

University of Southampton
Doctoral Programme in Educational Psychology

Title: Out of school: a phenomenological exploration of extended non-attendance.

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Abstract

The concept of 'extended non-attendance' ('school phobia' or 'school refusal') was distinguished from truancy by Broadwin (1932), and refers to children who fear school and avoid attending. Subsequent research has established that instances of extended non-attendance tend to be highly individual and multi-factorial in causation (Nuttall & Woods, 2013), but despite this improved understanding, outcomes for those affected are often poor and the child's voice remains largely absent from the evidence base. The current study sought to address these shortcomings by examining the experiences of four children with extended attendance difficulties. Data consisted of semi-structured interviews conducted in the participants' homes, and was analysed using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2009). Emergent themes include being disbelieved, experiencing fragmented support, and feeling blamed and punished. Various implications for practitioners are discussed, among them the importance of early intervention and the need to consider the voice of the child.

Keywords: educational psychology; extended non-attendance; school refusal; school phobia; phenomenology; anxiety

Background

Extended non-attendance (often termed school refusal – Lyon & Colter, 2007; Last & Strauss, 1990) was first described in a clinical case study (Jung, 1913), and subsequently differentiated from truancy related non-attendance by Broadwin (1932). The latter described a form of non-attendance usually presenting with a component of anxiety, and developing gradually from initial reluctance to attend through to flat refusal. Subsequent commentators note that affected children frequently appear unable to articulate their objections and feelings (Broadwin, 1932; Hersov, 1977), with parents and teachers likewise reporting finding these hard to understand (Blagg, 1987; Miller, 2008). Those involved often show little response to the usual forms of encouragement, support or punitive response used by parents and schools (Hersov, 1977; Kearney, 2007), with the result that extended non-attendance has often been viewed as a medical issue requiring a pharmacological response (Burke & Silverman, 1987; Fremont, 2003).

Local variations in reporting arrangements mean that accurate national statistics for the prevalence of extended non-attendance are hard to obtain, with estimates varying from 1-5% of the school-age population (Fremont, 2003; Miller, 2008). The majority of commentators suggest a figure between 1 and 2% (Emmerson et al, 2004; Gregory & Purcell, 2014; Kearney, 2008[a]), with higher prevalence among secondary pupils (Elliot, 1999; Gregory & Purcell, 2014). Outcomes for those affected are often poor and include low academic achievement and social isolation in the short-term, alongside increased risk of unemployment, relationship instability, mental health difficulties and offending behaviour in the longer-term (Fremont, 2003; Garry, 1996; Hibbert & Fogelman, 1990; King et al., 1998; McShane, Walter & Rey, 2004).

Terminology: what's in a name?

Jung (1913) referred to “neurotic refusal”, Broadwin to a “special form of truancy” (1932); subsequent commentators have used the terms “school phobia” (Johnson et al, 1941), “school refusal” (Hersov, 1977), “chronic non-attendance” (Lauchlan, 2003) and “extended non-attendance” (Pellegrini, 2007). The latter term has been adopted by recent commentators as it avoids the within-child focus and potential pathologisation implicit in some earlier terms (Pellegrini, 2007; Gregory & Purcell, 2014), an emerging convention that has been followed here.

However, it should be borne in mind that any debate regarding nomenclature results partially from the difficulty of defining what causes extended non-attendance. Commentators variously cite unconscious processes (Jung, 1913), separation anxiety (Johnson et al, 1941), school specific anxiety (Kearney, 2008[c]; Miller, 2008), generalised social anxiety (Francis, Last & Strauss, 1992), and the child's affronted sense of omnipotence (Berry, Inejikian & Tidwell, 1993) as causes. Attempts to differentiate truancy (child-motivated absence without parental knowledge; no apparent fear of school – Berg et al., 1969) from extended non-attendance (child absent with parental knowledge; apparent fear of school – Blagg & Yule, 1984) also appear imprecise, with characteristics crossing between categories (Blagg, 1987).

Miller (2008) suggests these complications mean that extended non-attendance cannot be viewed as a unitary concept, and such apparent heterogeneity clearly underpins moves by some researchers towards a functional analysis of extended non-attendance aimed at exploring the purpose served for each individual (Kearney & Silverman, 1990). It also explains calls by researchers in the field for further

exploration of the individual accounts of non-attenders (Gregory & Purcell, 2014), a call to which the current study aims to respond.

Risk factors and interventions

Research to date suggests an association between points of transition and the onset of extended non-attendance, with incidence rates peaking in line with Primary and Secondary school start ages (Pellegrini, 2007; Nuttall & Woods, 2013). Onset often occurs after holiday or illness related time away from school (Berg, 1996; Miller, 2008). Prevalence appears higher among children who have attended multiple schools (Campbell, 2001), and children of parents with mental health difficulties (Hersov, 1977). No associations are apparent between extended non-attendance and socio-economic status, gender or academic ability (Berg, 1996; Pellegrini, 2007). Issues of environment appear important: references to bullying, nervousness of strict teachers, and fear of unmonitored areas of school (toilets, changing rooms, etc) occur throughout the literature (Kearney & Beasley, 1994; Lauchlan, 2003; Lyon & Cotler, 2007).

Again, such diversity supports the contention by earlier commentators that explanations of extended non-attendance are likely to be multi-factorial, interactive and individual (King & Bernstein, 2001; Miller, 2008; Nuttall & Woods, 2013). Such reasoning also begins to explain the range of interventions trialled to date. Early strategies included conditioning, desensitisation and flooding (Wolpe, 1954; Blagg, 1987; Kennedy, 1965), with later methodologies drawing on behavioural, family therapeutic, and cognitive-behavioural approaches (Galloway & Miller, 1978; King, Heyne & Ollendick, 2000; Schweizer & Ocks, 2003).

Although most current psychological interventions appear broadly cognitive-behavioural, the specific format varies and outcomes appear mixed (Beidas et al, 2010; Heyne et al, 2011; King, Heyne & Ollendick, 2000; Last, Hanson & Franco, 1998). This situation suggests a need for both a systematic review of evidence surrounding current intervention practice (such as that currently being undertaken by the Campbell Collaboration – Maynard, 2014), and, again, more detailed analysis of individual occurrences, a point noted by several researchers (Gregory & Purcell, 2014; King & Bernstein, 2001; Nuttall & Woods, 2013).

Missing voices

Despite the preceding recognition, the voice of the child is barely represented in the literature, with searches through EBSCO, ScienceDirect and PsychArticles, plus journal specific searches (*Educational Psychology in Practice; Child and Educational Psychology; The British Journal of Educational Psychology*), returning four relevant papers, considered here in chronological order. Malcolm, Wilson, Davidson & Kirk (2003) conducted a report into absence from schools for the Department of Education. This mentions pupil perspectives but provides little detail, and although it claims to discuss different forms of absence, clearly focuses on truancy. Emergent themes include the academic and social costs of absenteeism; the methodology and number of participants are unclear.

