

**“If it wasn’t for them, I would probably just breakdown”: An IPA  
study exploring how secondary aged girls with SEMH needs  
describe and make sense of their relationships in school.**

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## **Abstract**

The prevalence of social, emotional and mental health difficulties amongst young people has increased and Child, Adolescent and Mental Health Services (CAMHS) are struggling to respond to the current need. Therefore, more than ever, schools are playing a role in supporting young people with these needs, and the relationships they have in school are at the forefront of this. Previous research suggests that the range of relationships formed in school can play a key role in supporting or hindering the social, emotional and mental health of students.

SEMH needs amongst girls have been consistently under identified in schools which has led to them being underrepresented in the research. Furthermore, studies in this area tend to utilise quantitative designs and, typically, self-report questionnaires to explore either the positive or negative aspects of specified relationships in school. This study aims to give a voice to girls with SEMH needs and seek insight into their relationships in school, without being restricted by a specific narrative or scale, which has so often been the feature of research in this area.

This thesis explored how three secondary aged girls with SEMH needs experience a single-sex secondary school and the meaning they take from the relationships they have within it. Interviews were recorded, transcribed and analysed using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA). Poignant themes were generated to summarise their experiences: Sources of Support, The Emotional Experience, Difficult Past Experiences, and Identity.

In the discussion of the findings, the girl's accounts are linked to various psychological theories to help explore their experiences. The findings provide several implications for EPs and schools as well as outlining directions for future research.

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## **Introduction**

The present study aimed to explore the lived experiences of secondary age girls with Social, Emotional Mental Health (SEMH) needs, regarding their relationships in school. The purpose of this chapter is to outline the global and national context of young people with SEMH needs, in addition to an examination of legislation and policy regarding SEMH needs in education. It will also state the research rationale and aims. Finally, definitions will be provided for the key term in this research: 'SEMH'.

### **Background to the Research**

The purpose of this section is to describe the background of the researcher in relation to the context of the research. For clarity, this section will be written in first person.

Prior to starting my doctoral training on the Education, Child and Community Psychology course, I worked extensively with students with SEMH needs. Firstly, as a 1:1 teaching assistant (TA) in a mainstream

primary school and then in a specialist setting for adolescents with significant SEMH needs. During my time in these roles, I noted the impact of their relationships (with both peers and adults) in relation to their overall experience of school. It seemed to be that, even just one positive relationship in school could be a predictor of many outcomes including attendance, engagement in learning and an increased sense of calm and happiness in school.

In my current role as a Trainee Educational Psychologist (TEP), I have received many referrals for students with SEMH as their primary area of need. However, it seems to be that when it comes to SEMH needs, professionals, including EPs, reach for the same few suggestions time and time again. These include structured interventions such as Emotional Learning Support Assistants (ELSAs). However, I have wondered about the 'evidence base' from which these recommendations are made, particularly in relation to secondary school students. Similarly, I am curious as to whether there are more nuanced aspects of relationships in school which are not acknowledged within the research but may be having a meaningful impact on the experience of students.

A vital part of the Educational Psychologist (EP) role is "listening to young people" (Mercieca & Mercieca, 2014, pp. 24). However, research around SEMH needs tends to be focused on statistical data and specific



factors relating to SEMH such as bullying or academic attainment.

Furthermore, the research has seldom elicited the views of girls identified as having SEMH needs.

This research aims to centre the voices of adolescent girls and explore their lived experience as a key contribution to research about them.

Context

*Terminology*

SEMH is an umbrella term for children and young people (CYP) experiencing a wide range of difficulties. The category of 'SEMH' was introduced in the SEND Code of Practice (CoP) in 2015, to describe what was previously referred in the literature as 'Social, Emotional and Behaviour Difficulties' (SEBD), 'Behaviour, Emotional and Social Difficulties' (BESD) or 'Emotional, Behavioural Difficulties' (EBD). The change in language reflects the change in perspective in relation to difficulties experienced by CYP, namely, the increased recognition that presentation such as challenging behaviour is so often a result of deeper SEMH difficulties (DfE, 2016). As a result of the changes in perspective and subsequent terminology, some of the research discussed throughout this review will use terms like 'Social Emotional and Behavioural Difficulties' (SEBD) and the others mentioned earlier. As

well as this, the broad nature and relatively recent introduction of the term 'SEMH' as a term, means that more specific terms such as 'mental health', 'emotional wellbeing' have also been considered when reviewing the literature.

The global and national rise in CYP experiencing difficulties in relation to their SEMH has been well documented in recent years (Green, McGinnity, Meltzer, Ford, & Goodman, 2005; Kieling et al., 2011; Bor, Dean, & Najman, 2014; Viner et al., 2021). Awareness and concern surrounding the issue resulted in the World Health Organisation (WHO) referring to mental health as a 'growing priority' (2016). In the UK alone, figures suggest prevalence rates for CYP with these difficulties were around 12.8% in 2018 (NHS Digital, 2018), rising to 17.4%, in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic (NHS Digital, 2021).

### *National Context*

The global and national issues relating to SEMH are mirrored within a more local context too. The borough from which the researcher is on placement published a 'Local Health and Care plan' which revealed that 'mental health issues amongst young people in the borough are on the rise and outcomes are often poor' (no reference has been provided for this plan as it contains identifiable features relating to the borough and

would therefore breach anonymity). In fact, research conducted as part of the same borough wide improvement plan found that in 2019, young people within the borough were actually experiencing issues relating to SEMH at higher rates than London and the rest of the UK. In order to try to address this issue, the Local Authority (LA) chose 'Emotional wellbeing and mental health for young people' as a specific area of focus for improvement and review.

Stressors within the environment or 'systems' around the child are known to play a role in the development of SEMH difficulties in children and young people (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998). Therefore, the even more recent context of COVID-19 and its world-wide impact is one which cannot be underestimated (De Miranda et al., 2020). It is thought that the overarching impact of COVID-19 has led to an increased amount of young people experiencing SEMH difficulties, especially in relation to their mental health (Arnold & Davis, 2022). There are also significant correlations between children experiencing SEMH difficulties and exposure to chronic adversity and acute stressors from a young age (Roffey 2016; Jutte et al., 2015; Radford et al., 2011). Similarly, links between poverty, stressful life events and mental health difficulties are well established (Caughy et al., 2003; Fell and Hewstone, 2015).

With this information in mind, the difficulties CYP are experiencing in relation to their SEMH are arguably attributable, at least in part, to the current socio-political climate in which they find themselves. Currently in England, SEMH is the second most common need (after speech, language and communication) and there are around 208,900 young people with an Education, Health and Care Plan (EHCP) or Special Educational Needs (SEN) support who have SEMH listed as their primary need (Department for Education, 2022). Although SEMH needs have typically been associated with adolescents (Gunnell et al., 2018), instances of mental health difficulties in particular, are increasingly being noticed in primary aged children. A national survey reported that about one in ten (9.5%) 5–10-year-olds met the criteria for one mental health diagnosis and about one in thirty (3.4%) met the criteria for two or more diagnoses (UK Government Statistical Service [GSS], 2018). Kessler et al. (2007) found that 'impulse-control disorders' have the earliest age of onset and symptoms often develop from as young as 7 years old. As well as this, anxiety disorders are frequently being reported in primary aged children (Beesdo et al., 2009).

The UK government has acknowledged the figures around mental health and young people and has identified a continued lack of time and capacity as problematic in supporting pupils' mental health (DfE, 2017).

In response to the issue, government guidance has outlined the importance of prevention, early intervention, and the role played by schools. As well as this, it has pledged to expand and train the children's mental health workforce in order to ensure that an additional 70,000 children per year receive evidence-based treatment when in need (Department for Health & Social Care [DHSC] & DfE, 2018).

## Rationale

### *Gender and SEMH*

Within this research, the terms 'girls' and 'women' are used to describe individuals who identify as female gender.

Throughout the literature, SEMH needs have often been referred to in relation to behavioural presentation. A common way in which this behaviour is classified from the presence of either 'externalising' or 'internalising' behaviours (Hamblin, 2016). Internalising behaviours are directed inwards and include fearfulness, social withdrawal, and anxiety, while externalising behaviours are directed outwards and tend to include physical aggression, disobedience and conduct disorder (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). Research into gender differences and SEMH needs has commonly focused on this and typical patterns suggest that women are more likely to engage in internalising

behaviours and boys externalising (Bask, 2015; Hamblin, 2016; Chaplin & Aldao, 2013).

A survey of child and adolescent mental health in the U.K. indicated that young women aged between fourteen and sixteen are reporting significantly higher levels of psychological distress than their male counterparts (World Health Organization, 2018). Despite this, in school aged populations, boys and young men are substantially more likely to be categorised with SEMH as their primary SEN need than young women and girls (Lessof et al., 2016). It may be that this disparity is a result of boy's tendency to exhibit SEMH needs in the form of 'externalising behaviours', which increases the likelihood of their needs being identified in school. The potential mismatch between identification and actual prevalence suggests that girls could be underrepresented within the current research. By gaining insight into the experiences of girls with SEMH needs, there may be greater opportunity to support those who may be silently struggling within school and education.

#### *Outcomes for CYP with SEMH*

Importantly, Kessler et al., (2005) found that approximately 50% of adults with mental health difficulties first encountered problems before the age of 15. Similarly, the WHO suggests that 50% of clinically

diagnosable disorders develop by the age of 14 (2018). Findings such as these, highlight the vital role that schools can play in the prevention and support of mental health difficulties for CYP. In line with this, the DfE sets out expectations for schools in supporting mental health and wellbeing of their pupils. For example, schools are expected to develop approaches tailored to the particular needs of their pupils. They go on to explain that all schools have a statutory duty to promote the welfare of their pupils, which includes preventing impairment of children's health or development, and taking action to enable all children to have the best outcomes (DfE, Keeping Children Safe in Education, 2018).

### *SEMH and Schools*

Schools are thought to be the optimal setting for early intervention for children with SEMH difficulties. Durlaket al., (2011) and Weare (2015) noted the importance of a whole school approach when it comes to support CYP SEMH. Furthermore, more specialist services such as Child & Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS) are struggling to respond to the current need which is meaning that schools are often forced to be the sole source of support to children with difficulties in this area (Crenna-Jennings & Hutchinson, 2020). Unfortunately, the literature indicates that this particular group of CYP are much more likely to be

excluded from school (Graham et al., 2019; Bowman-Perrott et al. 2013). O'Reilly et al., (2018) explored teachers experiences of working with CYP with SEMH and found that they often feel ill-equipped to work with this group of children. This may indicate that high rates of exclusion could be a result of teachers lacking time or facilities to develop a full understanding of the CYP's needs, or to be able to adjust approaches and policies appropriately.

### *Relationships in School*

Relationships play a key role in an individual's development throughout their lifetime (Hartup 1993; Ladd, 2005). As a CYP grows, their relationships with others go through significant changes. Research suggests that as a CYP develops, the significance of different relationships varies.

For example, it is thought that relationships with peers become increasingly valuable during adolescence (Pellegrini et al., 2016). As their social interaction skills improve and they spend increasing amounts of time with their peers, these relationships become more important. Some research even suggests that, by adolescence, CYP tend to identify with peers in place of family as their primary reference group (Csikszentmihalyi & Larson, 1984).



Peer relationships have been linked to many positive outcomes including academic achievement, better adjustment in school and better emotional wellbeing (Criss, Pettit, Bates, Dodge & Lapp, 2002; Wentzel & Asher, 1995). As well as this, positive peer relationships are thought to be provide a protective affect against adverse childhood experiences including those relating to socioeconomic background or special educational needs (Moore et al., 2017).

At the other end of the spectrum, problems with peer relationships are associated with a variety of negative outcomes. For instance, difficulties forming good quality peer relationships have been linked to issues in adolescence and adulthood, such as low academic achievement, behavioural disorders, and truancy (Lochman et al., 1995), as well as mental health issues (Dodge et al.,1998; Cowen et al., 1973; Parjker et al., 2015). As the majority of these studies are correlational, it is unclear if early peer problems actually lead to later issues or whether they are a result of wider risk factors. Nevertheless, a clear relationship has been established and consistent patterns throughout the literature tend to show that positive peer relationships are associated with positive outcomes and difficulties with peer relationships are linked to an array of negative outcomes and risk factors (Rubin, Bukowski & Bowker, 2015).

Among relationships within the school, relationships with teachers also seem to play an important part in fostering adolescents' social, emotional and mental health (Cotterel, 2007) and satisfaction with school (Samdal et al., 1998). Student's relationships with their teachers in the school environment are consistently predictive of a broad range of outcomes relating to social, emotional and mental health (Bonell et al., 2013; Moore et al., 2017; Suldo et al., 2009). Additionally, teacher connectedness has also been found to operate as a compensatory mechanism for lower levels of parental support (Brooks et al., 2012).

The potential importance of relationships between students and certain members within a school has been well documented (Butler et al., 2022; Garcia-Moya et al., 2015; Pomeroy, 1999; Oldfield, Humphrey & Hebron, 2016). Despite this, research tends to reduce 'school staff' to 'teachers' and there are much fewer studies which have focused on student's relationships with staff other than teachers (Conboy, 2020; Littlecott, Moore & Murphy, 2018). The research which has focused on relationships with school staff other than teachers, has found that support staff working alongside teaching staff tends to work well in supporting wellbeing of students, as there are increased opportunities to build trust, develop rapport in work in one-to-one contexts (Littlecott,

Moore & Murphy, 2018; Conboy, 2020). Additionally, these studies have tended to seek insight from the staff members themselves, for example, teaching assistants, rather than students.

Therefore, this research aims to maintain a neutral stance when interviewing the participants. By giving the participants a broad task to draw and discuss their relationships in school, it is hoped that this will leave them space to discuss all and any relationships in school that they find meaningful, rather than leading them to discuss specific relationships such as those with friends or teachers. It is hoped that this study will offer valuable insight from secondary aged girls regarding their relationships in school.

With rates of SEMH continuing to rise, and a context in which schools and services are struggling to cope. It is hoped that gaining insight into the experience of an underrepresented population of girls will be a valuable contribution to the field of research which helps inform the work of EPs and other professionals.

## Literature Review

### Search Strategy

A literature review was conducted on 02/01/23, using EBSCO Host. This search yielded results from 11 different databases that were included during the search (see appendix E1 for a full list of databases with associated hit count).

The first literature search attempted to review the literature relating to relationships in school and social, emotional and mental health. In order to address the research question ‘*What does the UK literature tell us about relationships in school for secondary aged girls with SEMH needs?*’ the following search terms were used:

*Table 1: Search terms used*

Boolean Phrases		AND	AND
Search terms used	“mental health” or “social emotional” or SEMH or wellbeing or well-being or	“relationships in school” or friend* or peer* or connection*	school

	SEBD or "mental illness"		
Found in	Title	Title	Title

The following limiters were applied: Full text; Peer Reviewed; Language: English

This search yielded 306 results, many of which were not relevant (for example, they were focused on the mental health of adults). Further limiters were therefore necessary to ensure that relevant papers were left for review.

*Table 2: Limiters applied.*

Limiter	Set Limits	Rationale	Papers excluded	Papers remaining
Source Types	Academic Journals only	Only academic journals were selected to ensure only peer-reviewed empirical research was included in the studies.	1	305
Subjects	Mental health, bullying, well-being, schools, adolescents, peer group , psychology, well being,	These subjects related to the topic of the study. Examples of some of the	40	265

	<p>children, friendship, psychological wellbeing, peer relationship, students, interpersonal relations, teenagers, secondary education, social support, peer support, adolescence, anxiety, depression, peer relations, emotions, school, school children, teachers, child psychology, peers, school environment, intervention, mental health of students, adolescent psychology, school connectedness, friends, gender differences, mental well-being, psychology of high school students, psychology of school children.</p>	<p>subjects which were excluded are as follows:</p> <p>crime victims, foreign countries, victims, parents, school violence, Asian Americans, medicine, covid-19.</p>		
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Language	English	To ensure the researcher was able to thoroughly understand the study, its methods, and its findings.	0	265
Geography	UK & Ireland	Based on the focus of the fact that the research question is focused on relationships in school and there are many differences between the school systems across countries, the researcher felt that it would be most beneficial to consider only the articles that were conducted in the U.K and Ireland.	250	15

The researcher then read the 15 remaining papers. Table 3 shows the papers which were excluded as well as the rationale for doing so.

*Table 3: Papers excluded after being read by researcher*

Paper	Rationale for excluding
The relationships between school children’s wellbeing, socio-economic disadvantage and after-school activities: a cross sectional study. (Kennewell, et al., 2022)	Focus on socio-economic status rather than relationships. Also explored the children’s experience after school rather than in school.
Prenatal Family Adversity and Maternal Mental Health and Vulnerability to Peer Victimization at school (Lereya et al., 2013)	Focus on maternal mental health. Explores vulnerability to victimization rather than relationships.
Bullying, mental health and friendship in Australian primary school children. (Stokes et al., 2018)	Research conducted with Australian children and different school system to UK.
A Grounded Theory of Educational Psychologists' Mental Health Casework in Schools: Connection, Direction and Reconstruction through Consultation	A focus on EPs use of consultation. Does not directly explore students relationships in school.



(Zafeiriou, Evrydiki, Gulliford, 2020)	
Delivery of a Mental Health First Aid training package and staff peer support service in secondary schools: a process evaluation of uptake and fidelity of the WISE intervention. (Fisher et al., 2020)	Focus on staff mental health and a specific intervention in schools (mental health first aid). Did not include students.
Evaluating the implementation of a school-based emotional well-being programme: a cluster randomized controlled trial of Zippy's Friends for children in disadvantaged primary schools. Clarke, A. M., Bunting, B., & Barry, M. M. (2014).	Discussing an intervention delivered by teachers, not focused on friendships, relationships between peers or teachers. Focus is also on very young children (not applicable to secondary age.)
Peer-victimization and mental health problems in adolescents: are parental and school support protective? Stadler, C., Feifel, J., Rohrmann, S., Vermeiren, R., & Poustka, F. (2010).	Sample was based in schools in German, not UK.
Effects of peer victimization in schools and perceived social support on adolescent well-being. Rigby, K. E. N. (2000).	Sample was based in schools in Australia, not UK.

After the 8 papers from the table above were excluded, 7 papers remained. The papers were as follows:

*Table 4: Remaining papers for review*

Title	Authors	Date Published
The Contributing Role of Family, School, and Peer Supportive Relationships in Protecting the Mental Wellbeing of Children and Adolescents.	Butler, N., Quigg, Z., Bates, R., Jones, L., Ashworth, E., Gowland, S., & Jones, M	2022
School Climate, Peer Relationships, and Adolescent Mental Health: A Social Ecological Perspective.	Long, E., Zucca, C., & Sweeting, H.	2021
'Best Friends Forever'? Friendship Stability across School Transition and Associations with Mental Health and Educational Attainment.	Ng-Knight, T., Shelton, K. H., Riglin, L., Frederickson, N., McManus, I. C., & Rice, F.	2019
The role of parental and peer attachment relationships and school connectedness in predicting adolescent mental health outcomes.	Oldfield, J., Humphrey, N., & Hebron, J.	2016
The Relationship Between Use of School-Based Peer Support Initiatives and the Social and Emotional Well-Being of Bullied and Non-bullied Students.	Houlston, C., Smith, P. K., & Jessel, J.	2011
Peer Attitudes to SEBD in a Secondary Mainstream School	Visser, J., & Dubsy, R	2009
Can social support protect bullied adolescents from adverse outcomes? A	Rothon, C., Head, J.,	2011

prospective study on the effects of bullying on the educational achievement and mental health of adolescents at secondary schools in East London.	Klineberg, E., & Stansfeld, S.	
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Greenhalgh & Peacock (2005) suggest that systematic review of literature cannot solely rely on predefined, protocol driven strategies, no matter how many databases are searched. Strategies that might seem less efficient (such as browsing library shelves, asking colleagues, pursuing references that look interesting, and simply being alert to serendipitous discovery) may have a better yield per hour spent and are likely to identify important sources that would otherwise be missed. Citation tracking is an important search method for identifying systematic reviews published in obscure journals.

In line with this, the snowballing technique was then used in which the researcher conducted a hand search and read the reference list of the remaining 7 papers. The following papers were found and, after reading them, the researcher deemed them to be appropriate to include in the literature review.

The papers selected from the reference list of the remaining papers were:

*Table 5: Additional papers found through snowballing method*

Title	Author/s	Date Published
Subjective well-being in adolescence and teacher connectedness: A health asset analysis. <i>Health Education Journal</i> , 74(6), 641-654.	Garcia-Moya, I., Brooks, F., Morgan, A., & Moreno, C.	2015
The teacher-student relationship in secondary school: Insights from excluded students.	Pomeroy, E.	1999

After the researcher had followed the aforementioned steps, a total of 9 papers remained for critical review. To synthesise information and evaluate the research methods used in the literature in a systemised way, the following critical appraisal tools were used. The tools were selected in accordance with the chosen methodology of each study:

- Critical Appraisal Skills Programme (CASP) - Qualitative Studies Checklist.
- CASP - Randomised Controlled Trial Checklist.
- Mixed Methods Appraisal Tool (Hong, 2018).
- National Institute for Health and Care Excellence (2012) - Critical Appraisal Checklist for a Questionnaire Study.

See appendix E2 for evidence of use of the critical appraisal tools and conclusions drawn from them. Thomas and Harden (2008) proposed thematic synthesis, which utilises the principles of thematic analysis specifically for application in systematic reviews, as one method that can be used to synthesise the results of a literature search. As thematic synthesis has been developed and previously applied to systematic reviews that have focussed on addressing research questions regarding people's experiences and perceptions, it was considered an appropriate way to approach and structure this literature review.

Thematic Content

*Literature Review Question:*

What does the UK literature tell us about relationships in school for secondary aged girls with SEMH needs?

## Language

### *'Mental Health'*

Within the literature, the language used to describe topics referring to SEMH was varied. The most used term was 'mental health' (Long, Zucca, & Sweeting, 2021; Ng-Knight et al., 2019; Oldfield, Humphrey and Hebron, 2016; Rothon et al., 2011). This is in keeping with various government policies and documentation that have been published using the term 'mental health', who describe it as a critical area for public health policy (World Health Organisation, 2013; House of Commons, 2019). However, it could be considered that the term 'mental health' has connotations with the medical model of describing these needs (Carr et al., 2023). As well as this, the term 'mental health' without the addition of 'social emotional' does not necessarily encapsulate the wider contextual factors such as social difficulties and other dynamics at play when thinking about these kinds of needs. Interestingly, the studies which used the term 'mental health' are the studies which did not include a rationale regarding their chosen terminology, as others did. This suggests that the term 'mental health' is one of the most widely accepted and could be viewed as the 'status quo' of the current time, in the UK.

### *'Well-being'*

Other papers used the term 'well-being' or something similar such as 'subjective well-being' or 'social emotional wellbeing'. These papers seemed to be focused on approaching SEMH needs from a positive psychology viewpoint. Garcia-Moya et al. (2015) explained their use of the term 'subjective wellbeing' as an effort to adopt a positive paradigm to explore adolescent health and development. In their study, they specifically focused on the 'health asset framework' (Morgan et al., 2010). They noted that the World Health Organisation (2014) expresses wellbeing as a further elaboration of its definition of mental health as one in which 'the individual realises his or her own abilities, can cope with the normal stresses of life, can work productively and fruitfully, and is able to make a contribution to his or her community (Herman et al., 2005, p.2). Garcia-Moya et al. (2015) stated that, in the context of their study, subjective wellbeing at the individual level is about personally feeling good and functioning well. Garcia-Moya et al. (2015) reference to the 'subjective' nature of wellbeing and their consideration of an individual's sense of what life satisfaction is lends itself to a more relativist ontology, as it indicates a belief that reality is finite, subjective experience. However, interestingly, this does not appear to be the approach that they took in their study as they employed quantitative methods of analysis.

Similarly to Garcia-Moya et al.(2015), Houlston, Smith & Jessel (2011) described applying a 'positive and holistic approach' to their research, and alluded to how this linked with their chosen term 'mental wellbeing'. Butler et al., did not discuss their rationale for the use of the phrase 'mental wellbeing' and, although they used this term in their title and research question, they used a variety of terms interchangeably throughout the rest of the paper. For example, they refer to 'mental health', 'mental disorders' and 'mental illness' at various times throughout.

### *'SEBD'*

In the study by Visser & Dubsky (2009), the phrase "SEBD" (Social, Emotional, and Behavioural Difficulties) was utilised (2009). This is most likely a result of the study's publication date and the political environment of the time. For instance, terminology like SEBD, BESD (Behaviour Emotional Social Difficulties), and EBD (Emotional & Behavioural Difficulties) were often used when this study was published in 2009. However, in 2014, when the SEND CoP 2014 reform took place, the abbreviation 'SEMH' was introduced. At this time, the word 'behaviour' was omitted as it was more widely acknowledged that behaviour is only ever a way of communicating something more significant. Moreover, "mental health" was included in the new acronym, reflecting the growing



attention on tackling issues which have an impact on the mental health of CYP.

The numerous terminologies associated with SEMH were included in this literature review in order to provide a thorough response to the literature review question and take into account all pertinent literature. In the current study, the author will group the aforementioned terms under the general term SEMH. This was deemed suitable since the study's target group had special educational needs that are comparable to those described in the literature.

Although the current study does not intend to categorise or label CYP, it is hoped that the use of educational language such as 'SEMH needs' helps to promote a degree of mutual understanding. This is particularly helpful as the language used in relation to CYP with SEMH needs appears to be so inconsistent and subjective (Caslin, 2019).

### *'Relationships'*

There is also a range of language used to describe the type of relationship in which the studies are focused. For example, many took a similar stance to the current study and used the word 'relationship' (Butler et al., 2022, Long, Zucca & Sweeting, 2021; Oldfield, Humphrey

& Hebron, 2016; Pomeroy, 1999). A few of those added words to the term such as 'supportive relationships' (Butler et al., 2022) or 'attachment relationships' (Oldfield, Humphrey & Hebron, 2016). Other research used the term 'connectedness' (Oldfield, Humphrey & Hebron, 2016, Garcia-Moya et al., (2015). Some were more specific in their focus, and this was reflected in the terms used. For example, Houlston, Smith & Jessel and Rothon et al., explored bullying relationships, Ng-Knight et al., (2019) specifically focused on best friends and Visser & Dubsky (2009) focused on peer attitudes towards students with SEBD needs. Much of the terminology used to describe the relationships being explored within this literature could be perceived as lending itself a predetermined view or aim of the researcher. For example, exploring 'supportive relationships' suggests that the predominant feature of the participant's school relationships is support. For the current study, the researcher took the decision to include, where possible, neutral language within the research question. In doing this, the intention was to avoid having an influence on the outcome of the data gathered. For example, if the researcher was to ask a question regarding 'supportive relationships in schools' the participants are likely to discuss those rather than naturally speaking about those most poignant (positive or negative) in their school life at that moment. Similarly, if the research question

featured the word 'bullying' the participant would likely be inclined to discuss relationships with bullies in the school.

Overall, there was a wide variety of language used throughout the literature. At times, it varied in relation to the specific focus of the research and in some circumstances, it was intentionally chosen to correspond with a certain viewpoint such as positive psychology.

Additionally, the variation in terms used throughout, demonstrated the significant influence that politics, specifically government guidance and policy, has on the language used throughout the literature. For clarity and coherence of this literature review, where 'social emotional mental health' is used in the subsequent themes, it refers to an umbrella term that encompasses the terminology used in the literature that links to CYP with a wide range of needs. Generally, these CYP have difficulties expressing and managing their emotions and behaviours, have difficulties developing positive relationships, or there are concerns about their mental health. More specific aspects of SEMH needs will now be discussed.

### **Type of SEMH need**

While all studies discussed CYP in relation to SEMH of some form, some of them focused on specific areas of need or diagnoses. The majority of the studies looked in to 'mental wellbeing' in a general population of students, to examine relationships between different factors, rather than purposively sampling participants who have a recognised SEMH need (Butler et al., 2022; Long, Zucca & Sweeting, 2021; Ng-Knight et al., 2019; Oldfield, Humphrey & Hebron, 2016; Garcia-Moya et al., 2015). For this, they used tools such as the 'Warwick Edinburgh Wellbeing Scale', 'Stirling Children's Wellbeing Scale' (Butler, et al., 2022), 'General Health Questionnaire' (Long, Zucca & Sweeting, 2021), the 'Kidscreen Index' and the 'Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire' (Ng-Knight et al., 2019; Oldfield, Humphrey & Hebron, 2016) which measure general emotional wellbeing or psychological distress. As a result of this, there is a lack of research which provides more in-depth, contextual analysis, for example, the nature of the difficulties experienced by the participants whose scores indicates that they were experiencing psychological distress.

Visser & Dubsky (2009) conducted the only study within this review which chose to explore the relationships between peers and those with a recognised need or 'label'. Within their research, they used case studies and asked their participants (CYP) to rate their attitudes and feelings

regarding different behaviours in the classroom. Within the case studies, Visser & Dubsky (2009, p. 318) explained how they included children with “aspects of Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) and Aspergers”. They used the participant’s responses to these to explore their attitude and consequent relationship to the students who have these needs.

Some studies chose to focus on a specific issues surrounding relationships in school such as bullying (Houlston, Smith & Jessel, 2011; Rothon et al., 2011) or exclusion (Pomeroy, 1999). Rothon et al., (2011) explored the experiences of victims of bullying, asking questions about this particularly negative aspect of their relationships in school and the impact on their mental health. Pomeroy (1999) sought insights regarding teacher student relationships, from students who had been excluded. Although the study failed to include much context including the reason behind the exclusion, given the statistics around disproportionate exclusion rates for students with SEMH needs (Department for Education, 2021; Ferguson; 2021), it might be reasonable to assume that most, if not all, students that are excluded (like the participants in Pomeroy, 1999 study) could be classed as having needs relating to SEMH. However, while the study took a fairly unique, qualitative approach, it failed to gather contextual information relating to the specific

type of need of the students. It may have been useful to gather information regarding the participant's special educational needs and try to understand what their specific difficulties in school looked like, while considering how their relationships helped or hindered them.

Additionally, it may have been interesting to hear from students who had previously been at risk of being excluded, to explore factors that supported them to maintain in school (such as positive relationships, perhaps).

In summary, most of the literature focused on overall wellbeing or general psychological distress. However, a few studies did explore relationships for CYP with specific types of SEMH like the victims of bullying or excluded students (Rothon et al., 2011; Houlston, Smith & Jessel, 2011). This review reveals a paucity of research which explores the relationships of students with more specific needs such as those with anxiety, Autistic Spectrum Disorder (ASD) or Emotionally Based School Avoidance (EBSA), particularly as there are so many children being identified as having these needs at the current time in school (O'Hagan et al., 2022). The approach used in the present study aims to take in to account the complexities of SEMH needs when exploring CYP relationships in school. For example, through using a semi structured interview and IPA approach, it is hoped that this will maximise the

participants opportunities to discuss overlapping SEMH needs rather than just in the context of one diagnosis or need.

## **Gender**

The literature regarding relationships and SEMH demonstrates general differences in the way boys and girls perceive and make use of relationships in school. For example, research suggests that girls are more likely to have close friendships and use their peers for emotional support (Houlston, Smith & Jessel, 2011; Humphrey & Hebron, 2016). As well as this, correlations between factors affecting mental health appear to differ between the genders. Aside from Pomeroy, 1999, the rest of the literature explored gender as a covariate in their data analysis. Butler, et al., (2022); Long, Zucca & Sweeting, (2021) found that females reported lower overall mental wellbeing, regardless of their relationships. Ng-Knight et al., 2019 found that girls were more likely to have better quality best friends than boys but were also more likely to have emotional problems at baseline and follow up. As well as this, boys were more much likely to have conduct problems at baseline and follow up. This fits with what is generally found in the literature regarding how boys often present with externalising behaviours and girls seem more likely to engage in internalising behaviours (Leadbeater et al., 1999; Plenty et al., 2021). This pattern was also reflected in Oldfield,

Humphrey & Hebron (2016) study, who found that boys were significantly more likely to exhibit conduct problems and girls more likely to exhibit prosocial behaviours. Additionally, Oldfield, Humphrey & Hebron (2016) found that girls were more likely to have stronger peer attachment. In Houlston, Smith & Jessel (2011) study, gender was a significant predictor of perceived close friend and general peer support, meaning that girls were more inclined to view their relationships with peers and friends in school as having a supportive function.

Visser & Dubsky (2009) discussed gender differences in relation to how CYP perceive students with SEBD needs and the impact of an intervention to teach students about different types of SEBD and how they present. They measured how 'accepting' students were of different behaviours by asking questions such as who the participant would and wouldn't like to work with and the extent to which they feel they would 'fit in' to their school (from a range of case studies with different types of SEBD needs and associated behaviours). Gender was considered as a variable as they noted previous research which suggested that behaviours related to SEMH needs are far less accepted in girls than boys (Callahan & Talbott, 1997). Contrary to previous research, Visser & Dubsky (2009) found no notable gender difference in relation to attitudes towards behaviours that could be associated with SEMH. However, they



did find that students were generally not accepting of students with SEMH needs. Additionally, their findings suggested that children who exhibit negative externalising behaviours (e.g. shouting, throwing things, threatening people) were more likely to be rejected by peers than those whose needs were more internalised (e.g. selective mute, shy, low mood, anxiety).

Although Visser & Dubsky (2009) yielded some interesting findings, the age of this research, as well as much of the research around gender differences and SEN, is noted as a caveat. It would be interesting to replicate their study with today's population of children, to see if attitudes have changed, particularly in the context of the SEN reform and the idea of inclusivity in the classroom being promoted more than ever (Juvonen et al., 2019).

Rothon et al. (2011) explored gender differences between the impact of bullying in relation to a range of things including mental health.

Interestingly, they found bullying had more of a negative impact on the mental health of boys than of girls. For girls, bullying had a stronger impact on factors such as their academic achievement. When discussing possible explanations for this finding, Rothon drew on previous research which has suggested that girls may be more likely to seek help than boys or demonstrate conflict resolution strategies (Feldman & Gowan,

1998; Osterman et al., 1997) which may mean that bullying is sometimes resolved before it impacts significantly on their mental health. It may be that the academic achievement is compromised as they spend more energy trying to resolve the situation or seeking support from others. However, the causal direction of these findings cannot be determined, and possible reasons can only be speculative. With this in mind, further research into this area would be beneficial.

In Garcia-Moya et al. (2015) study, the positive effect of teacher connectedness on subjective emotional wellbeing appeared to operate regardless of gender, with negligible differences between the boys and girls.

Pomeroy (1999) did not discuss gender differences when reporting the accounts from excluded students. However, they did report that their sample (10 females and 23 males) featured an over representation of females, when compared to the general population of excluded students. As well as this, much of the research included in their literature review was conducted with excluded male students, indicating that, in the past, research exploring the views of excluded females may have been marginal.

The findings from these studies generally fit with the wider research around women and mental health, particularly where girls were found to report having lower overall emotional wellbeing. Additionally, the literature suggests that there have been instances where information surrounding the experiences of girls has been lacking, due to girl's tendency to internalise their feelings and 'fly under the radar'. This provides further backing for research seeking insight from the young women themselves. Furthermore, Smith (2015) suggested that, if research is to understand the lived experience of participants, an IPA approach is key. As such, this approach is missing from the literature when exploring the experiences of secondary aged girls with SEMH needs and their relationships in school.

### **Relationships and different stages of development**

The studies had samples from a range of ages and it was felt useful to note what the research says about relationships at the various points in adolescent development. The youngest participants within the literature being reviewed were aged 8 and the eldest were aged 16.

Ng-Knight et al.,(2019), Houlston, Smith & Jessel (2011) and Visser & Dubsky (2009) had samples of participants on the youngest side of the spectrum. Ng-Knight et al.,, 2019 focused on a specific and poignant

time in an a CYP's life, the transition to secondary school. In order to explore this, they gave questionnaires to participants at age 11, towards the end of year 6 and then a year later at age 12, towards the end of year 7. They explored how the stability of potentially protective factors such as a best friend could impact the outcomes for CYP as they developed into adolescence. In their longitudinal study, they found that friendship stability was not associated with better mental health outcomes, however it was associated with less 'conduct problems' and better academic achievement at the end of the first year at secondary school. Further, when they applied broader measures of friendship quality and stability such as the CYP's top three friends, they found an interaction between friendship quality and stability such that maintaining a greater number of lower quality friendships was associated with increased emotional problems. Houlston & Jessel (2011) study also gathered their data from participants who were in year 7. They focused on the impact of a bullying intervention. Similarly to Ng-Knight et al., (2019), Houlston, Smith & Jessel (2011) acknowledged the transition to secondary school as a poignant time in a young person's life and having particular relevance to their emotional wellbeing. The participants in this study were already enrolled in a peer support scheme and most of them had been identified as needing additional support with the transition to secondary school by their primary schools. Thus, providing rationale for

why this research used students in year 7 to focus their research. Visser & Dubsky (2009) explored attitudes to SEBD in a mainstream secondary school. Again, their participants were in year 7. Visser & Dubsky (2009) stated that year 7's (11-12 year olds) in particular were chosen because it was considered that they were less likely to have entrenched attitudes born out of five years attendance at the school. Through the use of pre and post questionnaires, their study found that students at this age would be unhappy to be in a class with a peer displaying externalised or internalised behaviours despite intervention to try provide students with knowledge and understanding of why behaviours occur. Further, it is suggested that, in order for more positive lasting change to occur, a similar intervention would have to be continued throughout the year groups and embedded into the school culture.

Long, Zucca & Sweeting (2021) and Pomeroy (1999) both conducted their research with 15- and 16-year-olds. Similarly to Ng-Knight et al., (2019), Houlston, Smith & Jessel (2011) and Visser & Dubsky (2009) also focused in on a small age range for their participants. However, these participants were some of the oldest in the school, at 15 and 16 years old. Long, Zucca & Sweeting (2021) used a social ecological approach to investigate peer relationship and school climate factors associated with adolescent mental health. In keeping with the age of

their participants, Long, Zucca & Sweeting (2021) explored variables particularly pertinent to that age range of students, including exams stress. They found that those who perceived their school to be inclusive were more protected against the negative impact of exam stress of their mental health. However, some of their findings contrasted with theoretical perspectives relating to resilience and social support. For example, they also found that, for the 15–16-year-olds in this sample, peer support, peer popularity, and friendship network size were not significantly related to mental health outcomes.

Pomeroy (1999) also conducted their research with participants aged between 15-16 years old. Pomeroy's study sought to gain insights regarding to the experiences of excluded students, particularly in relation to the student-teacher relationship. Although they did not explicitly include a rationale for choosing this age range, it could be considered that this age range is more likely to be excluded than younger year groups as a result of cumulative factors leading to their exclusion that have built up through their years being at the school. As well as this, being in year 10 or 11 means that they will have had many years of school experience prior to being excluded that they are able to draw from. Interestingly, in this study, the young people expressed that the student-teacher relationship should change as the students reach their

final years of schooling, to one in which their 'non-child status' was acknowledged. The students described an ideal teacher-student relationship as one in which teachers communicated 'caring' without inadvertently 'parenting' them. The students in this study repeatedly demonstrated a preference for teachers who knew them, talked to them, would explain things to them and would listen to them.

The final four papers (Butler, et al. (2022), Oldfield, Humphrey & Hebron (2016), Rotheron et al. (2011) and Pomeroy (1999) included a wide range of ages in their samples. It was noted that the studies which included a range of ages tended to have a larger proportion of younger participants. For example, Butler, et al. (2022), included 22 primary schools and only 5 secondary schools. This pattern mirrors the issues faced in the present study (explored in more detail in the discussion chapter) as the researcher found it difficult to engage secondary schools during the recruitment process. This indicates potential challenges and perhaps a lack of representation across the literature when it comes to gaining perspectives from certain pockets of students, particularly those in the latter years of secondary school, when compared with primary school and year 7 students. Unfortunately, none of the studies compared differences between ages in relation to their specific independent variables. This could have provided useful information, given the ideas

around significant changes in relation to relationship dynamics across these ages. This also would have been particularly interesting for studies such as Butler, et al. and Oldfield, Humphrey & Hebron, who explored the contributing role of family, school and peer supportive relationships and attachment on mental wellbeing, as it could well have changed among different age groups. For instance, with students seeking different things from their relationships at different stages in their development. In Butler et al.'s study, the participants were between ages of 8-15, in the context of what is known about the cognitive developments that occur between those ages, comparisons of findings with age considered could have been fascinating.

