experiences and receive support from peers who share their difficulties.

Finally, although I have shown a commitment to avoid pathologising the girls, it is important to acknowledge that there are cognitive distortions evidenced in the girls' accounts. For instance, Tew's (2005) biopsychosocial model is also permissive of a focus on individual psychology within a wider systemic formulation. This has implications for the need for universal and targeted interventions to support competence-building in pupils' self awareness, social problem-solving and to develop adaptive habits of mind. This could be achieved via the universal SEAL curriculum or via targeted intervention which might use personal construct psychology as a therapeutic framework for

intervention (delivered by educational psychologists or other qualified professionals).

### *5. 2. Implications for educational psychologists*

Personal construct psychology has provided a valuable theoretical framework for this research, supporting understanding of the way in which these young people construct their experiences. As briefly highlighted in the above paragraph, this has implications for the practice of educational psychologists in their assessment and targeted intervention with young people at risk of developing chronic school refusal, which may complement the work of other professionals involved in school attendance issues, such as education welfare officers (EWOs). Therapeutic interventions, based on personal construct psychology, could be used, for example, to support developments of more adaptive construing through further developing the submerged poles of constructs to bring balance within the choice corollary (e.g. developing the poles of 'being confident' and 'wanting to attend school') and/or to resolve the tensions within the fragmentation corollary (e.g. within the girls' dual role as a young carer and student).

## **6. Original contribution to knowledge and theory development**

This study offers an original contribution to knowledge and theory development in the field of emotionally-based non-attendance. Firstly, the sample of young people used in this study were still attending school, yet demonstrated intermittent patterns of attendance and experienced a levels of anxiety, likely to jeopardise their resuming a fuller attendance pattern.

Therefore, their views represent a specific sample of young people who had not yet been investigated within previous research, thus contributing to improved understanding of the potential for early intervention for emotionally-based non-attendance.

Secondly, I specifically sought the views and subjective experiences of the young people themselves. For some time, this has been an area of research that has received little investigation, as previous literature has been dominated by clinical studies (Shilvock, 2010). Whilst acknowledging that biomedical research into emotionally-based non-attendance remains valuable, I have argued that for too long there has been a significant gap in the literature concerning the subjective experiences of the young people themselves. It is important to move away from the tendency to individualised and pathological explanations of the needs of this group of young people, and to adopt a systemic, ecologically-grounded approach to understanding emotionally-based non-attendance (Tew, 2005), by taking into account their own construction of their lived experiences.

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