Brand and O'Connor (2004) studied the experiences of three secondary-age girls, and point to the importance of multi-agency working and good information sharing. However, the transferability of their findings appears limited (the cases are high-achievers in a selective, private American school), no mention is made of methodology, the paper is brief, and the participants' voices are barely evident.

Nuttall and Woods (2013) interviewed two children, their parents, and support staff, subsequently analysing transcripts using Braun and Clarke's (2006) articulation of thematic analysis. Their findings suggest that successful intervention results from considering the individual factors that construct each case. Little is revealed about the children's opinions or experience; the total number of participants is unclear.

Gregory and Purcell (2014) used Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) in an attempt to elicit the voice of the child, concluding that each case is highly individual and needs to be approached in terms of a systemic rather than within-child conceptualisation. This appears to be the only study to date in which the child's voice is clearly apparent: emergent themes include being bullied, feeling blamed, and being threatened with punitive action. The paper provides a firm foundation for the current study in terms of demonstrating the possibility of eliciting the child's voice, but equally has a number of limitations. The authors provide few details of their analytic process, omit to include copies of the interview schedules and, although the children's feelings are articulated, there is little revealed regarding how they made sense of their experience, or what they thought might have helped them to remain in school.

Hence, the current study sought to address the shortcomings of the existing evidence base through a detailed examination of the lived experience of extended non-attendance, with a particular focus on informing the practice of Educational Psychologists and others working with this group. Given the emphasis on the voice of the child, an interpretative phenomenological approach was chosen in order to initially gain a sense of the child's experience as lived (Langdrige, 2007), and to subsequently allow a degree of interpretation and triangulation between accounts (Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2009). Such an approach allows the researcher to both retain phenomenology's essentially idiographic focus, seeking (as it does) a sense of

the world as felt from within the skin and the mind of the individual, whilst producing findings that are potentially transferable and able to inform practice (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The research was guided by the following questions: How do children who have been absent long-term from school make sense of their experience? How might this inform the professionals seeking to support them?

Method

Participants

Participants consisted of secondary school-age children living in one Local Education Authority (LEA) area in the South of England. All participants had experienced attendance difficulties lasting at least one term, and were either receiving support from the Home Education service for this reason, or were on the elective home education register due to their parent/guardian deciding to educate them at home because of their non-attendance. Due to difficulties identified by previous researchers in recruiting members of this vulnerable group (Gregory & Purcell, 2014), recruitment was undertaken by word of mouth through colleagues in the Home Education and Educational Psychology services. Potential participants were initially approached by a professional known to them, and, if willing to participate, were subsequently contacted by the researcher. Seven potential participants were identified, of whom four (two female, two male) agreed to participate.

Procedure

Following this initial approach, the researcher arranged to meet with parent and child to explain the research in detail. Informed consent was obtained in writing

from parents, and informed assent from children. Given the power imbalance when working with vulnerable children (specifically, the danger that they might comply with adult requests regardless of their true feelings), the right to withdraw and/or stop at any point was explained to both parties, and reiterated to the child before the interview began. Interviews lasted 30-50 minutes and took place in the participants' homes when the parent/guardian was home, but with the parent/guardian absent from the room.

Design

In keeping with the inductive and idiographic focus of IPA, interviews were semi-structured and prompted by a topic guide (Appendix 1) designed to “permit participants to tell their own stories” (Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2009; p.57). Development of prompt questions was driven by the literature and the resultant focus of the current study, and were designed to explore early school experience, participants' perceptions of the causes of non-attendance, their perception of the attributions made by others, support received, and anything they felt might have been done differently.

Data analysis

Transcripts were anonymised, then analysed using IPA following the six-stage iterative process described by Smith, Flowers and Larkin (2009; Appendix 2). Recordings were listened to before transcription, and replayed whilst reading through subsequent transcripts. Transcripts were read repeatedly during initial noting, then interrogated using a process of deconstruction (de-contextualising text from the narrative flow, and considering the meaning of single sentences/clauses in isolation).

A sense of the texture of the individual's lived experience was sought (their phenomenon) through re-consideration of the whole, before the more interpretative process of noting emergent themes was begun (Appendix 3). Connections between themes were sought using abstraction and subsumption for each case before consideration was given to seeking patterns between cases. During this final stage, attention was given to the idiographic and singular elements of each individual's lived experience alongside evidence of commonalities (or Master Themes - Table 1) in experience that might inform subsequent understandings and intervention practice.

Results

Initial school experiences

All four participants report different initial experiences. Graham¹ remembers being sick on his first day, but refers to this as “first memory of school” rather than a bad memory. He recalls moving schools and countries, and is uncertain how many schools he has attended (“three or four”). Remembering his five-year-old self, he comments “I didn't really feel like I fitted in ... I felt like everyone else was succeeding [at school work] and I wasn't”. Cynthia, in contrast, only attended one Primary School. She recalls crying “before [she] went in”, but adds “then I used to be okay”, describing school as “one big family, really. I used to love it”.

Malcolm's first memory of school is “meeting one of [his] friends” at pre-school. He describes primary school as a process of “meeting friends, misbehaving, not really getting lessons done”, a “good” experience with nothing “bad about it”. In contrast, Amelia's first memory is of “getting bullied”; she recalls attending eight

¹ Names, places and other identifying features have been changed throughout.

schools, and moving house and country. She comments that she “didn’t like” her first teacher, and describes being “made [to] stand up in class and read out of books which I couldn’t read”.

Table 1: Master themes and sub-ordinate themes

Master theme	Sub-ordinate themes
Initial school experiences	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Primary school experiences (4) - Transition to secondary school (4) - Multiple schools and relocation (2)
Participants’ perceptions of the causes of non-attendance	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Bullying (2) - Nervousness/anxiety (4) - Depression (1) - Chronic fatigue (1) - Fear of teachers (1) - Social isolation in school (1) - Separation from parent (1)
School and other support experiences	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Initial responses and being disbelieved (4) - Pressure to return quickly or remain in school (4) - Slow or inappropriate support experience (4) - Fragmented support experience (4) - Medication and prescribing (3) - Things that might be done differently (4)
Punishment, blame and control	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Being labelled naughty (3) - Being punished and controlled (4) - Recognising (but not excusing) why (3)
Friendship and belonging	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Difficulty accessing a friendship group (1) - Friends as a positive aspect of school (3) - ‘Belonging’ to primary school (2)
The future	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Future plans (3)
Impact on the child’s phenomena	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Anger (4) - Fear (4) - Hiding emotions and keeping secrets (4) - Seeking meaning and making sense (4)

NB. Numbers in brackets refer to the number of accounts in which each sub-ordinate theme was present.