## **Interventions**

It felt particularly important to note the implications derived from the literature at hand, particularly in relation to what it says about potential interventions surrounding relationships and SEMH needs. Throughout the literature, a range of implications and subsequent interventions were suggested, many of which were considered very relevant to the work of Educational Psychologists. These included training, changes to



procedures and policies, specific peer support schemes and some more universal, whole school approaches.

All the studies felt that intervention to support students in establishing positive, trusting relationships amongst peers was important. However, some felt it should be more of a priority than others.

Butler et al. (2022) found that cumulative supportive relationships from peers, family and school provided the optimum protective effect on mental wellbeing. However, when they examined specific combinations of support, the importance of peer support was highlighted. They found that high peer support had an equivalent impact of two other protective factors (family support and school adult support) on mental wellbeing. With this considered, they make recommendations school-based peer support interventions. They state that their research indicates that certain interventions to increase peer support would be effective in strengthening resilience and protecting against mental health problems. However, it could be argued that this study took an overly simplistic view of complex phenomena. For example, when they were exploring the relationship between mental wellbeing and protective factors, they did not collect data around things which may have led to variation in responses, such as levels of deprivation, cultural differences, or past

experiences of participants. Additionally, Butler et al. (2022) acknowledged that while they controlled for age and gender in their analysis, this may have obscured potential differences in the impact of different sources of support on mental wellbeing depending on the developmental stage of the child (e.g. middle childhood vs. adolescence) and gender. Butler et al.'s study did not lend itself to exploring those factors and is an important area for future research.

Long, Zucca & Sweeting (2021) and Rethon et al. (2011) suggest that, although supportive relationships are a protective factor against mental health difficulties, they alone, are not enough to fully protect against the powerful negative impact of peer victimization. Therefore, they promote the idea of targeting healthy peer relationships, for example, through socio-emotional learning modules. Additionally, they suggest a focus on combatting negative peer experiences in a preventative approach to mental health difficulties. They suggest various ways in which this could be done such as by developing more rigid school policies and skilling other students up in order to prevent bystander effects. Additionally, they suggest things to improve school climate, particularly around times of potential high stress for students such as exam periods. Strategies such as strengthening student-teacher connectedness was thought to alleviate stress of students in high pressure academic environments.

They also suggested that incorporating inclusivity through things like diversity training to increase emotional wellbeing of students.

Ng-Knight et al.,(2019) suggested that, during the transition to secondary school, changing procedures could be useful in supporting the SEMH outcomes of students. In line with this, they claim that their study produces preliminary evidence to suggest that procedural amendments may aid prevention of mental health problems in children. Specifically, incorporating children's friendship preferences into the configuration of their secondary school form groups may increase best friend stability, which, in turn, was found to be associated with reduced levels of conduct problems and increased academic attainment.

However, they produced very limited evidence to suggest that this could increase the emotional wellbeing of students and their main finding was that procedures such as this led to increased friendship stability which, some would argue, is to be expected.

Oldfield, Humphrey & Hebron (2016) and Visser & Dubsy (2009) discussed the idea of training as an intervention to support relationships and lead to better SEMH outcomes. Visser & Dubsy (2009) developed a specific education-based training intervention which it delivered to year 7 students. However, after pre and post measures were administered, the impact of this training was minimal. Visser & Dubsy (2009)

acknowledge the disappointing impact of the intervention whilst offering the extent of time at which the follow up was conducted as a caveat.

They suggest that the impact of the intervention may have been stronger if they had administered post measures just 1 term after the intervention had finished, rather than 2. Nonetheless, they suggest that their findings emphasise the importance of a sustained programme of training for a change in perceptions around SEBD to occur. They propose that schools should develop their inclusive practices by providing a core curriculum around SEBD in which knowledge and understanding of why behaviours occur can be instilled in students. Oldfield, Humphrey & Hebron (2016) describe intervention and training strategies in an even more defined way, they suggest that intervention strategies should be tailored to specific areas.

Oldfield, Humphrey & Hebron (2016) suggest attempts should be made to provide parents with the tools needed to enable them to provide more effective support for their child. As well as this, they state that schools should therefore encourage strong peer relationships by promoting group work, cooperative working, peer tutoring, and activities that involve students working together. Interventions such as Promoting Alternative Thinking Strategies (PATHS) were suggested as being potentially beneficial in this regard.

Houlston, Smith & Jessel (2011) and Pomeroy (1999) suggest the importance of strengthening the relationships of specific vulnerable groups. For example, through peer support schemes or through setting aside specific time in the day to build on certain teacher relationships. Garcia-Moya et al. (2015) suggest that it would be beneficial for schools to provide opportunities to build on connectedness with students by incorporating within-school activities not focused on academic work to strengthen teacher-student relationships. They go on to explain that this is particularly important for those at higher risk of disengaging with teachers, for example low achievers. Similarly, from the findings gained in their qualitative study regarding insight from excluded students about their relationships with teachers, Pomeroy (1999) have developed a model on 'Ideal student-teacher relations' based on what the students reported.

### Critical Appraisal

The literature will now be considered in relation to the methodological aspects and associated strengths and limitations. Ideas regarding areas lacking and additions which the author feels would have added value will also be discussed.

## *Aims and Design*

The majority of the studies were quantitative in nature and aimed to measure the association between SEMH of some sort (wellbeing, mental health, emotional or conduct problems) and various factors in school related to relationships (Butler, et al. 2022; Long, Zucca & Sweeting 2021; Ng-Knight et al., 2019; Oldfield, Humphrey & Hebron 2016; Houlston, Smith & Jessel 2011; Rotheron et al. 2011; Garcia-Moya et al. 2015)

Contrastingly, Pomeroy (1999) addressed the research question in a different way, and aimed to explore the perceptions or experiences from a homogenous group of participants in a more qualitative approach. Visser & Dubsky (2009) aimed to do both and used a mixed methods approach which included questionnaires with Likert scales and more open-ended questions to provide more rich data.

Many of the studies featured a cross-sectional or correlational designs. As a result, causal relationships could not be determined and this limits the extent to which findings can be interpreted and conclusions drawn. This was frequently acknowledged by the researchers. For example, Butler, et al. (2022) found that there were associations between different sources of support and mental wellbeing for the CYP in their study.

However, the cross-sectional study design prevents determination of the direction of the relationship. Therefore, from their findings, it cannot be assumed that CYP have lower mental wellbeing because of having less support from peers, family and school. It could be that those CYP who already have lower mental wellbeing find it more difficult to form supportive relationships with those people or even just perceive having less support from those around them. Long, Zucca & Sweeting (2021), Ng-Knight et al., (2019), Oldfield, Humphrey & Hebron (2016), Houlston, Smith & Jessel (2011), Garcia-Moya et al. (2015) used similar designs with the same limitations.

Ng-Knight et al., (2019) research aimed to examine changes in mental health and school attainment over time, while taking friendship quality and stability into account. To achieve this, they used a prospective longitudinal design. The study is innovative in its attempt to look at this relationship at a prominent time in a young person's life, the transition to secondary school. However, a limitation of using a prospective longitudinal study is that it is impossible to predict how many participants will be present at follow up. In Ng-Knight et al., (2019) study, they had 157 children out of 750 who did not return for follow up for various reasons including attending a different secondary school than planned or being absent on the day of follow up. However, the follow up sample

was actually larger than the baseline sample, which indicates that there was lots of variation in participants from baseline to follow up. This limits the validity of the findings as they are in fact following a different child over time than the child that completed the questionnaire at baseline.

Similarly to Ng-Knight et al., (2019), Rothon et al. (2011) used a longitudinal design and followed students up 2 years later. Of the original 2790 participants, there were 2093 who completed follow up. This means that 697 participants did not complete their data. If they had, the data could have looked very different. For example, the researchers state that reasons for not completing the follow up survey included school absence, illness and other school activities. It could be that the absence or illness was linked to the impact of bullying such as significant mental health difficulties or emotionally based school avoidance. Without the data, it is hard to draw conclusions regarding this and the ideas remain speculative. However, this is a limitation that is associated with longitudinal studies such as this one and may have been avoided if a different approach had been used.

Visser & Dubsky (2009) used case studies within their research. They were one of only a few studies within this literature review with a design which could yield more rich qualitative data. The study conducted pre and post measures in relation to an intervention around peer attitudes



towards students with SEBD. After the intervention, the students left feedback comments such 'I will understand why people behave that way' and 'this unit opened my eyes to the smaller things'. However, it could be argued that the use of case studies has limited generalisability to real life. As well as this, the questionnaires left lots of room for students to bias the results. The outcome of the intervention relied on self report from students but it is likely that students would feel more inclined to say more positive things about students with SEBD after they had been involved in the intervention. Whether this would transfer to real life is harder to tell. Value may have been added to this study if they also sought pre and post information via other means, for example, observation or teacher reports. Additionally, the design of the study could have had more ecological validity if participants provided information regarding their attitude towards students they knew in real life, for example members of their class.

Pomeroy (1999) used a qualitative approach to gather in depth information regarding the experiences of students who had been excluded. Although Pomeroy (1999) state that their 'very use of the word 'explore' suggests a methodology without preconstructed theories and hypotheses' they do not expand much further on this. Throughout the paper there is no mention of a specific design approach in which they

used to analyse their qualitative data. This leaves it open to criticism, as the process in which the researcher took to develop findings and avoid (or at least acknowledge) bias within the data has not been made clear.

### *Sampling and participants*

Most of the studies used opportunity sampling to collect their data. For example, through recruiting participants from a whole school within their area. Although this is a convenient way to collect data there are some drawbacks, particularly in relation to sample bias. For example, Butler et al., (2022) targeted whole schools and asked parents/carers to give their permission for their child to take part. After doing this, the study sample only represented 17% of the school's population of students. Further, the researchers did not collect information regarding why students did not take part. Therefore, this sample method could have excluded certain groups of children such as those with less parent support whose parents did not return the permission slips or those who had poorer relationships or had worse mental health and did not wish to participate in a study which explored this. Similarly to Butler et al., (2022), Long, Zucca & Sweeting (2021) did not provide information on those participants who did not take part in the study. Although they had a much higher participation rate of 81% of the school, the lack of information around

those who chose not to take part means it can also be subject to the same scrutiny regarding sample bias.

Contrastingly, Ng-Knight et al., (2019) included detailed information regarding those who did not participate in their study as well as the numbers of participants for each reason given. Providing this transparency, for example, 61 children dropped out due to attending a different school, a clearer picture of the data can be drawn. As well as this, Ng-Knight et al., (2019) made efforts to ensure that their sample was representative of their target population. They used a more systematic sampling method to try to ensure that their sample was broadly representative of the regions secondary schools in terms of pass rates, and proportions of pupils from minority ethnic and economically disadvantaged backgrounds. This is a real strength when considered against the rest of the literature in this review as many of the studies failed to even include information regarding the demographics (e.g., ethnicity or socioeconomic background) of their participants.

The size of the samples also varied greatly. Often this was in keeping with the design of their study., Butler, et al. (2022), Long, Zucca & Sweeting (2021), Rothon et al. (2011) and Garcia-Moya et al. (2015) had large samples, with over 2000 participants. Visser & Dubsky (2009), Houlston, Smith & Jessel (2011), Oldfield, Humphrey & Hebron (2016)

and Ng-Knight et al., (2019) had 100-400 participants. Pomeroy (1999) was the smallest sample size, with only 33 participants. However, as the only qualitative study, a much smaller sample is to be expected. Some studies acknowledged limitations in relation to the size or homogeneity of their sample. Houlston & Jessel (2011) suggested that a larger, more homogenous sample would have been advantageous. However, the nature in which schools deliver peer support initiatives for students who are being bullied is so varied, there are challenges associated with trying to gather a large or more homogenous sample of participants. For example, if the researchers were to attempt to obtain data from a sample of participants in one school or with more homogenous characteristics, the sample size would have likely been too small to analyse in the way they did. This is because Houlston & Jessel (2011) used a hierarchical regression analysis, in which an adequate sample size is important to ensure validity (Keith, 2014)

All participant samples from the studies in this literature review, consisted of school students as this was in keeping with the research question and the subsequent search terms and inclusion criteria. There were no studies which included one, specified gender and so all of them included a combination. The age of participants ranged from around 8 years old to 16 years old. When adults were included in the study, this

was to provide additional information in relation to the research question at hand. For example, to explore the relationships that students had with their teachers or parents.

### *Measures/ Data collection and analysis*

Aside from Pomeroy (1999), all the studies made use of questionnaires as their main method of data collection. Most used pre-existing questionnaires which claim to have been standardised against a similar population and had high levels of construct validity and external reliability. However, some studies such as Butler et al., (2022) used measures which had not been validated for the full age range of the students within their sample. Furthermore, some studies such as Houlston, Smith, & Jessel (2011), Butler et al., (2022) and Garcia-Moya et al., (2015) made adaptations to the questionnaires to suit the purpose of their research. It could be argued that making adaptations to previously standardised questionnaires diminishes any pre-existing validity that could have been claimed from using these measures. Additionally, the data was frequently collected through self-report measures. Data collection of this nature leaves room for bias and adopting a multi-informant approach to data collection may have reduced these effects.

A range of methods were used for analysis of the data including multivariate analysis (Butler et al., 2022; Ng-Knight et al., 2019), logistic regression analysis (Oldfield, Humphrey, & Hebron, 2016), mediational analysis (Houlston, Smith, & Jessel, 2011) hierarchical multiple regression (Visser & Dubsky, 2009), Mentel-Haenszel analysis (Rothon et al., 2011), Cohen's d (Garcia-Moya et al., 2015). All studies provided sound justification for their choice of analysis which was considerate of relevant statistical guidance and indicated why that approach was most appropriate for their individual studies.

#### Key Gaps and Justifications for Current Research

It is important to recognise that children and young people identified as having SEMH needs do not represent as a homogenous population. Their experiences are unique therefore the views synthesised in the literature are unlikely to reflect every child and young person's experience who is assigned a label of SEMH. The impact of different factors being explored and the experiences of CYP will be affected by a range of factors including social and environmental factors. However, much of the time within the literature reviewed, the simplistic, quantitative design of the studies meant that potentially important contextual factors were unknown. Tying the previous two points together, there is a gap in the existing literature, in which direct insight is

gained from adolescent girls, regarding how they experience their relationships in school and how this interacts with factors relating to their social, emotional, and mental health. Research which enables young women to provide open accounts of their experiences and the relationships they find meaningful, that is not led or influenced by an overly structured research design or quantifiable hypothesis, would be a valuable addition to the literature. Hence, this study's research question: How do secondary age girls with SEMH needs describe and make sense of their relationships in school?

## **Methodology**

### Chapter Overview

This chapter will discuss the rationale for the methodological approach chosen to address the research question:

*How do secondary age girls with SEMH needs describe and make sense of their relationships in school?*

It will discuss the ontological and epistemological positions underpinning this study as well as the corresponding data analysis approach. It will also explain the steps followed to recruit participants and collect and analyse the data. Participant information will be provided, and the procedural aspects of the study will be carefully considered and evaluated against other potential approaches. Finally, this section will include reflections on issues relating to ethics, quality and validity, which may have impacted the research.

Ontology and Epistemology

*Constructivism and Relativism*

Various perspectives about the nature of knowledge and truth exist, as such, there are different methodologies which relate to them. The ontological and epistemological views held by the researcher are important to discuss as they provide rationale for the approaches and procedures followed in this study.

Ontology relates to the underlying belief system and philosophical assumptions about the nature of being and reality. It is concerned with



the nature of existence and the structure of reality (Crotty, 1998).

Philosophical assumptions about the nature of reality are crucial to understanding how to make meaning of the data that is gathered.

Similarly, Snape & Spencer, 2003, define ontology as the nature of the world and what we can know about it. Thus, one must consider what it is possible to know about the world in order to make sense of research.

This research takes a relativist position as it assumes that there are many truths and therefore reality depends on the viewpoint of the observer, or by individuals living in it (Robson & McCartan, 2016). Within the context of this research, reality is accepted to be the experience of the participants that were interviewed. It is also acknowledged that the researcher brought their own sense of 'reality', hence, there are multiple truths.

Epistemology is used to describe how we come to know about the truth or reality. It considers the study of knowledge and how knowledge can be obtained (Heaviside, 2017). Constructivism is based upon the principle that an individual's understanding is based on their life and that their life and experiences affect the meanings that they ascribe (Creswell, 2009). Individuals construct their own meanings of the world through interactions between their existing beliefs and experiences Ültanir (2012).

This research does not claim to gather universal facts or information that applies to all girls with SEMH needs, rather, it explores the personal perspectives of the individuals that were interviewed. This research took on a constructivist stance which aimed to understand a phenomenon through 'participants and their subjective views' (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2007). This is in keeping with the research question 'How do secondary age girls with SEMH needs describe and make sense of their relationships in school?'

## Overview of IPA

The ontological and epistemological positions of the researcher directly influenced the analysis method that is used in the research. In line with a relativist, constructivist stance, the researcher chose to analyse the data through Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA). The following section includes an introduction to IPA, its theoretical underpinnings, and outlines how it appropriately fits with the research question.

### *Introduction to IPA*

IPA was first introduced as distinctive research method in psychology in the mid-1990's, as a way to enable researchers to capture the qualitative and experiential dimension of psychological research. At this time, Smith

(1996) argued that psychology could and should be both experimental and experiential. IPA is a qualitative approach to data analysis which aims to provide detailed examinations of personal lived experience (Smith & Osborn, 2015). IPA draws on ideas from phenomenology, hermeneutics and on engagement with subjective experience and personal accounts. IPA is also concerned with how meanings are constructed by individuals within both their social and personal world. IPA shares the views that human beings are sense-making creatures, and therefore the accounts which participants provide will reflect their attempts to make sense of their experience. With these principles at the forefront, IPA is an approach which explores the experiences of a small number of participants in rich detail (Smith et al., 2009).

Phenomenological and hermeneutic approaches, including IPA, are regularly used in health and wellbeing research as they are concerned with the experiential and interpretative realities of the participants themselves (e.g., Smith & Osborn, 2007). IPA is seen by many as the most 'participant-oriented' qualitative research approach; a research approach that shows respect and sensitivity to the 'lived experiences' of the research participants (Alase, 2017). Typically, IPA involves collecting qualitative data from a reasonably homogenous group who share a certain contextual perspective on a given experience (for example, adolescent girls with special educational needs that relate to their social,

emotional and mental health). Accordingly, Smith, Flowers and Larkin state “we ask questions about people’s understandings, experiences and sense-making activities, and we situate these questions within specific contexts, rather than between them” (2009 p. 48). It is intended that this provides an in-depth view of a specific experience from a personal perspective. It aims to illuminate people’s relationship to their life and world.

In summary, IPA considers the data as a reflection of individual experiences and perspectives on a particular phenomenon. Therefore, it has a small sample size and findings that are not generalisable. Rather, it aims to provide rich insight into the lived experience of a particular group in a specific and unique context. The rationale for choosing IPA for this research is that it aims to explore the experiences of secondary age girls with SEMH needs and their relationships in school. This is an under-researched area, therefore an exploratory approach feels appropriate. IPA provides the opportunity for participants to speak freely and openly about their experiences. Additionally, IPA fits well with the epistemological and ontological positions of this research. Through exploring and interpreting the girl’s views in this way, it allows for a constructivist approach which considers that the individuals’ experience of their relationships in school may be based on their own previous

experiences, as well as what the researcher subjectively brings to the data. Furthermore, this method complements a relativist perspective that multiple realities exist around the phenomena.

### *Theoretical Underpinnings of IPA*

This section of the methodology will focus on the theoretical underpinnings of IPA and the ways in which it draws upon these theoretical approaches to inform its distinctive epistemological framework. The three main theoretical ideas discussed will be phenomenology, hermeneutics, and ideography.

### *Phenomenology*

Phenomenology is the study of human experience and of the ways things present themselves to us in and through such experience (Sokolowski, 2002). It focuses on the description of the common meaning for several individuals of their lived experiences of a concept or phenomenon. Phenomenologists believe that the pure meaning of a phenomenon can only be understood subjectively and intuitively. Smith et al. defined it as “the study of structures of consciousness as experienced from the first-person point of view” (2009, p.21). The concept of phenomenology originated from Husserl, who was concerned with the study of experience. Heidegger, Sartre and Ponty also played a

key role in the development of ideas around phenomenology. The phenomenological philosophy explores what is it like to be human in our lived world. Phenomenologists are also interested in how we develop our understanding of individuals' experiences of the world. They believe that knowledge and understanding are embedded in our everyday world. In line with this, they do not believe that knowledge can be quantified or reduced to numbers or statistics. Husserl argued that, to examine human experience, the individual experiences need to be examined with careful consideration.

Smith et al., state that phenomenology provides IPA with a rich source of ideas about how to examine and comprehend lived experience (2009). Smith et al., go on to explain that humans have a tendency to categorise ideas in to pre-existing constructs. However, to be phenomenological, one needs to remove themselves from the tendency to do so, they must notice and reflect on the each aspect of an experience. Husserl developed a method of separating the pre-existing constructs and "taken-for-granted experiences" in a process he called 'bracketing'. In a series of methodological steps called 'reductions', an understanding of the root of a phenomenon can be obtained (Oxley, 2016). In phenomenology, the role of the researcher is to 'bracket' assumptions and usual ways of perceiving. Thus, pure phenomenological research

seeks essentially to describe rather than explain, and to start from a perspective free from hypotheses or preconceptions (Husserl 1970).

### *Hermeneutics*

Hermeneutics comes from the Greek word 'interpretation'. Heidegger developed Husserl's ideas around phenomenology further and argued that a removal of oneself (bracketing) from an inner world is not possible as humans are always related to the world (Smith et al., 2009). In line with this argument, hermeneutics is concerned with the interpretation of a phenomenon with an emphasis on contextual meaning (Oxley, 2016). It is concerned with the way humans derive meaning from language, whether written, spoken or through other symbolic expression. To clarify the connection between the researcher's and the participant's interpretation of the phenomenon, IPA research uses the idea of double hermeneutics. As well as Heidegger, philosophers like Scheieermacher and Gadamer have added to ideas around hermeneutics.

Scheieermacher suggested that each individual has a unique way of expressing themselves which gives an insight to their world (Smith et al., 2009). According to Scheieermacher, a person's language use and the meaning they want to transmit through their words depend on the cultural context in which they are positioned (Smith et al., 2009).

Therefore, when analysing the participant's responses, researchers must

consider their cultural context. Additionally, in IPA methodology, the researcher seeks to go further than describing the experience of participants. As suggested by Heidegger, it seeks to interpret the participants words and their meaning. Through this interpretation, the researcher is drawing on their own prior knowledge to interpret the participant's words (Smith et al., 2009). Although Heidegger believed that priority should be given to new experience (such as the participants words during interview) he acknowledged that previous knowledge can not be fully discounted.

In practice, this means that the notion of 'bracketing' should be aimed towards but the researcher's relation to the phenomena being explored should be considered. Tuffour suggested that the IPA research process can be understood through the concept of a 'hermeneutic circle' (2017). The hermeneutic circle considers the relationship between the whole, and the parts which make up the whole. As such, it is thought that the parts which make up the whole can only be understood in relation to the whole and vice versa (Smith et al., 2009). In the context of this research study, the researcher aimed to focus on the linguistic analysis, descriptive analysis, and conceptual analysis (see appendix D1 for initial comments on the transcript that have been coded as either conceptual, descriptive or linguistic).



Additionally, the researcher utilised reflexivity as a tool to record their own feelings, explore preconceptions and accept their role in the interpretations. The researcher's reflexivity is included later in this chapter as well as in a research diary (see appendix F1).

### *Idiography*

IPA is concerned with the experiences of individuals rather than attempting to make generalisations about groups or populations (Oxley, 2016). In line with this, it utilises detailed and in-depth analysis which is systemic and thorough. It typically involves small, homogenous samples of participants. To answer the research question of 'How do secondary age girls with SEMH needs describe and make sense of their relationships in school?' in an ideographic way, a sample of three participants were selected and interviewed at length to gather a rich, detailed picture of their individual experience.

### *Theoretical Underpinnings of IPA in this research*

IPA and its theoretical underpinnings are complementary to this research. This is because the research aims to explore the lived experience of girls with SEMH needs, attending secondary school. The research fits within a national context of SEMH needs rising, specifically amongst this group of young people, who are all experiencing a

particular phenomenon. The sample size is small and aims to gather in depth perspective from individual students, without seeking to generalise the data to whole populations. Therefore, it is ideographic. As well as this, the topic encompasses analysis of experience which involves complex interplay between individuals, their relationships, their environment, and the wider systems. As well as this, there are characteristics and experiences that the researcher shares with the participants, for example, gender and experience of attending secondary school. Thus, hermeneutic aspect of IPA is also relevant and key to this study.

### Critique of IPA

Willig (2013) discuss several conceptual and practical limitations of IPA. These relate to the role of language, the suitability of accounts, and explanation versus description.

#### *The role of language*

Willig's main criticism around the role of language in IPA is its function (2013). In their chapter, they argue that language serves to construct

reality rather than describe it. They question the validity of assuming that participants can use language as a tool to fully capture and represent their experience. Phenomenological research approaches like IPA are interested in exploring the actual experience itself, they argue that the use of data collection methods like language could impact the data. As such, Willig argues that “the words we choose to describe a particular experience always construct a particular version of that experience. The same event can be described in many different ways.” (2013 p.94). This perspective suggests that the words people choose to use to describe the experience add a new layer of meaning and therefore, direct access to someone else’s experience is impossible. With this argument in mind, data collected via language such as an interview transcript, tells us more about the way someone talks about an experience within a particular context rather than about the experience itself. Further, it is considered that the availability of a particular language when talking about an issue influences the choice of what is brought up. Therefore, language could be said to be shaping the experience, rather than reporting on it. Willig (2013), argues that language precedes and therefore shapes experience. It does not constitute the means by which we express something we think or feel, it prescribes what we can think and feel. In summary, IPA is criticised for not engaging sufficiently with its role to determine the way things are and derive insight from phenomenon.

A counter argument to this critique is that an IPA researcher acknowledges this issue and emphasises the importance of steering away from drawing assumptions from the data. As well as this, meaning is sought by delving deeper and asking probing questions to encourage the participant to elaborate on their responses. Additionally, by 'bracketing' off preconceptions, it is hoped that assumptions drawn from the language used are minimised. An additional response to this point of criticism is the acknowledgement that people can only use the tools they have (including language) to give meaning to their experiences (Smith et al., 2009; Heidegger, 1962).

### *Suitability of accounts*

IPA is concerned with gathering people's experiences of certain phenomenon. For this reason, it is reliant on participants abilities to provide accounts of their experiences. Willig (2013) discusses the limitations that come with relying on people to provide accounts, especially when much of the time, the participants in question are recalling difficult or emotive topics. As well as this, the research relies on participants being able to have the language to articulate their experience. In summary, Willig (2013) questions 'to what extent do

participants accounts constitute suitable material for phenomenological analysis?’

In response to this argument, the researcher regularly comes in to contact with participants in this population and it was thought that this group was generally suitable for an IPA study. Furthermore, in their role as a Trainee Educational Psychologist, the researcher is involved in accessing pupil voice and eliciting views rather than making judgements on the suitability of accounts.

In addition, the researcher employed a ‘draw-talk-draw-talk’ framework, in order to assist the participants in articulating their feelings and experiences (Boden, Larkin & Iyer 2019). As well as this, it could be argued that to not use this approach to explore their experiences, the researcher would have been ignoring a group which is already underrepresented in the literature. Finally, this research approach does not claim to gather data which can be generalised to a whole population. Rather, it aims to explore the unique experiences and expressions of a group of participants in whichever form they wish to share it. Smith et al. (2009 p.8) identify that “access to experience is always dependent on what participants tell us about that experience”. It is the role of the researcher to interpret the account of the phenomenon to form an understanding.

### *Explanation versus description*

Another critique by Willig (2013) is that IPA provides a description of a phenomenon rather than an explanation. IPA aims to explore how people experience their world but cannot make any claims about the world itself. Further, it cannot explain why there are differences among people's experiences. As it cannot provide explanation or determine a cause, Willig has critiqued IPA for its inability to provide understanding of a phenomenon. However, the 'hermeneutic circle' explains that one cannot claim to understand a whole phenomenon without understanding the smaller parts. By exploring the perceptions of individuals who have experienced a particular phenomenon, it provides context for larger, more widespread phenomena. In this respect, IPA provides a fuller understanding of a concept than other types of research. Although the findings from IPA are not generalisable and cannot determine cause, Smith et al. suggest that there is potential for theoretical transferability where "the reader makes links between the analysis in an IPA study, their own personal and professional experience, and the claims in the extant literature" (2009, p.52). Furthermore, IPA and this study in particular, do not claim to be explanatory. Rather, this study aims to explore the experiences of a particular group of students in relation to the phenomena that is SEMH.

## Participants

### *Purposive Sampling and Homogeneity*

Smith et al. suggest that IPA studies should have a 'fairly homogenous' sample of participants to fit with the research question (2009, p.50).

When rich, detailed data is gathered from the participants around their experience, the homogeneity of the sample supports the theoretical transferability of the findings.

### *Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria*

Because this study was focused on a specific experience, sought from a group of individuals, purposive homogenous sampling was used. A total of three students were recruited and interviewed for this research.

Participants were recruited through the qualified educational psychologists employed at the service where the researcher was on placement as a second and third year TEP. Permission from the Principal EP was sought to ensure it was ethical for EPs to contact the SENCOs of their schools about potential participants, including young people and their families following the closures of cases. Once the young people had been identified, the EPs were asked to send two information sheets (see appendix B1) to be read by the SENCO's, the

young people and their families, regarding the aims of the research study, what would be involved if they chose to participate and how their data would be used and destroyed in the future. Explanations of the right to withdraw, confidentiality and publication were also explained in simple terms on the information sheet.

The inclusion criteria included the following:

- Identify as female
- Attending a mainstream secondary school
- Could communicate verbally in English
- Of secondary school age (between 11 – 16 years old)
- Identified by a qualified educational psychologist or SENCO as having SEMH as their primary need on SEN register or EHCP, at the time of the research taking place.
- Informed consent given from the young person and the young person's parent or caregiver for them to take part in the research.

Initially, it was intended that participants would be selected from a range of secondary schools. However, the researcher only yielded interest from participants who attended one secondary school, of which she is



the link TEP. The difficulties with the recruitment stage, specifically in recruiting participants in keeping with the criteria, has been reflected on in the discussion chapter. Despite divergence from the original intention of the researcher, the outcome of this was that homogeneity was increased, as all participants attended the same school. In addition, the inclusion criteria meant that participants had similarities in relation to their SEN needs, age and gender.

Although the sample was fairly homogenous; there were inevitable differences in the contexts of participants. A more detailed explanation of the differences between participants is included in the beginning of the analysis chapter.

Smith et al. (2009) guidance on IPA research states that the optimal number of participants is between four and ten. With this in mind, attempts were made to try to gather a sample size within this range. The attempts at increasing the participant sample size involved making amendments to the researcher's original ethics form and taking a different approach to recruitment (see appendix B3). This included attending schools to meet students face to face, discuss the research and hand out recruitment leaflets. Additionally, the researcher aimed to increase participant's incentive to take part by offering them a gift card

for their participation as well as a certificate to acknowledge their role in doctoral level research. The researcher also sent an email out to SENCo's in schools just outside the borough at which they were on placement.

After these attempts, 3 participants were recruited to take part in the research study.

Therefore, the sample size of this research is just outside of what Smith (2009) deemed as optimal. In the defense of this studies sample size, Smith, flowers and Larkin (2022) also stated that a small sample size such as three participants allows for a more thorough and details analysis as well as a pattern of experience across cases.

In keeping with the research question, the participants were aged between 14-15 years old and were on their schools SEN register for having Special Educational Needs in the area of SEMH. All participants were recruited from a school in Greater London, in the borough at which the researcher is on placement. Participant information is presented in the table below.

<b>Participant pseudonym</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Type of school</b>	<b>Month of interview</b>
Maisy	14	Single-sex mainstream comprehensive secondary school	February 2023
Zoe	14	Single-sex mainstream comprehensive secondary school	February 2023
Lydia	15	Single-sex mainstream comprehensive secondary school	February 2023

Data Collection

*Semi-structured interviews*

Individual, semi-structured interviews were carried out for this study. In fitting with principles around IPA, the interviews included an in-depth exploration of the participants experiences. The researcher sought to create space for participants to feel comfortable and able to be open and reflective of their true experiences. Smith et al., (2009) suggest that interviews of this nature allow for the creation of a dialogue between the researcher and the participants. It is hoped that, during this time, the lived phenomena can be reflected upon and interpreted in a meaningful way.

The researcher chose to use semi-structured interviews for their flexibility. It was considered that the quality of the data may have been hindered if a rigid, structured schedule of questions was to be followed. By approaching the interviews in a semi-structured way, the researcher had prompts available but resisted temptation to fill the space with predetermined questions. Instead, allowing participants to have time to reflect and move freely across different topics of conversation as they see appropriate. Willig (2013) critiqued semi-structured interview approach for their ambiguous nature, which she felt could disrupt the rapport that is built during an interview and reinforce the unequal dynamics of interviewee- interviewer. The researcher hoped to counteract this by ensuring that participants were aware of the nature of

the research and that, in order to elicit their experiences and allow them to be heard, the interviewer would provide space and 'say very little' (Smith et al., 2009). In addition to this, the researcher spent some time before commencing the interview to build rapport with the participants and help them to feel more comfortable. It was hoped that, the interviewer's experience in working professionally with similar populations (secondary aged girls), as well as the interviewer's transparency, would help to build rapport and gather rich data from participant responses. A flexible approach was taken and when it was deemed necessary and appropriate (e.g. to build rapport or gather more detail about potentially relevant topics) the researcher asked questions that were not predetermined but that allowed the conversation to flow and enhanced the richness of the shared experiences. It was felt important to allow the conversations to flow naturally and in the direction taken by the participants rather than influencing the findings with predetermined questions.

### *Developing an interview schedule*

The advice given in Smith et al. (2009) was followed in order to create an interview schedule. According to Smith et al., "the main purpose of an interview is to support an interaction that enables participants to relate their own stories, in their own terms. Thus, the interviewer primarily

listens to the individual as they speak.” (2009, p. 57). As a result, participants should take the lead during interviews, and the interviewer should encourage the participant to talk about their experiences. It is advised that interviews begin with a question that invites the subject to describe a descriptive episode or experience in order to facilitate this (Smith et al., 2009). Furthermore, questions should be open, not be leading and should not assume anything about the participant's experience.

In line with guidance, the interview schedule included an initial question which aimed to elicit participants' experiences of the phenomenon, followed by a series of prompt questions to delve deeper into those experiences. The researcher tried to remain flexible in their approach, letting the participants veer the conversation in whichever way they wished. Therefore, the prompt questions were used as just that, a prompt for if the participant appeared to be struggling with a response. Participants were also introduced to the draw talk framework (Boden, Larkin & Iyer, 2019). However, they were informed that it was not mandatory, and they could just respond verbally if they wished. See appendix C1 for a copy of the interview schedule.

### *Conducting Interviews*

Participants were recruited via contacting school EP's, SENCo's and asking them to share information about the research with students who met the criteria (shown above). As well as this, the researcher attended schools to hand out research leaflets face to face. The students were asked to inform a teacher or the SENCo if they were interested, after which consent forms were shared with parents of the participants for them to complete. The schools, parents and participants were given the researchers contact details in case they wished to discuss things further. At the beginning of the interview, the students were asked whether they were still happy to take part and reminded that they could change their mind and withdraw their data for six weeks following the interviews. All interviews were held at the participants school and lasted around 1 hour. The final 10 minutes were spent debriefing the participant about who they could speak to if they felt they needed support in school. Rossetto (2014) suggests that qualitative research interviews can be therapeutic for participants and help them make sense of their experiences. During the interviews, the researcher used skills and experience working with children and young people (as a TEP and in previous roles) to develop a rapport, remain aware of their emotional states, demonstrate empathy and compassion and give space for them to share their views and

experiences. The interviews were recorded using a secure device and transcriptions were made from the audio files.

### *Draw Talk Draw Talk*

Participants were asked to attend a semi-structured interview with the researcher which followed the Relational Mapping Interview framework (Boden, Larkin & Iyer, 2019). This framework utilises a 'draw-talk-draw-talk' interview arc whereby participants are asked to visually represent their school relationships using drawing materials. The researcher used verbal prompts and open questions to help the participant to elicit a 'rich' description of their relationships in school. Participants' drawings were analysed in accordance with the Relational Mapping Interview framework process (Boden, Larkin & Iyer, 2019) which is a visual and verbal method for use specifically within IPA framed research. This method was designed to support participants to express and reflect upon the complexity, subtlety, and intensity of their relational experience, which, in this case, was useful to explore their relational experiences in school. It is thought that using visuals, such as drawings, the researcher can gather richer meaning from the participants (Malchiodi, 2005) and improve the depth of verbal data. Drawings are thought to help participants express subjective experience in ways that fit with the phenomenological and hermeneutic principles of IPA. Furthermore, drawings do not rely on language, therefore they help to spontaneously



capture the rich detail of experience and can be used to help minimize the limitations that come with relying on language, for example, those stated by Willig (2013) when the role of language in IPA was speculated against. In line with this, those in favour of the use of drawings in IPA research, suggest that the combination of immediacy and flexibility can allow the unsayable to reveal itself (Kirova & Emme, 2006).

The participants were provided with drawing materials and asked to draw a representation of their relationships at school. Participants were asked open questions about their drawings following the 'draw-talk-draw-talk' interview arc (Boden, Larkin & Iyer, 2019). Boden, Larkin & Iyer (2019) suggest that there are four components to this process.

The four components to the Relational Mapping interview outlined by Boden, Larkin & Iyer are as follows:

- 'Mapping the self' – participants can use words, symbols and/or images to represent themselves.
- Mapping relationships with 'significant others'.

Participants are asked to represent the relationship which is 'most important' to them. The researcher can then enquire about the

representation, asking open questions. The participants are then asked to add further important people to the map and verbal prompts are used to facilitate a rich description of the relationships held by the participants.

- ‘Stepping back’ – the participants are asked to reflect upon the visual representation of their relationships and verbal prompts are used by the researcher to gain the participants thoughts associated to the map as a whole.

- In the final component of the interview, participants are prompted to consider if in any way they would like their map to be different. The researcher then uses verbal prompts to elicit information about the nature of any desired differences.

For the current study, the Draw-Talk approach was used in a much more flexible manner. The participants were introduced to the framework and the initial components of ‘Mapping the self’ and ‘Mapping relationships with significant others’ and these remained the focus much more than the latter components of ‘Stepping back’ or considering how they would like their map to be different. The researcher always intended to use this as a prompt or ‘backup’ for eventualities where participants felt stuck or struggled to articulate themselves using words alone. In the case of the current study, the framework was useful as a ‘conversation starter’ and it

was felt that the interviews were enhanced by using the participant's initial drawings as a starting point as well as a reference point during later discussions. The researcher left space for the participants to go back to the drawings or make additions to their original relational map but, in the case of these participants, it was rarely utilised beyond the initial stages of the interview. After reflecting on how this approach benefited the rapport that was present in the interviews as well as the richness of the data gathered, the researcher would advocate for using this framework in a relaxed and flexible way, ensuring that participants are given the opportunity to take the lead on how they wish to articulate their experiences.

All interviews were recorded by the researcher and visual representations / drawings were collected at the end of each interview. The transcriptions of the interviews and the participant's drawings are included in the analysis chapter.