All four participants recall their feelings about moving up to secondary school, which differ despite evident shared nervousness. That said, Graham comments “I wasn’t nervous at all”, but then qualifies this, adding “I was trying not to think about it”. Cynthia reports being “excited” and “scared”; Malcolm also felt “scared”, but remembers looking forward to “a whole new experience ... a really fun thing”. Amelia describes being “quite stressed” for “the first couple of days”, but settling in “because I knew I was with my classmates”.

Participants’ perceptions of the causes

Participants’ perceptions of the reasons for their non-attendance differ considerably. Graham describes his experience in terms of feeling “anxious”, school getting “the better of me”, feeling he “didn’t fit in” and being socially isolated. He refers to a diagnosis of “depression”, and comments that he might still be in school “if the teachers involved took a little more care”. Cynthia mentions being bullied “in the first two weeks” as her initial reason for non-attendance, but comments elsewhere that she “can’t remember why” she stopped attending. She refers to “anxiety” as the cause on a number of occasions, and mentions being “really scared” and “feeling sick” at the thought of school.

Malcolm, in contrast, describes a pattern of tiredness and disrupted sleep, which he attributed to playing sport, and which led to his feeling like a “zombie” and falling asleep in school. He recalls being punished repeatedly and labelled “lazy”, alongside growing nervousness at the thought of school, before being diagnosed with Chronic Fatigue. Amelia describes her non-attendance as the result of being bullied, feeling scared of teachers, “having difficulty learning” and wanting “to be with

Mum". She refers to "stress and anxiety, OCDs" mentions "crying and crying", being "scared", and a diagnosis of Asperger's syndrome.

School and other support experiences

Conversely, all four participants report broadly similar support experiences. "They didn't see any need for it" comments Graham, reflecting on the school's response to his absence; "the only thing they really cared about was their figures"; he describes their response as "Out of order". Cynthia recalls "the school just thinks you're being, like, naughty" and reflects "I didn't know who I could talk to". Although stating he does not "blame" anyone, Malcolm refers to the school's response as "awful": "they told Mum to just take things away from me"; "they refused to send work home because they thought, again, I was just being lazy". Amelia's experiences appear similar: "I just kind of thought they don't really care really, they've got too many students to deal with. They didn't take things seriously".

Pressure to return to school quickly was evident in all accounts. Graham recalls willingly attempting to return, and the placement subsequently falling apart due to pressure to resume a full timetable as quickly as possible: "I felt I was progressing ... I was getting more confident [doing three lessons a day] ... then they just pulled the plug ... told me I had to be in the whole day". Cynthia comments "you can't just expect to do two or three days of help and then it be all okay", and reiterates later "Help for two or three days does not fix anxiety". Although again emphasising that he understands the school's position, Malcolm refers to their response to him as "harassing", commenting "not everyone's the same – they try to push the same quick fix on everyone, and it doesn't work". Amelia, returning to school after two years of non-attendance, describes how the rules regarding how long she was supposed to be

in school “changed” within days of her return, regardless of her asking them to “stop pushing her”, leaving her feeling “imprisoned” (a sentiment she repeats) and “scared to go in”.

The considerable length of time that elapsed between initial non-attendance and accessing support and understanding was evident in all accounts. Graham recalls his school offering a part-time timetable “About six months” after he stopped attending, and mentions a mental health referral being made around the same time. Cynthia is specific in identifying the onset of her non-attendance as the “tenth day” at secondary school, but does not remember receiving any form of structured intervention or alternative schooling until several months later.

Malcolm identifies the first point at which he had a “small moment” of understanding from anyone as being when he saw a GP “a long time” after the onset of the problem; he mentions repeatedly that things happened “really slowly”. Amelia reflects that “Mum has believed me the whole time”, but reiterates “teachers haven’t believed me”. In response to a question regarding which organisations she has found helpful, she replied “Home education ...they understood”; her involvement with them began in Year 9 whereas her attendance difficulties began in Year 3.

All four participants mention attending CAMHS (Community Adolescent Mental Health Service): three report receiving antidepressants as a result; Amelia also received Risperidone (an anti-psychotic medication). She reports finding this helpful (“more medication would help”) but her Doctor frightening; Graham notes having found support from CAMHS useful until the worker he had a relationship with moved away. Access to other support appears fragmented: two of the four receive (and speak highly of) tuition from the Home Education Service; Cynthia has attended Hypnotherapy (“he did help a bit”) and a Local Counselling service (“I didn’t like it

because she made me do the talking”); she was the only participant who had seen an Educational Psychologist. Malcolm receives some form of therapeutic support (“I can’t label it”), has had two tutors, but states he struggles to engage unless they are “flexible”. Amelia attends a form of family counselling, but reports “never find[ing] it useful”.

All four identify points at which things could have been done differently. Graham feels the school should have taken a “little bit more care” and phased his return: “they could have just put it up an extra hour or two” instead of insisting he went full-time. Cynthia identifies the need for “more understanding” and “someone” to support her “at school”. She also suggests that there should be “Help straightaway instead of ... a few months down the line”. Malcolm echoes the same sentiment: “I feel things could have been done quicker ... everything moved really slowly”. Amelia identifies the barrier of being disbelieved (“some teachers haven’t believed me”), and the need for a carefully phased return rather than constant “pushing” to resume a full timetable quickly.

Punishment, blame and control

Issues of punishment, blame and control were central to all four accounts. Graham recalls “they [the school] wanted to start charging us for unauthorised absences”; “It felt like she [Teacher] was calling all the shots. Like, I didn’t get a say in anything”. Cynthia mentions being referred to as “naughty” repeatedly and regards this as her “main point” (“I have anxiety. I’m not naughty”), being given “detentions”, being publicly questioned by a teacher regarding her absences, and finding rumours circulating that she was absent due to pregnancy. She mentions teachers not communicating regarding what lessons she could withdraw from (“[he] had a go at

me, saying I can't do that ... [but] miss said I could"), and points to the problem of adults deciding what the reason for her non-attendance was rather than asking her ("he [counsellor] ... changed what it was about ... to something completely different. So I stopped going").

Malcolm remembers the schools punitive responses, and their attempts to influence his Mother: "it was kind of like, take everything like my Xbox, my scooter, whatever, just take everything away ... [Mum was] being pressured into doing it by the school". He is equally annoyed at their refusal to send work home: "them refusing to do that and not investigating it more, kind of, slowed everything down". Amelia mentions being scared of teachers and their response to her attendance difficulties repeatedly ("most teachers haven't been very nice"). She recalls being branded a "drama queen", being questioned when an anxiety attack left her unable to enter a lesson ("do you feel ill?"), and being left standing outside ("it kind of looked like I'd been naughty") whilst the teacher decided what to do.