## Data Analysis

The approach to data analysis in this study was based on guidance provided by Smith & Nizza (2021) which includes updated terminology (developed from Smith et al., 2009). Whilst this analysis applies the

updated terminology included in Smith & Nizza guidance (2022), previous guidance around IPA principals were also drawn upon from Smith et al., 2009). Smith & Nizza (2021), state that IPA is flexible and cyclical. It is not a linear process and is flexible in order to fit with the researcher's objective. It is also important to consider the hermeneutic circle and move between the part and the whole. The stages followed by the researcher when analysing the data are as follows:

1. Reading and re-reading
2. Exploratory noting
3. Developing experiential statements
4. Searching for connections across experiential statements and clustering them to develop personal experiential themes
5. Moving to the next case.
6. Looking for patterns across cases and developing group experiential themes

Although the stages are included above in a sequential format, the researcher was guided by Smith & Nizza (2021) who suggests that the analysis process of IPA is typically an iterative and inductive cycle. This meant that the researcher often revisited stages as new ideas and interpretations around the data came to the fore.

### *Stage 1: Reading and re-reading*

The initial stage of IPA involves the researcher immersing themselves in the data or in the words of Smith & Nizza (2021) 'try to step into the participants shoes as far as possible'. In order to do this, the researcher listened to the audio files and created transcripts. She then read transcripts of the interviews, while listening to the audio and looking at the pictures drawn by the participants. During this process, the researcher also checked and amended the transcript where necessary, such as when she had made errors. By listening, reading and re-reading thoroughly, the researcher immersed themselves in the data. As suggested by Smith & Nizza (2021), each time reading and listening to the audio of the interview may provide new insight to the research. Immediate thoughts and observations were recorded in a research diary, in an attempt to 'bracket' preconceptions brought by the researcher.

### *Stage 2: Exploratory noting*

Stage one and two often overlap or merge together. Stage two also involves reading the transcript several times. In this stage however, it also involves the exploratory noting. Smith & Nizza (2021) describe this stage as creating a commentary of the interview data. The commentary

consists of an exploration of the language used and the semantic meaning from the interviews. During this stage of analysis, the researcher made notes on what was said in the interviews and annotated the transcripts. This was done via Microsoft Word, where the 'commenting' tool was used to make initial notes and a table was created with a column for experiential statements. As suggested by Smith & Nizza (2021), three types of notes were made by the researcher in the categories of descriptive, linguistic and conceptual. Descriptive notes involved describing the context of what the participant said and involved the researcher attempting to 'take things at face value'. The next process involved making linguistic notes which focused on the language used by the participant (including metaphors, repetition, pauses, laughter etc). Finally, conceptual notes were taken which involved the researcher engaging at a more interrogative and conceptual level.

Smith et al (2009) note that the strategies and processes suggested are not prescriptive and other strategies can be used to analyse the data. During this stage the researcher also used elements of other strategies to interpret the data including free association (focusing on thoughts, feelings, images that come freely to the mind while reading the

transcripts) and deconstructing (breaking down and dissecting parts of the interviews).

### *Stage 3: Developing experiential statements*

The next stage involves developing experiential statements and mapping relationships and patterns in the data. As outlined in Smith & Nizza (2021) guidance, this stage should lead to a reduction in the data being analysed, as the researcher draws links between the notes and commentary they produced in previous stages. However, during the reduction of data, the complexity of the data set should remain. Smith et al (2009) describe this stage as 'a synergistic process of description and interpretation'. They state that experiential statements should feel like they have 'captured and reflect an understanding' of the original data.

### *Stage 4: Searching for connections across experiential statements and clustering them to create personal experiential themes*

Once the previous steps had been carried out and personal experiential themes had been established, the researcher began 'mapping' how the themes fitted together. To begin this process, the researcher placed all the personal experiential themes in to text boxes and moved these around to see which ones overlapped and could be grouped together. The researcher also drew on suggestions from Smith et al. to try to

develop connections between the themes. These included 'abstraction' (creating a subordinate theme that fitted with several experiential statements); 'polarisation' (focusing on oppositional themes); 'subsumption' (finding personal experiential theme or concept that could become a group experiential theme as it could help to summarise multiple themes) and 'numeration' (considering the frequency in which a theme is supported by the data).

This process resulted in the generation of subordinate themes. The researcher made a note of the initial comments, experiential statements, personal experiential themes and quotes which supported them which helped to refine the themes in a research diary (See appendix F1 for excerpts from this).

#### *Stage 5: Moving to the next case*

Smith & Nizza (2021) emphasise the importance of 'treating the next case on its own terms, to do justice on its own individuality'. This means that, as far as possible, the researcher should look at each set of data from a fresh perspective. They should try to 'bracket' ideas from personal experiential themes that they had formed from immersing themselves in the previous participants transcripts. This is also in keeping with the ideographic principles within IPA.



### *Stage 6: Looking for patterns across cases to create group experiential themes*

Finally, the analysis focuses on setting the transcripts alongside each other and carefully considering the themes. During this stage, the researcher questioned possible connections across the cases and which themes seemed stronger than others. Smith & Nizza (2021) forewarn that this stage will often lead to 'reconfiguring and relabelling of themes.'

At the end of this stage of analysis, the researcher was left with a graphic which represented connections across the group as a whole (See appendix D).

Importantly, Smith & Nizza (2021) note that this stage is not the end of the analytic process. They explain 'It is also the case that analysis continues into the writing phase so that as one begins to write up a particular theme, one's interpretation of it can develop.'

Reliability, Validity and Trustworthiness

Holliday (2002) highlights the importance of justifying every decision and strategy used in qualitative research as a means of establishing reliability, validity, and trustworthiness. The following section will therefore describe the ways in which the researcher attempted to ensure validity and account for issues which may have compromised the study's reliability, validity, or trustworthiness.

In a response to a call for guidance on conducting reliable IPA research, Smith (2011) produced a review which set out criteria for achieving good quality IPA research. More recently, Nizza, Farr and Smith (2021) expanded this guidance and suggested further features particular to good IPA studies. Yardley sets out some main principles which should be followed when producing good quality research (2000). The main principles include sensitivity to context, commitment and rigour, transparency and coherence and impact and importance. The following section will discuss the ways in which these have been adhered to by the researcher.

### *Sensitivity to context*

Yardley (2000) notes the importance of 'sensitivity to context'. This means that the study demonstrates an awareness of relevant literature and is supported by theory within it. As well as this, sensitivity to context refers to an awareness of the socio-cultural setting in which the research exists. It also includes consideration of the social nature of research and potential power imbalance. The researcher took numerous steps to ensure that sensitivity to context could be achieved as far much as possible.

- A thorough literature search was conducted around the topic and other topics closely related.
- The researcher demonstrated an awareness of the theoretical underpinnings of the approach taken, including IPA and theory around hermeneutics, ideography and phenomenology.
- The researcher was familiar with the socio-cultural context in which the participants and phenomena exist as they worked within the borough and had a working relationship with the participants schools.

- The researcher kept a research diary throughout the process. It was hoped that this would help them to be considerate of the impact of themselves in the research (e.g. their age, gender, previous experience).
- The researcher used prior experience and skills from their role to help to build rapport with the participants during the interview. As well as this, the interviews took place in the school in which the participants attending and would be familiar with. These steps were taken to help participants feel more comfortable and to try to minimize the impact of perceived power imbalances between the participants and the researcher. However, Edward & Holland, (2013) note that it is not possible to create a totally equally power relationship and that power can shift between the interviewer and the interviewee throughout the process. With this in mind, the researcher used a research diary to reflect thoughts around this and remain curious and mindful.

### *Commitment and rigour*

Yardley (2000) states that importance of prolonged engagement with the topic to demonstrate commitment and competence in the methods being used. As outlined in IPA guidance, the researcher spent time fully

immersing themselves in the data. By following the guidance closely and committing time to follow procedures properly, the research developed skills and competence in IPA methodology. In addition, the researcher worked closely with a supervisor, sharing thoughts throughout the process and through keeping a research diary, thus, adding the protective element of peer review and rigour to the study. Yardley (2000) also discussed the adequacy of the sample, this was achieved by selecting a homogenous group of participants that matched the research question.

#### *Transparency and coherence*

Yardley (2000) expressed the need for transparency in good quality research. Yardley defined transparency in this context as “detailing every aspect of the data collection process and the rules used to code the data, by presenting excerpts of the textual data and/or by making detailed records of the data” (p.222) In keeping with this, the researcher provides a detailed account of the processes followed with evidence such as participant quotes to support this. A visual representation of the themes as they were developed and refined is also provided (see appendix D2). Yardley also notes the important of coherence. In fitting with the research question, the researcher interviewed a group of participants who have experienced having SEMH needs and were, at

the time, attending a secondary school. This is coherent with the intention of the study and the subsequent research question.

### *Relevance, impact and importance*

Yardley states 'the ultimate value of a piece of research can only be assessed in relation to the objectives of the analysis, the applications it was intended for, and the community for whom the findings were deemed relevant' (2000, p. 223).

This research is particularly relevant to the work of EPs and others within the education system. As previously mentioned, the voices of young girls with SEMH needs have previously been underrepresented, particularly when compared to males in secondary schools. Whilst the findings from this research cannot be generalised or accepted as universal truth, it hopes to gain insight into themes relating to their experience, particularly what they perceive to be important within their relationships in school. As well as this, it could support EPs in relation to their work with young people as well as the wider system, for example, areas in which they feel under supported. Finally, by exploring the experiences of these students, it may help inform development at a wider level and may positively impact upon the experience of children who experience difficulties in relation to their social, emotional, and

mental health. Something which is important at a time where so many young people's mental health is compromised.

### *Reflexivity*

An important principle when it comes to validating qualitative research is reflexivity. Reflexivity is the idea that the researcher is open and transparent about their beliefs, experiences and general background and acknowledges the impact that this will have on the interpretation of the data. In line with this, Yardley (2015) suggested that researchers should consider how their beliefs and assumptions have resulted in them carrying out research. Elliott et al. (1999) described reflexivity in relation to the researchers need to 'own their perspective'.

A way in which the researcher hoped to maintain reflexivity and awareness of their own subjectivity, was to keep a research diary where they recorded the process of research including feelings and emotions which arose from it.

### *Audit Trail*

Additionally, this created an audit trail in which each stage of analysis was saved and can be referred back to within appendix D, should the validity, trustworthiness or reliability of the interpretations be questioned.

### *Peer Review*

It is suggested that studies should include 'the review of the data and research process by someone who is familiar with the research or the phenomenon being explored' (Creswell & Miller, 2000, p.129) The researcher also made use of regular supervision (individual and group supervision) in order to peer review their interpretations and analysis of data.

### *Ethical Considerations*

The following section will discuss potential issues relating to ethics and how the researcher ensured that they worked within the Code of Human Research Ethics set out by the British Psychological Society (2014).

### *Gaining Ethical Approval*

Before the research commenced, ethical approval was sought from The Tavistock and Portman NHS Trust Ethics committee (see appendix A).



### *Valid, informed consent*

The researcher ensured that all the participants as well as their parents and carers had consented freely and voluntarily to participation, having been given sufficient information to enable them to make an informed choice. They were informed that they could withdraw from the data gathering phase at any time and could modify their consent throughout the process. The participants were able to ask for destruction of all or part of the data that they had contributed to within agreed and consented limits. They were informed that the time limit for them to be able to withdraw their responses was 6 weeks. Participants and their parents and carers were also made aware that the research may be submitted for publication in journals and could be presented at conferences.

### *Confidentiality and Anonymity*

Subject to the requirements of legislation, including the Data Protection Act (2018), information obtained from and about the participants was kept confidential. Names and identifying details such as the name of their school and teachers were anonymised, and pseudonyms were used instead. The recordings of the interviews as well as the transcriptions and drawings were stored securely, in a password protected folder which was only kept for as long as needed for analysis and then deleted. The transcripts were coded so that they were

anonymous. The researcher attempted to produce the data, as far as possible, so that participants are not identifiable. However, participants were informed that due to the small sample size, this may have implications regarding anonymity (BPS, 2014).

### *Risk*

Hollway and Jefferson (2000) highlight an important distinction between “distress” and “harm,” whereby distress is not necessarily harmful. They suggest instead that it is the relational context in which distress is experienced that determines whether it is felt to be harmful. In line with this, research was conducted in a way which was in line with principles of honesty, respect and sympathy. As well as this, the interviews offered the participants a safe space in which they could experience being genuinely listened to.

The level of risk associated with this research is minimal, however, the nature of the research topic means that some emotive topics were brought up. For example, mental health and wellbeing. In order to minimise the distress caused to the participants the researcher took time to build rapport and create a safe space for the participant as well as signpost to relevant support when needed. This included the emergence of safeguarding concerns, which would have been dealt with in the

proper manner according to the procedures of the schools involved and the Local Authority. I kept at least half an hour free between meetings in case additional time was required to talk through any concerns and talk to a safeguarding officer. I debriefed participants after the interview by asking how they found the interview and if they felt they needed more support to process any of the issues explored. All participants were able to reflect on their general feelings after the interview and, although they reported feeling okay, I ensured that they could name and identify at least one source of support they could use, should they need it later.

## **Analysis**

### Chapter Overview

This chapter aims to describe a detailed idiographic account of the experiences of three secondary aged girls with SEMH needs, in relation to the research question: *How do secondary age girls with SEMH needs describe and make sense of their relationships in school?* Before describing the analysis, contextual information for each participant will

be provided to assist the readers understanding of the data, interpretation and findings. To maintain the phenomenological aspect of IPA, extracts from the transcripts will be provided. The extracts will also be used to support the researcher's interpretations (Smith et al., 2009). Additional participant's quotes for each theme can be found in the appendix D. To maintain the anonymity of the participants, their friends and families, school staff and the school., all names and identifying features have been replaced with pseudonyms,

#### Contextual Information about the School and Participants

All the participants attend a single-sex, mainstream secondary school in the borough of London, at which the researcher is on placement as a trainee educational psychologist. All the girls have attended the school since year 7. As they are in year 9 or 10, they all have at least 2 full years of experience attending the school. The school at which the data collection took place is situated in a relatively affluent area of London and has approximately 1,300 female students. At the time at which the research took place, the school was rated as 'Outstanding' by Ofsted. The proportion of pupils who have SEN and/or disabilities is in line with the national average. The proportion of pupils known to be eligible for free school meals is also in line with the national average.

As discussed in the methodology chapter, all participants interviews started with the use of the 'draw talk' framework (Boden, Larkin & Iyer, 2019) in which they were asked to draw a picture, symbol or word to represent them, and their relationships in school and then asked questions regarding this. Some of the interviews were more heavily focused around this framework while others relied mainly on dialogue. The researcher let the participants direct the structure in which the interview took by allowing them to choose whether to draw as well as talk in relation to the questions. Contextual information as well as the drawings created by each participant is provided below.

### 'Maisy'

Maisy is in year 10 and has attended the school since year 7. She lives at home with her mother and father, who adopted her as an infant. Maisy sometimes struggles with her emotional regulation and was initially noted by the school to have additional needs in the area of SEMH as a result of 'angry outbursts' in home and difficulties developing friendships. Maisy gets support from pastoral support in the form of 1:1 sessions in which she can discuss difficult feelings and develops strategies to help her manage her emotions. Maisy does not have an Education Health and Care Plan but is listed on the schools SEN register, with SEMH as

her primary area of need. Throughout the interview, Maisy seemed comfortable to talk about her experiences and was able to articulate difficult feelings she had experienced in school. Below is Maisy's drawing in response to the initial part of the interview in which she was asked to draw herself in school followed by her relationships in school.

*Figure 1: Maisy's drawing of her relationships in school*



When asked to draw herself in school, Maisy seemed initially reluctant to and remarked on how she was “bad at drawing”. After some reassurance, Maisy started by drawing herself (the largest person with glasses on the right side of the page). When she had completed the drawing of herself, Maisy began to tell me about some of her friends in school who are particularly good at art. From there, conversation around

her favourite subjects and other interests was evoked. The researcher noted how this initial task assisted the rapport building stage as Maisy became increasingly talkative.

Following this, Maisy was asked to draw the significant relationships she had in school. In response to this, Maisy drew her friends one by one (stick figures to the left of the drawing of herself). After this, Maisy was asked if there was anyone else important to her in school. This led to Maisy drawing her teacher (at the back holding the guitar). The placement of the teacher at the back but nevertheless present could be seen to be symbolic of the role of teachers vs friends that is discussed later on in the findings and discussion chapters.

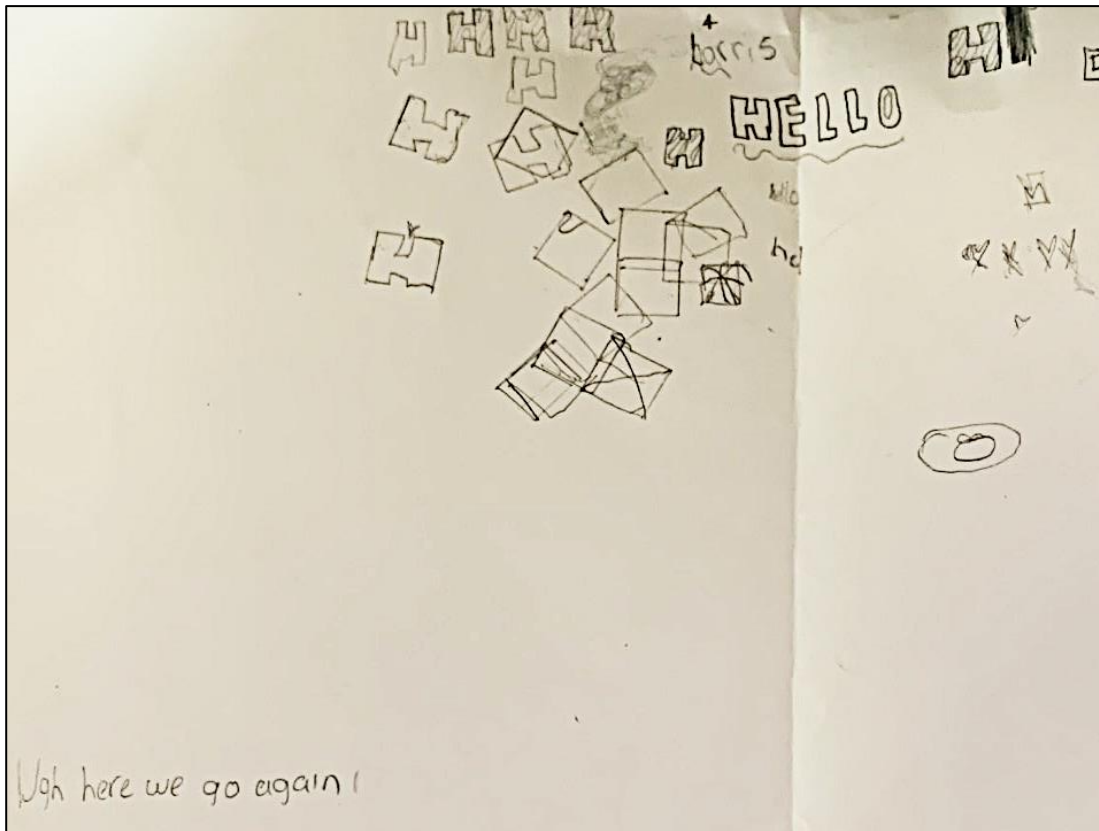
‘Lydia’

Lydia is in year 9 and has attended the school since year 7. She lives at home with her mother, father and 2 older sisters. Lydia’s teachers report that she has difficulties in line with Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) and she has previously been referred to the Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service for a neurodevelopmental assessment, although the results of this are still pending. Lydia’s teachers report that she can struggle to interact positively with adults

and can display challenging behaviour in the classroom. As well as this, she has had friendship difficulties in the past which has resulted in her avoiding some classes and generally struggling to enjoy school. Lydia had previous involvement from an EP a year before the interview and is on the schools SEN register. Lydia does not have an Education Health and Care Plan but is listed on the schools SEN register, with SEMH as her primary area of need. During the interview, Lydia was initially quiet. However, the researcher was able to build rapport relatively quickly. Additionally, it was noted how Lydia's demeanour changed so that she appeared more positive and at ease when she was discussing those she felt closest too, such as her family, friends, and favourite teacher. Below is Lydia's drawing in response to the initial part of the interview in which she was asked to draw herself in school followed by her relationships in school. Lydia was told that she could write or draw symbols in response to this.

*Figure 2: Lydia's drawing of her relationships in school*





Lydia chose to use mainly symbols and words to portray her experience. The first thing Lydia added to the paper was the bubble writing of 'hello' and several corresponding 'H' letters. This was added in the form of doodles created by Lydia at the beginning of the interview when she perhaps felt more nervous. It was felt that the initial doodles were used by Lydia as a way of coping with the anxiety of the unfamiliar interview situation. Although used slightly differently to the other participants, this was another example of how access to drawing in the interview can create a safe space for participants and, in turn, enhance the rapport and richness of the data gathered. As in the other interviews, the researcher began by asking Lydia to draw something that symbolised

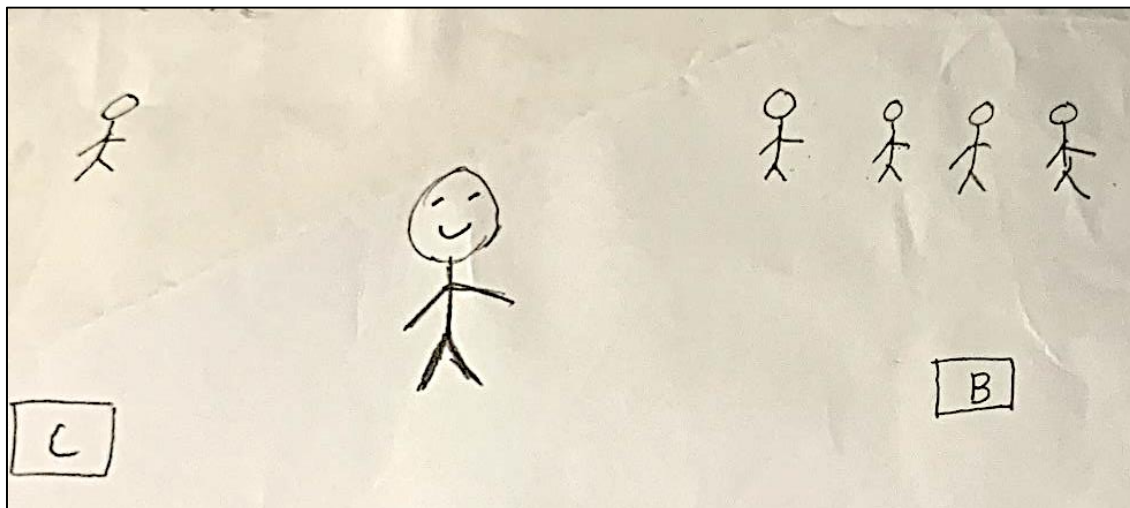
how she sees herself in school. Lydia responded to this by writing the words 'Ugh here we go again!' which sparked conversation of Lydia's experience of school, much of which centred around her relationships. When it was felt that Lydia had been given sufficient space and time to explore that topic, she was asked to draw her significant relationships in school. Lydia drew a cluster of several squares to represent her friends and family in school, which she described as "her community". It was considered that the squares may have resembled houses or bricks which would coincide with Lydia's expressions of how her community provides feelings safety. This idea is explored in greater depth in the findings and discussion chapter.

### 'Zoe'

Zoe is in year 10 and has attended the school since year 7. She lives at home with her mother, father and younger brother. Zoe's main areas of need, according to her school, are around her low self-esteem and general confidence. Zoe has struggled with friendships in the past and has accessed support in the form of small group social skills interventions. Zoe does not have an Education Health and Care Plan but is listed on the schools SEN register, with SEMH as her primary area of need. Zoe presented as shy and relatively quiet throughout the

interview. When talking to Zoe, the draw-talk framework was helpful as it seemed to ‘break the ice’ and allow Zoe space to reflect on feelings in which she struggled to put into words. Below is Zoe’s drawing in response to the initial part of the interview in which she was asked to draw herself in school followed by her relationships in school. This is discussed further within the analysis and discussion chapters.

*Figure 3: Zoe’s drawing of her relationships in school*



Similarly to the other participants, Zoe remarked on her lack of ability to draw well and shared that she would draw stick men instead as she is “rubbish at art”. Again, this evoked conversations about her preferred subjects and the researcher felt it was a useful conversation starter. After she drew herself, Zoe drew her four friends who, as stated by her, she “speaks to most in school”. Following this, Zoe was asked to draw

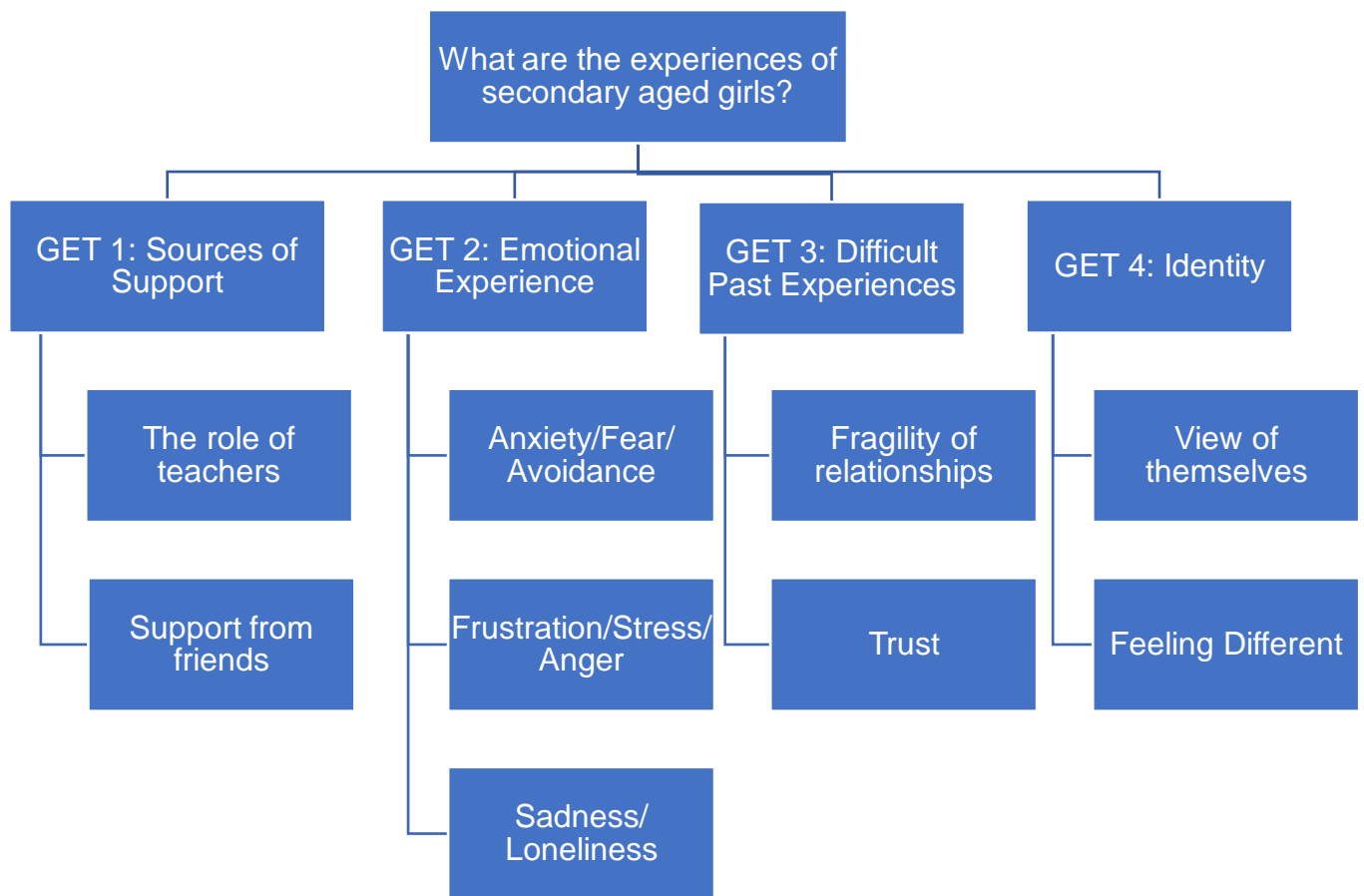
anyone else that she felt was important in school, to which she responded by drawing one of her teachers that she relied on most regularly. Zoe explained that the 'B' and the 'C' represented the block at which she would find each of them; her friends in B block and her teacher in C block. This was an interesting addition to the drawing, as later on during the analysis stage, it was found that accessibility and ease at which participants could find and approach people in school had an influence on the way in which they used the relationship. During Zoe's interview, her drawing was rarely referred back to and no additions were made after the initial task was given. It was felt that going back to the drawing may have interrupted the flow of the conversation.

### Group Experiential Theme Overview

The analysis will be presented in a 'case within theme' approach (Nizza, Farr & Smith, 2022). This means that each theme will be presented with supporting evidence from participants, as opposed to 'theme within case' approach, where ideas are presented in relation to each participant in turn. Smith, Flowers & Larkin (2022) suggests that, in IPA research with one to three participants, the group experiential themes should be supported by the transcript of all the participants. In line with this, group experiential themes discussed in this section were derived from ideas that were present for all three participants in the study. Within the group

experiential themes, the data will be organised into subthemes, where two or more participants discussed more specific aspects of the wider, group experiential theme. The subthemes exist 'underneath' the umbrella of a theme, sharing the same central organising concept as the theme, but focusing on one notable specific element. The group experiential themes cover four areas of the young women's experiences of their relationships in school. The first theme is 'Sources of Support' which describes the different ways in which the participants have sought support with their problems in school including through their favourite teacher or speaking to friends. The second theme is 'The Emotional Experience' which encompasses the wide range of emotions expressed by the participants when discussing their relationships in school including anxiety, stress, anger, and sadness. The third theme is 'Difficult Past Experiences' which includes the subthemes 'Fragility of Friendships' and 'Trust' to demonstrate some of the more challenging experiences they have faced during their time in school including disputes and loss of friendships. Finally, theme four is 'Identity' which brings together the participants feelings around how they see themselves and participants experiences of feeling different. Figure 1 provides a visual overview of the group experiential themes with the corresponding subthemes.

Figure 4: An overview of group experiential themes (GET) in relation to the research question.



## **Group Experiential Theme 1: Sources of Support**

This first theme, 'sources of support' was generated from the participants dialogue around seeking support for problems in school, the people who they rely on for support and the ways in which they are supportive. The subthemes within this group experiential theme are 'the role of teachers' and 'support from friends.'

### **The Role of Teachers**

All the participants identified one (sometimes two) individual, key teachers in the school, whom they had a close relationship with and would choose to seek support from, should they need it. Names of teachers and areas in the school have been changed to pseudonyms (e.g. Ms. Hinton and the 'Hive' are pseudonyms).

*Zoe: I talk to one teacher in school a lot. Ms. Hinton. She's in the Hive.*

*Maisy: Ms. Brampton. She's a geography teacher.*

*Interviewer: Okay. And why would you go to her out of all the teachers?*

*Maisy: Yeah. She's really nice and understanding and caring.*

*Lydia: Yeah, my science teacher. Yeah. Yeah, but I still-- of course, I would always tell her my problems. (p. 12)*

Each of the participants expressed, in some way, how they felt that they would find school more challenging without them. For example, when asked what school would be like without her favourite teacher ('Ms. Smith'), Lydia said:

*Very crazy. I'd be very lonely, and I wouldn't have the confidence I have today. (p. 11)*

Similarly, Zoe said:

*I would struggle a bit more 'cause like Ms. Hinton's known me for so long and knows what helps me and what really doesn't. (p. 10)*

Whilst Maisy did not explicitly mention her feelings about being without her key teacher, she acknowledged the role that a teacher had played in helping her build a friendship in school.

*Maisy: And well, if it wasn't for this teacher, we probably wouldn't be friends. So we were both reading a book, opposite ends of the playground, looking at*



*the ground and the teacher was like, child reading, child reading, put two children reading together, maybe talk? (p .23)*

The language that Maisy uses here to describe her experience and the role of the teacher is striking. Maisy includes detail regarding where she and the other student were sitting in the playground (opposite ends) as well as what they were doing (reading their books). Maisy's quote creates an image of two students sat with their heads down (looking at books), seemingly unreachable from each other, as two, very separate entities. Maisy describes how it took the actions of a teacher to realise this and lead them towards each other, as she facilitated an interaction that led to them becoming friends. It seemed almost as if the teacher saw the two parts (individual students) and created a whole. Maisy's depiction of the teacher's role in this situation could be interpreted as a magnet connecting two parts together to make the students experience of school, inclusiveness and belonging a more positive one. Maisy also seemed to feel that the teacher's separation from her situation or 'outsider's perspective' made it easier for the teacher to see the solution. This narrative also features in Zoe's description of the role of her teachers. Zoe describes how her teacher can help her to think about rationale solutions when she is feeling highly anxious. Zoe explains that, when the teacher offers her solutions, they seem obvious and simple, but she struggles to see them due to her anxiety. For instance:

*Interviewer: Miss Hinton. And what would Miss Hinton do, do you think?*

*Zoe: Uh, like sometimes she'll tell me stuff to tell my teachers. Like once I had to do a presentation BTEC Sport and I reall-- my a-anxiety took over and I really didn't want to do it. So like, she told me, 'cause I was like, "What do I do about it? 'Cause I don't wanna do it in front of my class." She's like, I could just tell them that I didn't want do it in front of my class. It's so easy, but I couldn't really think--*

When describing the relational dynamics between the participants and their favourite teacher, there were some similarities across all their descriptions. For example, all three participants described their favourite teachers as 'understanding' and either explicitly stated or implied that they felt the teachers were familiar with them and their needs and took on a caring, nurturing role.

Lydia indicated a strong attachment to her favourite teacher and described an almost friend-like relationship.

*Lydia: Um, well, 'cause, of course, I'm her favourite. But, like-like, I don't even know 'cause she said she came to the school. So. like, I always used to like*

*go to her classroom and I check up on her. And-and I always tell her my problems.*

*And she'd always sometimes tell me her problems.(p. 10)*

Lydia's portrayal of her relationship with her favourite teacher, Ms. Smith, suggests that she values feeling understood by her teacher. Lydia explains that the teacher used to go to the same school so can relate to some of her problems. Lydia goes on to suggest that the teacher also confides in her, at times. It seems that Lydia feels respected and as though there is more of an equal power balance between her and Ms. Smith, that is not necessarily typical of many teacher-student relationships.

As shown in the quote above, Zoe appreciates having a long-standing relationship with her teacher, Ms. Hinton, as she feels this means that she is more aware and understanding of her needs. This appears to be something which Lydia also values in her relationships with teachers, as evidenced by the following quote regarding a teacher that she has not known as long:

*Lydia: Yeah, but I-I-- 'cause, like, I'm kind of new there. I don't really share my problems 'cause, like, I'm-- sometimes I'm shy.*

Maisy seemed to value having a connection outside of lesson and a shared interest in music with her favourite teacher. For example, when asked how her teacher would describe her, she says:

*Maisy: Consistent 'cause I go to Guitar club.*

She also mentions that he teaches her favourite lesson and this is part of the reason that he is her favourite teacher.

*Maisy: He's really nice, and he's also, you know, a teacher of music.*

When discussing the role of teachers, all three participants seemed to feel that there was a limit to the support that they could provide. Both Maisy and Lydia explicitly referred to teachers making matters worse if they tried to intervene with certain issues that they were facing.

*Maisy:*

*Uh, it is like-- 'cause they're adults, right? So they can't like-- 'cause you're not really meant-- you're not allowed to really be friends with the teachers.*

*Like it's not-- you can't call them your friends. They're like your acquaintances.*

*And so like they can't really do anything about friendship because they can't go like, "Hey, you have to be friends with Masie. You have to include her." And then they'll be like, "That doesn't make us want to go with her -even less." (p.21-22)*

Additionally, Maisy said:

*Um, I mean she's tried multiple times.*

*Because this has been a recurring issue for over a year now.*

*But there's not really much they can do because it's my-my classmates you can't force them to like someone. (p. 42)*

Similarly, Lydia said:

*It won't help. 'Cause they'll just be like, "Oh my God, why did you tell miss" and stuff. And like, you know, so it doesn't help. But it's nice for them to get in trouble. (p.17)*

While Zoe did not express that teachers could make matters worse, she did seem to feel that teachers had more of a role in helping to support her with academic problems, rather than anything else. When discussing her help-seeking behaviours, Zoe explained how she would approach her best friend

Malika first, who might advise her to speak to a teacher, particularly if the problem is work related. For example:

*Interviewer: Do you think if you were feeling a bit upset about something or worried about something, who would you go to out of all these people around you? Who would you speak to?*

*Zoe: Malika.*

*Just 'cause I end up seeing her and-- if it's in the morning 'cause we're in the same tutor group.*

*So we kind of help each other like sometimes.*

*Um, she'd like tell me if it's like-she might try and help me out a bit or sometimes she'd tell me if I should go see someone about—cos sometimes I'm like, do I talk to someone else about it-or not. (p. 5-6)*

When discussing how teachers and her teaching assistant can help her in school, Zoe mainly discusses work related problems:

*Interviewer: Mona. How does Mona help you?*

*Zoe: Um, help me by like when I'm like stuck on a bit of my schoolwork or-sometimes they understand what's going on in my other-- like my classes at the moment, 'cause sometimes they're being really disruptive. (p. 12)*

Additionally, Lydia felt that teachers would often be the last people she would reach out to if she was struggling emotionally:

*My sister, my sisters. And then-- Okay. It'll be my sisters and then it'll be my primary school best friend. And then it'll be my-my group chat, uh, like, community. And then teachers are last. (p. 17)*

Interestingly, Lydia stated that her teachers would be the last people she would approach if she was struggling emotionally. However, she also spoke in detail about how she would see her teacher nearly every day when things were at their worst with her friendships. It could be argued that there is more of a stigma around using teachers for support, as her words in this quote contradict what she previously said about her teacher, Ms. Smith. On the other hand, it may be that the teacher was a more accessible option while she was at school and does not have access to her phone or family.

However, if she could choose support from anyone, it would be her family or her 'group chat' on her phone. This potentially emphasises the importance of students having support in a variety of forms, accessible to them at different times. For example, a student who has strong family support, would still benefit from strong teacher support as well as access to peer support.

It was also noted that all of the participants mentioned that they would be most likely to approach one of their subject teachers for support, despite them having access to pastoral staff. It seemed to be that regular access and subsequent familiarity with the staff seemed to be an important feature of the relationship between the participants and their preferred teachers, as they all referred to frequency in which they have contact with them. Quotes to demonstrate this point are as follows:

Zoe mentioned reaching out to the teaching assistant who is in most of her classes this year:

*Maybe the TA that's in my majority of my classes this year 'cause they normally change every year. (p. 11)*

Zoe also mentions her deputy head of year, justifying this choice with the fact that the deputy is less busy and therefore more accessible than the head of year.

*Maybe-- maybe my deputy head of year, over my head of year 'cause my head of year is busier. [chuckles]*

*So like-I probably-- yeah, probably, goes to my deputy head of year who's also my history teacher. (p. 12)*



Lydia:

*Because when I was learning, I'd always go to her class, and then she would give me advice. Because she went to this school so. (p. 10)*

And

*Um, this week I have her on Tuesday and Friday.*

*And then next week, I have her on Wednesday and Friday.*

*(p. 12)*

This quote demonstrates how Lydia is clear about the days she will see her teacher (Wednesday and Friday). The frequency and structure of seeing her teacher regularly and at set times seems to increase her likelihood of approaching her for support when she needs it.

Maisy shared that she has sessions with a member of staff from the pastoral support team outside of lesson, however the focus seemed to be on things that happen at home rather than problems in school:

*Um, well, we talk about my, um, anger issues at home.*

*And she tries to help with that. (p. 42)*

Maisy shares that she talks to a member of the pastoral support team about her anger issues at home. I noted that Maisy included the description of 'at home' at the end of her sentence. This suggests that Maisy feels her anger may be something which is an issue at home rather than at school. This could suggest that Maisy feels the need to act differently at school rather than at home, for example, by internalising or masking her feelings of anger while she is at school and expressing her anger at home, where she, perhaps, feels more safe, as detailed in 'the emotional experience' group experiential theme later on in this chapter. In line with this, Maisy talks a lot about feeling sad in school rather than angry. In relation to the role of the teacher, Maisy says that the teacher 'tries' to help with her anger. Maisy's use of the word 'tries' suggests that there has been limited success with this.