Equally, all the participants show a degree of insight into the possible factors that structure their negative experience and the schools' responses to them. Although angry and branding the school's attitude towards him as "wrong", Graham recognises this results from the school being busy not bad: "[I'm] just one of their pupils. They've got hundreds more to worry about"; he further identifies that they may be concerned because of their need to maintain their "attendance percentage".

Amelia, sitting down to talk to a teacher she had previously been frightened of, recalls realising "he actually wasn't a scary man. He was just trying to keep the class under control", an interesting insight from her perspective into the processes that lead teachers to appear as they do to her. Malcolm's response is even more considered: "I don't blame anyone for thinking I was just being lazy or anything. I

think that would be my, if I was in that position, my first thing that I would think". His description of the school as "massive", and the comment that "they try to push the same quick fix on everyone" echoes Graham's sentiments, and triangulates with Cynthia's comment that "they've got too many students to deal with", suggesting a cumbersome system which overlooks individual needs and circumstances.

Friendship and belonging

Friendship and belonging appear central, in different ways, to all four accounts. Graham identifies the formation of social groups and his exclusion from them as one of the reasons behind his non-attendance: "you kind of know who's with who – and that's probably one of the reasons why I stopped going in"; he further mentions "being isolated" from other pupils by being made to work alone in school as a barrier to attendance.

The remaining participants all identify friendship as a positive element of school. Cynthia recalls that when attendance became difficult "I talked to my friends" and "my best mate sat next to me", reflecting that one of her drivers to try and return to school had been loneliness at home – "it's boring on my own". Malcolm, likewise, recalls making friends in school, turning down the chance to attend another school because he wanted "to stay close to my friends", and remains part of a friendship group originally built around school. Amelia identifies knowing she "was with [her] classmates" as one of the reasons why Year 7 was successful, and notes "friends not being in the same class, so I couldn't ask them for help" in Year 8 as a reason for non-attendance.

Two of the participants recall a sense of belonging towards their primary school: "It was like one big family" (Cynthia); "it was fine" and "quite fun"

(Malcolm). Amelia clearly has a strong sense of attachment to her Mother (“I wanted to be with Mum”) and belonging to her family, particularly her sister, connections which have informed her decision to try and return to school: “I want it to be easier for them as well”.

The future

Of the four participants, three have a sense of the future. Graham reflects: “I’m starting to [have a plan] ... I want, you know, to be physical, like, sports-related”. Academic outcomes still matter to him: “hopefully, I’ll do well in my exams ... I did my science last year ... And I’m doing Maths, English, RS, D&T, and prep for working life ...”. Cynthia regards the purpose of education as “getting a good job”, and is planning to start a “full-time course” in “childcare”: “I want to do something with people with problems” she comments, mentioning “psychology” and “teaching”. Malcolm likewise wants to “carry on studying” - science and maths are going “fairly well”, and his priority is finding “someone who can be flexible enough to teach me English”.

Impact on the child’s phenomenon

The impact of these lived experiences on the participants’ perceived selves, their behaviours and the way they construe and act upon the world (their consciousness and phenomena – Husserl & Heidegger, 1927) appears clear in all cases. Graham remains angry, describing his experience as “wrong” and the school as “Out of order”. He describes avoiding discussing the issue with school after their initial response: “I didn’t really let it get to the point where people could ask me”; “I would, kind of, block it and I wouldn’t let it get to the topic”. He describes football as

“the only thing that makes him happy”, and clearly has a need to talk (“Just talking to someone, like, with the same interests; someone who understands”) but some difficulty believing this will be possible: “It would have to be the right person”.

Cynthia describes hiding emotions, “putting on a smile” and making comments such as “Yeah, I am fine, it’s just fine, because I didn’t want them to make a fuss over me”, whilst at the same time “[sitting] in the toilets and texting Mum because I used to get that wound up with myself, because I couldn’t do it”. Her anger at being branded “naughty” and her refusal to accept or assimilate this into her sense of self (“I have anxiety. I’m not naughty”) is palpable. Equally, it is apparent that her experiences inform her desire to help “people with problems” and her potential choice of career.

Malcolm’s initial experiences and the interpretation placed on them by his school seem to have led him to temporarily accept the explanations of others. He reflects “I think, at first, when everything started happening, I thought maybe I do actually have a choice ... the reason I’m not sleeping tonight is because I don’t want to. But that just made it worse because I had all these conflicting ideas and things”. Later, he comments “I’d go to a friend’s house and I would be wide awake when they’re getting tired and I’d think, oh, that’s just because I want to stay up, but it, kind of, wasn’t”. He refers to feeling “relief” when Chronic Fatigue was diagnosed, and still feels anger (“The school’s response was awful”) at the programme of sanctions designed to make him “get myself together” which appear to have constituted his early support experience.

Amelia describes herself and her experience in terms of bullying, not wanting to separate from her Mother, unfriendly teachers, pressure from school, and appears to make sense of it in terms of a series of conditions: “stress and anxiety, OCDs” and

“Aspergers”. The value of talking and support seem to have been lost (“I never find it useful”), whereas medication is clearly important (“Far more medication would help ... I used to be on diazepam ... Fluoxetine is to get rid of the OCDs ... then Aripiprazole is like the Risperidone”). She appears more “scared” than angry, describes hiding her fears when attendance became a problem, and subsequently learning to hide them in other circumstances: “I used to be able to hide quite well and I’m even better now ... I can hide it and people just think I’m fine”.

Discussion

Making sense of experience

This study sought to address two questions: How do children who have been absent long-term from school make sense of their experience? How might this inform the professionals seeking to support them? Given the richness and complexity of the accounts presented here, it would be trite to suggest that the first of these questions could be subject to a simple answer. The sense made by each participant (their understanding of their lived experience) appears highly individual, a point noted by previous commentators (Gregory & Purcell, 2014; Kearney & Silverman, 1990), although the impact of this experience on the individual phenomenon is clearly marked in all cases.

Having said that these experiences are individual, it is equally clear that the external influences that structure them are shared between accounts. Adult interpretations, in particular, shape the understandings of all the participants, although the form of this shaping varies. Cynthia’s angry rejection of herself as “naughty” contrasts with Malcolm’s adult-informed assumption that he must be choosing these

behaviours, and appears different again from Amelia's adoption of a medical (and medicated) understanding of her experience. Although the voices of the participants can be heard very clearly in this account, the impression given is that they were suppressed, ignored, or had their meaning reframed by the adults involved during the period when attendance became difficult for them. The consequences of this include a still palpable sense of anger, a tendency to suppress emotions and avoid discussing the issue, and a sense of having been lost in a system slow to respond to individual needs. All four participants evidently understand this last point, and although they view their experience in terms that suggest they feel it was made worse by punitive responses on the part of their schools, all four appear nuanced in their understanding and slow to blame, despite retaining feelings of anger.

Corroborating past accounts

Many aspects of these accounts triangulate with findings from previous research. In particular, causal factors referenced by participants and seen in the broader literature include anxiety, depression, fear of teachers, bullying, and separation anxiety (Johnson et al, 1941; Kearney & Beasley, 1994; Lauchlan, 2003; Lyon & Cotler, 2007; Miller, 2008), with the theme of social isolation in one account echoing explanations that reference general social anxiety (Francis, Last & Strauss, 1992). Evidence of other known correlates of extended non-attendance was also present, with onset occurring for three of the participants shortly after a point of transition or time out of school, and two reporting attendance at multiple schools (Berg, 1996; Campbell, 2001).

Equally, the individuality of the accounts and the extent to which these factors differ from one participant to another triangulates with previous findings that suggest extended non-attendance is, almost by definition, multi-factorial in causation (Nuttall & Woods, 2013), cannot be treated as a unitary concept (Miller, 2008), and needs to be considered in terms of a functional analysis (Kearney & Silverman, 1990). What is equally apparent is that these findings have *not* impacted on the recent school and support experiences of this sample of young people, questioning the extent to which current support and intervention practice is genuinely evidence based.

Particularisation and generalisation

The criticism that psychology and intervention practice tends to generalise (supplying uniform explanations to apparent problem behaviours that purport to hold good across populations) when it should particularise (by seeking the causes of each individual case) is one that has been made before (Billig, 2002), and one which the preceding point indicates could be made here. Despite having very individual experiences and citing different causes for their non-attendance, participants support experiences appear remarkably similar. The type of school responses recounted suggest that non-attendance behaviours are generalised and viewed (at least initially, and in these schools) as refusal behaviour requiring disciplinary action. All four participants report finding the process of accessing any other form of support long-winded and, in most cases, of limited use, suggesting a system that is quick to demand a return to normal, but slow to respond in any other way.

Although it must be remembered that these are the accounts of young people for whom this process went wrong, and who may frame their understanding accordingly, their accounts triangulate with one another, and with the identified

themes of blame and fear in the only previous study designed to elicit the child's voice (Gregory and Purcell's, 2014). It is further concerning to note that the most readily available form of support appears to be medication, often including SSRI type antidepressants, whose noted side-effects include aggression and suicide, and which commentators suggest should be contra-indicated for this population due to the plasticity of the still developing adolescent brain (Bennett, 2011; Garland, 2004; Wilson, 2011).

Language was clearly important to all participants, in particular the use of the terms "naughty", "lazy", and "refuser", which had been experienced in some form by all. Such terminology appears potentially damaging, again generalising what is a very individual problem, and is inaccurate when applied to children with mental and physical health issues who have genuine difficulty attending. The language of refusal and the label "school refuser" in particular appear problematic, attributing, as they do, a form of within-child responsibility to the individual (Pellegrini, 2007; Gregory & Purcell, 2014). An equivalent usage if such terminology were applied to adults absent from work due to anxiety, depression, or chronic fatigue would be "Work refuser", a term unlikely to be deemed acceptable.

Implications for school and EP practice

In answer to the second question posed by this study (How might this inform the professionals seeking to support them?), a number of practical suggestions result from these findings. These include:

- Improving schools' understandings of extended non-attendance through evidence-based training or consultation (including understanding the various causes, and the value of functional analysis)
- Ensuring all staff have some awareness of extended non-attendance, but equally ensuring schools have a key person (SENCo or other) with lead responsibility
- Seeking to improve multi-agency working in order to ensure intervention is quick, joined up, and appropriate; making sure professionals in associated organisations have an understanding of extended non-attendance
- Responding to children's difficulties swiftly, and with understanding; making sure their voices are heard and understood
- Emphasising the role of the EP, ideally at an early stage (*only one* of the participants in the current study had seen an EP, despite evident psychological issues in all cases)
- If it proves impossible to maintain the placement, providing rapid access to school work or tuition and social opportunities for those young people who are out of school

Limitations and future research

The current study has a number of limitations, including a small sample size, with the result that generalising in a traditional quantitative sense is clearly inappropriate. That said, the purpose of the current study was to provide a nuanced sense of the experience of extended non-attendance from the young person's perspective, and thought was given at the outset to the need for thick description and

triangulation in order to allow findings to be transferable (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The choice of methodology is both a benefit and limitation, allowing detailed exploration of the texture of lived experience: application of a discursive approach instead (or alongside) would have allowed more specific exploration of the language and discourses surrounding extended non-attendance. Recruitment was a particular issue: participants were approached by staff known to them with the result that selection was in part out of the researcher's hands; given the nature of the study this may mean that those who participated were more ready to engage, more articulate, or deemed more suitable by their support worker.

Future research might focus on a number of areas. Firstly, conducting a similar study with a larger number of children, possibly drawn from different LEAs, would allow more robust triangulation of accounts, and allow likenesses and differences in service delivery across different LEAs to be examined. Secondly, the current study indicates differences in the understandings of extended non-attendance held by parents and various professionals, and given the impact of these understandings on the children involved they merit further examination. Thirdly, the paucity of data regarding extended non-attendance locally and nationally, and the difficulty of examining differences in outcomes locally, suggests the need for better data gathering and analysis of the same, ideally co-ordinated at a national level.

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Appendix 1 – Topic Guide

Researcher: Matt Baker

18th November 2013

Project Title: Out of school: a phenomenological exploration of long-term non-attendance.

Guiding Questions:

How many schools have you been to?

What's your first memory of school?

What was it like going to that school?

What were the good things/the bad things?

Did you have any problems with attending that school?

What happened?

What support did you receive?

What was it like moving up to Secondary school?

When did you first find it hard to attend?

What did that feel like?

Did you talk to anyone about it?

Did anyone talk to you?

Did you feel you were believed/disbelieved? Who by?

Did you feel they understood?

(Did you feel people were trying to help you with a problem, or that they were just trying to make you go back to school?)

What happened next?

What support have you received since/who from?

How long is it since you were last in school?

How does that make you feel?

What education are you receiving at the moment?

What would you like to happen now?

What else would (would have) helped?

NB. As the methodology is essentially inductive and the interview approach semi-structured, the questions here are designed as a prompt or guide only; emergent themes will be explored as appropriate and with due regard to participant willingness.

Appendix 2 - Steps in Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (abbreviated from Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2009).

- 1. Reading and re-reading** (and listening and re-listening), with the aim of ensuring a focus on the participant and a sense of how it felt to live this experience; involves a process of consciously suspending the interpretative self (epoche, or bracketing – Langdridge, 2007).
- 2. Initial noting:** making exploratory comments on the transcript, broadly divided into descriptive (describing content), linguistic (considering the use of language) and conceptual (becoming more interpretative and considering the participants understandings), although with no set limit on what should or can be commented on. A process of deconstruction is usually undertaken, which involves reconsidering elements of an account in isolation, or considering sentences individually but in reverse order through the text to see if meaning is retained or changed due to the alteration in context. Typically, initial notes are made on a wide right margin adjacent to the transcript.
- 3. Developing emergent themes.** Moving to a more interpretative consideration of the text, a process of considering what initial themes appear important, in large part on the basis of how (and how often) they are represented in the participant's account and in the process of initial noting. Typically detailed on a wide left margin adjacent to the transcript.