In summary, the findings around the role of teachers indicate that the participants often had strong relationships with one, key member of staff (usually a class teacher) who they saw regularly and felt able to approach. The participants valued feeling understood and respected by their teachers, however, they all conveyed that there was a limit to the support that teachers were able to provide. In line with this, there were some situations in which the participants felt that the teachers had a lack of control and would even make situations worse, such as managing conflict between peers. Similarly, there

were certain aspects of their difficulties that the participants felt more comfortable discussing with teachers and some issues they felt peers were best place to help them with.

### Support from Friends

All the participants seemed to consider their friends as a significant source of support. They mentioned speaking to their friends about their problems and being emotionally contained by them. When I asked the participants to draw their relationships in school, each one of them drew their friends first. This suggests that their relationships with their peers are a particularly poignant aspect of their experience in school.

Lydia repeatedly referred to her friendships in school as her 'community'. The word 'community' could be perceived as suggesting a sense of safety and togetherness.

*Yeah, I would say it's like a community basically.*

*It was just me and her- -and then more people started coming-*

*-that she was friends with, and now I'm basically friends with them. So—(p. 8)*

In the quote shown above, Lydia describes finding a new friendship group, after she had fallen out with her previous friends. Lydia went on to share how her friends support her when she is struggling with things in school:

*“Of course, they would like try to relate to it, and they would try to make me happy and not stressed.” (p.5)*

In a similar tone, Zoe shared how her friends validate her feelings and offer their support when she is feeling anxious.

*she'd like tell me if it's like-she might try and help me out a bit or sometimes she'd tell me if I should go see someone about—cos sometimes I'm like, do I talk to someone else about it-or not. (p. 5)*

Echoing the importance of friendships for support in school, Maisy said

*Yeah. Uh, we sometimes talk about like, uh, what's worrying- like worrying us. (p.13)*

Later in the interview, she emphasises their significance by saying:

*If it wasn't for them, I would probably just breakdown. (p. 38)*

There was mutuality in relation to Maisy and Lydia's use of their phones (specifically WhatsApp) to message friends for support.

*Maisy: Uh, yeah I message them on WhatsApp. Very frequently. (p. 39)*

*Lydia: Oh, yeah, I told my-my group chat. My group chat on WhatsApp. (p. 18)*

Additionally, Lydia had maintained a close bond with a friend from primary school who went to a different secondary school, whom she reported speaking to everyday via her phone. Emphasising their strong bond, she said

*She's my primary school friend. We've known each other for-for six years.*

*Yes. I speak to her about everything. (p.16)*

However, Zoe did not use WhatsApp or any other form of messaging application to speak to her friends about her problems and expressed a preference for waiting until she could see them in person.

*Zoe: ...But like if we have a problem, you know, we just wait until we're in school to be honest, so it's like--*

*Depends. 'Cause it depends if that person's in school on time and stuff. (p. 19)*

Primary school friends were mentioned at some point within everyone's interviews, indicating that they could play a prominent, enduring role in the participants lives.

As well as the close bond that Lydia described having with one of her primary school friends, she also shared how she had called upon some different friends from primary school when she had fallen out with her friendship group at secondary school. Lydia said:

*So I had-- since they all left me, I had no one to, like, actually talk to except from my primary school friends. So I hung with her (p.7)*

Lydia seemed to view her primary school friends as a familiar 'safety net' that she could fall back on when things went wrong with newer friends. However, it did not seem that Lydia viewed this as an ideal solution, as when she was asked what school would be like without her current 'community' of friends, she said:

*So I'd be-- probably I would be searching around-  
-looking for people.*

*And probably still being with my primary school friends. (p. 13)*

The above quote from Lydia seems to indicate that 'being with primary school friends' is more of a last resort to avoid being on her own than her preferred choice.

Maisy talked about how she had been separated from all her friends from primary school, as a result of her secondary school timetable.

*Because most of my friends from primary school that moved up, um, they're on the Spanish side and I've kind of—(p. 18)*

Zoe shared how she struggled with friendships in primary school, especially towards the end.

*It kind of like-- people dropped me every year. Like the last two years, I tried different friend groups, and then they'd just kind of leave me a lot-  
near the end. So I kind of still have one friend near the end, but I was like only with them so I wasn't alone. (p. 16)*

Throughout all the participants interviews, there was a clear feeling that being seen alone in school was a very negative prospect. All participants described ways they could avoid this, for example, Lydia hiding in the toilets and spending time with her primary school friends. Maisy seemed to use her books as a form of escapism, she explains sitting in the playground alone, with her head down facing a book. Zoe describes her experience of spending time with people she didn't have a connection with so that she could avoid being alone, similarly, she talks of having acquaintances in the clubs outside school to avoid standing alone.

Within all the participants' accounts, in which they talked of avoiding being seen alone, there was a strong sense of vulnerability. For the participants, it seemed clear that to be alone was to be vulnerable. This led to the interviewer drawing parallels between adolescents and a herd of animals. Like an animal that is separated from its pack in the wild, the students seemed to feel an immediate sense of danger and vulnerability when they were seen to be alone in school. It seemed that, through being without friends, the students were less protected against the risk. It could be that, in this case, the 'risk' was the prospect of being the targeted by other students or being at the centre of 'rumours and drama'. The student's experiences of feeling like outsiders as well as being involved in 'rumours and drama' is



explored in more detail within the 'Identity' theme. The overall narrative during the participants descriptions of the support from their friends, is that they provide them with a sense of protection and their good quality relationships with peers are intrinsically linked with feelings of wellbeing, belonging and safety.

## **Group Experiential Theme 2: The Emotional Experience**

The second group experiential theme 'the emotional experience' encompasses the emotional experiences of the participants. All the participants conveyed the emotional experience of their relationships in school during their interview. Some of these were explicitly stated, and others are inferred by the researcher as a result of things that they said during their interview.

### **Anxiety, Fear and Avoidance**

There was a sense of anxiety present at least one point in every interview. Some participants explicitly stated this, while others either alluded to it or described actions which were interpreted as a manifestation or subsequence of feelings of anxiety.

Strikingly, Lydia used the word 'hiding' when describing her experience after falling out with friends.

*I would still be hiding in toilets. And then my mum would tell me to leave the toilets 'cause I'd be texting her. (p. 12)*

She explained that she wanted to avoid the students she had fallen out with and intentionally arrived late to school to achieve this.

*No, I wasn't bunking school. I was just getting very-- Okay. I wasn't like very late, but I was always late enough to miss tutor time.*

*And then I only went tutor time two times, and I hated it so much. (p. 13)*

Later in the interview, she repeatedly states that 'she doesn't care' or 'it's irrelevant'. However, her repetition of this throughout the interview suggests that this she does perhaps care more than she is claiming to. As well as this, she goes on to say that she still doesn't want to go to form time as she doesn't know who is there.

*'Cause Ms.-- she m-made me like a special tutor group, which I don't really want to go to.*

*I don't know. 'Cause I don't know who's in it. (p.13)*

In the quote above, Lydia describes how she is still reluctant to attend a new tutor group that her teacher placed her in. Lydia's reason for being reluctant to attend the new group is that she does not know who will be in it. Lydia seems to be hyper-aware of her surroundings, such as who may be in each of her lessons, something which is a common reaction to feelings of anxiety. It seems that her anxiety is linked to bumping into certain students that she does not get along with and one of her main aims is to avoid them. It seemed to be that Lydia's anxiety was a result of her previous issues with friendships which indicates the impact that relationships, particularly between peers, can have on the mental health of students. Lydia's general emotions when describing her relationships in school, particularly in relation to pupils she has fallen out with, were interpreted as containing lots of anxiety.

Maisy's anxiety was reflected in her description of dread when it comes to certain lessons which she feels she may have to pair up with people:

*For-For my main learning group. So it's most of my lessons. So I get quite sad and worried when it's like drama or PE or like something that we have to go to pairs for-*

*-because no one ever wants to go in a group with me. (p. 16)*

Zoe conveys her anxiety in relation to being put in classes with people that she is not familiar with. She explains that she worries about them judging her:

*Oh, I'd kind of hate it because that's kind of happened because obviously like different subjects I have people but I don't like it that much 'cause I keep assuming stuff they think of me when it's not true.*

*Yeah. 'Cause they've known me and like know that I struggle 'cause I'd be just like-- and I-- my English and stuff, but then I'm thinking these other people don't know and I kind of-- my work and other stuff-*

*-I struggle reading. (p. 11)*

Zoe went on to share that she is 'seeing someone' in school to help her manage her anxiety. During the interview, it was noted that Zoe spoke in a quieter tone while talking about her anxiety. It could be that this was a result of feelings of shame or stigma that Zoe may have associated with her experience of anxiety and specifically 'seeing someone' about it. Zoe also

says 'deal with it' which suggests she sees it as a big problem in her life that needs to be 'fixed'.

*It's not-- Like I used to have it a lot in primary school.*

*But for some reason, it started to come back again, so I'm seeing someone for it.*

*Yeah, I'm learning ways to like strategies, help me deal with it. (p. 15)*

From the participant's accounts of their experiences, it seemed that anxiety is a common emotion within the context of school, particularly in relation to navigating social situations. Some of the participants, such as Zoe, seemed to view their anxiety as a fault within themselves that they needed to try to fix. Others were less open about their anxiety, but it was portrayed within their actions and behaviours in school, such as avoiding or dreading certain lessons. At times, there was also a sense that the participants felt ashamed of their feelings and were less comfortable discussing them.

### **Frustration, Stress and Anger**

Each of the participants expressed feelings of frustration, anger, and stress at some point in their interviews when talking about their relationships in school.

Zoe expressed her frustration with the teachers in school changing so frequently. A distinct change in tone was noted when Zoe discussed this topic, as Zoe had presented as rather quiet and timid until this moment. However, when talking about the change in teachers, you could clearly sense her annoyance and her expression became more animated.

She said:

*Sometimes it's a bit annoying when you don't have a teacher for that-that long. 'Cause I'm like already on my third biology teacher! (p. 14)*

*Yeah, I had like-- We had RE training teachers last year, and they would come in and think that we could literally copy like two pages of notes off the board every lesson, and that's just not. Basically yeah- Need to know. Like, yeah we can't! (p. 15)*

Earlier on in the interview, Zoe had shared how she preferred the familiarity of people who knew her well as she often worried about how others may perceive her and her learning needs, particularly in relation to her dyslexia. Her frustration around having new teachers seemed to be related to this as

she had grown tired with having to explain her learning needs and expected new teachers to ask her to complete tasks that she was unable to do.

*Zoe: And then we had another teacher that we only had for a couple of lessons. It was maybe like three or five or something like that.*

*And then she ended up leaving just before Christmas. So now we've got a brand new one again. Not all of them know I struggle with work.*

*That's like a massive issue. I feel like a lot of the new trainee teachers don't know anything to do with dyslexia at all, and cannot. (p. 14-15)*

Through conversation with Zoe, it was clear that she prides herself on her work ethic and she described herself as hard working several times. This contextualises Zoe's feelings, explaining her frustration when she is taught by individuals who show little awareness of her learning differences.

While Zoe's main source of frustration was from a frequent change in teachers, Lydia and Maisy's frustration was more geared towards peers.

Lydia expressed her anger at the students she had fallen out with calling her mum. She said:

*I'm very mad because someone called my mum from the school. So— (p. 18)*

Additionally, when talking about the same group of peers she said:

*Well, there's-- like, you have a community and then people, like, bad people always come in to like try to ruin the community and stuff. And, like, that's very annoying and stuff, too. (p.4)*

Lydia explained how she felt targeted by the students that she had fallen out with. She shared her feelings of anger and frustration as a consequence of their actions. It was also noted that Lydia changed tense in which she was speaking when discussing certain topics (from third person to first person). Switching from first to third person could have been her way of distancing herself from the experience, perhaps as it is particularly painful to think about.

Maisy was more subtle in her expressions of frustration. Nonetheless, there were times when she seemed to echo the feelings of Zoe and Lydia.

*Because I-I just want to do the lesson. 'Cause here's the thing when it's like partner work in dance, or in drama, or PE I'm like guuuys.*

*Yes, I dread it and I'm like I need to be in a group (p.37)*



As shown in the quote above, Maisy accentuates the word 'guuuys', indicating her frustration with being rejected by her peers when it comes to partner work.

Similarly, Maisy describes her previous attempts to forge friendships with peers with a sense of frustration and hopelessness.

*I've tried to be nice to them-but they just don't really care.*

*(p.37)*

With Maisy's frustration there seems to be a sense of hopelessness. As well as this, she uses the words 'they' and 'them', she does not use names but talks about other students in plural form, perhaps emphasising how she views herself as very separate from 'them'. The lack of names or identifying features also seems to depersonalise the situation, perhaps a technique used by Maisy to manage her uncomfortable feelings around being disliked.

This subtheme indicates that, although ignited by different things, the students all felt a sense of anger or frustration at times. Interestingly, the ways in which their frustration was conveyed was often more implicit than of other emotions such as sadness and loneliness. For example, frustration was

often interpreted rather than explicitly articulated, through language used or tone of voice exhibited by the participants during their interviews.

## **Sadness and Loneliness**

A feeling of sadness was pertinent during Maisy's interview but was also present in Zoe and Lydia's experience.

Maisy expressed her sadness as a result of her struggle to build friendships with peers her own age. She said:

*So like there's-- everyone has big friendship groups for like at least one like really good friend. You know like who they're like always with. But like I feel kind of lonely 'cause I'm usually like by myself. Which is-- makes me kind of sad sometimes. (p. 25)*

*Because, um, I feel lonely both ways because lonely as in then because there's like nobody, like hardly anyone there. But lonely now as in like, I feel so small compared to everyone else. (p.25)*

Maisy expressed feelings of loneliness and the emotional impact of this. Her feelings of sadness seem to be exacerbated by her comparisons of herself to

others in the school. For example, she compares herself to other students who are part of large friendship groups while she spends lots of time alone.

Lydia described experiencing similar emotions when she felt lonely in school.

*Well, it was so stressful. I hated it so much.*

*I hated it. It was like-like the worst. It was my-- It was one of my worst times ever because I was also lonely because they were only-- they were my only-- they were my friends. (p. 7)*

Lydia portrayed the notion of sadness when she discussed her experiences of falling out with friends and feeling as though she had no one to talk to in school.

*'Cause when this drama all happened to me, I was in like a really bad place, and then I get to, like, being late and bunking. (p. 5)*

Contrastingly, Zoe spoke about sadness hypothetically, when imagining her schooling experience without her friends.

Zoe said:

*...what about-- what would your experience of school be like if you didn't have these people, Malika and the rest of your friends?*

*Zoe: I'd probably be sad a lot 'cause I'd be sitting alone.*

*Interviewer: So, how would it feel-- make you feel in terms of your emotions?*

*You think you'd be generally?*

*Zoe: Quite sad and lonely. Yeah. (p. 10)*

In all of the participants accounts, a lack of friendship and subsequent feeling of loneliness was the main catalyst for experiencing emotions like sadness.

For some, the feeling was more present in their everyday experience of school and for others, they related the feeling to more difficult times or the possibility of losing friendships.

### **Group Experiential Theme 3: Difficult Past Experiences**

The third group experiential theme is centred around the difficult past experiences of the participants. All participants talked about challenging experiences they had faced, either during their time at secondary school or during primary school. Perhaps the most pertinent theme for the researcher, the sense of fragility as the participants described friendships was consistent throughout. Further, it was felt that their difficult past experiences seemed to

have a lasting impact on their attitude towards their relationships in school, particularly in relation to their ideas of trust. With this considered, the following subthemes will be discussed:

- Fragility of friendships
- Trust

### **Fragility of Friendships**

Both Zoe and Lydia conveyed a lack of control and the unpredictable nature of relationships within school. They both explicitly mention 'drama and rumours' to be a significant issue within their school. However, they also convey how they feel a lack of control and see friendships in school as temperamental and every changing. Hence, there was a sense that the relationships they form in school tend to be 'fragile' in the way that they could be broken easily and without warning. The ease at which their friendships were broken and changed was interpreted as bringing a sense of unease to the participants as they frequently used emotive words and phrases such as 'a massive issue', 'stressful' and 'toxic' to describe their experiences.

Zoe said:

*There's a lot of rumours happening in this school.*

*It's like-- it's a massive issue.*

*They'll just say something that's not true.*

*And it goes around school and then everyone hates on them for no reason.*

*It started off again, which is not great but--*

*(p.8-9)*

There were lots of parallels between Zoe and Lydia's experience of this. For example:

*Mm. They are stressful. Like, when you're in-- Well, this year, like, year nine, it's not the best year. So, like, a lot of drama happens in this year. And, like, when you're in drama, it's very hard to get yourself out of drama. (p. 2)*

Both participants discuss friendships and relationships with peers in school as a very fragile entity. For example, they emphasise the temperamental nature of them as they share that issues can begin and escalate very quickly, which impacts on their relationships with others. Both seemed to share the sense that they had little control over 'drama' occurring and seemed to be in a constant state of anticipation for issues to occur. Lydia emphasises the unpredictable nature of issues occurring between peers in the following quote:

*And then sometimes the drama is necessary. But when you're in drama, sometimes you don't even know that you are in drama until someone says something like 'Eeew' or like "Ugh," or something, and then you'll know something's happened, and then they won't tell you.*

*Yeah. Yeah. There's a lot of rumours and whispering and all that stuff. Like, it's every day.*

*(p. 2)*

The fragile nature of friendships is also described by Maisy, as she mentions leaving previous friendship groups as a result of not feeling valued.

*Um, the two main ones who I was quite close friends with was Leah and Lily. But turns out they were quite toxic.*

*And they didn't really like me that much and left me out quite often. I was like, "It's fine."*

*They were sisters and they'd be occupied.*

*But it-it just got worse and-and worse.*

*Um, I decided- 'cause like I decided to, um, leave.*

*(p. 43)*

Additionally, Maisy spoke of a friend that she no longer has any contact with due to a fall out and then her moving away.

*But then we got into a massive disagreement and we didn't talk to each other for like half a year. And then turns out, end of year eight, moving to Poland--and doesn't speak to me at all. (p. 21)*

Zoe talked about a struggle to connect with peers at primary school. She also implies that there were ruptures in her friendships each year.

*It kind of like-- people dropped me every year. Like the last two years, I tried different friend groups, and then they'd just kind of leave me a lot--near the end. So I kind of still have one friend near the end, but I was like only with them so I wasn't alone.*

*Connection, which is why I was kind of happy to move onto high school and find new people.*

*(p. 16)*

In relation to this, Zoe shared that she felt positive about the transition to secondary school as she saw it as an opportunity to forge new friendships.



Maisy and Zoe both talked about the impact of Covid in relation to the fragility of friendships. Specifically, there was a focus on the idea of school closures and being physically separated from certain peers. During these conversations, there was reference to positives and negatives of school closures but the overall message was that Covid led to increased changes in friendship dynamics.

Zoe refers to this in the following quote:

*And there's obviously lockdown, so I didn't see people-  
for like so long.*

*So, like, friendship groups in our year have changed so much because we had like friends, then we had lockdown, then we came back again and some people spoke more than others. So like some friendship groups stayed, some didn't.*

*So, like they all flipped, but then Year 8 we went back into another lockdown, but it was*

*Like different friendship groups came outta that. And then loads of stuff.*

*Drama happened in our year last year. Like she split so many different groups apart-*

*with now different groups again. But nothing's happened this year. (p. 3)*

On a more positive note, Maisy shared how covid related school closures led to her making a friend.

*Because, um, we had to go into lockdown in year seven and both me and Molly were key worker child-children.*

*So she like dragged me over to Molly. We were kind of like, "Hi." And. but then we-we started to get more like friends. (p. 23)*

A big part of each participant's experience of school seemed to be the rupture of friendships and formation of new ones. However, there was an added layer of unease and a sense that participants were constantly anticipating the next drama or issue to occur within their friendship. With this, it seemed that the participants could never fully relax and rely on their friendships in school. Hence, the notion of fragile friendships came to the fore.

## **Trust**

The following points have been grouped into the subtheme 'trust'. All three participants featured topics relating to trust. Often, their views on trust, seemed to be a consequence of their difficult past experiences.

The topic of trust was particularly pertinent for Lydia, who, since falling out with friends, seemed to be very guarded when it came to who she chose to put her trust in. For example, Lydia said:

*Uh, to not trust anyone.*

*Everyone lies.*

*You shouldn't trust everyone because when you trust somebody and then they-- you tell them, like, somebody else secrets-- when you're involved with them, they'll tell, like, all of your secrets. Oh, it's not worth it. (p. 22)*

Contrastingly, Zoe implied she could trust her current friendships not to 'flake on her', as others had done in the past. Zoe associates this with feelings of happiness.

*Zoe: No, I feel like it's got a lot better. Like now I know I've got a stable--*

*Interviewer: Okay. And how does that make you feel?*

*Zoe: Happy. 'Cause I know they're not gonna flake on me like others-- people have.*

*(p. 16)*

Interestingly, Zoe and Lydia seemed more preoccupied with the idea of trust than Maisy, who said very little on the topic. As shown in the previous subtheme 'fragility of friendships', Zoe and Lydia were the two participants who, during their interviews, had shared their experiences of drama, secrets and rumours. It could be considered that their difficult past, that seemingly featured violations of trust, is likely to have intensified their feelings around this topic, hence them bringing it up during the interview.

#### **Group Experiential Theme 4: Identity**

Throughout the participant's interviews, they referred to aspects of their personality, both as an individual and as a group member. The final group experiential theme 'identity' explores how the participants view and describe themselves when part of a group vs individually and their experiences of feeling different.

#### **View of Themselves**

It was noted that the participants tended to speak more positively about themselves within the context of a group or friendship.

For example:

Maisy:

*Because I guess we're kind of on the same wavelength I guess. We-We're all quite silly. (p. 16)*

When asked how the people in her friendship group would describe her,

Maisy said:

*I think she'd describe me as honest-playful-and silly. (p. 32)*

Similarly, Lydia said:

*Uh, funny, crazy, weird. Um, yeah, that's it. (p. 9)*

Zoe said:

*Yeah. Um, I end up not having a lot. Actually, like, I'm the only one who likes sport for instance.*

*(p. 20)*

When asked about their personality traits in the context of their friendship groups, the descriptions were generally positive. This could perhaps indicate the impact of being part of group on how they view themselves. In this case,

their association with their friends seemed to lead them to describe themselves in a more positive way than when they described themselves as individuals.

Some of the participants also described certain needs in relation to how they identify.

For example, Zoe identifies as being someone who finds reading and writing difficult.

*Um, I feel like sometimes-- but I'm not that-- it depends on the situation. Like if it's to do with me trying to learn something--then I get really anxious.*

*Yeah. But some not—sometimes in BTEC sport when we're like writing and stuff. Yeah.*

*...But like I don't have enough time is my problem.*

*(p. 17)*

When explaining her experience of coming in to school during covid related school closures, Maisy describes herself as having “special needs” because she is adopted:

*Well, Molly was a key worker. I got to go to school 'cause I'm adopted. So special needs and yeah, stuff. (p. 23)*

When considering how her teachers may describe her, Lydia reflects on some of her areas of difficulty she identifies with:

*I get distracted a lot. She'd probably call me smart. (p. 20)*

The way in which the participants linked their additional needs to their identity was noted. When discussing the idea of labels and identity, Taylor et al. (2010) suggest that generic labels such as SEN have a negative impact on pupils self-esteem compared to more specific labels such as ‘dyslexia’, indicating that the positive or negative impact of labels is dependent on language. For the participants in the current study, the labels were not necessarily discussed in a way which was interpreted as particularly negative

or positive. However, the way in which the label seemed to form part of their perceived identity was apparent.

## **Feeling Different**

For some participants, there were stark contrasts between how they identified (or how they felt others would describe them), dependant on context.

For example, when considering how her peers perceive her, Maisy says:

*Yeah, I'm not friends with anyone in my year.*

*It's literally none-out of like the 250 students.*

*I don't know. They just don't like me.*

*They just think I'm weird. (p. 15)*

This quote highlights Maisy's feelings about how others (outside her friendship group) perceive her. The way in which Maisy describes herself when thinking about how others view her is much more negative than that of her friends (silly vs weird). Maisy conveys feelings of being different from others and excluded as a result. She emphasises how significant she feels this is, as she explicitly quantifies the students who supposedly do not like her (250).



When discussing aspects of her identity, Zoe also spoke of feeling different to others in her class:

*Interviewer: Okay. Um, how do you think your class would describe you?*

*Zoe: I seem to be the only one doing my work. I feel like that would come up.*

*(p. 8)*

While Maisy and Zoe talk about feeling different from many of their peers, Lydia conveys this more implicitly, as she discusses her attempts to 'fit in'.

*They would always just cause mischief and bully people.*

*Yeah. And it's-- it wasn't cool, but, like, I still hung with them and tried to fit in.*

*(p. 9)*

Lydia later reflected on how she wished she had been more kind than she was when she was friends with her previous friends, suggesting that she changed parts of her identity to fit in and feel more included within her friendship group.

Additionally, Lydia felt that some of her peers would attribute less desirable personality traits to her. For example:

*Interviewer: Okay. What about-- how would these people have described you?*

*Lydia: Uh, rude? Uh, I don't even know. I was actually still very crazy- when I was with them. But, like, of course, since they don't like me, they'll just say all the bad things about me rather than the good. (p. 9)*

When talking about her new friendship, Lydia says:

*Well, she's better than them because she's actually caring. Well, she's got, like, attitude. But, like, she-she-she understands my point of- my point of view, and I understand her point of view, whereas them lot.*

*They would always just cause mischief and bully people. (p.9)*

This suggests that Lydia previously did not feel as though her friendship group could relate to her as well and felt there were differences between them.

A significant topic in Maisy's interview was around the difference in year group between her and the majority of her friends. Early on in the interview Maisy described this as "an issue" in relation to her relationships in school.

*Um, an issue is that, um, apart from Molly, they're all younger than me.*

*Yeah, they're, year 8. (p.10)*

Maisy later described how other students have ridiculed her in relation to this.

For example:

*Maisy: People make fun of me for being friends with the year eights.*

*'Cause they're younger.*

*Interviewer: Like who?*

*Nearly everyone in my year group. (p. 15)*

All three of the participants described feeling different to the majority of their peers at one point in school. However, this was a more consistent feeling for some participants, such as Maisy. It was noted that feeling different seemed to be portrayed as a negative rather than a positive. For example, they described instances where they were made fun of by other students for being

different or how they had looked forward to leaving the school or peer group, perhaps as an opportunity to reinvent themselves.

The group experiential theme 'Identity' demonstrates the multifaceted nature of relationships in school and their impact on aspects of a young person's view of themselves. For the participants in the current study, the relationships formed in their current and previous schools played a role in helping them develop their sense of self.

# Discussion

## Chapter Overview

The aim of the following chapter is to consider the findings in the context of relevant existent literature. Smith & Nizza (2022) describe IPA is an inductive approach. Therefore, in keeping with IPA's inductive approach, the themes that occurred within the analysis could not be foreseen. Consequently, it will be necessary to discuss additional literature which was not included in the introduction or literature review but that is relevant to the findings, including relevant psychological theory and frameworks. As well as discussing the findings in relation to existing literature, this chapter will consider the unique contributions of the current study, the implications, limitations, and possible future directions for research in this domain.

## Sources of Support

This section includes a discussion of the subthemes:

- The Role of Teachers
- Support from Friends

## The Role of Teachers

It was common for the participants in this study to identify one key adult in the school, with whom they felt they could rely on most for support. This has been found in other research including work by Whitehead et al., (2019) who conducted a review examining the importance of trusted adults during adolescence, with an aim of defining their role. In keeping with the present study, Whitehead et al. found that the most commonly identified 'trusted adult' (after parents) were teachers. Whitehead et al. outlined some of the factors that appeared to help facilitate the formation of a trusting, supportive relationship between a student and an adult, many of which were in keeping with the current findings. For instance, from their review, Whitehead et al. (2019, p.3) suggested that facilitators of trusted adult relationships included 'young people being able to choose their preferred adult', 'genuine, empathetic and proactive support offered' and 'youth and adult matched on sociodemographic criteria', all of which were mentioned by the participants in the current study. For example, Lydia implied that her teacher has a level of genuine empathy in relation to her situation as she previously attended the school when she was Lydia's age. When asked why Lydia sought support from Ms. Smith, she discussed how she frequently sees her in class (she is easily accessible) and that she also went to the same school (an increased level of understanding and empathy).

Additionally, Whitehead et al suggest some barriers to forming a trusting adult relationship. One of which was 'perception that relationship is time limited'. A quote by Zoe mirrored this concern as she describes how she felt her head of year was probably too busy to provide her with additional support.

Furthermore, when searching for literature around a single key adult as a source of support, the term 'natural mentoring' came to light (Van Dam et al., 2018). This term is based on the idea that students develop organic relationships with 'natural mentors' who they perceive to be available to listen and support them. Natural mentor relationships are thought to occur within the existing social network of the young person and provide support to them where needed. This was the case within this study, as all the participants identified using their relationships with subject teachers as a source of support rather than a relationship that had been intentionally 'set up' to provide them with support, such as through an intervention, pastoral support or counselling services. As with the current study, other research has emphasised the importance of natural mentoring relationships. It has found that such relationships tend to be longer-lasting and more prevalent than formal mentoring relationships and require fewer resources than formal programs (Dubois & Silverthorn, 2005; Hurd & Zimmerman, 2010; Zimmerman, Bingenheimer, & Behrendt, 2005).

A research report by Department for Education (2017) explored schools' perceptions of their role in supporting the emotional wellbeing of students. Within this report, a large proportion of schools felt that a lack of time and capacity limited their ability to develop staff awareness and skills required to identify and support mental health alongside teaching commitments. Despite this, the findings from this study indicate that students are highly likely to call upon a range of school staff including class teachers for support. Therefore, the idea that many teachers lack capacity or feel inadequately equipped to respond to this is somewhat concerning. Research by Barry et al (2017) indicates that interventions for social, emotional and mental health yield most successful outcomes when they are integrated into daily practice, form part of school culture and seek to engage all staff. With teachers and peers both identified as a key aspect of support for participant's experiences of SEMH, the current study posits the importance of a whole school approach to mental health and action being taken to ensure that all staff feel equipped to support student wellbeing when they are called upon. The Social and Emotional Aspects of Learning (SEAL) programme was developed in the UK as a whole school framework to support the social and emotional skill development of children and young people. This resource included whole school materials including resources relating to staff development. The current research supports the idea of frameworks such as this. Furthermore, EPs are well placed to help implement whole school frameworks as they have the skills,



knowledge and access to the school organistaion at different levels (students, teachers, parents).

Research into teacher-student relationships has found that supportive teacher-student relationships are associated with better adolescent mental health (Miller-Lewis et al., 2014; Wang et al., 2013). Within the qualitative information provided in the current study, the participants described features of their relationships with their key, trusted teacher. There were several common characteristics of the teachers that were in keeping with existing literature around teacher-student relationships. Ideas from attachment theory have been drawn upon to shed light on some of the findings. The participants tended to describe their favoured teacher as providing a nurturing role. For example:

*Yeah. She's really nice and understanding and caring. (Maisy)*

Theories around attachment suggest that, while it usually begins with family members, attachment to a trusted adult such as a teacher can have a significant influence on a young person's development (Bowlby, 1982; Geddes, 2017). Supportive relationships between students and teachers have been found to positively influence a variety of things including school engagement, achievement and social skills (Morrison & Allen, 2007; Sharkey et al., 2008; Woolley & Bowen, 2007). The participants experiences in the

present study provide real-life, contextual examples of this, as they explain what their experience of school would be like without the support of their key teachers. For example:

*Very crazy. I'd be very lonely, and I wouldn't have the confidence I have today. (Lydia)*

Attachment theory may help in further unpicking the relationships that some of the students in this study described having with their teachers. Attachment theory outlines the initial relationships that develop between an infant and their carer (Bowlby, 1969). Bowlby (1969) explained that parents act as a secure base that helps a child make sense of their world, while simultaneously providing a place for the child to return to, where their emotional and physical needs will be met. In a school environment, some suggest that school staff can fulfil this role (Werner & Smith, 1989). When describing attachment theory, Geddes (2017, p.39) outlines that, once a child has embedded an attachment figure in their experience, and knows that they will return, the child can hold the carer 'in mind' (Geddes, 2017, p.39). In the following quote, Lydia could be thought to be describing her teacher as a 'secure base'. She seems to hold her teacher in mind, describing how she sees her teacher less now that things are better for her in school but that she knows she can go back to her if she needs to:

*Yeah. Yeah, but I still-- of course, I would always tell her my problems.*

Additionally, Geddes (2006) explained that a feature of attachment theory is that adults help children to process their emotional experiences; having sensitive attunement to the child's emotions and helping them regulate stress. A consistent element of the support that the teachers provided for the participants in the current study was in helping them regulate during stressful or anxiety provoking situations. However, as discussed earlier, many teachers are feeling inadequately skilled and experienced and lack capacity (Department for Education, 2017). Docherty (2014) suggested that many teachers experience stress and are unlikely to receive support. A core role of supervision is not only to reflect on practice, but also on the emotional experiences involved. Staff supervision would be a way in which EPs could provide the school staff with a space to reflect on their practice, get containment themselves and ensure that they can be attuned to the student's needs (Hawkins & McMahon, 2020)

## **Support from Friends**

Another source of support for the participants in this study was their friends. The findings indicated that they used their friends to speak with about things that were worrying them. The participants also linked their friendships to their mental health and emotional wellbeing. For example, when describing how school would be without her friends, Maisy said:

*If it wasn't for them, I would probably just breakdown.*

This mirrors much of the existing research into the significance of peer relationships. Research has found an association between peer relationships and lower levels of mental health difficulties (McPherson et al., 2014; Rothon et al., 2011). Additionally, Hartup (1993) found that school peers can also be an important contributor to resilience, developing social competencies, building self-esteem, and providing a source of emotional and practical support.

This was echoed in the accounts provided by the current participants. For example, Zoe talked about how her friends offer her advice.

Additionally, Lydia suggested that her friends are able to relate and validate her feelings when it comes to her emotions. She described her friends as her 'community' indicating feelings of safety and belonging associated with them.

It was noted that all participants referred to their peers before any other relationship in school, potentially indicating that they play one of the most significant roles for the participants. In line with this, a study by Butler et al. (2022) found that peer relationships were found to have an equivalent impact of two other protective factors combined (school support and adult support) on mental wellbeing.

As illustrated in the literature review chapter, much of the research in relation to the impact of peer relationships in school is quantitative and correlational, which means that a causal relationship cannot be determined. However, the benefit of this study being qualitative is that participants were able to share their thoughts in relation to the direction of the relationship. The participants in the current study felt that their friendships directly led to a decrease in issues relating to their mental health such as low mood and stress.

For instance, when describing how her friends support her with her problems, Lydia said:

*Of course, they would like try to relate to it, and they would try to make me happy and not stressed.*

A theoretical framework which fits well with the findings in this area is the 'stress buffering model' (Cohen and Willis, 1985). The stress buffering model proposes that social support, or positive relationships with others, help protect or mitigate some of the negative impact of stressors. Research has found that, during the transition to adolescence, the peer group becomes more salient than many other relationships, playing an important role in identity development, and emotional experiences (Ladd & Troop-Gordon, 2003; Larson & Ham, 1993). In the case of these participants, it seems that good quality relationships with peers have led to them being well-placed to provide the participants with emotional support.

Although there are associations between peers and mental health, the emphasis on 'good quality' relationships is noted. Research suggests that good quality, supportive, reciprocal friendships are related to positive mental health (Roach, 2018). Whereas problems in peer relationships such as peer conflict and victimization are associated with a heightened risk of mental health problem (Patalay & Fitzsimons, 2016).

Negative impact of peer conflict is something which the participants in the current study spoke of and will be explored in greater depth within the later themes 'the emotional experience' and 'difficult past experiences.'

All the participants in the current study spoke about primary school friends at some point in the interview, this was a topic of focus for one of the studies including in the literature review for this study. Ng Knight et al., (2019) suggested that maintaining friendships from primary school was a source of concern for many children as they transition to secondary school. As well as this, they suggested that maintaining primary school friendships was associated with higher academic performance and better mental health. However, the desire to maintain friendships with primary school friends was not shared by the participants in the current study.

Zoe shared how she struggled to find connections with her friends in primary school, particularly towards the end:

*near the end. So I kind of still have one friend near the end, but I was like only with them so I wasn't alone.*

*..., which is why I was kind of happy to move onto high school and find new people.*

Similarly, Lydia spoke of how she spent time with a primary school friend as she had no other options at that time, due to her arguments with other friends:

*So I had-- since they all left me, I had no one to, like, actually talk to except from my primary school friends. So I hung with her.*

In Ng-Knight et al. (2019) study, they suggested that procedural amendments such as incorporating children's friendship preferences into the configuration of their secondary school form groups, may aid prevention of mental health problems in children. Although Zoe and Lydia did not indicate a strong desire to be closer to their friends from primary school, this may have benefitted Maisy, whose emotional wellbeing seemed to be impacted as she struggled to form new friendships within her classes at secondary school.

In the quote below, Maisy speaks of how she had been separated from friends from primary school, as a result of differing timetables at secondary school:

*It is sad.*

*Because most of my friends from primary school that moved up, um, they're on the Spanish side and I've kind of—*

The current participants' differing experiences highlight the limitations of studies which claim to be able to generalise their findings, such as Ng-Knight et al (2019) study. Within Ng-Knight et al. (2019) study, it was suggested that



students are supported by procedures which place them with their peers from primary school. However, while this may have been appreciated by Maisy, Lydia and Zoe indicated that they would prefer opportunities to make new friends. In studies which aim to make claims on behalf of a whole cohort of students, there is potential for the voice of certain students to be missed. This demonstrates how closed ended methods alone, such as surveys, often do not provide enough insight into the experience of others (Creswell, 2014).

## **The Emotional Experience**

This section discusses the group experiential theme 'Emotional Experience' which includes the following subthemes:

- Anxiety, fear and avoidance
- Frustration, stress and anger
- Sadness and loneliness

### **Anxiety, Fear and Avoidance**

Anxiety, fear and avoidance are three aspects of the participant's experience that have been grouped together, as they were thought to be intrinsically

linked with one another. As such, there is overlap between these feelings during the interviews, as well as some which seemed to be a consequence of one another, for example, anxiety and avoidance.

Each of the participants described feelings of anxiety, fear or avoidance when discussing their experience of secondary school. Current research suggests that anxiety is a common issue for adolescents, particularly girls. The World Health Organization reports that women experience higher rates of depression, anxiety, psychological distress (WHO, 2017). A survey by the Department for Education which spoke to 30,000 pupils aged 14-15, found that depression and anxiety have risen among teenage girls in England, with more than a third reporting symptoms of distress, although the rates had remained relatively stable among teenage boys (DfE, 2016). While an abundance of research focuses on prevalence rates of anxiety (Racine et al., 2021; Gasso et al., 2020; Showraki et al., 2020), there is a lack of research which speaks directly to the students who are experiencing it. As the participants gave insight into their experiences of feeling anxious, some of them described the ways in which it manifested itself and impacted different aspects of their school experience. For instance, Lydia shared her experience of hiding in the toilets at school and getting detentions for intentionally arriving late to lesson, so that she could avoid certain peers.

Further research by Ingul, Havik, & Heyne (2019) suggests that feelings of anxiety and fear regarding certain aspects of school are directly linked to an increased risk of school refusal. Terms relating to this phenomena are ever-changing but the most common term that is currently used is 'Emotionally Based School Avoidance' (EBSA). In accordance with research in the area of EBSA, the current participants' anxiety and avoidance of certain aspects of school put them at increased risk of becoming 'school avoiders'. Lydia's case provides support for their ideas around early predictors of EBSA, as she described how she had begun to arrive late to avoid certain, anxiety-provoking aspects of school such as tutor time.

Thambirajah, Granduson, De-Hayes (2008) suggest that a way to prevent school refusal for those at high risk is through collaborative working between school, family and the student. Similarly, Havik et al., (2014) proposed that extra support to parents, and cooperation between home and school personnel is an integral part of EBSA prevention. Lydia shared how her mother intervened and spoke to the school. Consequently, teachers gave Lydia the option of a different area of the school rather than having to attend tutor time.

In Lydia's case, it seemed that these protective factors, centred around her relationships in school, meant that she successfully reintegrated back into

attending the full school day before things escalated to full scale non-attendance. This research, particularly Lydia’s experience, provides backing for the contribution of qualitative research and the first-hand insight it can provide, particularly when considering successful reintegration for a student at risk of EBSA.

The pattern of anxiety, fear and avoidance and its potential to lead to EBSA is depicted in the diagram below.

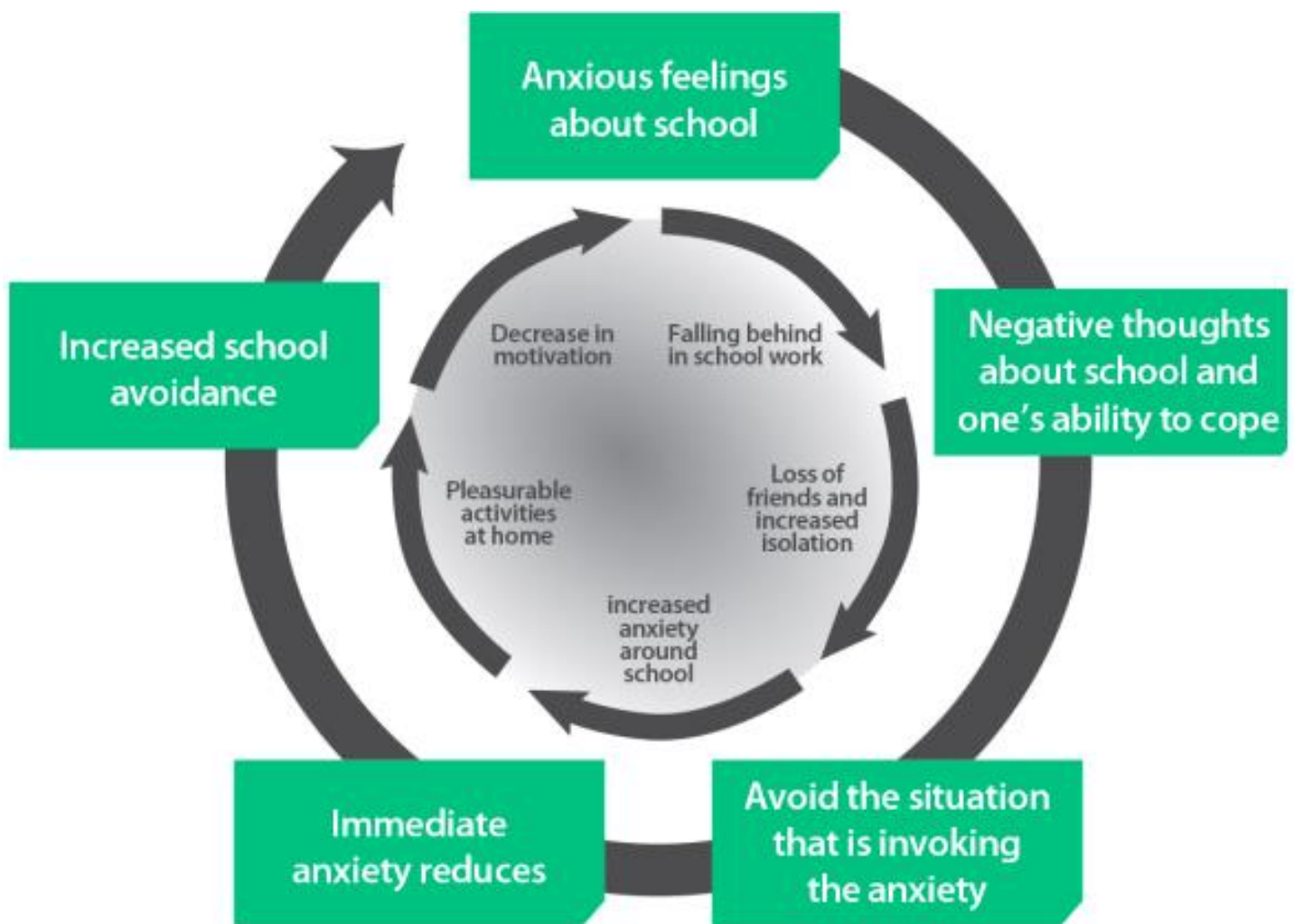


Figure 1: Diagram showing the cycle of fear, avoidance and EBSA. (West Sussex County Council, 2022)

Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems model (1979; 2007) provides a useful framework to explore the links between the anxiety cycle and EBSA, as well as potential intervention, such as a multidisciplinary approach.

Bronfenbrenner's ecological model proposes that there are five different systems around an individual: the microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, macrosystem and chronosystem. The ecological model suggests that an individual, such as a CYP, does not exist within a vacuum. Rather, an individual interacts and develops within varying social contexts. Importantly, it is acknowledged that the contexts overlap and interact with one another. In Lydia's case, the interactions between different systems and the outcome on the individual was apparent. For example, the microsystem includes the CYP immediate environment such as their school, family and peers. The mesosystem refers to the relationships between the different microsystems (e.g. Lydia's relationships with her peers or her parent's relationships with the school). Moving outwards, the exosystem refers to external environments that indirectly affect the Lydia. This could include the school policies, politics or government action which could influence finances, home stability, school resources or teacher retention at her school. The findings from the current participants, considered in relation to theory such as systems theory, advocates for a holistic approach to students who show early signs of school avoidance. Furthermore, it highlights the importance of considering their

relationships in school when exploring the potential factors increasing their motivation to avoid school. Ideas around this, including where the work of an EP might fit, will be developed later on in this chapter, in the implications section.

### **Frustration, Stress and Anger**

A great source of frustration for one of the participants was at the frequent change in teachers. As well as this, Zoe shared how she felt that new teachers or trainee teachers did not have a sufficient understanding of her special educational needs. This led to Zoe feeling frustrated and lacking motivation with her learning. For example, she says:

*That's like a massive issue. I feel like a lot of the new trainee teachers don't know anything to do with dyslexia at all, and cannot.*

*and we always say, "These teachers that are coming in do not-- they don't know."*

Zoe's experience of a high teacher turnover mirrors that of many other students in secondary schools as England currently faces a crisis in the

recruitment and retention of appropriately qualified teachers (Worth, 2018), particularly within secondary schools (Jerrim and Sims, 2019).

The research in relation to Zoe's perception that trainee teachers are less knowledgeable of her additional learning needs is mixed. Many have claimed the teacher training curriculum does not sufficiently prepare prospective teachers for the practical challenges of inclusion (Davies and Garner, 1997; McIntyre, 2009; National College of Teaching and Leadership, 2012). In contrast to Zoe's experience of trainee teachers being unable to support her additional learning needs, research by MacFarlane & Woolfson (2013) found that teachers who had more experience were less willing to work with children with SEN. However, a qualitative study by Robinson (2017, p172) found that both experienced and inexperienced teachers generally described feeling 'inexpert in dealing with diagnosed or undiagnosed SENDs'. Furthermore, a survey report for NASUWT Teachers Union published in 2018 found that more than two thirds of teachers report that they never, rarely, or only sometimes receive the support they need to teach learners with SEN/ ALN/ ASN effectively. From the research in this area, it seems that, while teachers try their best for the learners they teach, they are not always equipped with the knowledge, skills and expertise to meet the needs of learners with SEN. Increasing pressures and workloads, including those arising from other education reforms, have consequences for teacher morale, teacher wellbeing

and teacher retention. One of the unique contributions of this research, is that it highlights the potential impact that this issue has on students.

From Zoe's description of her experience, it seems that the frequent change in teachers meant that the gaps in understanding in relation to additional learning needs were perpetuated, leading to increased frustration on Zoe's part. Furthermore, Zoe goes on to share how the inability to form long-standing, familiar relationships with teachers impacts on her motivation to learn:

*Yeah. Like if a teacher's not helping me at all, I kind of get-- I don't do a lot of work.*

*I end up not doing-*

*Like in science sometimes I feel like not doing much 'cause the teacher doesn't do a lot.*

With teacher retention at an all-time low in the UK (Hulme, 2022), it would be useful for future research to explore this phenomenon further, particularly in relation to how it impacts on student's motivation towards learning.

When Maisy spoke of feelings of anger, she seemed to refer to it as something which presents itself at home rather than school. Maisy did not go



into detail about how her 'anger issues at home' present themselves.

However, some literature around anger and girls has been drawn upon to explore this quote further. There is some research which suggests that there are gender specific differences in how adolescents express emotions including anger (Chaplin & Aldao, 2013). Focusing on the use of specific emotional regulation strategies, studies show that girls use more maladaptive emotional regulation strategies, such as rumination and suppression (Chaplin and Aldao, 2013). Research suggests that maladaptive strategies are strongly related to depressive symptoms (Chaplin & Aldoa, 2013; Orgiles et al., 2018).

Throughout the literature, there are suggestions that society is more accepting of boys expressing anger rather than girls (Brody, 1999; Brody & Hall, 2008; Maccoby & Jacklin, 1974). Additionally, Chaplin & Aldao (2013) examined social context as a moderator of gender differences. They found that girls had greater propensity to display positive emotions and mask emotions such as anger when interacting with less familiar adults and or when they are around peers.

With this considered, Maisy may be suppressing or internalising some of her feelings of anger at school, and expressing her anger at home, where she feels more comfortable and less pressure to conform to gender expectations.

This may explain why Maisy talked of having anger issues at home, rather than at school.

One possible theory to help explain gender differences in emotional expression and regulation is social learning theory (Bandura, 1969). Within social learning theory, Bandura suggested that CYP learn through modelling, and this includes how to behave according to gender roles. Some have argued that the differences in gender expression are consistent with traditional gender roles, that are pushed on to children from a young age. For example, females are encouraged to be more relationally orientated, nurturing, and accommodating than males, consistent with the role of caregiver. Boys are generally expected to show less of these tender emotions, in contrast to the display rules for girls' emotions, they are allowed to express 'externalising' emotions such as anger, contempt, and disgust more than girls (Brody & Hall, 2008).

In summary, the literature and theory suggests that girls are more inclined to use maladaptive techniques to regulate their emotion such as suppressing (Brody & Hall, 2008). The current study also indicated that some of the participants tend to suppress feelings such as anger when they are in the school environment. The current study did not interview boys, therefore it is unable to speculate as to whether gender played a role in their tendency to

do this. Nevertheless, it is useful to know that girls in secondary school may be more inclined to express feelings such as anger at home rather than at school. This provides support for the idea that secondary school students may benefit from interventions which support them to develop more adaptive emotional regulation skills. While interventions such as this seem to be more commonplace in primary schools, the findings from this study could indicate a need for this to continue in secondary school, where emotional regulation interventions do not tend to be as commonplace. Further, it may highlight the need for interventions around gender expectations and breaking down potentially harmful gender stereotypes.

### **Sadness and Loneliness**

A salient theme throughout the participants accounts of their experience at school in was loneliness and sadness. These feelings stemmed from a lack of sense of belonging, for Lydia and Maisy this was a result of friendship difficulties within the secondary school and for Zoe, this was during primary school where she struggled to connect with anyone. When discussing her experience of sadness and loneliness, Lydia said:

*Well, it was so stressful. I hated it so much.*

*I hated it. It was like-like the worst. It was my-- It was one of my worst times ever because I was also lonely because they were only-- they were my only- they were my friends.*

*But that was only until, like, mid-argument and stuff, so I was actually alone all the time. And I used to sit in the toilet because I had no one to talk to.*

Similarly, Maisy said:

*Quite sad 'cause I have absolutely no friends*

*Because, um, I feel lonely both ways because lonely as in then because there's like nobody, like hardly anyone there. But lonely now as in like, I feel so small compared to everyone else.*

The participants described feeling alone and sad, despite being physically surrounded by hundreds of other students and adults. During times of sadness and loneliness, they describe lacking meaningful relationships in school and how they struggled with this emotionally.

Lydia discussed struggling to find a connection in primary school and how she looked forward to a fresh start at secondary school.

*near the end. So I kind of still have one friend near the end, but I was like only with them so I wasn't alone.*

Additionally, when Zoe is speaking about her experience of school without her friend, she says:

*I'd probably be sad a lot 'cause I'd be sitting alone.*

For all three participants, being alone in school is closely linked with sadness. Recent data from surveys (Australian Loneliness Report 2018; CIGNA 2018; Office of National Statistics 2018), reports (Coop Foundation 2018; Griffin 2010), and academic research (BBC Loneliness Experiment 2018) shows that feelings of loneliness are common among adolescents and young adults. The association between loneliness, and depressive symptoms is well established within the literature (Erzen and Çikrikci, 2018). Moreover, Orben, Tomova & Blakemore, (2020) identified loneliness as a particular risk factor for depression in adolescents, compared to children or adults. This is likely due to their increased sensitivity to peer acceptance and rejection as well as an increased need for a sense of belonging during this developmental period (Rubin, 2006; Haller et al., 2014; Smetana et al., 2015).

Research into early adolescent loneliness trajectories is concerning and links it to a range of negative implications such as poor sleep and physical health (Eccles et al., 2020), poor academic progress (Leigh-Hunt et al., 2017; Freyhofer et al., 2021) and psychological distress (Allen & Bowles, 2012). On the other hand, a sense of belonging in school is linked to positive outcomes such as better developed social emotional skills (Allen et al., 2016) and enhanced academic outcomes (Osterman, 2000).

Allen and Kern (2017) suggested that teacher support positively impacts sense of belonging and it was proposed that when students feel that their teachers care about them, are fair, and are a resource when problems occur, they feel more connected to school. Additionally, Bouchard and Berg (2017)'s study revealed that positive and caring social interactions with teachers as well as peer friendships fostered a sense of belonging in school for students.

Maslow (1943) hierarchy of needs theory regarded perceived belongingness as one of the most fundamental needs of the self. He argued that the need to belong has to be satisfied before other needs such as self-actualisation can be fulfilled. Self-actualisation refers to an individual's ability to achieve their 'ideal self' and is a stage which students need to reach before they are able to learn and reach their full potential. In the context of this study, this

suggests that students relationships in school play a vital role in fulfilling fundamental needs within Maslow's hierarchy.

The figure below illustrates Maslow's hierarchy of need and how it relates to feelings of belonging in school.

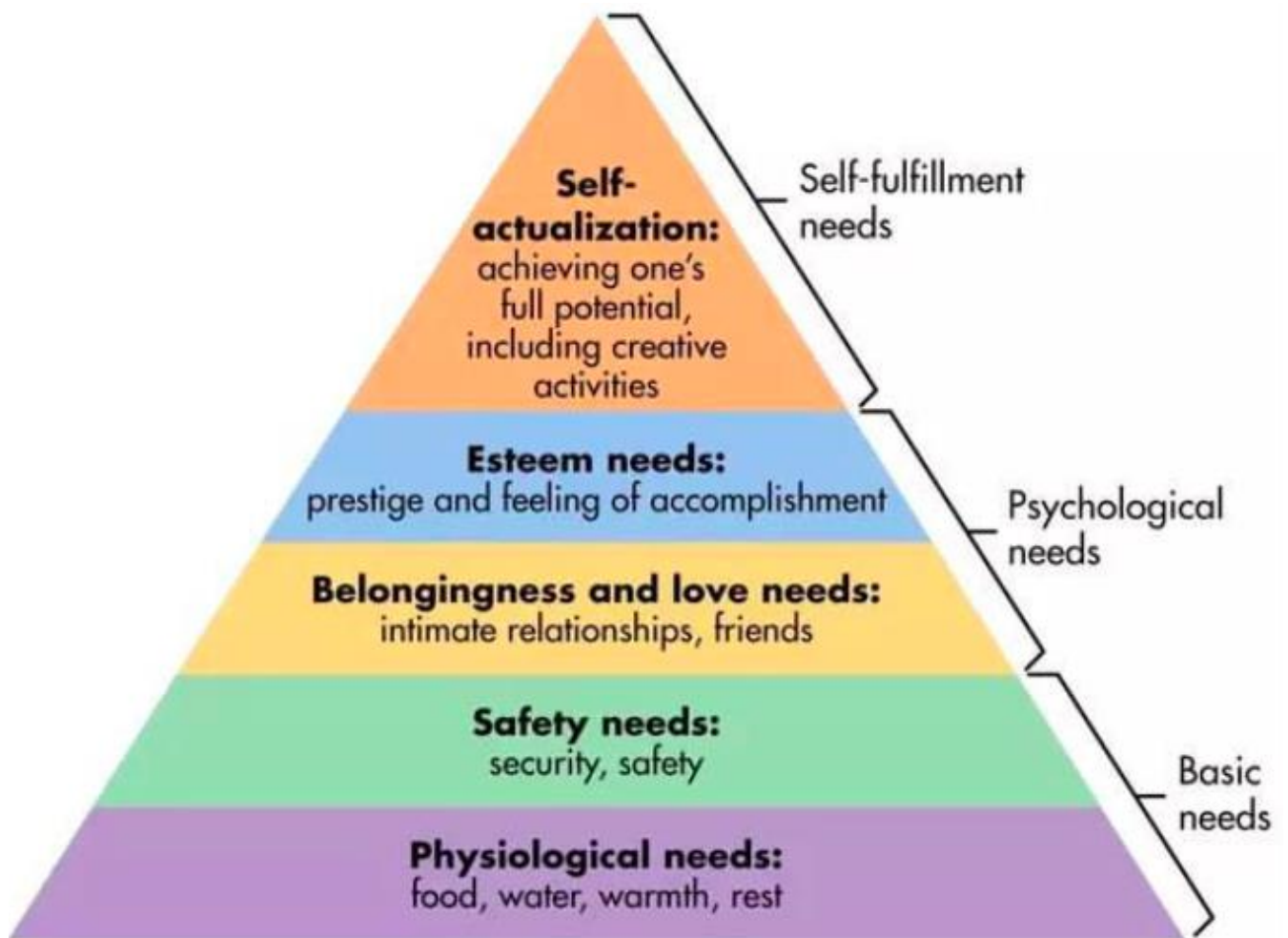


Figure 2: Maslow's hierarchy of needs (1943)  
Adapted version sourced from: Maslow's Hierachy of Needs and Inner-City Schools- (Im) Possibilities, (2017)

## **Negative Past Experiences**

The following group experiential theme, 'negative past experiences' includes the following subthemes:

- Fragility
- Trust

### **Fragility of Relationships**

A feeling of fragility was conveyed during the participant's descriptions of their relationships in school. For Lydia and Zoe, 'drama and rumours' were a significant part of their experience. They described the unpredictable nature of the rumours leading to transient friendships and seemed to feel a lack of control of when they would be involved in them.

Some research has suggested that girls are at an increased risk of being socially excluded or having rumours spread about them (Ortega and Moran-Merchan, 1999; Rigby and Slee, 1999; 2000; Whitney and Smith, 1993). However, this finding has not been replicated in other studies (Baldry and Farrington, 1999; Lösel and Bliesener, 1999; Olweus, 1993; Wolke et al., 2001). For Zoe and Lydia in particular, it seemed that the presence of rumours or drama amongst peers was a catalyst for friendship ruptures and



added to the essence of fragility when it came to their relationships in school. It was noted that the feeling of rumours and drama being a prominent part of the school's culture was in the context of an all-girls school. Given the research around girls and rumours, it would be interesting to explore whether this narrative was as strong in the context of a mixed-sex or all-boys school.

Maisy did not mention drama or rumours, however, she spoke of previous friendships which had dispelled for various reasons. She described some of her previous friendships as 'toxic' and leaving the friendship group in order to protect her wellbeing.

Given that adolescence is known to be a time of significant change (Smetana et al., 2015), it is somewhat unsurprising that the participants described changes, including ruptures and formation of new relationships, when it came to their experience of school. Despite some findings that long standing relationships tend to be beneficial during adolescents (Eccles, 1993), they do not appear to be commonplace. Poulin and Chan (2010) suggest that friendships stability is not 'the norm' during adolescents. Further, two other studies into the friendships of secondary school students found that 86% and 75% of adolescents reported that at least one of their friendships had dissolved within the past year (Flannery & Smith, 2021; Lessard and

Juvonen, 2018). Lending credence to these findings, the participants in the current study described frequent changes in friendship groups.

There is also some literature which suggests that friendship instability is a welcome occurrence in adolescents lives, as it increases opportunities for new social experiences and relationships that are better suited to adolescents changing needs (Bowker2011; Flannery and Smith, 2021; Hartl et al., 2015; Traylor et al., 2016) However, for the participants in the current study, it generally seemed to be more of a negative experience, as well as a source of distress. In line with the present findings, several studies suggest that the loss of a significant friendship increases risk of subsequent emotional problems in children and adolescents (Goodyer et al., 1991; Goodyer et al.,1989; Monroe et al., 1999). Lydia's quote below depicts her negative feelings regarding the experience of falling out with friends:

*I hated it. It was like-like the worst. It was my-- It was one of my worst times ever because I was also lonely because they were only-- they were my only-- they were my friends.*

Relationship fragility was certainly noted to be the case for the participants in the present study. However, the context in which these findings are situated is potentially important. The participants were all at the very beginning of their

secondary school journey when covid-19 resulted in school closures and frequent changes to normal school routines including the separation of year groups and staggered timetables. It is difficult to know the extent of the impact on the relational dynamics amongst the students and how their relationships would have played out if covid and subsequent school closures hadn't been such a significant part of their experience.

Some of the participants also commented on their perceived impact of covid in relation to their relationships in school.

The experience of covid-19 and the range of associated consequences is an important part of the participant's unique experiences and will have undoubtedly shaped part of their stories. Although not the main focus of this research, covid-19 had a significant impact on the lives of many, including children and young people, their relationships and their SEMH. Furthermore, the students were at particularly poignant points in their transition to secondary school and development as individuals when schools were closed as a result of covid-19. Furthermore, the participants will have experienced unprecedented levels of change, significant events and even potential trauma, that will have shaped their views. This further emphasises the place for research of this nature, which explores the unique experience of individuals in relation to a specific phenomenon and context.

## Trust

The participant's past experiences including the fragility of their relationships in school seemed to have led to some of the participants having significant issues with trusting others. The participants explicitly talked of how their negative experiences with friendships in the past had made them more cautious and less trusting in their current relationships with peers. Lydia's sentiment of 'trust no one, everybody lies' emphasised the extent to which the fragile, unpredictable nature of relationships in school had influenced her expectations and ability to rely upon or build trust in new relationships.

The literature within this area regards interpersonal trust as essential to the psychosocial adjustment of adolescents. Trust in others around them is thought to be associated with adolescent mental and physical health.

Rotenberg et al., (2023) examined relations between trust beliefs in significant others and interpersonal stress for adolescents and found that the adolescent's levels of trust in peers was negatively associated with interpersonal stress and internalising psychopathology. Similarly, Rotenberg (2010), Van Den Bos et al., (2011) and Clarke et al., (2021) found that interpersonal trust was associated with better mental health outcomes. These

findings suggest that trust in others can act as a buffer against stress, increasing resilience for adolescents.

Similarly to what was discussed in the initial theme 'sources of support', these findings are well placed within attachment theory (Bowlby, 1991). As mentioned earlier individuals can develop relationships outside of traditional child-parent attachments. It is thought that adolescence is a period in which peer relationships gradually take on more and more qualities of attachment relationships and can become key providers of both emotional and social support (Wilkinson, 2004; Fraley and Davis, 1997). Trust is an important aspect of attachment, as an individual must believe that the other is able to understand and respect their needs and desires. If the participants have had negative experiences in the past in relation to their relationships with peers, it could be suggested that, in line with the attachment theory, they have formed negative views and lack of trust within their internal working model of relationships with peers. There is a body of research which explores how parent attachment is associated with peer attachment styles in later life (Armsden and Greenberg 1987; Gorrese & Ruggieri 2012). However, there appears to be a lack of research which explores how previous experience such as a negative experience of friendships impacts on how individuals form attachments with peers later in life. As friendship changes and conflict seems to be a common occurrence within the lives of adolescents, it seems relevant

to further explore the potential impact of this on their future relationships. Further, this may also help inform approaches to take for professionals working with students who have social, emotional and mental health needs who may have experienced a great deal of change and turbulence in relation to their relationships in school.

In the context of existent research into the area of trust and relationships in school, it could be interpreted that the participants' issues with trust have potential to negatively impact on their psychological wellbeing and adjustment in school. As many of these issues seemed to have stemmed from previous relationship difficulties and negative experiences, it could be argued that preventative work around friendship management would be the optimal way to alleviate the trust issues and the potential for subsequent harm. As well as this, it could be beneficial to increase trust building opportunities within schools. Additionally, the students negative past experiences and the impact on their trust provides support for the implementation of restorative justice approaches being used in schools. Within this, students may have opportunities to repair harm and restore more healthy relationships with those they have had issues with (Reimer, 2020).

## **Identity**

The final theme is identity. Branje et al (2020) suggests that developing a coherent identity is one of the key developmental tasks in adolescence. There seemed to be clear links between the participant's experiences and accounts of their relationships in school and their sense of identity. The participants in the current study conveyed experiences of feeling part of a group as well as times where they had felt like outsiders and this was considered in relation to existing theory and literature. Therefore, the final group experiential theme is 'identity' and it incorporates the following two subthemes:

- View of themselves
- Feeling Different

### **View of Themselves**

Throughout the interviews, the participants revealed insight into how they viewed themselves and through their accounts, aspects of their identity came to the fore. Interestingly, it was noted that the participants seemed to focus on their more positive attributes when they were thinking about themselves in the context of some of their closer relationships. For example, when describing how their friends or favourite teachers would describe them, they used much more positive adjectives such as 'playful', 'hardworking' or 'funny'.

However, there was also noted to be a stark contrast between how they described themselves, dependent on context. For example, they seemed to view themselves in a much more positive light when they were considering themselves as part of their friendship groups compared with when they were considering how 'outsiders' such as their classmates perceive them.

For instance, when considering how her classmates perceive her, Maisy said:

*They just think I'm weird.*

Similarly, Lydia felt that some of her peers would have negative things to say about her and Zoe shared her concerns regarding other people in class judging her, specifically in relation to her learning needs.

Branje et al.'s review into the mechanisms of identity development found that, for adolescents in particular, the development of personal identity is also strongly embedded within the context of the broader peer group (2021).

Similarly, in Albarello et al. 2018 study, adolescents' identification with their classmates and with their group of friends over time predicted stronger interpersonal identity commitment and exploration, as well as lower reconsideration. These findings suggest that when adolescents are comfortable and at ease in their larger peer groups, they have a basis from which they can explore their personal identity. In line with this, the participants in the current study seemed to have formed ideas about their identity based on the role they took up within their friendship group. Additionally, the way in



which they viewed themselves seemed to be more positive when they considered themselves as part of a group.

A prominent theory in relation to the group experiential theme of identity and the participants view of themselves, is Erikson's theory of psychosocial development (1950). Within this theory, Erikson proposes that identity formation is intrinsically linked to relationships. Erikson suggests that a primary task during adolescence is to solve the crisis of identity vs role confusion. This involves an individual forming their own sense of unique identity and finding the social environment in which they feel they belong and can create meaningful relationships with other people. In relation to adolescent development, Erikson suggested that adolescents seek to understand their sense of self and how they fit into society, while also seeking validation and acceptance from their peers.

Social identity theory posits that successful resolution of this crisis leads to the development of a strong sense of identity, which provides adolescents with a foundation for future social interactions and relationships. On the other hand, failure to resolve the crisis can lead to feelings of confusion and lack of direction.

Erikson also emphasized the importance of social context in the development of identity, highlighting the role of family, peers, and culture in shaping an individual's sense of self. Overall, Erikson's social identity theory emphasizes

the importance of adolescent identity development as a crucial aspect of healthy psychosocial development and the role in which their relationships play in contributing to this. In line with this theory, Sheffield and Morgan (2017) found that being classified as having needs within the area of SEMH influenced the way in which students viewed and described themselves. The findings from the current study indicate that, as well as being categorised as having SEMH needs, the extent to which students feel inside or outside of a group of peers or feel 'different', has an impact on their sense of identity.

### **Feeling Different**

Some of the girls described feeling different from their peers. They spoke of their differences and at times, compared themselves to their peers. Some of them spoke of their difficulties 'finding a connection' with people and others mentioned how they were friends with people in other year groups as they are 'more on their wavelength'.

Adolescence is a time where individuals begin to question and explore their identity, including the person they want to be and the roles they want to occupy in society (Meeus et al., 2010). During this time, adolescents may become very aware of their similarities and differences in relation to those

around them. In line with this, there were several occasions when they participants in the current study implied feeling different from others.

There was a sense that the participants felt the need to defend their difference, as if it may be something that made them more vulnerable within the context of the school setting.

Zoe's additional learning needs also appeared to inform her views about herself and formed an additional layer of her identity as she referred to her dyslexia, for example, several times throughout the interview. Maisy also referred to her feelings of being different from others. Humour was perceived to be used as a potential defense for Maisy, as she seemed to trivialize potentially serious or uncomfortable topics of conversation. For example, Maisy sniggered and took on a sarcastic tone as she said:

*... I got to go to school 'cause I'm adopted. So special needs and yeah, stuff.*

Sheffield & Morgan's research (2017), exploring the perceptions and experiences of young people who were classified as having needs within the area of SEMH (similar to the participants in the current study) found that the CYP often applied formal and informal labels to themselves such as "special needs", "school phobic", "dyslexia" and "different". As demonstrated in the

previous quote, the participants in the current study echoed some of these descriptions.

As set out in the research question and consequent sample criteria, all the participants in the current study are categorised as having primary SEN needs in the area of SEMH. It was interesting and valuable to hear how, for some participants, identifying with the label of SEN seemed to contribute to elements of their identity. While there are studies which examine the impact of SEN 'labels' and categorization on the self-concept of adults (Beart et al., 2005; Higgins et al., 2002), there is limited research which explores how being categorised as having SEMH needs impacts on the identity of younger people. In one such study, adolescents viewed themselves more negatively as a result of having an SEN label (Humphrey & Lewis, 2008).

The experience of the participants in this study and how they described feeling different to those around them was considered in relation to social comparison theory (Festinger 1954). According to social comparison theory, individuals determine their own self-worth by comparing themselves to others and looking for differences and similarities. The comparison can be upward or downward, depending on whether the individual feels superior or inferior to the person they are comparing themselves to. For CYP with special educational needs, including in the area of SEMH, it may be that that they

compare themselves to others, who do not have additional needs in this area (Levine, 1983; Buunk, Kuyper & Van der Zee, 2005). In this context, social comparison can become particularly salient as they try to make sense of their own abilities and compare them to those of other students.

When considering social comparison theory in the school context, research suggests that the ideal comparison target for students seems to constitute a classmate who resembles them in age, sex, and possibly other related or unrelated attributes but who performs better than they do (Schunk, 1987; Wheeler & Suls, 2005). For the participants in the current study, this seemed to be the case, as they compared themselves to students in their class. The literature and theory in this area serve to emphasise the importance of a school environment which fosters a sense of inclusion and acceptance, so that students can feel valued for their unique strengths and contributions, rather than being defined by their differences.

### Single-sex Schools

Although not a deliberate choice, as mentioned earlier, the data from the current study was collected in a single sex secondary school. Therefore, in order to contextualise the findings of this research, a search of the literature around single-sex schools and relationships was deemed appropriate.

Although the research in this specific area was generally sparse, there were some studies which explored factors relating to relationships, focusing specifically on single-sex schools. A study by Osborne-Oliver (2008) set out to explore whether female students' perceptions of social support as well as their involvement in bullying differed between students enrolled in co-educational and single-sex schools. Results indicated that students attending single-sex schools reported being a victim of bullying less frequently than their co-educated counterparts. There was found to be no significant difference between single-sex and co-educated students when considering their perceived social support. Osborne-Oliver gathered some interesting findings and demonstrate the potential influence of a single-sex context on relational dynamics in a school. However, there are many other contextual factors that will have inevitably influenced their findings. For example, this research took place were private schools, the schools were also situated in New York and the research was conducted during one specific year (2008). All of these factors will have been at play and will have had an influence on findings. Therefore, it is important to emphasise that research of this nature (qualitative, ideographic, experiential) is not intended to be generalised across contexts but sheds light on the experiences of specific people in a specific context.

A study by Johnson & Gastic (2014) also explored the notion of bullying. Additionally, they considered this in relation to gender conformity and attendance in either single-sex or co-educational schools. Their findings indicated that gender nonconforming students, and students who vary from their dominant school gender norms, are likely to experience bullying regardless of school context. Similarly to the previous study, the findings contribute to a complicated terrain in the research literature on single-sex schools.

A third and final study was found, by Pahike & Hyde (2016), which explored various outcomes associated with single-sex schooling such as academic achievement and student attitudes. Their findings suggest that single-sex schooling is not more effective than co-educational schooling at improving students' academic achievement or attitudes. However, this study did not look directly at factors relating to relationships or SEMH. In keeping with this, the authors of this research suggest that more work is needed to explore a broader range of outcomes and examine developmental factors that may influence the effectiveness of various types of schooling.

The very few studies found in this area highlight the complexities of research in organisations that are as multifaceted as schools. Furthermore, it highlights

a significant gap in the literature which explores the experience of students in a range of different school contexts.

### **Implications of the Research**

The participants in this study described their relationships in school as a significant aspect of their experience. They provided useful insight into the links between their relationships and their mental health including the role of peers and teachers as well as their negative experiences and the impact on their sense of identity. Consequently, there are several implications which can be drawn from this research.

#### **Peer conflict, separation from friends and links to distress**

Participants portrayed their relationships in school as particularly fragile.

Although existing research suggests that this is not unusual during adolescence (Chan 2010; Smetana et al., 2015), it should be noted that this seemed to be a common source of distress for the young people. With this considered, students in secondary school may benefit from having more opportunities to develop their skills in navigating social situations, repairing



ruptured relationships and enhancing trust amongst one another. Schools could try to promote healthy peer relationships through introducing or increasing social emotional learning modules and offering safe spaces for issues to be discussed and resolved. As well as this, the findings support the idea of schools implementing restorative approaches in response to relationship and/ or discipline difficulties and to support students, for example, through peer mediation (Gregory et al., 2016; McCluskey, G. 2014).

Additionally, some participants were experiencing feelings of mistrust as a result of negative past experiences. With this in mind, schools could strive to combat experiences of peer victimisation or ostracization through improving school policies, skills surrounding bystander intervention and improving school ethos around inclusion.

EPs have knowledge skills and experience in a range of relevant areas such as designing and facilitating training, bringing about organisational change and working at different levels in schools (Ruttledge, 2022). EPs could support this by offering training to school staff around resolving peer conflict, or coaching. Additionally, EPs can deliver interventions with students around healthy peer relationships and developing social skills. There are a range of interventions designed to support with just this. For example, the Emotional Literacy Support Assistant programme, 'Circle of Friends' (Pearpoint, forest & Snow, 1992) (the principles of which coincide with the findings of the current

study) aims to use ideas such as peer modelling to increase inclusion and develop a support network around individuals in the school community who are experiencing social difficulties. Similarly, 'Talkabout for Teens' (Kelly, 2017) aims to help adolescents to develop the necessary skills to form meaningful relationships in school and manage the important but often fragile relationships that the current study found to be associated with this period of development. Alternatively, EPs could support school staff in delivering these interventions.

It may be useful for those involved in organising the more procedural aspects of the school day, such as timetables, group work and class sets for students, to consider the findings from this research. Feelings of loneliness, stress and overall discomfort were felt by some students during times where they were separated from friends or when they were forced to be in proximity to students they had conflict with. With this in mind, additional consideration may be useful when organising students into different groups. There could perhaps be some elements of the school day in which students are asked to provide preferences relating to the students they share lessons with or students could be placed in groups according to shared interests or factors that may increase their likelihood to develop friendships. There is scope for further research in this area, for example, the outcomes associated with

increased student autonomy (e.g. in relation to their timetable or those they work closely with).

### **Anxiety, avoidance and risk and protective factors.**

The participants described feelings of anxiety as a result of difficulties with peer relationships and how it led to them dreading or avoiding certain aspects of school.

One of the participants described how she intentionally arrived late to school to avoid attending tutor time, as she had fallen out with friends. She shared how, despite receiving detentions from school, she continued to arrive late on purpose as she would rather this than be in the anxiety provoking situation that was tutor time.

Firstly, this experience demonstrates the limitations associated with punitive approaches such as detentions, particularly in situations like Lydia's. Instead, it provides support for enhancing communication between school staff and students who do not comply with behavioural expectations such as attending school on time. Lewin's equation states that behaviour is a function of a person's personality, as well as their environment (1946). Additionally, 'personality' is considered to be the person as a whole and it refers to how all of an individual's experiences have informed how they view the world and respond to it in that moment. An idea which Lewin refers to as 'Life Space'. In

accordance with Lewin's theory, Lydia's behaviour (missing or arriving late to school) was a result of factors in her environment (conflict and fear of seeing certain peers), her perception of this and her existing skills/ experience of how to manage this. Listening to Lydia's experience provided explanation for why she was breaking the school rules. In this case, this seemed more beneficial than giving her a detention which would have been less likely to address the root of the problem. Further, this student's experience provides support for research and recommendations around EBSA prevention, such as a multidisciplinary approach (Ingul, Havik & Heyne, 2019). In Lydia's case, a multidisciplinary approach including communication between home and various members of school staff, resulted in the situation being improved, so that she was reintegrated back in to attending the full school day.

Fortunately, Lydia never got to a stage where she was missing school entirely, however, research around EBSA and risk factors suggest that, without intervention, this could have been the case. Earlier in the chapter, Bronfenbrenner's ecological model was outlined, as a useful framework to unpick Lydia's experience of anxiety and avoiding school. With this considered, there are many suggestions which can be made with regards to the issue of EBSA and relationships in school. For example, the findings and literature highlight the importance of effective collaboration and common goals between CYP, school, parents and other services to address the

factors that might be causing or maintaining EBSA. EPs are well placed to support with this as they have knowledge of up-to-date research, theory and development of CYP. At a more systemic level, EPs could work with schools to promote regular attendance for all students and help design person-centred bespoke interventions to identify and target at risk students (Nuttall & Woods 2013). It could also be considered that EPs have the ability to use their professional platform to make evoke change within the wider systems, for example, helping to inform government policy (Birch, Fredrickson & Miller, 2015).

### **One key adult**

Another key finding was that all participants identified one key adult who they felt they would approach for support in school. Interestingly, the key adults were all subject teachers rather than pastoral staff or allocated mentors.

Research around the 'natural mentorship' supports this finding and the idea that all members of staff including subject teachers could be called upon for emotional support by their students (Van Dam et al., 2018). These findings highlight the importance of a whole school approach to mental health.

Research suggests that many teachers do not feel equipped to support with the emotional wellbeing of the students they work with (Department for

Education, 2017). As well as this, many schools report a lack of capacity to train all teachers in this area (Department for Education, 2017). Increased government funding to schools so that they can increase capacity and develop skills in these areas would be beneficial. Furthermore, research suggests that investing in more preventative measures such as whole school approaches to mental health and wellbeing, are a much more efficient use of funding than focusing on intervention (Fazel et al., 2014; Arango et al., 2018) Also in support of this suggestion, Deighton et al., (2019) explored potential factors leading to SEMH needs and potential implications. As a result of their findings, they suggested that significant resourcing and additional support provision is essential to create more systemic solutions, such as teacher upskilling, to support CYP mental health.

In line with this finding, EPs can provide support to key teachers in the form of supervision, training or consultation. Additionally, EPs are well-placed to provide whole school training in relation to mental health, positive student-teacher relationships and help to embed a whole-school mental health promoting ethos (Ruttledge, 2022).

### **Teacher retention and knowledge of SEN**

Finally, for some participants a lack of teacher retention was a great source of frustration. One participant shared how a lack of consistent teachers led to a

lack of confidence in her teacher's ability to understand and support her with her additional learning needs. The same participant went on to explain how this also reduced her feelings of motivation and willingness to put in effort when it came to her learning tasks.