- 4. Searching for connections across emergent themes.** Exploring initial themes in order to identify likeness and difference; incorporating related themes to create super-ordinate themes. Processes used include abstraction (abstracting like elements of text and experience and placing them together) and subsumption (recognising that an emergent theme is in fact super-ordinate and connects a series of other emergent themes).

- 5. Moving to the next case.** Suspending assumption and again bracketing the self in order to allow an idiographic focus on a subsequent account; this is repeated for each subsequent case.

- 6. Looking for patterns across cases.** Seeking both commonalities and differences in experiences and identified themes; subsequently developing Master Themes across cases.

Appendix 3 - Emergent themes and Master themes

NB. Quotes presented are representative rather than encyclopaedic, and hopefully reveal something of the thinking that lay behind the analysis; they are not the only instances where a theme occurs in any given account. In the interests of transparency and accountability, the researcher has resisted the impulse to re-write or 'tidy-up' these tables, and left them as they were originally put together during the analysis; they should be read as one step in a process of moving from initial idiographic analysis to subsequent triangulation between accounts.

Case 1: 'Graham' (all identities anonymised) – initial themes:

Theme(s)	Quotes
Primary school experience	'I remember being sick' – 'three or four' – 'we moved to Northern Ireland' – 'first memory of school'
Transition to secondary	'wasn't nervous' – 'trying not to think about it' – 'forming into different friendship groups'
Anger	'Isolated' – 'Wrong' (in answer to 'what did this process feel like?') – [they should have] 'actually understand what was going on' – 'they just pulled the plug' – 'got the better of me' – 'I think I could have still been in school if the teachers involved just took a bit more care' – 'I feel like the school failed me'
Pressure to return quickly or remain in school	'after a few months of that they wanted me in full-time' – 'I felt I was progressing ... but then they pulled the plug ... told me I had to be in the whole day' (after missing two years and being back for two months part-time)
Initial responses and being disbelieved	'they wanted to start charging us for absences. They wanted to send me to the PRU'
Punishment, blame and control	'they didn't see any need for [my absences]. They wanted me in the school' - 'they wanted to start charging us for absences. They

	wanted to send me to the PRU' - 'It felt like she (head of house) was calling all the shots' - 'just seeing my name not in school and demanding this and that' - 'they told me I had to be in the whole day and I had to do lessons in a separate room with no-one else'
Slow or inappropriate support experience	'It felt like she [head of house] was calling all the shots' - 'I think the only thing they cared about was their figures' - 'the person (CAMHS) I was talking to got referred to a different unit and it hasn't been helpful since' - 'I feel like the school failed me' 'Year 8 I started taking a lot of time off school' - 'I think around the start of Year 9 they said I could come in and do three lessons' (in that time, threatened with PRU and with fines but no other support offered) - 'I had so much time off I, kind of, got used to it that it was like a big step again' - 'I didn't go to school in Year 9 ... tried going back in Year 10'
Nervousness/anxiety	'I was getting nervous' - 'anxious' - 'It got the better of me' - 'I couldn't handle it' - 'depression' - 'they gave me medication' - 'it seemed to make sense' - 'isolated'
Difficulty accessing a friendship group	'I didn't really feel like I fitted in' - 'everyone else was succeeding and I wasn't' - 'as you go through secondary school people start, like, forming into different friendship groups - you, kind of, know who's with who - and that's probably one of the reasons why I stopped going in as well' - 'I didn't fit in'
Recognising (but not excusing) why	'I think the only thing they really cared about was their figures' - 'I'm just one of their pupils. They've got hundreds more to worry about'
Hiding emotions and keeping secrets	'I would, kind of, block it and I wouldn't let it get to the topic' (after initial attempts by the school to make him attend full-time)
Multiple schools and relocation	'four schools' - 'I think we moved to Northern Ireland when I was five ...

	stayed there for five years and then we moved back ... when I was ten'
Future plans	'hopefully I'll do well in my exams' – 'I'm starting to [have a plan for the future]' – 'I want to, you know, to be physical, like sports based'
Medication and prescribing	'They gave me medication [for depression]. It doesn't really help'
Things that might be done differently	'It would have to be the right person' (support needs) – 'Just talking to someone ... someone who understands' – 'I think maybe instead of doing, like a full day, they could have just put it up an extra hour or two' – 'I think I could have still been in school if the teachers ... took a little bit more care ... actually understand what was going on'
Nervousness/anxiety	'got the better of me' – 'I didn't fit in' (lack of belonging/friendship group) – 'depression' – 'anxious' – 'could have still been in school if the teachers involved took a little more care' – 'I was getting nervous' (stopped going in)
Seeking meaning and making sense	'It got the better of me' - 'I couldn't handle it' – 'depression' – 'they gave me medication' – 'it seemed to make sense' - 'isolated'
Depression	'depression' – medication – 'diagnosis/CAMHs' - only thing that makes him happy is 'football'
Social isolation	'I didn't fit in' (lack of belonging/friendship group) – 'you knew who was with who ... probably one of the reasons why I stopped going in'

Case 2: 'Cynthia' – initial themes:

Theme	Quotes
Primary school experience	'I used to cry' – 'then I used to be okay' – 'best friends' – 'one big happy family' – 'I used to love it' – 'If I could go back now, I would'
Belonging to primary school	'one big happy family' – (as above)
Transition to secondary	'excited' – scared' – 'going to be okay' - 'I did two weeks ... refused to go' – 'bullying' – 'scared'
Being labelled naughty	'I had my Maths teacher say in front