This finding has implications that relate to teacher retention and teacher training. Schools may consider placing more emphasis on developing their knowledge and understanding of individual students, their learning needs and how these present in the classroom. Furthermore, EPs can offer skills and expertise in relation to different areas of SEN and how best to support said pupils. For students with EHCPs or who have had involvement from EPs, a process of assess, plan, do, review should involve EPs reviewing their recommendations and support schools to implement them (CoP, 2015).

At the same time, the extremely challenging context in which schools currently find themselves is acknowledged. In the current climate of austerity, schools face significant challenges relating to expectations, funding and a lack of capacity which would likely act as a barrier to implementing these suggestions.

## **Future Research**

The findings from the present study highlighted areas in which there is scope to conduct future research. Some directions for future research could include:

- An exploration of school staff's views regarding the emotional or mental health support that they provide.
- Teacher wellbeing and how this relates to a student's likelihood to perceive them as a source of support.
- The experience of students who have received support from an EP in relation to their SEMH and/or relationships in school
- The experience of students who have been involved in interventions to support their relationships in school.
- A review of supervision, training and/or consultation provided to schools to develop their skills and confidence in providing students with mental health support.
- Longitudinal research around student's relationships in school and associated future outcomes.
- It would be interesting to replicate this study within a mixed sex school, in order to compare findings.

## **Strengths and Limitations**

A strength of this research was its ability to give a voice to a relatively underrepresented population of girls with SEMH needs (Osler, 2006; Martin,



2019). As such, a lot of research in this area is quantitative, for example, exploring correlations between different variables and relationships. The present study design allowed an in-depth exploration of the participants experience. The small sample enabled a detailed focus on individual pupil's experiences whilst acknowledging their unique perspectives. Further, it is felt that the use of semi-structured interviews was appropriate as it enabled the participants to spontaneously articulate their experience, speak about what they felt to be important and tell their story in a way that made sense to them. In addition to this, the interviewer was able to maintain some control over the content of the interview in order to appropriately address the research question.

There are limitations associated with the size of the sample as interviews were only conducted with three participants. Although attempts were made to gather a larger sample, they were unsuccessful. The difficulty in reaching this group of participants has been noted and reflected on in previous sections of this thesis. Furthermore, for novice IPA researchers, like the researcher in the current study, Smith, Flowers and Larkin (2022) advocate that three participants is an optimum number as it allows the steps of IPA to be followed well, analysing each case individually before finding a pattern of experience across cases. In summary, the IPA approach favours quality over quantity,

and the small sample size meant that the analysis was thorough and completed to an optimal standard.

An additional feature of this study which could be considered a limitation is the lack of generalisability of the findings. IPA aims to explore the lived experiences of a particular group. Due to the nature of this methodology, the findings do not stand on their own as generalisable. However, IPA provides an opportunity for theoretical generalisability. As Smith et al. (2009) write, 'Immediate claims are therefore bounded by the group studied but an extension can be considered through theoretical generalisability, where the reader of the report is able to assess the evidence in relation to their existing professional and experiential knowledge' (p. 3-4). It is therefore hoped that readers of this research will be able to apply and relate the findings to their own practice.

Another limitation relates to the prompts and attempts to build rapport with the participants during the interviews. Smith et al., advise that IPA should be carried out with as little prompting from the researcher as possible, so that their influence on what the participant says is minimised and does not lead the narrative through assumptions or expressions of empathy (2009). However, they also note that children and young people may need more prompting than adults when being interviewed.

In line with this, some of the participants being interviewed had been described by teachers as struggling with confidence, anxiety and emotional literacy. Upon interviewing them, some participants needed more prompting than was intended by the researcher. On reading the transcripts, the researcher reflected on how some questions were less open than advised and at times empathy or agreeableness was portrayed.

Within the interviews, the researcher felt inclined to build rapport and attempt to make the participants feel at ease. The researcher has reflected on her role as a trainee educational psychologist and experience working with other young people in this context and how it may have led to particular valences within role. Smith *et al.* (2009) advise that researchers use their professional training and judgment to ensure that child participants or those with learning difficulties are able to engage fully in the interviews. It was felt that the researchers training as an educational psychologist, which involves active listening and empathy, was in line with their suggestions and helped the participants to engage with the process. Furthermore, the researcher did not feel the prompts had an impact on the participants account of their experiences.

## **Reflections on the Research Process**

### **Recruitment**

I found the recruitment stage of the research process to be one of the most challenging. I experienced feelings of anxiety that I believe were associated with a lack of control. After I had shared my research advert with the relevant people, I was left feeling helpless as I waited for responses. As I struggled to get enough participants, I was forced to adapt my original recruitment plan (see appendix A3 for changes). After these changes I fortunately found three participants who were willing to participate in my research. However, I reflected on my feelings of anxiety as a result of a lack of control. I can draw parallels between these feelings and how students may feel when navigating a school system, where often, their voice is not heard, and they have limited control over the situation in which they find themselves. In addition to this, I reflected on the difficulty in engaging secondary schools and wondered whether this was a consequence of their lack of capacity in so many aspects including time and resources.

Although I found the recruitment process challenging, I gained some valuable learning from the experience. I specifically learnt of the importance of language, my emotional state and what I may have been projecting during my attempts to engage schools with my research. This was helpfully highlighted to me by a main grade EP on my placement, whom I will give the pseudonym Laura. I emailed said Laura to ask her to share a recruitment email with her secondary schools as she was their link EP. The email thread was headed up with 'Desperate call for participants.' Laura agreed to approach her schools

but made the suggestion that I reframed my request to one which might be perceived more positively such as 'Opportunity for schools'. Laura's suggestion reminded me of how powerful language could be in this context. Furthermore, it emphasized the value in peer supervision and seeking other people's perspectives during what can be a very demanding process. I felt that Laura was able to provide a fresh outlook, particularly as I was so entrenched in the research process, the feelings of 'the unknown' and the stress and anxiety that were, at times, associated with it. These are helpful learning points that I will continue to be mindful of in future research endeavors as well as many other aspects of my practice.

## Interviews

During the interviews, I felt that my role as a trainee educational psychologist and experience in working with young people was advantageous. I felt that it helped me to build rapport with the participants. As well as this, I shared characteristics such as gender and previous experience of attending secondary school. However, I was mindful of how this may have increased my tendency to over identify with the students and expect or assume things that they would say. I found keeping a research diary and having access to regular supervision to be helpful in encouraging me to reflect throughout the process and separate my views from participants, 'bracketing off' where possible. I also reflected upon my position as a researcher and the feelings I

was experiencing as I took up my role. For example, I feel I was probably more anxious as I went in to the initial interview and I have considered how this may have impacted on things like my tendency to speak to 'fill space' or say or do things which may have influenced the direction the interview took. However, the benefit of the IPA approach is that it does not deny the influence of the researcher. Instead, I tried to be as transparent as possible about my experience, characteristics, viewpoint and anything else that I may have been bringing to the research. I acknowledge that, by bringing feelings such as anxiety (probably more so in the initial interview) I may have influenced the accounts of the first participant more than I did in the last interview (as I was less nervous and more experienced).

## Analysis

As I embarked on my first IPA study, I found the guidance from Smith, Flowers and Larkin (2022), to be immensely valuable. Their structured IPA framework made the analysis process less daunting, while their flexibility in relation to its iterative approach provided me with space to explore and build upon different avenues of thought.

I learned the importance of 'hanging in there' and remaining patient. I experienced feelings of frustration and excitement throughout the process. As I began to build connections, gain deeper insight and tried to convey my

interpretations of the participants experience, I felt an overwhelming sense of reward.

## **Conclusion**

This research aimed to explore how secondary aged girls with SEMH needs describe and make sense of their relationships in school. A literature review revealed that, qualitative research in this area is limited. Other research in this area has focused on exploring adolescent relationships in school in a constricted way, for example by exploring their relationship in relation to specific factors or variables like bullying or exclusion.

The current research was an IPA study with three participants who attended the same, single-sex secondary school in a London borough.

The students discussed their experiences of attending secondary school and the relationships that they had developed and found meaningful, revealing the significant and multifaceted role of the connections those around them. The research uncovered differences and similarities between the participants interviews and were grouped into the following themes:

- Sources of Support
- The Emotional Experience
- Difficult Past Experiences
- Identity

The students identified peers and class teachers as their main sources of support, providing them with a space where they felt understood and had their feelings validated. All participants seemed to identify at least one key adult whom they trusted to support them with their problems in school.

Perceived busyness and understanding of needs were factors which impacted the student's likelihood to identify a member of staff as a source of support. The participants experienced a range of emotions as a consequence of their relationships in school but the significance of peer relationships, their identity and overall wellbeing was apparent throughout all participants accounts.

Based on the findings, a range of suggestions have been put forward. These relate to the opportunities held by schools, EPs and the wider system, in improving the support and experience of students with SEMH needs in secondary school.

The findings from this study emphasise the importance and value in seeking insight from the students themselves, as we strive to improve our understanding and support students' social, emotional and mental health needs. It is hoped that future research will continue to use the voice of CYP with SEN as a powerful tool to inform good practice.



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## **Appendices**

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## **APPENDIX A: Ethical approval**

### **A1: TREC Form**

The Tavistock and Portman   
NHS Foundation Trust

#### **Tavistock and Portman Trust Research Ethics Committee (TREC) APPLICATION FOR ETHICAL REVIEW OF STUDENT RESEARCH PROJECTS**

**This application should be submitted alongside copies of any supporting documentation which will be handed to participants, including a participant information sheet, consent form, self-completion survey or questionnaire.**

Where a form is submitted and sections are incomplete, the form will not be considered by TREC and will be returned to the applicant for completion.

For further guidance please contact Paru Jeram ([academicquality@tavi-port.nhs.uk](mailto:academicquality@tavi-port.nhs.uk))

#### **FOR ALL APPLICANTS**



**If you already have ethical approval from another body (including HRA/IRAS) please submit the application form and outcome letters. You need only complete sections of the TREC form which are NOT covered in your existing approval**

Is your project considered as 'research' according to the HRA tool? ( <a href="http://www.hra-decisiontools.org.uk/research/index.html">http://www.hra-decisiontools.org.uk/research/index.html</a> )	Yes
Will your project involve participants who are under 18 or who are classed as vulnerable? (see section 7)	Yes
Will your project include data collection outside of the UK?	No

**SECTION A: PROJECT DETAILS**

<b>Project title</b>	How do secondary age girls with SEMH needs describe and make sense of their relationships in school?		
<b>Proposed project start date</b>	March 2022	<b>Anticipated project end date</b>	August 2023
<b>Principle Investigator (normally your Research Supervisor):</b> Dale Bartle			
<b>Please note: TREC approval will only be given for the length of the project as stated above up to a maximum of 6 years. Projects exceeding these timeframes will need additional ethical approval</b>			
<b>Has NHS or other approval been sought for this research including through submission via Research Application System (IRAS) or to the Health Research Authority (HRA)?</b>	YES (NRES approval) <input type="checkbox"/>	YES (HRA approval) <input type="checkbox"/>	Other <input type="checkbox"/>
	NO <input checked="" type="checkbox"/>		
<b>If you already have ethical approval from another body (including HRA/IRAS) please submit the application form and outcome letters.</b>			

**SECTION B: APPLICANT DETAILS**

<b>Name of Researcher</b>	Charlotte Cracknell
<b>Programme of Study and Target Award</b>	Professional doctorate for child, community and educational psychology
<b>Email address</b>	ccracknell@tavi-port.nhs.uk
<b>Contact telephone number</b>	07825163888

**SECTION C: CONFLICTS OF INTEREST**

<p><b>Will any of the researchers or their institutions receive any other benefits or incentives for taking part in this research over and above their normal salary package or the costs of undertaking the research?</b></p> <p>YES <input type="checkbox"/> NO <input checked="" type="checkbox"/></p> <p>If YES, please detail below:</p>

<p><b>Is there any further possibility for conflict of interest? YES <input type="checkbox"/> NO <input checked="" type="checkbox"/></b></p>
<p><b>Are you proposing to conduct this work in a location where you work or have a placement?</b></p> <p><b>YES <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> NO <input type="checkbox"/></b></p> <p>If <b>YES</b>, please detail below outline how you will avoid issues arising around colleagues being involved in this project:</p> <p>Share research proposal at team meeting. Gather the teams feedback. Speak with the Educational Psychologists (EPs) allocated to each school I work with. Consult Principal EP.</p>

<p><b>Is your project being commissioned by and/or carried out on behalf of a body external to the Trust? (for example; commissioned by a local authority, school, care home, other NHS Trust or other organisation).</b></p> <p><small>*Please note that 'external' is defined as an organisation which is external to the Tavistock and Portman NHS Foundation Trust (Trust)</small></p>	<p><b>YES <input type="checkbox"/> NO <input checked="" type="checkbox"/></b></p>
<p>If <b>YES</b>, please add details here:</p>	
<p><b>Will you be required to get further ethical approval after receiving TREC approval?</b></p> <p>If <b>YES</b>, please supply details of the ethical approval bodies below AND include any letters of approval from the ethical approval bodies (letters received after receiving TREC approval should be submitted to complete your record):</p>	<p><b>YES <input type="checkbox"/> NO <input checked="" type="checkbox"/></b></p>
<p>If your project is being undertaken with one or more clinical services or organisations external to the Trust, please provide details of these:</p>	
<p>If you still need to agree these arrangements or if you can only approach organisations after you have ethical approval, please identify the types of organisations (eg. schools or clinical services) you wish to approach:</p>	
<p>Secondary schools. ELSA network/ ELSA supervisors from my LA.</p>	
<p><b>Do you have approval from the organisations detailed above? (this includes R&amp;D approval where relevant)</b></p> <p>Please attach approval letters to this application. Any approval letters received after TREC approval has been granted MUST be submitted to be appended to your record</p>	<p><b>YES <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> NO <input type="checkbox"/> NA <input type="checkbox"/></b></p>

**SECTION D: SIGNATURES AND DECLARATIONS**

**APPLICANT DECLARATION**

I confirm that:

- The information contained in this application is, to the best of my knowledge, correct and up to date.
- I have attempted to identify all risks related to the research.
- I acknowledge my obligations and commitment to upholding ethical principles and to keep my supervisor updated with the progress of my research
- I am aware that for cases of proven misconduct, it may result in formal disciplinary proceedings and/or the cancellation of the proposed research.
- I understand that if my project design, methodology or method of data collection changes I must seek an amendment to my ethical approvals as failure to do so, may result in a report of academic and/or research misconduct.


<b>Applicant (print name)</b>	CHARLOTTE CRACKNELL
<b>Signed</b>	C.Cracknell
<b>Date</b>	04/02/2022

**FOR RESEARCH DEGREE STUDENT APPLICANTS ONLY**


<b>Name of Supervisor/Principal Investigator</b>	Dale Bartle
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**Supervisor –**

- Does the student have the necessary skills to carry out the research?  
**YES**
- Is the participant information sheet, consent form and any other documentation appropriate?  
**YES**
- Are the procedures for recruitment of participants and obtaining informed consent suitable and sufficient?  
**YES**
- Where required, does the researcher have current Disclosure and Barring Service (DBS) clearance?  
**YES**

<b>Signed</b>	
<b>Date</b>	26.11.22

**COURSE LEAD/RESEARCH LEAD**Does the proposed research as detailed herein have your support to proceed? YES  NO 

<b>Signed</b>	
<b>Date</b>	27.11.2022

**SECTION E: DETAILS OF THE PROPOSED RESEARCH**

1. Provide a brief description of the proposed research, including the requirements of participants. This must be in lay terms and free from technical or discipline specific terminology or jargon. If such terms are required, please ensure they are adequately explained (Do not exceed 500 words)

This research seeks to explore how secondary age (11-16) girls with Social Emotional Mental Health needs describe and make sense of their staff and peer relationships in school. I am seeking to interview six young people who are part of the SEN register or identified by their SENCO as having a primary need of SEMH. I intend to recruit participants from schools and education settings from within the Local Authority at which I am on placement as a Trainee Educational Psychologist.

Participants will be asked to attend a semi-structured interview with the researcher which will follow the Relational Mapping Interview framework (Boden, Larkin & Iyer, 2019). This framework utilises a 'draw-talk-draw-talk' interview arc whereby participants will be asked to visually represent their school relationships using drawing materials. I will use verbal prompts and open questions to help the participant to elicit a 'rich' description of their relationships in school.

The research question which guides this research is: How do secondary age girls with SEMH needs describe and make sense of their relationships in school?

Interviews will take place in a quiet room in the school or setting which the young person attends. The interviews will be recorded on audiotape and drawings will be collected from the young person at the end of the interview. Participants will be informed in advance that their drawing will be kept by the researcher for the purpose of supporting the analysis phase of the research. After the interviews are completed, I will analyse transcripts using Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA). Participants' drawings will be analysed in accordance with the Relational Mapping Interview framework process (Boden, Larkin & Iyer, 2019) which is a visual and verbal method for use specifically within IPA framed research.

**2. Provide a statement on the aims and significance of the proposed research, including potential impact to knowledge and understanding in the field (where appropriate, indicate the associated hypothesis which will be tested). This should be a clear justification of the proposed research, why it should proceed and a statement on any anticipated benefits to the community. (Do not exceed 700 words)**

Promoting the mental health and well-being of adolescents has increasingly become a priority for legislation in the UK. The Special Educational Needs and Disability (SEND) Code of Practice (DfE, 2015) highlights the increasing responsibility professionals have for supporting and promoting pupils' social, emotional and mental health (SEMH) needs, a role which is especially pertinent for schools. As well as this, the lack of resource available in services such as CAMHS has led to a real push towards preventative, lower level interventions being promoted in schools. This could include helping girls develop relationships which they perceive to be protective. Before this can be done, first hand insight needs to be gained in to this area.

Positive peer relationships for all adolescents are linked to social and emotional wellbeing (Blatchford, Pellegrini & Baines, 2016; La Greca & Harrison, 2005). Additionally, relationships were repeatedly identified, in the literature, as an influencing factor on young people's educational experiences (O'Connor et al, 2011; Nind et al, 2012; Jalali & Morgan, 2017). Negative relationships with school staff were raised as being a significant risk factor for young people with SEMH needs and young people attributed some of the behavioural difficulties they experienced to negative relationships with members of school staff (Cosma & Soni, 2019). CYP spend around 15,000 hours at school (Oberle & Schonert-Reichl, 2016), continued research around how they perceive their relationships at school seems crucial.

Research has consistently reported that around 2/3 to 3/4 of children and young people referred for SEN support are male (Rutter et al., 1970; Vardill & Calvert, 2000). In England in 2019/20, males accounted for 73.1% of pupils with Education, Health, and Care Plans (EHCPs), the most resource-intensive form of SEN support (Department for Education, 2020). This is the case despite statistics showing that females are almost three times as likely to experience a common mental health issue than men, they are twice as likely to be diagnosed with anxiety (Remes, Brayne, Lafortune, 2016) and they are nearly three times more likely to report having self-harmed (McManus, Bebbington, Jenkins, Brugha, 2016).

Since our understanding of the CYP experiences is based predominantly from males, interventions may be more geared towards boys. For **girls**, we may be overlooking specific gender-related relationship

perceptions. This could mean that girls with SEN (in this case SEMH) are receiving disproportionate attention from EPs, not only in the case of referrals but in the form of research into their views.

This research aims to give a voice to underrepresented population of girls who may be flying under the radar because they present as less disruptive than the boys in their class.

The proposed study seeks to explore young girls' experiences of their relationships in school, without specifying and making assumptions about the types of relationships that they find meaningful in school and may wish to discuss. For this reason, the research question is intentionally ambiguous, allowing the participants space to talk a range of interpersonal dynamics.

**3. Provide an outline of the methodology for the proposed research, including proposed method of data collection, tasks assigned to participants of the research and the proposed method and duration of data analysis. If the proposed research makes use of pre-established and generally accepted techniques, please make this clear. (Do not exceed 500 words)**

The proposed research has a qualitative design and is underpinned by a relativist ontology and constructivist epistemology. Young people who meet the inclusion criteria for participation will be interviewed using the 'Relational Mapping Interview' framework (Boden, Larking & Iyer, 2019). This is a visual interview method where participants are provided with drawing materials and are asked to draw a representation of their relationships at school. The Relational Mapping Interview has been specifically devised to explore relational contexts within an Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis framework. Participants will be asked open questions about their drawings following the 'draw-talk-draw-talk' interview arc (Boden, Larkin & Iyer, 2019). There are four components to the interview and the participant will be guided through these by the researcher (see interview schedule also).

The four components to the Relational Mapping interview are:

- 'Mapping the self' – participants can use words, symbols and/or images to represent themselves.
- Mapping relationships with 'significant others'.  
Participants will be asked to represent the relationship which is 'most important' to them. The researcher will enquire about the representation asking open questions. The participant will then be asked to add further important people to the map and verbal prompts will be used to facilitate a rich description of the relationships to be gained from participants.
- 'Stepping back' – the participant will be asked to reflect upon the visual representation of their relationships and verbal prompts will be used by the researcher to gain the participants thoughts associated to the map as a whole.
- In the final component of the interview, participants are prompted to consider if any way they would like their map to be different. The researcher will use verbal prompts to elicit information about the nature of any desired differences.

All interviews will be recorded by the researcher and visual representations / drawings will be collected at the end of each interview. It is anticipated that each interview will last approximately an hour. Data analysis Interviews will be transcribed and analysed using Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (Smith, Flowers and Larkin, 2009). The visual data collected from each participant will be analysed alongside verbal interview data using the framework for analysing interviews based upon relational maps as described by Boden, Larkin and Iyer (2019). It is anticipated that data analysis will be conducted over a period of 3 months after the completion of interviews.

## **SECTION F: PARTICIPANT DETAILS**

**4. Provide an explanation detailing how you will identify, approach and recruit the participants for the proposed research, including clarification on sample size and location. Please provide justification for the exclusion/inclusion criteria for this study (i.e. who will be allowed to / not allowed to participate) and explain briefly, in lay terms, why these criteria are in place. (Do not exceed 500 words)**

Participants will be recruited through the qualified educational psychologists currently employed at the service where the researcher has been placed. Permission from the Principal EP will be sought to ensure it is ethical for EPs to contact the SENCOs of their schools about potential participants including young people and their families following the closures of cases. Once the young people have been identified, the EPs will send out two information sheets (see appendix) to be read by the SENCO's, the young people and their families regarding the aims of the research study, what would be involved if they chose to participate and how their data would be used and destroyed in the future. Explanations of the right to withdraw, confidentiality and publication will also be explained in simple terms on the information sheet.

**Inclusion criteria:**

- Identify as female
- In mainstream, mixed school (If there is a lack of participants recruited from mixed secondary schools, all girls schools will be approached).
- Can communicate verbally in English
- Of secondary school age (between 11 – 16 years old)
- Identified by a qualified educational psychologist or SENCO as currently having SEMH as their primary need on SEN register or EHCP.
- Informed consent has been received from the young person's parent or caregiver for them to take part in the research.

**5. Please state the location(s) of the proposed research including the location of any interviews. Please provide a Risk Assessment if required. Consideration should be given to lone working, visiting private residences, conducting research outside working hours or any other non-standard arrangements.**

**If any data collection is to be done online, please identify the platforms to be used.**

Interviews will be conducted face to face. In a quiet, private room in the school in which the participant attends. The interviews will be conducted in schools at which the researcher is on placement therefore no additional risk assessment will be necessary.

**6. Will the participants be from any of the following groups?(Tick as appropriate)**

- Students or Staff of the Trust or Partner delivering your programme.
- Adults (over the age of 18 years with mental capacity to give consent to participate in the research).
- Children or legal minors (anyone under the age of 16 years)<sup>1</sup>
- Adults who are unconscious, severely ill or have a terminal illness.
- Adults who may lose mental capacity to consent during the course of the research.
- Adults in emergency situations.
- Adults<sup>2</sup> with mental illness - particularly those detained under the Mental Health Act (1983 & 2007).
- Participants who may lack capacity to consent to participate in the research under the research requirements of the Mental Capacity Act (2005).
- Prisoners, where ethical approval may be required from the National Offender Management Service (NOMS).
- Young Offenders, where ethical approval may be required from the National Offender Management Service (NOMS).
- Healthy volunteers (in high risk intervention studies).
- Participants who may be considered to have a pre-existing and potentially dependent<sup>3</sup> relationship with the investigator (e.g. those in care homes, students, colleagues, service-users, patients).
- Other vulnerable groups (see Question 6).
- Adults who are in custody, custodial care, or for whom a court has assumed responsibility.
- Participants who are members of the Armed Forces.

<sup>1</sup>If the proposed research involves children or adults who meet the Police Act (1997) definition of vulnerability<sup>3</sup>, any researchers who will have contact with participants must have current Disclosure and Barring Service (DBS) clearance.

<sup>2</sup> 'Adults with a learning or physical disability, a physical or mental illness, or a reduction in physical or mental capacity, and living in a care home or home for people with learning difficulties or receiving care in their own home, or receiving hospital or social care services.' (Police Act, 1997)

<sup>3</sup> Proposed research involving participants with whom the investigator or researcher(s) shares a dependent or unequal relationships (e.g. teacher/student, clinical therapist/service-user) may compromise the ability to give informed consent which is free from any form of pressure (real or implied) arising from this relationship. TREC recommends that, wherever practicable, investigators choose participants with whom they have no dependent relationship. Following due scrutiny, if the investigator is confident that the research involving participants in dependent relationships is vital and defensible, TREC will require additional information setting out the case and detailing how risks inherent in the dependent relationship will be managed. TREC will also need to be reassured that refusal to participate will not result in any discrimination or penalty.

**7. Will the study involve participants who are vulnerable? YES  NO**

For the purposes of research, 'vulnerable' participants may be adults whose ability to protect their own interests are impaired or reduced in comparison to that of the broader population. Vulnerability may arise from:

- the participant's personal characteristics (e.g. mental or physical impairment)
- their social environment, context and/or disadvantage (e.g. socio-economic mobility, educational attainment, resources, substance dependence, displacement or homelessness).
- where prospective participants are at high risk of consenting under duress, or as a result of manipulation or coercion, they must also be considered as vulnerable
- children are automatically presumed to be vulnerable.

**7.1. If YES, what special arrangements are in place to protect vulnerable participants' interests?**

Some participants taking part in the research may be under the age of 16 and therefore classed as vulnerable. I have an enhanced DBS check and subscribe to the update service so that my DBS status can be checked at any time. Please also see description of arrangements to protect the participants' interests at question 14.

**If YES, a Disclosure and Barring Service (DBS) check within the last three years is required.**

Please provide details of the "clear disclosure":

Date of disclosure: 26.06.2020
Type of disclosure: Child and adult workforce student (NHS)
Organisation that requested disclosure: Tavistock and Portman Clinic
DBS certificate number: 001701986201

(NOTE: information concerning activities which require DBS checks can be found via <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/dbs-check-eligible-positions-guidance>). Please **do not** include a copy of your DBS certificate with your application

**8. Do you propose to make any form of payment or incentive available to participants of the research? YES  NO**

If **YES**, please provide details taking into account that any payment or incentive should be representative of reasonable remuneration for participation and may not be of a value that could be coercive or exerting undue influence on potential participants' decision to take part in the research. Wherever possible, remuneration in a monetary form should be avoided and substituted with vouchers, coupons or equivalent. Any payment made to research participants may have benefit or HMRC implications and participants should be alerted to this in the participant information sheet as they may wish to choose to decline payment.

**9. What special arrangements are in place for eliciting informed consent from participants who may not adequately understand verbal explanations or written information provided in English; where participants have special communication needs; where participants have limited literacy; or where children are involved in the research? (Do not exceed 200 words)**

Participants will under 16 years old. Therefore it is appropriate to make special arrangements for these participants. Two information sheets will be distributed (see appendices), one for the parent/carer of the young person and one with child-friendly language for the young person. As well as this, Relational Mapping Interview framework (Boden, Larkin & Iyer, 2019) will be used (as mentioned in question 1) which will use a utilises a 'draw-talk-draw-talk' interview whereby participants will be asked to visually represent their school relationships using drawing materials. I will use verbal prompts and open questions to support participants understanding of language.

**SECTION F: RISK ASSESSMENT AND RISK MANAGEMENT**

**10. Does the proposed research involve any of the following? (Tick as appropriate)**

- use of a questionnaire, self-completion survey or data-collection instrument (attach copy)
- use of emails or the internet as a means of data collection
- use of written or computerised tests
- interviews (attach interview questions)
- diaries (attach diary record form)
- participant observation
- participant observation (in a non-public place) without their knowledge / covert research
- audio-recording interviewees or events
- video-recording interviewees or events
- access to personal and/or sensitive data (i.e. student, patient, client or service-user data) without the participant's informed consent for use of these data for research purposes
- administration of any questions, tasks, investigations, procedures or stimuli which may be experienced by participants as physically or mentally painful, stressful or unpleasant during or after the research process
- performance of any acts which might diminish the self-esteem of participants or cause them to experience discomfiture, regret or any other adverse emotional or psychological reaction
- Themes around extremism or radicalisation
- investigation of participants involved in illegal or illicit activities (e.g. use of illegal drugs)
- procedures that involve the deception of participants
- administration of any substance or agent
- use of non-treatment of placebo control conditions
- participation in a clinical trial
- research undertaken at an off-campus location (risk assessment attached)
- research overseas (please ensure Section G is complete)

**11. Does the proposed research involve any specific or anticipated risks (e.g. physical, psychological, social, legal or economic) to participants that are greater than those encountered in everyday life?**

YES  NO

If YES, please describe below including details of precautionary measures.

**12. Where the procedures involve potential hazards and/or discomfort or distress for participants, please state what previous experience the investigator or researcher(s) have had in conducting this type of research.**

N/A



<p><b>13. Provide an explanation of any potential benefits to participants. Please ensure this is framed within the overall contribution of the proposed research to knowledge or practice. (Do not exceed 400 words)</b></p> <p><b>NOTE:</b> Where the proposed research involves students , they should be assured that accepting the offer to participate or choosing to decline will have no impact on their assessments or learning experience. Similarly, it should be made clear to participants who are patients, service-users and/or receiving any form of treatment or medication that they are not invited to participate in the belief that participation in the research will result in some relief or improvement in their condition.</p>
<p>This research study aims to contribute to the literature about young girls social and emotional wellbeing. As it aims to explore young people’s lived experiences and there is scope for discussion of positive aspects of their relationships in school built into the interview method, participants may find the interview beneficial in identifying positive relationships in their networks. A further benefit may be that young people will feel empowered by taking part in the project through knowing that, although anonymously, they will be contributing to research which aims to add to the literature base about young people’s lives which may contribute towards changes made in schools which will benefit other young people.</p>
<p><b>14. Provide an outline of any measures you have in place in the event of adverse or unexpected outcomes and the potential impact this may have on participants involved in the proposed research. (Do not exceed 300 words)</b></p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• All the people interviewed will be given a list of services they can access for support following the interview if needed (see appendices).</li> <li>• School will be asked for information regarding adults who can support the YP in instances where they may be feeling emotional distress. The young people will be signposted to these adults prior to the interview.</li> <li>• The researcher will ask the young people to identify an adult in school they could speak to about any troubling issues that might arise as part of the process, and with the YP agreement this adult will be contacted if any forms of emotional distress arise as part of the interview</li> <li>• The researcher will be sensitive to the feelings displayed by the participants throughout the interview and remind them of their right to withdraw/take a break if they would like. The interview will be stopped if the interviewee is deemed to be showing signs of distress.</li> </ul>
<p><b>15. Provide an outline of your debriefing, support and feedback protocol for participants involved in the proposed research. This should include, for example, where participants may feel the need to discuss thoughts or feelings brought about following their participation in the research. This may involve referral to an external support or counseling service, where participation in the research has caused specific issues for participants.</b></p>
<p>Potential participants will receive an information sheet (see appendix) upon recruitment that clearly outlines the aims, themes and procedures involved in the study. The information sheet will also make clear the participant’s right to withdraw at any time, right not to participate at all in the study and that all names and personal information of the participants will remain anonymous upon possible publication.</p> <p>Following the interviews, as outlined above, the participants will receive an information sheet regarding possible avenues to take if they feel any emotional distress, including appropriate counseling services. Once data analysis has been undertaken and conclusions have been reached, the participants will receive a brief summary of the results. The data sought is qualitative and there will be no measure of ‘performance’ taken.</p>
<p><b>16. Please provide the names and nature of any external support or counselling organisations that will be suggested to participants if participation in the research has potential to raise specific issues for participants.</b></p>
<p>CAMHS- Children and Adolescent Mental Health Service  Kooth- Online metal wellbeing community  ELSA- Emotional Literacy Support Assistant Network (If available in their school)  Prior to the interview, I will find out what support the school already has in place that the young person can access should they indicate a need e.g., School ELSA/ Pastoral support staff.</p>

<p><b>17. Where medical aftercare may be necessary, this should include details of the treatment available to participants. Debriefing may involve the disclosure of further information on the aims of the research, the participant's performance and/or the results of the research. (Do not exceed 500 words)</b></p>
<p>N/A</p>

**FOR RESEARCH UNDERTAKEN OUTSIDE THE UK**

<p><b>18. Does the proposed research involve travel outside of the UK?</b> <span style="float: right;"><input type="checkbox"/> YES <input checked="" type="checkbox"/></span></p> <p><b>NO</b></p> <p><b>If YES, please confirm:</b></p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> I have consulted the Foreign and Commonwealth Office website for guidance/travel advice? <a href="http://www.fco.gov.uk/en/travel-and-living-abroad/">http://www.fco.gov.uk/en/travel-and-living-abroad/</a></p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> I have completed a RISK Assessment covering all aspects of the project including consideration of the location of the data collection and risks to participants.</p> <p>All overseas project data collection will need approval from the Deputy Director of Education and Training or their nominee. Normally this will be done based on the information provided in this form. All projects approved through the TREC process will be indemnified by the Trust against claims made by third parties.</p> <p>If you have any queries regarding research outside the UK, please contact <a href="mailto:academicquality@tavi-port.nhs.uk">academicquality@tavi-port.nhs.uk</a>:</p>
<p>Students are required to arrange their own travel and medical insurance to cover project work outside of the UK. Please indicate what insurance cover you have or will have in place.</p>
<p><b>19. Please evidence how compliance with all local research ethics and research governance requirements have been assessed for the country(ies) in which the research is taking place. Please also clarify how the requirements will be met:</b></p>
<p> </p>

**SECTION G: PARTICIPANT CONSENT AND WITHDRAWAL**

<p><b>20. Have you attached a copy of your participant information sheet (this should be in <i>plain English</i>)? Where the research involves non-English speaking participants, please include translated materials.</b></p> <p><b>YES <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> NO <input type="checkbox"/></b></p> <p><b>If NO, please indicate what alternative arrangements are in place below:</b></p>
<p> </p>

**21. Have you attached a copy of your participant consent form (this should be in *plain English*)? Where the research involves non-English speaking participants, please include translated materials.**

YES  NO

If NO, please indicate what alternative arrangements are in place below:

**22. The following is a participant information sheet checklist covering the various points that should be included in this document.**

- Clear identification of the Trust as the sponsor for the research, the project title, the Researcher and Principal Investigator (your Research Supervisor) and other researchers along with relevant contact details.
- Details of what involvement in the proposed research will require (e.g., participation in interviews, completion of questionnaire, audio/video-recording of events), estimated time commitment and any risks involved.
- A statement confirming that the research has received formal approval from TREC or other ethics body.
- If the sample size is small, advice to participants that this may have implications for confidentiality / anonymity.
- A clear statement that where participants are in a dependent relationship with any of the researchers that participation in the research will have no impact on assessment / treatment / service-use or support.
- Assurance that involvement in the project is voluntary and that participants are free to withdraw consent at any time, and to withdraw any unprocessed data previously supplied.
- Advice as to arrangements to be made to protect confidentiality of data, including that confidentiality of information provided is subject to legal limitations.
- A statement that the data generated in the course of the research will be retained in accordance with the [Trusts 's Data Protection and handling Policies](https://tavistockandportman.nhs.uk/about-us/governance/policies-and-procedures/): <https://tavistockandportman.nhs.uk/about-us/governance/policies-and-procedures/>
- Advice that if participants have any concerns about the conduct of the investigator, researcher(s) or any other aspect of this research project, they should contact Simon Carrington, Head of Academic Governance and Quality Assurance ([academicquality@tavi-port.nhs.uk](mailto:academicquality@tavi-port.nhs.uk))
- Confirmation on any limitations in confidentiality where disclosure of imminent harm to self and/or others may occur.

**23. The following is a consent form checklist covering the various points that should be included in this document.**

- Trust letterhead or logo.
- Title of the project (with research degree projects this need not necessarily be the title of the thesis) and names of investigators.
- Confirmation that the research project is part of a degree
- Confirmation that involvement in the project is voluntary and that participants are free to withdraw at any time, or to withdraw any unprocessed data previously supplied.
- Confirmation of particular requirements of participants, including for example whether interviews are to be audio-/video-recorded, whether anonymised quotes will be used in publications advice of legal limitations to data confidentiality.
- If the sample size is small, confirmation that this may have implications for anonymity any other relevant information.
- The proposed method of publication or dissemination of the research findings.
- Details of any external contractors or partner institutions involved in the research.
- Details of any funding bodies or research councils supporting the research.
- Confirmation on any limitations in confidentiality where disclosure of imminent harm to self and/or others may occur.

## **SECTION H: CONFIDENTIALITY AND ANONYMITY**

**24. Below is a checklist covering key points relating to the confidentiality and anonymity of participants. Please indicate where relevant to the proposed research.**

- Participants will be completely anonymised and their identity will not be known by the investigator or researcher(s) (i.e. the participants are part of an anonymous randomised sample and return responses with no form of personal identification)?
- The responses are anonymised or are an anonymised sample (i.e. a permanent process of coding has been carried out whereby direct and indirect identifiers have been removed from data and replaced by a code, with no record retained of how the code relates to the identifiers).
- The samples and data are de-identified (i.e. direct and indirect identifiers have been removed and replaced by a code. The investigator or researchers are able to link the code to the original identifiers and isolate the participant to whom the sample or data relates).
- Participants have the option of being identified in a publication that will arise from the research.
- Participants will be pseudo-anonymised in a publication that will arise from the research. (I.e. the researcher will endeavour to remove or alter details that would identify the participant.)
- The proposed research will make use of personal sensitive data.
- Participants consent to be identified in the study and subsequent dissemination of research findings and/or publication.

**25. Participants must be made aware that the confidentiality of the information they provide is subject to legal limitations in data confidentiality (i.e. the data may be subject to a subpoena, a freedom of information request or mandated reporting by some professions). This only applies to named or de-identified data. If your participants are named or de-identified, please confirm that you will specifically state these limitations.**

YES  NO

If **NO**, please indicate why this is the case below:

**NOTE: WHERE THE PROPOSED RESEARCH INVOLVES A SMALL SAMPLE OR FOCUS GROUP, PARTICIPANTS SHOULD BE ADVISED THAT THERE WILL BE DISTINCT LIMITATIONS IN THE LEVEL OF ANONYMITY THEY CAN BE AFFORDED.**

**SECTION I: DATA ACCESS, SECURITY AND MANAGEMENT**

**26. Will the Researcher/Principal Investigator be responsible for the security of all data collected in connection with the proposed research? YES  NO**

If **NO**, please indicate what alternative arrangements are in place below:

**27. In line with the 5<sup>th</sup> principle of the Data Protection Act (1998), which states that personal data shall not be kept for longer than is necessary for that purpose or those purposes for which it was collected; please state how long data will be retained for.**

1-2 years  3-5 years  6-10 years  10> years

**NOTE: In line with Research Councils UK (RCUK) guidance, doctoral project data should normally be stored for 10 years and Masters level data for up to 2 years**

**28. Below is a checklist which relates to the management, storage and secure destruction of data for the purposes of the proposed research. Please indicate where relevant to your proposed arrangements.**

- Research data, codes and all identifying information to be kept in separate locked filing cabinets.
- Research data will only be stored in the University of Essex OneDrive system and no other cloud storage location.
- Access to computer files to be available to research team by password only.
- Access to computer files to be available to individuals outside the research team by password only (See 23.1).
- Research data will be encrypted and transferred electronically within the UK.
- Research data will be encrypted and transferred electronically outside of the UK.

**NOTE:** Transfer of research data via third party commercial file sharing services, such as Google Docs and YouSendIt are not necessarily secure or permanent. These systems may also be located overseas and not covered by UK law. If the system is located outside the European Economic Area (EEA) or territories deemed to have sufficient standards of data protection, transfer may also breach the Data Protection Act (1998).

Essex students also have access the 'Box' service for file transfer: <https://www.essex.ac.uk/student/it-services/box>

- Use of personal addresses, postcodes, faxes, e-mails or telephone numbers.
- Collection and storage of personal sensitive data (e.g. racial or ethnic origin, political or religious beliefs or physical or mental health or condition).
- Use of personal data in the form of audio or video recordings.
- Primary data gathered on encrypted mobile devices (i.e. laptops).

**NOTE:** This should be transferred to secure University of Essex OneDrive at the first opportunity.

- All electronic data will undergo secure disposal.

**NOTE:** For hard drives and magnetic storage devices (HDD or SSD), deleting files does not permanently erase the data on most systems, but only deletes the reference to the file. Files can be restored when deleted in this way. Research files must be overwritten to ensure they are completely irretrievable. Software is available for the secure erasing of files from hard drives which meet recognised standards to securely scramble sensitive data. Examples of this software are BC Wipe, Wipe File, DeleteOnClick and Eraser for Windows platforms. Mac users can use the standard 'secure empty trash' option; an alternative is Permanent eraser software.

- All hardcopy data will undergo secure disposal.

**NOTE:** For shredding research data stored in hardcopy (i.e. paper), adopting DIN 3 ensures files are cut into 2mm strips or confetti like cross-cut particles of 4x40mm. The UK government requires a minimum standard of DIN 4 for its material, which ensures cross cut particles of at least 2x15mm.

**29. Please provide details of individuals outside the research team who will be given password protected access to encrypted data for the proposed research.**

None

**30. Please provide details on the regions and territories where research data will be electronically transferred that are external to the UK:**

None

#### **SECTION J: PUBLICATION AND DISSEMINATION OF RESEARCH FINDINGS**

**30. How will the results of the research be reported and disseminated? (Select all that apply)**

- Peer reviewed journal
- Non-peer reviewed journal
- Peer reviewed books
- Publication in media, social media or website (including Podcasts and online videos)
- Conference presentation
- Internal report
- Promotional report and materials
- Reports compiled for or on behalf of external organisations
- Dissertation/Thesis
- Other publication
- Written feedback to research participants
- Presentation to participants or relevant community groups
- Other (Please specify below)

#### **SECTION K: OTHER ETHICAL ISSUES**

**31. Are there any other ethical issues that have not been addressed which you would wish to bring to the attention of Tavistock Research Ethics Committee (TREC)?**

N/A

#### **SECTION L: CHECKLIST FOR ATTACHED DOCUMENTS**

**32. Please check that the following documents are attached to your application.**

- Letters of approval from any external ethical approval bodies (where relevant)
- Recruitment advertisement
- Participant information sheets (including easy-read where relevant)
- Consent forms (including easy-read where relevant)
- Assent form for children (where relevant)
- Letters of approval from locations for data collection
- Questionnaire
- Interview Schedule or topic guide
- Risk Assessment (where applicable)
- Overseas travel approval (where applicable)

**34. Where it is not possible to attach the above materials, please provide an explanation below.**

## A2: Approval of TREC form:

The Tavistock and Portman   
NHS Foundation Trust

Charlotte Cracknell

### By Email

31 May 2022

Dear Charlotte

### Re: Trust Research Ethics Application

**Title:** How do secondary age girls with SEMH needs describe and make sense of their relationships in school?

Thank you for sending your response to the conditions set by the Assessor with regards to your TREC application. I am pleased to inform you that subject to formal ratification by the Trust Research Ethics Committee your application has been approved. This means you can proceed with your research.

**Please note that any changes to the project design including changes to methodology/data collection etc, must be referred to TREC as failure to do so, may result in a report of academic and/or research misconduct.**

If you have any further questions or require any clarification do not hesitate to contact me. I am copying this communication to your supervisor.

May I take this opportunity of wishing you every success with your research.

Yours sincerely,

**Paru Jeram**

Secretary to the Trust Research Degrees Subcommittee T: 020 938 2699

E: [academicquality@tavi-port.nhs.uk](mailto:academicquality@tavi-port.nhs.uk)

Quality Assurance & Enhancement Directorate of Education & Training Tavistock Centre  
120 Belsize Lane London NW3 5BA

Tel: 020 8938 2699 Fax: 020 7447 3837

### A3: Change to TREC form:

#### Change to Doctoral Research Protocol

Student name	Charlotte Cracknell
Date	10/11/22
Doctoral programme	Child, community and educational psychology
Supervisor(s)	Dale Bartle
Has ethical approval been granted? Please include process (TREC/UREC/IRAS) and date	Yes- TREC approval gained on 31/05/22
Please state clearly and simply the proposed changes to your project (methods of data gathering, changes to design etc)	
<p>I would like to attend the schools in person and discuss the opportunity to students who fit the criteria e.g. in a social skills intervention, lunch-time club or in an assembly. If they express interest I will give them the consent forms for themselves and parents to complete.</p> <p>I will also offer each participant a £10 amazon voucher for taking part in the study.</p>	
<p>For information governance purposes and in line with the Trust policies, please be advised that you must use the on-line video conferencing platform Zoom to conduct research/interviews. Please contact the Technology Enhanced Learning -TEL (<a href="mailto:TELSupport@Tavi-Port.nhs.uk">TELSupport@Tavi-Port.nhs.uk</a>) to set up a zoom account.</p> <p>If you are requesting a change to data collection (remote interviews for example) please consider the following guides/considerations regarding privacy:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Please ensure you have participant's consent before interviews are convened. All ethical approval documentation including consent forms/information sheets must be updated accordingly</li> <li>2. Please ensure that meetings with yourself and your participants are conducting in a safe environment and that confidentiality is maintained.</li> <li>3. Ask participants if they are happy with their environment; if they are alone and if they are assured that they are in a location where they will not be disturbed during the session</li> <li>4. Please ask participants if they have any concerns about WIFI or the technology which may cause disruption during the meeting.</li> </ol>	
<p>Please return this form as directed by your supervisor or course lead You <b>must</b> ensure any changes are also approved by your ethical approval body before you start work</p>	



#### **A4: Email granting approval of TREC amendments:**

Dear Charlotte,

I can confirm that I have received your updated TREC documentation and in light of the circumstances around recruitment, the changes have been approved. You may proceed with your research.

**Please note that any further changes to the project design including changes to methodology/data collection etc., must be referred to TREC as failure to do so, may result in a report of academic and/or research misconduct.**

Your updated TREC form is attached

Kind regards,

Paru

**Mrs Paru Jeram**

Senior Quality Assurance Officer

Academic Governance and Quality Assurance

<https://tavistockandportman.nhs.uk/research-and-innovation/doing-research/student-research/>

## APPENDIX B: Recruitment

### B1: Letters/ Information

What are the experiences of secondary age girls with SEMH needs?

This is an opportunity to capture the voice of some of your students who are potentially underrepresented. I am seeking the views of girls in secondary school with Special Educational Needs in the area of Social Emotional & Mental Health. I would like to explore which relationships they find meaningful and supportive in school.

Who am I?

I am a Trainee Educational Psychologist working in XXX and part of Tavistock and Portman NHS Trust Doctorate course. I would like to carry out a study about secondary age girls' experience in school and would like to invite your students to take part.

I would like to recruit young people who meet the following criteria:

Young people who have special educational needs in the area of Social, Emotional and Mental Health. (Participants do not need an EHCP. Students on SEN register or identified as having additional SEMH needs by an Educational Psychologist, SENCo or relevant professional will be appropriate.)

Identify as female.

Between the ages of 11-16

What will it involve?

Your students will be invited to take part in a semi-structured interview (no longer than an hour) to discuss their experiences. During this, they will be asked questions about their relationships in school with staff and peers. I hope to gain their views about the relationships they perceive as meaningful in school and how these support them in school.

What will participants get from being involved?

I am offering a £10 gift voucher for students who are willing to take part.

After their interview, they will also receive a certificate which can be used as part of their work experience/CV. This will show that they have been involved in a doctorate level research project and have an awareness of the processes involved in psychology research.

If you have students who meet this criteria and may be interested or would like to find out more, please contact me via email for more information. Please also share the information leaflet with them.

Charlotte Cracknell

Trainee Educational Psychologist [ccracknell@tavi-port.nhs.uk](mailto:ccracknell@tavi-port.nhs.uk)

# Exploring the Experiences of Girls at Secondary School.

To explore the experiences of girls at secondary school in relation to their relationships (sta148 and peer) at school.



## Aim of the study

### Who will be doing the research?

My name is Charlotte Cracknell and I am in my final year of training to become an Educational Psychologist.

### What will it involve?

Just an hour of your time! During school time, you will be asked to come and speak to me for no longer than an hour.

I will ask you questions about your experiences at school and make a note of your answers. You can also draw pictures in relation to some of my questions, if you wish.

I will anonymise the answers you give (this means that I will not include your name or any identifiable details). I will not share your information with parents or teachers (unless I feel you are at risk). Your answers will be included in my research write up along with several other (anonymous) students that I will speak to.

### What will you get from taking part?

£10 gift voucher valid in multiple stores.

A certificate which can be used as part of your work experience/ CV to show that you have been involved in a doctorate level research project. First hand experience and understanding of the process involved in psychology/ education research.

You will be helping to inform research in the area which could, in turn, improve the experiences of girls like you in the future.

Free drinks and snacks!

If you would like to find out more about this:

Student letter:

Hello!

My name is Charlotte. I am a trainee Educational Psychologist studying for my Professional Doctorate in Educational and Child Psychology. I also work in XXX Local Authority which means I regularly visit schools and work with young people in the borough.

I want to tell you about my research because I would like to know if you would like to take part.



**What will this involve?**

I am interested in learning about your experiences of school, particularly the different relationships you have formed and which ones are important to you. This might include friendships with other students or bonds you have formed with staff at your school.

It will involve me interviewing young people like you for about one hour. The interview will take place at your school, during school time. I will also ask you if you would like to do some drawing to help you express how you feel about the different relationships you have in school, but you don't have to draw.

**What will happen to the information I collect from you?**

The interview will be recorded and typed up so I can analyse it later. All the information you tell me, or we work on together will be 'anonymous'. That means that I will note down what you say, but not who said it when I write it up. Your information will also be 'confidential' to me, you, and people involved in helping me with the study. That means that I won't share what you say with other adults (such as teachers or parents), unless it sounds like you or someone else is not safe or at risk of not being safe.

**What if you want to change your mind about taking part?**

That's fine—you can tell me you don't want to take part anymore up until 1<sup>st</sup> March 2023, which is when I will then be writing up the study and will no longer know whose information is whose.

**How do you get involved?**

We need your permission and your parents/guardian permission for you to take part. Parents have already been written to and if you have been given this information form, they will have given their consent for you to take part. If you are also in agreement to take part, please complete the slip below. I will then arrange a time to come and meet with you.

Please feel free to ask me any questions. If you are happy to continue you will be asked to sign a consent form before we start.

Any questions or concerns please email [ccracknell@tavi-port.nhs.uk](mailto:ccracknell@tavi-port.nhs.uk)

Charlotte Cracknell

Trainee Educational Psychologist

Parent Information Letter

Dear Parent or carer,

Re: Invitation for your child to take part in a study

Who am I?

I am a Trainee Educational Psychologist working in XXX Local Authority and part of the Tavistock and Portman NHS Foundation Trust. I would like to carry out a study exploring the relationships of secondary age girls with special educational needs in the area of Social, Emotional and Mental Health (SEMH) as part of my doctoral research degree in Child, Community and Educational Psychology. I would like to invite your child to take part.

What is the research?

I am conducting research into the views of secondary age girls and their experiences of the relationships they have in school. I will be focusing on which relationships they perceive as meaningful and how this supports them in school. This research aims to give a voice to an underrepresented population of girls who may be flying under the radar. My research has been approved by the School of Psychology Research Ethics Committee. This means that my research follows the standard of research ethics set by the British Psychological Society.

What will your child gain from their participation?

I am offering a £10 gift voucher to thank students for their participation in my research. As well as this, they will receive a certificate which will demonstrate their involvement in a doctoral level research study. This can be used as part of a CV or work experience record and will be particularly useful for any students who may wish to pursue education or careers in the field of psychology or other social sciences in the future. They will gain first hand insight in to the process involved in undertaking research in the field of psychology.

What will your child's participation involve?

If you consent to your child taking part, I will include them in an initial meeting during the between March-April 2023 to explain the research and ask if they want to take part. If they wish to take part, they will be asked to attend a short, semi-structured interview with myself, in school. I will follow a 'draw-talk-draw-talk' framework whereby they will be asked to visually represent their school relationships using drawing materials. I will use verbal prompts and open questions to help your child to express their views about their relationships in school.

The research question which guides this research is: How do secondary age girls with SEMH needs describe and make sense of their relationships in school?

What will happen to the information I collect from your child?

All the information your child tells me will be anonymous. No identifying features will be recorded during the interview. This means that I will note down what is said, but not who said it when I write up this research. The information will also be 'confidential' to me, them and my supervisor for this research. The information will not be shared with other adults (such as teachers or parents) unless there are concerns about their safety. All their

information will be stored securely and retained for the duration of the study and up to 10 years after the study.

To consent to your child taking part, you will need to complete the reply slip on the next page and return it to me via email.

Yours Sincerely,  
Charlotte Cracknell  
Trainee Educational Psychologist

#### Contact Details

If you would like further information about my research or have any questions or concerns, please do not hesitate to contact me: Charlotte Cracknell [ccracknell@tavi-port.nhs.uk](mailto:ccracknell@tavi-port.nhs.uk)

If you have any questions or concerns about how the research has been conducted please contact:

Dale Bartle- Research Supervisor [dbartle@tavi-port.nhs.uk](mailto:dbartle@tavi-port.nhs.uk)

Adam Styles- Research Lead [astyles@tavi-port.nhs.uk](mailto:astyles@tavi-port.nhs.uk)

Simon Carrington – Head of Academic Governance and Quality Assurance  
[academicquality@tavi-port.nhs.uk](mailto:academicquality@tavi-port.nhs.uk)

Tavistock and Portman NHS Foundation Trust, Tavistock Centre, 120 Belsize Lane,  
London, NW3 5BA.



#### **TAVISTOCK AND PORTMAN TRUST**

### **Consent to my child participating in a research study**

#### **Research study: An Exploration of how secondary age girls with SEMH needs to describe and make sense of their relationships in school'**

I have read the information sheet relating to the above research study and have been given a copy to keep. The nature and purposes of the research have been explained to me, and I have had the opportunity to discuss the details and ask questions about this information. I understand what is being proposed and the procedures in which my child will be involved have been explained to me.

I understand that my child's involvement in this study, and particular data from this research, will remain strictly confidential. Only the researchers and their supervisors

involved in the study will have access to identifying data. It has been explained to me what will happen to the information collected once the research study has been completed.

I hereby freely and fully consent for my child to participate in the study which has been fully explained to me. Having given this consent I understand that my child has the right to withdraw from the study at any time without disadvantage and without being obliged to give any reason. I also understand that should I withdraw, the researcher reserves the right to use my child's anonymous data after analysis of the data has begun.

**Child's details:**

Name of child:

**Parent/carer's details:**

Signature

.....  
Parent or carer's name (BLOCK CAPITALS)

.....  
Relationship to the child:

.....  
Contact Telephone Number:

.....  
Date: .....

**Please return to:**  
**Charlotte Cracknell ccracknell@tavi-port.nhs.uk**

APPENDIX C: Interviews

C1: Interview Schedule

**Interview schedule:**

Summarise study and remind of consent, right to withdraw etc. Check they are still happy to go ahead.

Interview prompts:

Ask them to draw a picture/ symbol/ word to represent them in school. Then asked them to draw those around them in school. Ask them about this picture.

- Descriptive- Please could you tell me what your relationships in school are like?
- Structural- How often you see this person?
- Narrative- How long have you known them?
- Contrast- What are the main differences between your relationship with this person vs this person?
- Circular- How do you think ... would describe you
- Evaluative- How do you think your experience of school would be if you didn't have a relationship with this person?
- Would you approach them if you were feeling worried about something?
- Can you tell me a bit more about that?
- What do you mean by ... ?

Remember: Debrief, remind of support available and right to withdraw data until certain date

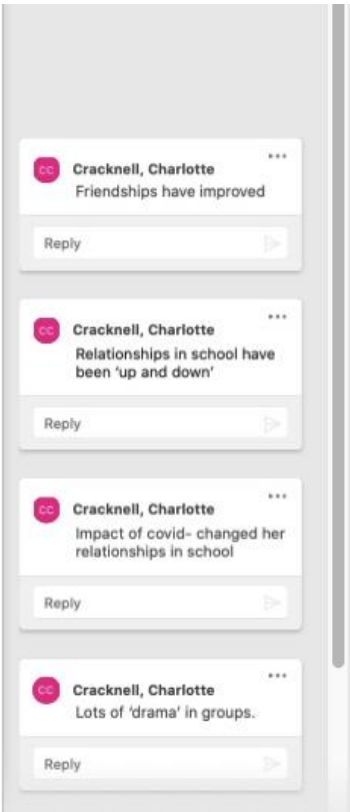
## APPENDIX D: Analysis

### D1: Examples of how experiential statements were formed

Examples of how comments and experiential statements were formed.

<p>Here friendships in school are now more positive than they were. However, they have generally been up and down.</p> <p>Friendships issues in the past but they are more positive now</p> <p>Covid lockdown had an impact on relationships in school, especially friendship groups.</p>	<p><b>Interviewer:</b> Okay. [00:04:00] Um, so is that all of them? <b>Zoe:</b> I think so. <b>Interviewer:</b> Yeah? Okay, cool. So, I'm just gonna ask you some questions. So, what-- in general, what would you say your relationships in school are like? How would you describe them? <b>Zoe:</b> Uh, my friendship groups. Um, my friendship groups are like better now than they were. <b>Interviewer:</b> Okay, good. <b>Zoe:</b> It kind of went up and down [laughs]- <b>Interviewer:</b> Up and down? <b>Zoe:</b> -because of like-- and I started in Year 7. <b>Interviewer:</b> Yeah. <b>Zoe:</b> And there's obviously lockdown, so I didn't see people- <b>Interviewer:</b> Oh, yeah, so true. <b>Zoe:</b> -for like so long. <b>Interviewer:</b> So true. <b>Zoe:</b> So, like, friendship groups in our year have changed so much because we had like friends, then we had lockdown, then we came back again and some people spoke more than others. So like some friendship groups stayed, some didn't. <b>Interviewer:</b> Okay. <b>Zoe:</b> So, like they all flipped, but then Year 8 we went back into another lockdown, but it was shorter. So, then that also like changed people. <b>Interviewer:</b> Yeah. <b>Zoe:</b> Like different friendship groups came outta that. And then loads of stuff. Drama happened in our year last year. Like she split so many different groups apart- <b>Interviewer:</b> Oh really? <b>Zoe:</b> -with now different groups again. But nothing's happened this year. <b>Interviewer:</b> Okay. That's so true. I didn't think you were Year 10. So that really would've had a huge impact on your relationships in school. So you said there's up-- there was ups and downs. Can you tell me a bit more about any of them?</p>
---	---

3





Gets stressed about detentions and waking up early.

Has not enjoyed being in her current year due to difficult relationships with peers.

school. It's just very tiring and wake up early and stuff.  
**Interviewer:** Uh-huh.  
**Lydia:** Knowing that sometimes you're there late or detention, and that's, what, 30 minutes of school. It's just like very, like, tiring.  
**Interviewer:** It sounds like a lot. Do you get detentions a lot?  
**Lydia:** Mm, no.  
**Interviewer:** Okay. So what sort of things do you get detentions for?  
**Lydia:** Like, mm, sometimes cause I don't go to my lates. That's-- Sometimes I get centrals and then the-- I think--  
**Interviewer:** Wait, what are lates? Your last lesson?  
**Lydia:** Like, late detention. No, like, when you're late to school. Sometimes I don't go and I get in trouble.  
**Interviewer:** Oh, oh, okay. Um, okay. So, stuff you find stressful about school is detentions, homework, getting up early.  
**Lydia:** Yeah.  
**Interviewer:** What about um, relationships with other students?  
**Lydia:** Mm. They are stressful. Like, when you're in-- Well, this year, like, year nine, it's not the best year. So, like, a lot of drama happens in this year. And, like, when you're in drama, it's very hard to get yourself out of drama.



for school

Reply

**Cracknell, Charlotte** ...  
Worries about being late and getting detentions

Reply

**Cracknell, Charlotte** ...  
Associates school with stress and fear of getting detentions even though she doesn't actually get them often.

Reply

**Cracknell, Charlotte** ...  
Gets in to trouble for arriving late to school

Reply

**Cracknell, Charlotte** ...

Talks about some of the friends that she previously had but has lost for various reasons including lockdown, moving away and fall outs.

Has experienced loss of friends for various reasons (moving away, fall outs)

Has a new friendship group in which she has more trust.

**Zoe:** Like I started off with one girl, but then she obviously like-- she was in school during lockdown when I was at home. But the people-- some of the people she's hanging out while she was in school kind of changed her a bit. But now we're still friends kind of 'cause we're in the same class but like we aren't like as close as we were before.  
**Interviewer:** Okay. So there was kind of a split because you were at home and she was in school?  
**Zoe:** Yeah. Her kind-- like how she was kind of changed a bit.  
**Interviewer:** Right. Okay.  
**Zoe:** And then I went to someone else, but then they kept dragging me into like massive arguments for no reason.  
**Interviewer:** Oh, that's not fun.  
**Zoe:** But then she ended up leaving last year.  
**Interviewer:** Oh okay.  
**Zoe:** -[00:06:00] to a new school. So she left. But then my other friend I was hanging out with like last year as well, she also left last year.  
**Interviewer:** Oh no. That must have been quite hard.  
**Zoe:** So they both left but then I was always kind of friends with these people I hang out with now. I was always kind of friends and things. I've been in class with them since year 7, so now I just hang out with them.  
**Interviewer:** Oh, nice. Okay. So would you-- are they included in this group that you've drawn here?  
**Zoe:** Yes. Yeah.  
**Interviewer:** Okay. So tell me a bit about your relationships with them. Are they mostly good? Are they mostly bad? What kind of things do you do?  
**Zoe:** There's like no drama in it anymore, which is good. Like they're not gonna go tell other people stuff.  
**Interviewer:** Yeah. That's nice. Um, and how often do you see them would you say?  
**Zoe:** I see them every lunch and break.

**Cracknell, Charlotte** ...  
Some students in school during covid and some at home- strain/ impact on relationships.

Reply

**Cracknell, Charlotte** ...  
People 'changing' particularly when hanging out with different people.

Reply

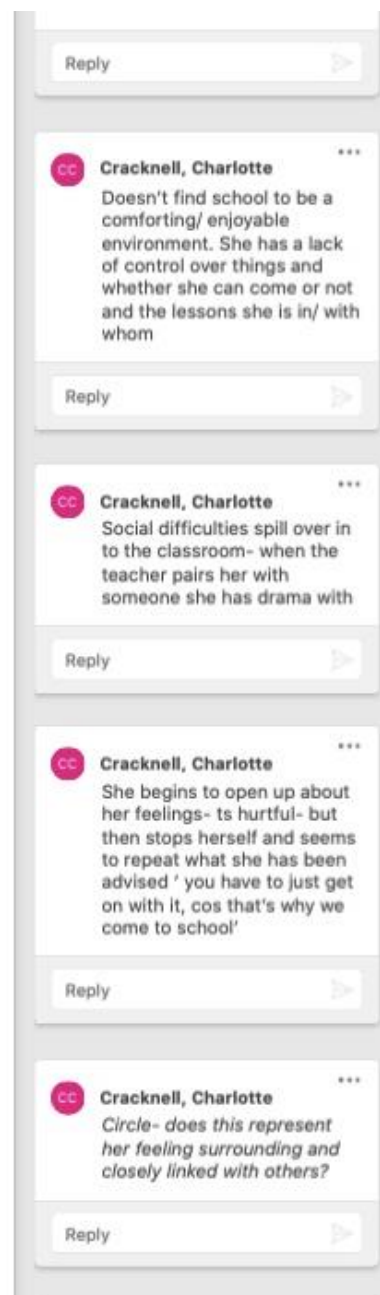
**Cracknell, Charlotte** ...  
Still seeing old friends in class- different kind of relationships. Still friends- 'sort of'.

Reply

**Cracknell, Charlotte** ...  
Difference in covid circumstances causing split between friends?

Reply

<p>Has had some very difficult experiences with friendships.</p>	<p>and then they won't tell you.  <b>Interviewer:</b> Okay. So kind of like rumors get started and stuff.  <b>Lydia:</b> Yeah. Yeah. There's a lot of rumors and whispering and all that stuff. Like, it's every day.  <b>Interviewer:</b> And how does that make you feel in school?  <b>Lydia:</b> It's very uncomfortable.  <b>Interviewer:</b> Yeah, I bet.  <b>Lydia:</b> -you know. And then you're in drama, and then the teacher puts you next to someone that-that you're in drama with. And then they say no-it's kind of hurtful, but, like, you have to just get on with your work 'cause that's why we come to school.  <b>[00:04:00]</b>  <b>Interviewer:</b> Oh, you mean so when the teacher forces you to, like, be around someone that you aren't necessarily getting on with.  <b>Lydia:</b> Yeah.  <b>Interviewer:</b> Okay. So, um, that sentence 'uh here we go again' that you wrote, was a really helpful starting point. So what about now? So you've got-- like, that's how you feel when you go to school. Um, and that represents you in school. What about-- can you draw or write something about the people that are around you in school? So draw the different people that you have in school.  <b>Lydia:</b> Like friends, like teachers?  <b>Interviewer:</b> Everyone. You don't have to draw every single person, but just do like a symbol to represent friends or teachers or--  <b>Lydia:</b> I'm gonna do a circle. I wanna draw people, but, like, you know, like a circle.  <b>Interviewer:</b> Yeah.  <b>Lydia:</b> And then another circle.  <b>Interviewer:</b> Yeah. Okay. So that's who?  <b>Lydia:</b> Okay. The big circle is a community.  <b>Interviewer:</b> Okay.  <b>Lydia:</b> And then this circle's like, uh- like, uh, cloud that's trying to break the community.</p>
<p>Issues with peers has previously made her feel very uncomfortable and have been a great source of stress.</p>	
<p>Is fearful of being around certain peers due to hostile relationships with them.</p>	
<p>Feels that the issues with other students impact on her learning and that she should try to ignore.</p>	
<p>Views those around her as a community.</p>	





Initial hesitation at the idea of discussing relationships in school.

**Maisy:** \*Pulls funny/worried face/hesitates\* Okay.

**Interviewer:** [laughs]

**Maisy:** I'll just do stick people.

**Interviewer:** So who's this?

Cracknell, Charlotte

Hesitates- is this because it's a difficult topic to talk about?

Reply

File name: M Interview.m4a

4

Identifies one key friend first.

**Maisy:** This is my friend, Molly.

**Interviewer:** Molly. Okay.

**Maisy:** Yeah.

**Interviewer:** Is she in your year?

**Maisy:** Yes.

**Interviewer:** Okay.

**Maisy:** But she's on the Spanish side.

**Interviewer:** Oh, okay.

**Maisy:** So we're not in any lessons.

**Interviewer:** Right.

Identifies other friends in different years.

**Maisy:** This is Becky. She's in year eight.

**Interviewer:** Okay.

Sees year group as a significant factor.

**Maisy:** She's a suitcase bag. So--

**Interviewer:** She has a suitcase bag.

Cracknell, Charlotte

Seemed sad when she said this

Reply

Cracknell, Charlotte

Seems sad doesn't see her in lesson

Reply

Cracknell, Charlotte

States that she is in year 8 almost immediately- seems to be significant for her

Reply

Cracknell, Charlotte

Suitcase bag/ others making fun seems a big part of

Others make fun of her for being friends with year 8's.

**Maisy:** People make fun of me for being friends with the year eights.

**Interviewer:** Oh really?

**Maisy:** Yeah.

**Interviewer:** Like who?

**Maisy:** 'Cause they're younger.

**Interviewer:** Okay.

Nearly everyone in her year group makes fun of her.

**Maisy:** Nearly everyone in my year group.

**Interviewer:** Oh, really?

**Maisy:** Yeah, I'm not friends with anyone in my year.

Feels different and excluded from other students in her year groups.

**Interviewer:** You're not friends?

**Maisy:** It's literally none-out of like the 250 students.

**Interviewer:** Right. Why? What is it about?

Perceives others do not like her.

**Maisy:** I don't know. They just don't like me.

**Interviewer:** They don't like you? Okay.

**Maisy:** They just think I'm weird.

Perceives that others think she is weird.

**Interviewer:** Oh, really? So why do you think you're friends of the year eights? What is it about them?

Cracknell, Charlotte

Again, bringing up the age difference. This has been an area of difficulty for her as others have made fun of her for it

Reply

Cracknell, Charlotte

Believes nearly everyone in her year make fun of her

Reply

Cracknell, Charlotte

Sees herself as an outsider from others in her year?

Reply

Cracknell, Charlotte

Doesn't feel she has any friends in her year

Reply

File name: M Interview.m4a

15

**Maisy:** Because they actually listen to me and they don't disinclude me.

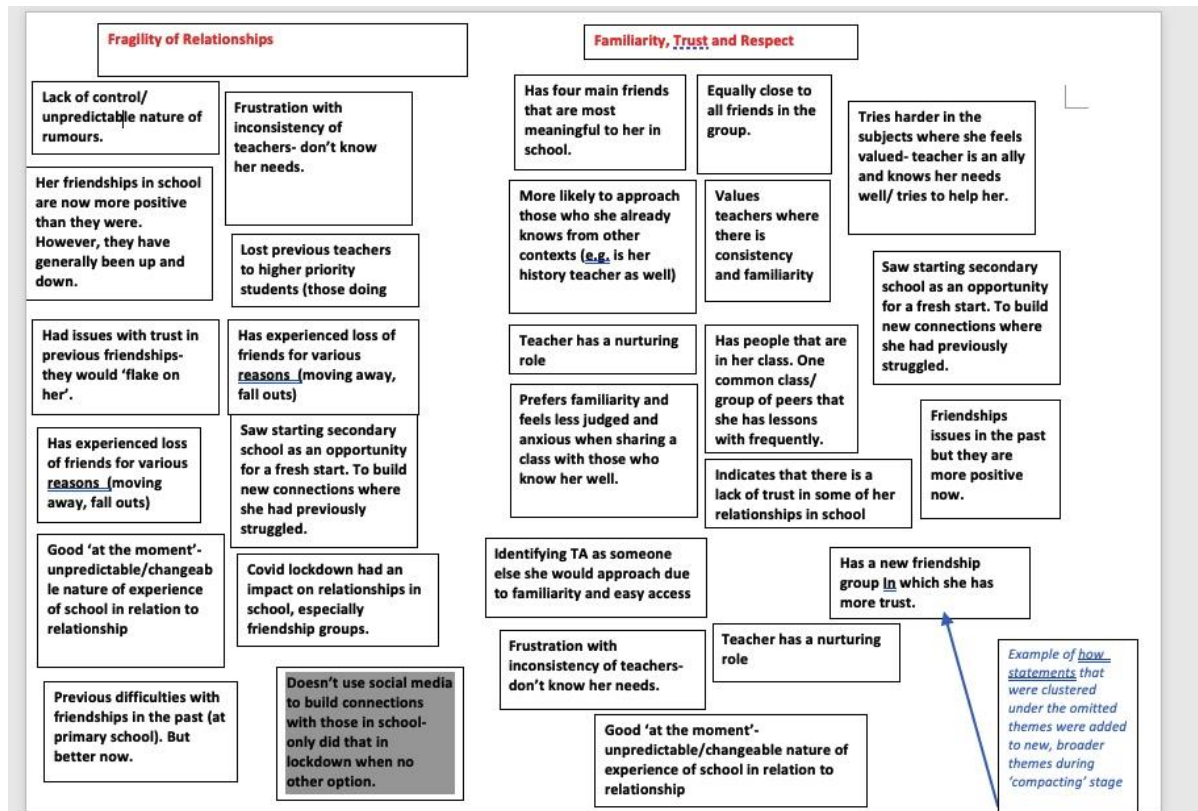
**Interviewer:** Right.

Cracknell, Charlotte

Feels that her year 8 friends include her. Does not feel

## D2: Example of clustering

Example of how experiential statements were clustered, moved around or removed (if duplicates or very similar, for example) until personal experiential themes were formed:



**Impact of covid/ lockdown**

**Identity/ how she views herself**

**Trust**

Views herself as different from many others in her class.

Views herself as part of a group

Saw starting secondary school as an opportunity for a fresh start. To build new connections where she had previously struggled.

Prefers familiarity and feels less judged and anxious when sharing a class with those who know her well.

Identifying TA as someone else she would approach due to familiarity and easy access

Themes that were omitted in the next stage of clustering are shaded in grey.

**Link between emotions and relationships**

**Role/ function of her different relationships**

Would feel sad and alone without friends

Previous difficulties with friendships in the past (at primary school). But better now.

Friendship issues in primary school possibly linked to anxiety

One key friend that she would go to if she had issues relating to her SEMH- feeling upset or worried.

Suggesting that friends/ people around her provide protection from negative impact of drama/ rumours/arguments.

Feels less attached to connections she has made outside of school.

Seeing someone for her anxiety- helping her learn strategies to deal with it.

Discussing help seeking behaviour in school- Uses different relationships for different things (teachers for learning problems and friends for everything else)

Has four main friends that are most meaningful to her in school.

Suggesting that friends/ people around her provide protection from negative impact of drama/ rumours/arguments.

Equally close to all friends in the group.

She would approach different people in school for different problems e.g. teachers about work related problems and friends about social problems.

Also has some relationships in clubs- these are more like acquaintances and main function of these relationships is to avoid being alone.

Who she approaches also depends on time of the day/ access

Would approach different people at different times depending on access/ time of the day.

Teacher mainly helps with school work related problems. Sometimes help with anxiety associated with this.

Would also approach deputy head of year- less busy than head of year/ more accessible.

One key friend that she would go to if she had issues relating to her SEMH- feeling upset or worried.

Friends help with validating feelings and offering advice.

Would struggle more without her key teacher- particularly with learning needs

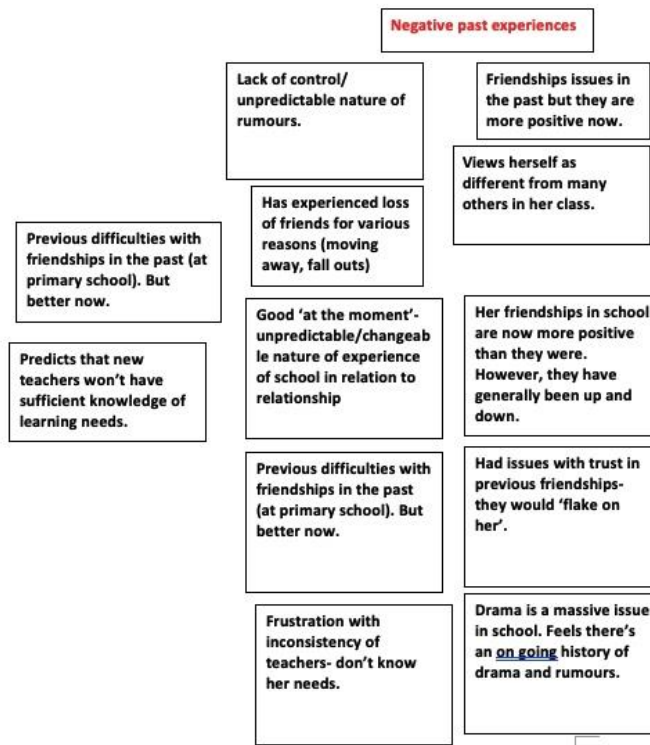
Approaches teachers for help with academic problems.

Feels less attached to connections she has made outside of school.

Identifying TA as someone else she would approach due to familiarity and easy access

Has a key teacher who she talks to in school.

Teacher has a nurturing role



### D3: Examples of Personal Experiential Tables

## Tables of Personal Experiential Themes for Zoe's Analysis

<b>Theme 1: Fragility of relationships</b>		
Experiential statements	Page number	Quotes
<b>Lack of control/ unpredictable nature of rumours.</b>	8	<p>There's a lot of rumours happening in this school. It's like-- it's a massive issue.</p> <p>It started off again, which is not great but-- Yeah.</p> <p>And it goes around school and then everyone hates on them for no reason.</p> <p>Like last year, literally something can start then the next—like one day they're like best friends, but then the day after, they literally will be going around talking to other people about them not being-- saying nice things.</p>
	10	
<b>Her friendships in school are now more positive than they were. However, they have generally been up and down.</b>	9	<p>When I'm with my friends and other people in my class, it's good at the moment. Like there's nothing, there's [00:14:00] no arguments at the moment.</p> <p>Yeah 'cause it can turn quite quickly.</p> <p>Uh, my friendship groups. Um, my friendship groups are like better now than they were.</p> <p>It kind of went up and down [laughs]-</p>
	2	





		copy like two pages of notes off the board every lesson, and that's just not. Basically yeah- Need to know. Like, yeah we can't.
<b>Lost previous teachers to higher priority students (those doing their A levels)</b>	14	It was like I had one teacher, but then the Year 13 teacher left, so he went to go take their class, 'cause they've obviously got their A levels this year.
<b>Saw starting secondary school as an opportunity for a fresh start. To build new connections where she had previously struggled.</b>	16	Connection, which is why I was kind of happy to move onto high school and find new people.
<b>Covid lockdown had an impact on relationships in school, especially friendship groups.</b>	3	So, like, friendship groups in our year have changed so much because we had like friends, then we had lockdown, then we came back again and some people spoke more than others. So like some friendship groups stayed, some didn't.





		Not all of them to know I struggle with work.
Subtheme (Other)		
<b>Doesn't use social media to build connections with those in school- only did that in lockdown when no other option. Values real life connections more</b>	19	Mostly just on the group. But like if we have a problem, you know, we just wait until we're in school to be honest
<b>Saw starting secondary school as an opportunity for a fresh start. To build new connections where she had previously struggled. Values feeling 'connected'</b>	16	Connection, which is why I was kind of happy to move onto high school and find new people.
<b>Tries harder in the subjects where she feels valued- teacher is an ally and knows her needs well/ tries to help her.</b>	18	Yeah. Like if a teacher's not helping me at all, I kind of get-- I don't do a lot of work.
<b>Equally close to all friends in the group.</b>	5	No, all of them as a whole.
<b>Has four main friends that are most meaningful to her in school.</b>	1	That's-that's one of them. I'm trying to think of how many there are-- Yeah, that's four of my friends that I hang out with the most.
<b>Theme 3: The Role/ Function of Zoe's relationships in school</b>		
<b>Discussing help seeking behaviour in school- Uses different relationships for different things (teachers for learning problems and friends for everything else)</b>	6	Uh, like sometimes she'll tell me stuff to tell my teachers. Like once I had to do a presentation BTEC Sport and I reall-- my a-anxiety took over and I really didn't want to do it. So like, she told me, 'cause I was like, "What do I do about it? 'Cause I don't wanna do it in front of my class." She's like, I could just tell them that I didn't want do it in front of

		my class. It's so easy, but I couldn't really think--
<b>Equally close to all friends in the group</b>	5	No, all of them as a whole.
<b>Who she approaches also depends on time of the day/ access</b>	5	Just 'cause I end up seeing her and-- if it's in the morning 'cause we're in the same tutor group.
<b>Would also approach deputy head of year- less busy than head of year/ more accessible.</b>	12	Maybe-- maybe my deputy head of year, over my head of year 'cause my head of year is busier.
<b>She would approach different people in school for different problems e.g. teachers about work related problems and friends about social problems.</b>	12 17	Um, help me by like when I'm like stuck on a bit of my schoolwork or-  it depends on the situation. Like if it's to do with me trying to learn something-
<b>Has four main friends that are most meaningful to her in school.</b>	1	That's-that's one of them. I'm trying to think of how many there are-- Yeah, that's four of my friends that I hang out with the most.
<b>Would approach different people at different times depending on access/ time of the day.</b>	13	But like if it is something that I maybe had last or at I-like after break- I probably would've gone to my friends first.
<b>One key friend that she would go to if she had issues relating to her SEMH- feeling upset or worried.</b>		Oh, probably one of them. I think Malika.
<b>Feels less attached to connections she has made outside of school.</b>	10	I don't know 'cause I didn't speak to them a lot so-  -I don't think it would affect me.