	<p>of the class, why haven't I been in?' – 'then I had rumours [] so I had people coming up to me "are you pregnant", so I went along with them' – 'others teachers disbelieving me and thinking I was just naughty' - 'too many people trying to help all at once, trying to know what's up with you' – 'dad thought I was being naughty'</p> <p>'the school just thinks you're being naughty' - '[They thought] I was just being naughty and picky with my lessons' (school started the conversation about which ones made her nervous) – 'I just don't think they understood' – 'she [education welfare officer] thought that I was being naughty and that I was just misbehaving and choosing not to go to school' – 'the head of the school said I could go in at 9am so missed Tutor. But then he came and got me out of science and said I had a detention because I came in at 9.00am' – 'they took away my inclusion [because they thought I wasn't co-operating]' - 'dad thought I was being naughty' – 'I was stood outside the building ... then I nearly had the police called because they thought I'd run away'</p>
Fear	<p>'in the toilet texting ... that wound up with myself' – 'anxiety' – 'feeling sick'</p>
Anger	<p>'2 to 3 days help does not fix anxiety' – 'I have anxiety, I'm not naughty ... that's my main point'</p>
Punishment, blame and control	<p>'then he came and got me out of science and said I had a detention' - 'I was stood outside the building ... then I nearly had the police called because they thought I'd run away' - 'the school just thinks you're being naughty' - '[They thought] I was just being naughty and picky with my lessons' (school started the conversation about which ones made her nervous)</p>
Fragmented support experience	<p>'family support worker came round</p>

	and went through my timetable' - 'I got told that [I had access to inclusion/only had to go to some lessons] on the Thursday; the deputy head came up and said. I did go down to some of my lessons ... then he came up and, like, had a go at me, saying I can't do that ... that's not what I'm allowed' - 'I went to hypnotherapy ... but he changed what it was about' - 'then I've been to 14-21 counselling' - 'I've been to CAMHS as well' - 'cognitive behaviour therapy' - 'too many people trying to help all at once, trying to know what's up with you, but then it feels like they're judging you'
Slow or inappropriate support experiences	'you can't just expect to do two or three days of help and then it be all okay' - 'there is no quick fix ... help for two or three days does not fix anxiety' -
Pressure to return quickly or remain in school (Things that might be done differently)	'And I was, like, well, I'm getting better, but I just need their help as well. And so they tried to help me, but because apparently I wasn't co-operating with them, that's when they took away my inclusion ... they thought if they gave me inclusion it would be fixed straight away, but it wasn't' - 'everything needs to be on my terms' - 'you could introduce people back into school slowly, but it would have to be on their terms. You can't just, like, rush someone. It's, like, I don't know, having a baby - you can't rush it to walk when it's just born or something'
Friends as a positive aspect of school	'Its boring on my own' [home education] - 'I talked to my friends' - 'best mate' - 'best mate sat next to me'
Nervousness/anxiety	'your confidence gets lower and so does your self-esteem' - 'anxiety' - 'I'm just really scared to go in ... feeling sick and I'd, like, not get out of bed; I'd pull the covers over my face and not talk to Mum or anyone' - 'I used to get that wound up with

	myself because I couldn't do it' – 'I used to sit in the toilets and text mum'
Initial responses and being disbelieved	[Primary]: 'It was like one big family, really. I used to love it. If I could go back now, I would. But it's just when I went to secondary school that things got really bad' - Cannot remember why did not go, but can recall the school's response: 'No. Well, when you refuse to go in, the school just thinks you're being, like, naughty, which you're not'
Hiding emotions and keeping secrets	'I talked to my friends because I knew they wouldn't go and tell anyone' – 'because I didn't think anyone understood or would understand' – 'I didn't know who I could talk to' - 'putting on a smile' 'putting on a smile' – [saying] 'Yeah, I am fine, it's just fine, because I didn't want them to make a fuss over me, obviously, because I don't want the whole class knowing my problems'
Future plans	'Learning. Like, getting a good job at the end of it' – 'I want to do something with people with problems like me'
Isolation	'Its boring on my own' – [don't like home education because of] 'being on my own' – 'it was just me and the dog'
Things that might be done differently	'Teachers and support workers should be more understanding' – 'Help for two or three days does not fix anxiety' - 'you could introduce people back into school slowly, but it would have to be on their terms. You can't just, like, rush someone.' - 'too many people trying to help all at once, trying to know what's up with you, but then it feels like they're judging you'
(Causes) Bullying (Nervousness/anxiety)	'It was because in the first two weeks I got bullied' – 'because you've got anxiety' – 'really scared ... feeling sick' - [elsewhere] 'I can't remember why' (but can remember response)
Recognising (but not excusing) why	'they've got too many students to

	deal with'
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Case 3: 'Malcolm' – initial themes:

Theme	Quotes
Primary school experience	'meeting one of my friends in foundation' – 'good' – 'misbehaving' – 'log cabin' – 'fun'
Transition to secondary	'a mixture of things' – 'scared' – 'It's massive' – 'you're worrying about things' – 'its also really fun ... a whole new experience'
(Initial responses and being disbelieved) Being labelled naughty	'The schools response was awful, basically. They were just, like, pinning everything, like, "You're just not going to school because your lazy"' – 'they told Mum to just take things away from me' – 'she was ... pressured into doing it by the school' – 'She thought I was just too lazy' – school 'harassing me' - HE DOES NOT BLAME – 'I think, because of how complicated the whole thing was, I don't blame anyone for thinking I was just being lazy'
Being punished and controlled	'they told Mum to just take things away from me' – 'scooter, Xbox' etc – 'harassing me' – 'they refused to send work home'
Recognising (but not excusing) why	'I think, because of how complicated the whole thing was, I don't blame anyone for thinking I was just being lazy' – just one of many students ...
Initial response and being disbelieved	'they refused to send work home' – 'I can't really remember the timeframes' – 'I just wanted to see someone and get it sorted' – GP: 'I wouldn't say it was a short time after it first started happening, but it wasn't ... a ridiculous amount of time' – 'I'd talk to the GP and then they'd send things off to the school and ... things would go back and forth' – 'I feel like things could have been done quicker ... my whole view is that it was really slow. It was like nothing was being done about it so I was just stuck' – 'not

	everyone's the same – they try to push the same quick fix on everyone, and it doesn't work' – involvement of home ed service 2 years in 'I think that was the first, kind of, point where I thought this person actually understands'
Friends as a positive aspect of school (Primary school experiences)	'I remember meeting one of my friends there' [pre-school] – [school was] 'just meeting friends' – [offer of another school, but did not go because] 'I just wanted to stay close to my friends' – 'making new friends, keeping old friends' – 'I also went to the skate park'
'Belonging' to primary school	Descriptions of playground/cabin - 'I remember meeting one of my friends there' [pre-school] – [school was] 'just meeting friends' – [offer of another school, but did not go because] 'I just wanted to stay close to my friends'
Hiding emotions and keeping secrets (Seeking meaning and making sense)	'get myself together' – 'at first ... I thought maybe I do actually have a choice' - 'I'm not sleeping tonight because I don't want to'
Slow or inappropriate support experience	'They try and push the same quick fix ...' – 'flexible enough to teach' – 'she wasn't as flexible as'
Things that might be done differently	'I feel like things could have been done quicker' – 'everything moved really slowly before anything actually happened' – 'my whole view is that it was really slow'
Medication	'CAMHS' – 'amitriptyline'
Seeking meaning and making sense	'weak and tired' – 'I just fell drastically behind in everything' - 'it made everything twice as hard' – nervousness: 'Yes' – 'chronic fatigue' – antidepressants – 'I thought I'd just got into a bad sleep routine' - 'at first ... I thought maybe I do actually have a choice'
Future plans	'carry on studying with the science and maths that I'm doing at the moment, because that's actually going fairly well' – 'find someone who can be flexible enough to teach me english'
(Causes)	'I wasn't really aware' – 'the schools

Chronic fatigue	response was awful' - 'chronic fatigue' - 'nervousness' [due to punitive responses/fear of being late]
Nervousness/anxiety	'nervousness' (fed by school/punishment) - "why are you late"

Case 4: 'Amelia' - Initial themes:

Theme(s)	Quotes
Primary school experience	'bullied' - moved schools and countries - 'she made me stand up/I couldn't read' - Mum/did not want to leave Mum - teacher 'wasn't nice'
Bullying	First memory of school: 'bullied' (for six months) - at two schools: (other country) - 'the school that I got bullied at'
Fear of teachers	'most teachers haven't been nice' - 'she [first teacher] wasn't nice to anybody' - '[teacher] used to scare me'
Transition to secondary	'stressed' - Nervous but okay because 'with classmates' - 'alright in year 7' - being without them explains problems in year 8
Friendship and belonging	'with classmates' - 'alright in year 7' (above) - sister - 'My Mum has believed me' - 'didn't want to leave Mum'
(Causes) Nervousness/anxiety	'emotions and stuff, stress and anxiety, OCDs' - 'OCDs' - 'diagnosis of aspergers' - attachment strategies 'scarf' - 'far more medication to help' - anxiety: 'scared' 'stress and anxiety, OCDs' - 'I used to cry ... saying that I felt sick' - 'I was scared so I'd cry, I'd try and run ... I couldn't cope'
Fragmented support experience	'most teachers haven't been very nice' 'CAMHS' - Home education 'were really helpful' - 'My Mum has believed me the whole time' - reaction to CAMHS: 'crying my eyes out' - 'not really anybody on the school staff' - 'Yeah it [home ed - 2 years in] was helpful'
Initial responses and being disbelieved	Called a 'drama queen' - 'not really'

	anybody on the school staff – ‘Yeah it [home ed – 2 years in] was helpful’ – ‘really helpful, very helpful, they understood’ – made to stand outside classroom – ‘she kept giving me late marks’
Slow or inappropriate support	[Primary] ‘teacher I didn’t like’ – ‘She wasn’t nice to anybody’ – ‘she didn’t like kids really, she only liked her horses’ – ‘my teacher called me a drama queen’ – ‘Then the teacher wasn’t very nice their either’ – ‘she was quite grumpy’ – ‘most teachers haven’t been very nice’ ‘CAMHS’ – Home education ‘were really helpful’ – ‘My Mum has believed me the whole time’ – reaction to CAMHS: ‘crying my eyes out’
Being labelled naughty	‘I couldn’t get in ... she kept giving me late marks’ – ‘you’re threatening us’ – ‘thinking I’d been naughty’ ‘I’ll do what they want me to do but I’ll try and impress them ... I want it to be easier for them as well’ – ‘So I went in’ – ‘I had to answer them (Dr from CAMHS) because otherwise I’d have felt rude, but I didn’t want to answer them really’ ‘I wanted to stay at \$\$\$\$\$’ – ‘I’ll do what they want me to’ – ‘I said I can’t go in, I can’t go in. She said, just go in ...’ - ‘If you keep pushing me and pushing me and pushing me, I won’t be able to come in tomorrow because I’ll break. So they said to me ... you’re just threatening us’ – ‘crying’
Being punished and controlled	‘she kept giving me late marks’ – ‘I had to answer them’ – ‘If you keep pushing me’ – ‘so they said ... you’re threatening us’ – ‘thinking I’d been naughty’
Fear	‘crying and crying and crying’ – ‘scary teacher’ - ‘I was scared so I’d cry, I’d try and run ... I couldn’t cope’
Pressure to return quickly or remain in school	‘They came round my house at first ... then they started trying to get me into the \$\$\$\$\$’ – ‘My Mum wanted me to go back to mainstream ...

	<p>most people did at \$\$\$\$\$\$ as well ... I wanted to stay at \$\$\$\$\$\$ – ‘I thought they wouldn’t let me come home’ – ‘So I went in on the Tuesday and it [the plan] had changed and then there was this test which I hate ... in a lesson that I had not done for two whole years ...’ – ‘Please can I go home? She said No, you can’t, you have to stay’ – ‘you can come in the whole day tomorrow and I’ll stay with you’</p>
Anger	<p>‘So I went in on the Tuesday and it [the plan] had changed and then there was this test which I hate ... in a lesson that I had not done for two whole years ...’ – ‘I just feel like some teachers haven’t believed me’ – ‘prison/imprisoned’ – (in response to) ‘drama queen’</p>
Medication	<p>‘They prescribed fluoxetine and aripiprazole and risperidone’ – [What else would you like?]: far more medication to help.</p>
Separation anxiety (separation from parent)	<p>‘I wanted to stay at home – I wanted to be with Mum’ – ‘Mum used to give me strategies ... a scarf that smelled of her ... little letters or like notes’</p>
Multiple schools and relocation	<p>‘Eight schools’ – ‘a bit less than a year’ – ‘we moved’ – ‘Australia for six months’ – North of England – ‘then we moved up here’</p>
Hiding emotions and keeping secrets	<p>‘I can hide it very well, I used to be able to hide it quite well and I’m even better now’</p>
Friends as a positive aspect of school	<p>‘I knew that I was with my classmates in my tutor group, that was better’ - ‘with my friends’ – ‘friends not being in the same class’ – ‘they weren’t in my class anymore ... That was stressful’</p>
Seeking meaning/making sense	<p>Various labels ‘stress and anxiety, OCDs’ – ‘Aspergers’ – not wanting to leave Mum – medication (‘more would help’) – ‘bullied’ – ‘scared’</p>

Master themes**Table 1: Master themes and sub-ordinate themes**

Master theme	Sub-ordinate themes
Initial school experiences	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Primary school experiences (4) - Transition to secondary school (4) - Multiple schools and relocation (2)
Participants' perceptions of the causes of non-attendance	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Bullying (2) - Nervousness/anxiety (4) - Depression (1) - Chronic fatigue (1) - Fear of teachers (1) - Social isolation in school (1) - Separation from parent (1)
School and other support experiences	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Initial responses and being disbelieved (4) - Pressure to return quickly or remain in school (4) - Slow or inappropriate support experience (4) - Fragmented support experience (4) - Medication and prescribing (3) - Things that might be done differently (4)
Punishment, blame and control	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Being labelled naughty (3) - Being punished and controlled (4) - Recognising (but not excusing) why (3)
Friendship and belonging	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Difficulty accessing a friendship group (1) - Friends as a positive aspect of school (3) - 'Belonging' to primary school (2)
The future	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Future plans (3)
Impact on the child's phenomena	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Anger (4) - Fear (4) - Hiding emotions and keeping secrets (4) - Seeking meaning and making sense (4)