<b>Suggesting that friends/ people around her provide protection from negative impact of drama/ rumours/arguments.</b>	10	Because it depends on like the people I'm around as well.
<b>Also has some relationships in clubs- these are more like acquaintances and main function of these relationships is to avoid being alone.</b>	7 10	Like, I speak to them so I'm not alone, but we don't talk to each other outside  I would just be standing there all alone
<b>Teacher mainly helps with school work related problems. Sometimes help with anxiety associated with this.</b>	6	She's like, I could just tell them that I didn't want do it in front of my class. It's so easy, but I couldn't really think--
<b>Friends help with validating feelings and offering advice.</b>	6	Um, she'd like tell me if it's like-she might try and help me out a bit or sometimes she'd tell me if I should go see someone about—cos sometimes I'm like, do I talk to someone else about it-or not.  Like another teacher. Yeah and she'll tell me like, is it big enough of an issue or something?
<b>Identifying TA as someone else she would approach due to familiarity and easy access</b>	11	Maybe the TA that's in my majority of my classes this year 'cause they normally change every year.
<b>Has a key teacher who she talks to in school.</b>	2	I talk to one teacher in school a lot. Ms. Hinton. She's in the Hive.
<b>Teacher has a nurturing role</b>	6	I've had-- 'cause I've had her since Year 7 and she knows like my dyslexia and everything else better than- than other teachers.

	7	<p>Very caring.</p> <p>Not that- not that strict, but with other people-- she knows they keep-- if you keep doing something then-</p> <p>-</p>
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## Theme 4: Emotional Experiences

Experiential Statements	Page number	Quote
<b>Would feel sad and alone without friends</b>	10	I'd probably be sad a lot 'cause I'd be sitting alone.  Quite sad and lonely. Yeah.
<b>Friendship issues in primary school possibly linked to anxiety</b>	17  15  16	...then I get really anxious.  It's not-- Like I used to have it a lot in primary school.  Like the last two years, I tried different friend groups, and then they'd just kind of leave me a lot-
<b>Suggesting that friends/people around her provide protection from negative impact of drama/</b>	10	Because it depends on like the people I'm around as well.  Because like some people I know are more likely to go say something to someone else than others.
<b>Seeing someone for her anxiety- helping her learn strategies to deal with it.</b>	15	But for some reason, it started to come back again, so I'm seeing someone for it.  Yeah, I'm learning ways to like strategize, help me deal with it.
<b>Would struggle more without her key teacher- particularly with learning needs</b>	18  10	Like if a teacher's not helping me at all, I kind of get-- I don't do a lot of work.  I would struggle a bit more 'cause like Ms. Hinton's known me for so long and knows what helps me and what really doesn't.

<p><b>Previous difficulties with friendships in the past (at primary school). But better now.</b></p>	<p>16</p>	<p>It kind of like-- people dropped me every year. Like the last two years, I tried different friend groups, and then they'd just kind of leave me a lot-</p> <p>-near the end. So I kind of still have one friend near the end, but I was like only with them so I wasn't alone.</p> <p>Connection, which is why I was kind of happy to move onto high school and find new people.</p>
<p><b>One key friend that she would go to if she had issues relating to her SEMH- feeling upset or worried.</b></p>	<p>5</p>	<p>Oh, probably one of them. I think Malika.</p> <p>she'd like tell me if it's like- she might try and help me out a bit or sometimes she'd tell me if I should go see someone about—cos sometimes I'm like, do I talk to someone else about it-or not.</p>
<p><b>Previous difficulties with friendships in the past (at primary school). But better now.</b></p>	<p>16</p>	<p>No, I feel like it's got a lot better. Like now I know I've got a stable--</p> <p>Happy. 'Cause I know they're not gonna flake on me like others-- people have.</p>
<p><b>Feels less attached to connections she has made outside of school.</b></p>	<p>10</p>	<p>-I don't think it would affect me.</p>
<p><b>Predicts that new teachers won't have sufficient knowledge of learning needs and feels frustrated.</b></p>	<p>15</p>	<p>That's like a massive issue. I feel like a lot of the new trainee teachers don't know anything to do with dyslexia at all, and cannot.</p>

		and we always say, "These teachers that are coming in do not-- they don't know."
<b>Lack of control/ unpredictable nature of rumours.</b>	10	Like last year, literally something can start then the next—like one day they're like best friends, but then the day after, they literally will be going around talking to other people about them not being-- saying nice things.
<b>Has experienced loss of friends for various reasons (moving away, fall outs, lockdown)</b>	3	So, like, friendship groups in our year have changed so much because we had like friends, then we had lockdown, then we came back again and some people spoke more than others. So like some friendship groups stayed, some didn't.
	4	Like different friendship groups came outta that. And then loads of stuff. Drama happened in our year last year. Like she split so many different groups apart-  And then I went to someone else, but then they kept dragging me into like massive arguments for no reason.
<b>Good 'at the moment'- unpredictable/changeable nature of experience of school in relation to relationship</b>	9	Um, I'd say good and bad. Well, because like I'm getting really stressed out about my school-- like, about my schoolwork at the moment. Like I'm not doing good enough in it.  Yeah 'cause it can turn quite quickly.



		So like they know what's going on with it all.
<b>Identifies as someone who struggles with learning</b>	17	Um, she helps like-like when I-- 'cause I did like a test thing like a while-- I think it was like September at the start of the year, we had to write these paragraphs for it, but then my teacher's like, "You are not getting it.. like at all." So I went to go do it with her at lunch in the PE office and she sat and helped me do it.  But like I don't have enough time is my problem.

### **Theme: Emotional Impact**

Experiential Statement	Page number	Quotes
Lydia would feel safer in school if the rules were enforced more consistently.	<b><u>19</u></b>	Most people don't listen to the rules. So I think they should just keep the rules the same but, like, isolation and all that stuff, it won't do anything to like make them change. So I would just say, like-like, maybe more discipline-
Still finds school stressful but not as bad.	<b><u>14</u></b>	Um, I'm actually happy now, and I don't doubt myself. Um, of course, they are still telling people not to like me, which is very stressful.
She now goes outside and tries to ignore what others are saying.	<b><u>16</u></b>	Uh, they're in my class. I just ignore them 'cause I know they want a reaction out of me, but like- <b>Interviewer:</b> Okay. <b>Lydia:</b> -I don't give it to them.

<p>Students have also been targeting Lydia's family members which makes Lydia angry.</p>	<p><b><u>18</u></b></p>	<p>I'm very mad because someone called my mom from the school. So--</p>
<p>Tries to tell herself that others (previous friendships) are irrelevant and not important to her.</p>	<p><b><u>8</u></b></p>	<p>I actually can go outside for a long period, and I don't care about what they say anymore. Because it's-it's kind of irrelevant.</p>
<p>Lydia goes to an allocated room in the school during the mornings to avoid the students she has fallen out with.</p>	<p><b><u>13</u></b></p>	<p>No, I wasn't bunking school. I was just getting very-- Okay. I wasn't like very late, but I was always late enough to miss tutor time.</p> <p>And then I only went tutor time two times, and I hated it so much.</p>
<p>Feels a lot happier in school now.</p>	<p><b><u>14</u></b></p>	<p>Um, I'm actually happy now, and I don't doubt myself.</p>
<p>Would prefer to get to get detentions for being late than see students she had fallen out with.</p>	<p>No, I wasn't bunking school. I was just getting very-- Okay. I wasn't like very late, but I was always late enough to miss tutor time.</p> <p>Like, late detention. No, like, when you're late to school. Sometimes I don't go and I get in trouble.</p>	<p><b><u>13</u></b></p> <p><b><u>2</u></b></p>

<p>Describes this year in school as 'crazy' and suggests feelings around a lack of control.</p>	<p><u>2</u></p>	<p>It's a crazy year. I'm just gonna say this- like, this year is like crazy. Sometimes the drama is unnecessary. And then sometimes the drama is necessary. But when you're in drama, sometimes you don't even know that you are in drama until someone says something like 'Eew' or like "Ugh," or something, and then you'll know something's happened, and then they won't tell you.</p> <p>Yeah. Yeah. There's a lot of rumors and whispering and all that stuff. Like, it's every day.</p>
<p>Describes falling out with friends in school as one of the worst times ever and a great source of stress and loneliness.</p>	<p><u>7</u></p>	<p>Well, it was so stressful. I hated it so much. I hated it. It was like-like the worst. It was my-- It was one of my worst times ever because I was also lonely because they were only-- they were my only-- they were my friends.</p>
<p>Finds school emotionally draining.</p>	<p><u>1</u></p>	<p>Uh, here we go again'. Okay. So that's what you think about school, is it?</p> <p><b>Lydia:</b> Yeah. 'Cause it's, like, very stressful and stuff.</p> <p><b>Interviewer:</b> It's very stressful. Tell me more. Why is it stressful?</p> <p><b>Lydia:</b> 'Cause, like, homework. And, like-like, you find out you have homework due today, and you get scared 'cause you</p>

		<p>don't want detention and, like, walking into school. It's just very tiring and wake up early and stuff.</p> <p><b>Lydia:</b> Knowing that sometimes you're there late or detention, and that's, what, 30 minutes of school. It's just like very, like, tiring.</p>
Hasn't enjoyed being in her current year due to difficult relationships with peers	<u>2</u>	<p>Mm. They are stressful. Like, when you're in-- Well, this year, like, year nine, it's not the best year. So, like, a lot of drama happens in this year. And, like, when you're in drama, it's very hard to get yourself out of drama. And, like-- yeah. It's-it's very hard. That's what I'm gonna say.</p>
Is fearful of being around certain peers due to hostile relationships with them.	<p><u>3</u></p> <p><u>13</u></p>	<p>Yeah. Yeah. There's a lot of rumors and whispering and all that stuff. Like, it's every day.</p> <p>It's very uncomfortable-</p> <p>'Cause Ms.-- she m-made me like a special tutor group, which I don't really want to go to.</p> <p><b>Interviewer:</b> Oh really? Even if those people aren't in it?</p> <p><b>Lydia:</b> I don't know. 'Cause I don't know who's in it.</p>
Feels her behaviour has improved since she has stopped being friends with them.	<u>7</u>	<p>And I was very naughty when I was with them, so-- Yeah. I did get loads of detentions because of them.</p>



Reflecting on where she went wrong by being friends with previous friends.	<u>23</u>	<p>"Be kind, Lydia." 'Cause I was crazy. And really, like-like, that, where like—</p> <p>Um, like, really-- was like-- was, like-- I got attached. I get attached.</p> <p>Yeah. And, like, I would never let anyone go, but eventually, you have to let them go.</p> <p>Yeah, well, 'cause I trusted them and stuff. But-- Yeah, I thought- I though they were never gonna go.</p> <p>Yeah. Have, like, more allies.</p>
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<b>Theme: Impact on Learning</b>		
Experiential Statement	Page number	Quotes
Has tried to ignore friendship difficulties and focus on her future.	<u>14</u>	<p>: But-but, like- but, like, it's fine 'cause I'm still like trying my best to, like, you know, still do what I need to do for school. 'Cause if I focus on them, they're not gonna get me anywhere. That's- -what my mom says all the time. She's like, "Stop focusing on them. They're not doing their work. If they're talking about you and focusing on you-</p>
Difficulties with peers impedes on her learning, at times.	<u>16</u>	<b>Lydia:</b> Uh, they're in my class. I just ignore them 'cause I know they want a

		<p>reaction out of me, but like-</p> <p><b>Interviewer:</b> Okay.</p> <p><b>Lydia:</b> -I don't give it to them.</p> <p><b>Interviewer:</b> Okay. Do you think it affects, like, how you learn when you're in-- do you learn-- is it easier to learn or harder to learn when they're in your lesson?</p> <p><b>Lydia:</b> Sometimes it's harder because sometimes they throw stuff at me.</p>
Disagreements with peers affecting her attendance in school.	<u>5</u>	'Cause when this drama all happened to me, I was in like a really bad place, and then I get to, like, being late and bunking.

<b>Theme: Negative Past Experiences</b>		
Experiential Statement	Page number	Quotes
Was previously arriving late to school to avoid seeing certain students.	<u>13</u>	No, I wasn't bunking school. I was just getting very-- Okay. I wasn't like very late, but I was always late enough to miss tutor time.
Lydia regrets getting 'too attached' to people in the past.	<u>22</u>	Um, like, really-- was like-- was, like-- I got attached. I get attached. <b>Interviewer:</b> Okay, cool. Get attached with people. That's quite normal. <b>Lydia:</b> Yeah. And, like, I would never let anyone go, but eventually, you have to let them go.

<p>Hiding in toilets to avoid being seen alone.</p>	<p><u>12</u></p> <p><u>7</u></p>	<p>I would still be hiding in toilets. And then my mom would tell me to leave the toilets 'cause I'd be texting her.</p> <p>But that was only until, like, mid-argument and stuff, so I was actually alone all the time. And I used to sit in the toilet because I had no one to talk to.</p>
<p>Had been issues with spreading rumours and telling secrets amongst peers.</p>	<p><u>14</u></p> <p><u>3</u></p>	<p>Because there's this girl-- Okay, so the drama was, there's this girl I accidentally told a secret, which I don't-- you know, she wouldn't tell me who told her. And then she told them, and then she told her friends, and then now they don't like me</p> <p>And then sometimes the drama is necessary. But when you're in drama, sometimes you don't even know that you are in drama until someone says something like 'Eeew' or like "Ugh," or something, and then you'll know something's happened, and then they won't tell you. Yeah. Yeah. There's a lot of rumors and whispering and all that stuff. Like, it's every day.</p>
<p>Her mum got involved to try to resolve the situation (told school what was going on).</p>	<p><u>6</u></p>	<p><b>Interviewer:</b> So-- How did that come about? Like how</p>

		<p>did teachers find out what was going on?  <b>Lydia:</b> My mum.  <b>Interviewer:</b> Okay. So you told your mom, and then your mom told the teachers?  <b>Lydia:</b> Uh, well, yeah, basically that.  <b>Interviewer:</b> And were you glad in the end that she told them? How did you feel when she told them?  <b>Lydia:</b> Uh, I felt good. Also, a bit stressed 'cause my mom, she's always like, "Oh my gosh, this is why you shouldn't, like, trust them." She would always-always, like, you know, tell us and say like, "Oh, you shouldn't have trusted them and stuff," because people that I was hanging out with weren't good. So she was like, "Oh my gosh, they weren't good for you anyway," and stuff.</p>
<p>Recognises how far she has come since things were at their worst.</p>	<p><b>12</b></p>	<p>How often do you just go and see her to sort of check in with her?  <b>Lydia:</b> Well, now, barely.  <b>Interviewer:</b> Okay. Why is that?  <b>Lydia:</b> I don't know actually. But I was walking home and I saw her in her car.  <b>Interviewer:</b> Oh, did you? Oh. So do you think you'd check on her less 'cause, like, you don't-- not in a bad way, but you don't need her as much? Like, you're-  <b>Lydia:</b> Yeah.  <b>Interviewer:</b> -happier in school?</p>

		<p><b>Lydia:</b> Yeah. Yeah, but I still-- of course, I would always tell her my problems.</p> <p><b>Interviewer:</b> So when things were really bad, how often were you seeing her?</p> <p><b>Lydia:</b> Like, every day.</p> <p><b>Interviewer:</b> Okay. Like, every lunchtime or something?</p> <p><b>Lydia:</b> Yeah.</p> <p><b>Interviewer:</b> Okay, so what would school be like if you didn't have this group of friends, your little community?</p> <p><b>Lydia:</b> I would still be hiding in toilets. And then my mom would tell me to leave the toilets 'cause I'd be texting her.</p>
Had no one to talk to in school.	<u>7</u>	But that was only until, like, mid-argument and stuff, so I was actually alone all the time. And I used to sit in the toilet because I had no one to talk to.

<b><u>Theme: Safety in numbers</u></b>		
Experiential Statement	Page number	Quotes
Views those around her as a community.	<u>8</u>	: Yeah, I would say it's like a community basically. It was just me and her-- and then more people started coming-- that she was friends with, and now I'm basically friends with them. So--
Lydia wishes she had made more effort and has friendships with others in the school so that she had more 'allies'.	<u>23</u>	<b>Interviewer:</b> Okay, cool. So you would have said like to your year seven self, you'd say maybe like build friendships with other people, too?

		<b>Lydia:</b> Yeah. Have, like, more allies.
Sees her new friends very regularly- during break and lunch and some lessons.	<u>8</u>	<b>Interviewer:</b> Um, so how often do you see that person? <b>Lydia:</b> Every day 'cause she's in my class. <b>Interviewer:</b> Oh, nice. Okay. And do you spend lunch and stuff and break times with them? <b>Lydia:</b> Yeah. And break times.
Her friends and family make up her community. She feels protected by them.	<u>15</u>  <u>4</u>	Yes, of course, I do. And then my sister has a friend who goes sixth form. So-- I do have allies.  Well, there's-- like, you have a community and then people, like, bad people always come in to like try to ruin the community and stuff. And, like, that's very annoying and stuff, too.
Has different friends and more confidence.	<u>8</u>  <u>9</u>	I actually can go outside for a long period, and I don't care about what they say anymore. <b>Interviewer:</b> Okay, good. <b>Lydia:</b> Because it's-it's kind of irrelevant.  Well, she's better than them because she's actually caring. Well, she's got, like, attitude. But, like, she-she-she understands my point of- my point of view, and I understand her point of view, whereas them lot.

<b>Theme: Sources of support</b>		
<b>Experiential Statement</b>	<b>Page number</b>	<b>Quotes</b>
Has fun with her friends.	<u><b>4</b></u>	I would say funny. And fun. Fun.
Lydia has a friend from primary school who she speaks to everyday on the phone and tells everything.	<u><b>15-16</b></u>	My best friend. <b>Interviewer:</b> Who's your best friend? <b>Lydia:</b> She's my primary school friend. We've known each other for-for six years.
Lydia is emphasising the longevity and closeness of her and her primary school friend.	<u><b>16</b></u>	Yes. I speak to her about every thing.- <b>Interviewer:</b> Oh really? Oh, that's so nice. How often do you speak to her? Every day Yeah. And we send stuff to each other. And she has a cat.
Lydia's sisters tell her mum when she tells them things that have happened in school.	<u><b>17</b></u>	'Cause my sister will probably tell my mom, who'll go to the school. So..
When issues have occurred, Lydia's mum will often go to the school on behalf of her.	<u><b>18</b></u>	Uh, sometimes I tell-- that's why sometimes school's last 'cause my mom will just go to school. So--
Lydia speaks to some of her friends from school in a group chat on whatsapp.	<u><b>18</b></u>	No, actually. Oh, yeah, I told my-my group chat. My group chat on WhatsApp.
Lydia talks to her sister about her problems.	<u><b>17</b></u>	But I don't really care because I just tell my sisters, and then my sisters make me laugh. So--
Lydia's family are protective of her in school.	<u><b>18</b></u>	Sometimes my sister gets really mad. She'll be like, oh

		my gosh-- "I'm gonna- I'm gonna go to that school. I'm going to go that school tomorrow," and stuff. 'Cause they do get on her nerve sometimes.
Sometimes borrows her mums phone so that she can speak to her friends.	<u>18</u>	'Cause my mom heard children. And only the people that I wasn't friends with normally-- 'cause sometimes I'm naughty at home. My dad takes my phone, and I use their phones to call my mom. So, yeah. But I've blocked them all off my mom's phone. So--
Went back to old friends from primary school to avoid being alone.	<u>7</u>	So I had-- since they all left me, I had no one to, like, actually talk to except from my primary school friends. So I hung with her.
Her and her friends give each other advice and relate to each other.	<u>4</u>	Yeah, because we just- we just- we just-- we have, like, things in common with each other. So it is nice to like relate to that person, like, my friend and stuff.
Feels her new friends are more caring and actually have her best interest at heart.	<u>9</u>	Well, she's better than them because she's actually caring. Well, she's got, like, attitude. But, like, she-she-she understands my point of- my point of view, and I understand her point of view, whereas them lot.
Links her friendships to her mental health and wellbeing- current friends make her happy and not stressed.	<u>5</u>	Of course, they would like try to relate to it, and they would try to make me happy and not stressed.
Her sisters cheer her up by making her laugh.	<u>17</u>	But I don't really care because I just tell my sisters, and then my sisters make me laugh. So--



<p>The schools breakfast club also provides Lydia with some emotional respite.</p>	<p><u>19</u></p>	<p>Yeah. I don't go there at break or lunch. I only go there in the morning.  <b>Interviewer:</b> Oh, in the morning, okay. Um, so you find it helpful to go there. Why'd you go there in the morning just to avoid tutor time?  <b>Lydia: [00:26:00]</b> Well, yeah. And-- 'Cause breakfast clubs, so I get breakfast.</p>
<p>Speaks to her friends about her problems whilst in school and via text.</p>	<p><u>5</u></p>	<p>No, I will speak in- I will speak in school, of course, about my problems--  --to my friends.</p> <p>But, like, normally, it would be texting more than speaking in school. But, like, sometimes, you know, we'd speak about problems at school, of course, 'cause school-- Sometimes school is a problem.</p>
<p>sister can relate to Lydia's difficulties as she went to the same school and is also not enjoying her new college.</p>	<p><u>15</u></p>	<p><b>Lydia:</b> Yeah. But my sister had my back. So--  <b>Interviewer:</b> Oh really? So is your sister in this school or not?  <b>Lydia:</b> She was. I have two.  <b>Interviewer:</b> Okay.  <b>Lydia:</b> She was, but then the sixth form didn't-- this sixth form--  <b>Interviewer:</b> Mm-hmm.  <b>Lydia:</b> -didn't give her what she wanted. So she's in another college now.  <b>Interviewer:</b> Oh, okay. Is she having a good time there?  <b>Lydia:</b> No.  <b>Interviewer:</b> No. Oh, no. So did you talk to her about things, like--</p>

		<p><b>Lydia:</b> Yes, of course, I do. And then my sister has a friend who goes sixth form. So--</p> <p><b>Interviewer:</b> Oh, okay.</p> <p><b>Lydia:</b> I do have allies.</p>
Has support outside of school from family members including mum and sisters.	<p><u>15</u></p> <p><u>17</u></p>	<p>Yeah. But my sister had my back. So--</p> <p>I do have allies.</p> <p>But I don't really care because I just tell my sisters, and then my sisters make me laugh. So--</p>
Lydia describes her families unconditional love for her.	<u>21</u>	<p>Crazy. Sometimes she'd probably call me rude because, yeah, I have like a big attitude at home.</p> <p>Yes. Um, annoying 'cause she says I'm annoying all the time. 'Cause I annoy my sisters, I annoy my dad, and I annoy my mum. Cause it's funny.</p> <p>I think it's just fun. Probably like-- I don't know actually. Pretty. And she always calls me her baby.</p> <p>And her-her little handbag.</p>

<b><u>Theme: The role of teachers</u></b>		
Experiential Statement	Page number	Quotes
Lydia feels that it would make things worse if she told her teachers about some of her difficulties.	<u>17</u>	It won't help. 'Cause they'll just be like, "Oh my God, why did you tell miss" and stuff. And like, you know, so it doesn't help. But it's nice for them to get in trouble.
In a consistent state of anticipation- waiting for	<u>4</u>	Okay. The big circle is a community. <b>Interviewer:</b> Okay.



	<b><u>20</u></b>	<p>Yeah. 'Cause I always bring in snacks. She loves my snacks. Yeah, I would always bring in these chocolate muffins from Tesco. And she always asks 'can I have one?' and I always give her one.</p>
<p>Teachers helped to improve the situation by offering her a safe space to avoid certain students.</p>	<b><u>6</u></b>	<p>And then the teachers just, uh, did stuff to support me. = Like, they gave me social studies and inclusion. They let me go inclusion because I didn't wanna be in my tutor group- -because all the people were there. That's why I'm in inclusion all the time-</p>
<p>Knows her key teacher is there as a 'safe base' should she need it.</p>	<b><u>12</u></b>	<p><b>Interviewer:</b> How often do you just go and see her to sort of check in with her? <b>Lydia:</b> Well, now, barely. <b>Interviewer:</b> Okay. Why is that? <b>Lydia:</b> I don't know actually. But I was walking home and I saw her in her car. <b>Interviewer:</b> Oh, did you? Oh. So do you think you'd check on her less 'cause, like, you don't-- not in a bad way, but you don't need her as much? Like, you're- <b>Lydia:</b> Yeah. <b>Interviewer:</b> -happier in school? <b>Lydia:</b> Yeah. Yeah, but I still-- of course, I would always tell her my problems.</p>



		<p>And then next week, I have her on Wednesday and Friday. Yeah. For lessons.</p>
<p>She values that her teacher also went to their school and can identify with her problems.</p>	<p><b><u>10</u></b></p>	<p>Because when I was learning, I'd always go to her class, and then she would give me advice. Because she went to this school so.</p> <p>Um, well, 'cause, of course, I'm her favorite. But, like-like, I don't even know 'cause she said she came to the school. So. like, I always used to like go to her classroom and I check up on her. And-and I always tell her my problems.</p> <p>She knows how it goes in this school. So--</p>
<p>Lydia feels that Ms. Smith (favourite teacher) sees beyond her difficulties and sees potential.</p>	<p><b><u>20</u></b></p>	<p>I get distracted a lot. She'd probably call me smart.</p>
<p>Would sometimes go to teachers in Inclusion but hasn't had a chance to build a trusting relationship with them yet so is more reluctant.</p>	<p><b><u>11</u></b></p>	<p>Yeah, but I-I-- 'cause, like, I'm kind of new there. I don't really share my problems 'cause, like, I'm--sometimes I'm shy.</p>
<p>Aside from Ms. Smith, teachers would be one of the last people that Lydia would approach for support.</p>	<p><b><u>17</u></b></p>	<p>My sister, my sisters. And then-- Okay. It'll be my sisters and then it'll be my primary school best friend. And then it'll be my-my group chat, uh, like, community. And then <b>[00:24:00]</b> teachers are last. Actually the--</p>



Lydia feels she needs to keep a wall up when it comes to her relationships in school.	<u>23</u>	That you shouldn't-- don't trust anyone. So you shouldn't trust everyone. And sometimes keep your secrets to yourself and keep, like, a wall up.  You know, like, "Keep a wall up for yourself until you trust them enough to break it down." Probably keep that wall up.
Lydia doesn't feel that others would listen to new rules if school introduced them.	<u>19</u>	So, like, I'm just saying probably some people won't listen. I don't even know.
Lydia has a lack of trust when it comes to her relationships in school.	<u>22</u>	Uh, to not trust anyone. Everyone lies.  You shouldn't trust everyone because when you trust somebody and then they-- you tell them, like, somebody else secrets-- when you're involved with them, they'll tell, like, all of your secrets.
Feels that others have been fake with her in the past.	<u>14</u>	Yeah. And then she didn't-- they didn't like me, and then they tell people not to like me. And then they're just fake with me.

<b><u>Theme: Identity</u></b>		
Experiential Statement	Page number	Quotes
Lydia feels that her friendship groups influenced aspects of her identity.	<u>6</u>	<b>Lydia:</b> Uh, I felt good. Also, a bit stressed 'cause my mom, she's always like, "Oh my gosh, this is why you shouldn't, like, trust them." She would always-- always, like, you know, tell us and say like, "Oh, you







Theme 1: Emotional Experience		
Experiential Statement	Page Number	Quotes
Has fun times with friends in school.	34	And her hair was free. Yeah. And then Jess kind of just, um, basically dragged Victoria then just started you know, like shoving Victoria around. I was like, "Get it on this." And we were kind of just was shoving Victoria back and forth.
	12	Um, yeah, well, yeah, we have quite a lot of fun together.
She talks about problems/ worries with her friends.	13	Yeah. Uh, we sometimes talk about like, uh, what's worrying-like worrying us.
Links her friendships with mental health- would break down without them.	38	If it wasn't for them, I would probably just breakdown.  And if-if they were gone- Then basically like no one would talk to me and interact with me at all.  <b>Interviewer:</b> Okay. What would you rate school out of 10 at the moment? <b>Maisy:</b> four. <b>Interviewer:</b> Four and if your friends weren't in school how- what would you rate it? <b>Maisy:</b> Oh, automatically it would be a zero.
	39	Well, they don't make me feel depressed.
Initial hesitation at the idea of discussing relationships in school.	4	<b>Interviewer:</b> Draw the-the people that you have around you in school. <b>Maisy:</b> *Pulls funny/worried face/hesitates* Okay.

Feels sad as she has no friends in her year group or classes.	16	<b>Maisy:</b> Quite sad 'cause I have absolutely no friends- -in my class.
She dreads lessons where she does not have friends and is more likely to be left out as nobody wants to be paired with her.	16  37	For-For my main learning group. So it's most of my lessons. So I get quite sad when it's like drama or PE or like something that we have to go to pairs for- -because no one ever wants to go in a group with me.  Because I-I just want to do the lesson. 'Cause here's the thing when it's like partner work in dance, or in drama, or PE I'm like guuuys. Yes, I dread it and I'm like I need to be in a group
Sense of loss due to covid-missed out on things.	19-20	<b>Maisy:</b> Because I-I'm not completely sure, but maybe it was something to do with COVID. <b>Maisy:</b> 'Cause that-- We kind of- So I kind of-- I missed out my stats- -and kind of missed out the going into school with everybody there- -situation. <b>Interviewer:</b> Do you think that impacted how you made friends? <b>Maisy:</b> I think a bit. <b>Interviewer:</b> Mm. <b>Maisy:</b> Yeah. Because, um, I would've been able to, I don't know like meet people from other year groups- -and because like now, I'm friends with year eights.
Became friends with another student during covid when	23	Because, um, we had to go into lockdown in year seven and

<p>only key worker students were in.</p>	<p>24</p>	<p>both me and Molly were key worker child-children. Well, Molly was a key worker. I got to go to school 'cause I'm adopted. So special needs and yeah, stuff. And well, if it wasn't for this teacher, we probably wouldn't be friends. So we were both reading a book, opposite ends of the playground, looking at the ground and the teacher was like, child reading, child reading, put two children reading together, maybe talk?</p> <p>So it's like dragged me over to Molly. We were kind of like, "Hi." And. but then we-we started to get more like friends. And it just- it just grew.</p> <p>Yeah, it was because it was, um-- it was like barely any people there.</p> <p>And so 'cause we were like, literally I was on one end of the playground, she was on the other end of the playground. It was like, nobody else there. 'Cause we had Marques in like the netball courts.</p>
<p>Uses books as form of escapism.</p>	<p>28</p>	<p>I love reading. It's like one of the best things.</p> <p><b>Interviewer:</b> What's it about? <b>Maisy:</b> Uh--Well, it's-it's about this, um, human child- And her mum's sending her to summer camp because she's a weirdo. And she's like, "I don't wanna go to the- they're gonna like fix me." But it's like, there's</p>

		nothing actually wrong with her.
Nearly everyone in her year group makes fun of her.	15	<b>Maisy:</b> People make fun of me for being friends with the year eights. 'Cause they're younger. <b>Interviewer:</b> Who does? <b>Maisy:</b> Nearly everyone in my year group.
Has little hope of forming friendships with those in her class.	17  15-16	I've tried to be nice to them--but they just don't really care.  And I-I would just love it if me and Molly could be in the same class.  I don't know. They just don't like me. They just think I'm weird.
School gives her a chance to experience friendship.	39	<b>Maisy:</b> Um, and I get to have fun. <b>Interviewer:</b> Yeah. <b>Maisy:</b> And experience friendships.
She feels sad that she spends lots of time alone/ struggles with friendships.	25	Because, um, I feel lonely both ways because lonely as in then because there's like nobody, like hardly anyone there. But lonely now as in like, I feel so small compared to everyone else. So like there's-- everyone has big friendship groups for like at least one like really good friend. You know like who they're like always with. But like I feel kind of lonely 'cause I'm usually like by myself.

## **Theme 2: Loss of friendships/ past relationships**

Experiential Statement	Page number	Quotes
<p>Had different friends before- friendships have changed due to fall outs and moving away.</p>	<p>21</p> <p>44</p> <p><b><u>19</u></b></p>	<p>But then we got into a massive disagreement and we didn't talk to each other for like half a year. And then turns out, end of year eight, moving to Poland- -and doesn't speak to me at all.</p> <p>But it-it just got worse and-and worse. Um, I decided- 'cause like I decided to, um, leave.</p> <p>Because most of my friends from primary school that moved up, um, they're on the Spanish side and I've kind of--</p>
<p>Previous friendship groups made her feel excluded.</p>	<p><b><u>43</u></b></p>	<p>And they didn't really like me that much and left me out quite often. I was like, "It's fine." They were sisters and they'd be occupied.</p>
<p>Can relate to characters in favourite books as others think she is strange.</p>	<p><b><u>28</u></b></p> <p><b><u>15</u></b></p>	<p>And her mum's sending her to summer camp because she's a weirdo.</p> <p>They just think I'm weird.</p>
<p>Friendships are the main positive she has in school.</p>	<p><b><u>38</u></b></p>	<p>Okay. What would you rate school out of 10 at the moment? <b>Maisy:</b> four. <b>Interviewer:</b> Four and if your friends weren't in school how- what would you rate it?</p>

		<b>Maisy:</b> Oh, automatically it would be a zero.
Feels lonely in school (during covid times and now)	<u>24-25</u>	And so 'cause we were like, literally I was on one end of the playground, she was on the other end of the playground. It was like, nobody else there. 'Cause we had Marques in like the netball courts.  It was so weird to think about now.  Yeah. And there was one for each year group. <b>Maisy:</b> I felt a bit lonely.
Seems sad at the loss of member of staff she used to see.	41	<b>Maisy:</b> 'Cause I used to do it with her, um, predecessor Steven but then he left. <b>Interviewer:</b> I remember Steven, he was good. <b>Maisy:</b> You know Steven?!
<b><u>Theme 3: Group Dynamics</u></b>		
Experiential Statement	Page number	Quotes



<p>Some group members in her friendship group are more consistent than others.</p>	<p><u>6</u></p>	<p>And then this is where it starts to get a bit strange, 'cause, um, we have friends in our group, right?  <b>Interviewer:</b> Mm-hmm.  <b>Maisy:</b> But they don't always come.  <b>Interviewer:</b> So like-like they're kind of not in the group consistently, but they're kind of fleeting in and out sometimes?  <b>Maisy:</b> Yeah. So--</p>
<p>Has shared jokes with different group members.</p>	<p><u>7-8</u></p>	<p>Supposedly she's so scared of pigs, so I-I oink at her.  [laughter]</p> <p>And then, uh, Chloe, and just some-some reason Ch-Chloe has an obsession with Flora, the butter brand. She has a flora bag. It's green with the logo on it. All right. I bet she'd eat a whole tub of Flora if she could.</p>
<p>Identifies one key friend first.</p>	<p><u>5</u></p>	<p>This is my friend, Molly.</p>
<p>Each group member has a defining characteristic/ different identities in the group.</p>	<p><u>7</u></p>	<p>Um, this is Lily. And at the moment she's hurt her leg, so she has a crutch.</p> <p>And there's this other person who's like, comes in and out of the group sometimes, her name is Tiffany. Supposedly she's so scared of pigs, so I-I oink at her.</p>

		<p>And then, uh, Chloe, and just some-some reason Ch-Chloe has an obsession with Flora, the butter brand. She has a flora bag.</p> <p>But like harder than a normal joke. Like, I can't control my own strength. I kind of shoved someone into a bush today.</p>
<p><b>Theme 4: Key adults/ role of teachers</b></p>		
Experiential Statement	Page number	Quotes
<p><b>Feels her key teacher views her positively – recognises her strengths/ efforts.</b></p>	<p><b><u>34-35</u></b></p>	<p><b>Interviewer:</b> Okay. So what, um, oh, how would Mr. Phillips describe you?</p> <p><b>Maisy:</b> In a good way. Consistent 'cause I go to Guitar club.</p> <p>And I'm a part of the band, or at least I was before they disbanded it for <i>Six Musical</i> thats happening.</p>
<p>Feels teachers can't do anything to help her with friendships</p>	<p><b><u>21</u></b></p>	<p>And so like they can't really do anything about friendship because they can't go like, "Hey, you have to be friends with Masie. You have to include her."</p> <p>Uh, it is like-- 'cause they're adults, right? So they can't like- - 'cause you're not really meant-- you're not allowed to really be friends with the teachers.</p> <p>So they would all be with their friends and I'm just like all by myself and the teacher can't really do anything about it</p>

	<u>42</u>	<p>because we're a class of odd number.</p> <p>Um, I mean she's tried multiple times. Because this has been a recurring issue for over a year now.</p> <p>But there's not really much they can do because it's my-my classmates you can't force them to like someone.</p>
Feels if teachers were involved with friendships it could make matters worse.	<u>21</u>	<p>And so like they can't really do anything about friendship because they can't go like, "Hey, you have to be friends with Masie. You have to include her." And then they'll be like, "That doesn't make us want to go with her -even less."</p>
Key teacher teaches her favourite subject and she relies on for support.	<u>9</u>	<p><b>Maisy:</b> Uh, Mr. Phillips <b>Maisy:</b> He's the music teacher. <b>Interviewer:</b> Oh, nice. So is he your favorite teacher? <b>Maisy:</b> Yeah. <b>Interviewer:</b> Why is he your favorite? <b>Maisy:</b> He's really nice, and he's also, you know, a teacher of music.</p>
Teacher has a nurturing role. Suggests teacher is familiar with her needs- 'is understanding'	<u>14</u>	<p>She's really nice and understanding and caring.</p>

Sees an adult in the school to speak about difficulties at home.	<u>42</u>	Um, well, we talk about my, um, anger issues at home.
Still friends with students that teacher introduced her to.	<u>23</u>	And well, if it wasn't for this teacher, we probably wouldn't be friends. So we were both reading a book, opposite ends of the playground, looking at the ground and the teacher was like, child reading, child reading, put two children reading together, maybe talk? So it's like dragged me over to Molly. We were kind of like, "Hi." And. but then we-we started to get more like friends. And it just- it just grew.
Would mostly go to teachers for work related problems.	<u>13</u>	<b>Interviewer:</b> Would you go to your teachers or would you go to your friends? <b>Maisy:</b> My friends. <b>Interviewer:</b> You go to your friends? Okay. Is there ever a time you'd go to your teachers? <b>Maisy:</b> If it's like work-related.

### Theme 5: Access/ contact

Experiential Statement	Page number	Quotes
Might be a chance of being with her friend in classes in the future but not too hopeful.	<u>18</u>	So she'll probably be in that set. So if she's in like set four and I'm set one there's like absolutely no chance we'll be in the same class.
Her friends are mostly in different year groups so she doesn't get to see them as much as she would like to.	<u>10</u>	Um, an issue is that, um, apart from Molly, they're all younger than me. <b>Interviewer:</b> They're all year eight. Are they? <b>Maisy:</b> Yeah, they're, year 8. <b>Interviewer:</b> Okay. Why do you think that's an issue?

		<b>Maisy:</b> Because, um, not-- can't really be friends with them in lessons. We can't really work together and stuff like that.
Is more likely to confide in a friend with her worries if she sees them more frequently.	<u>22</u>	I go to Molly, but Becky's the one who I see most of the time. Because we live closer.
Covid made socializing more difficult- could only see people in her year group.	<u>19</u>	<b>Maisy:</b> -and kind of missed out the going into school with everybody there- -situation. <b>Interviewer:</b> Do you think that impacted how you made friends? <b>Maisy:</b> I think a bit. Yeah. Because, um, I would've been able to, I don't know like meet people from other year groups-
Has one friend in her year but the timetable means that they don't have any lessons together. Lack of control over classes she's in and when she sees her friends.	<u>17</u>  <u>18</u>	And I-I would just love it if me and Molly could be in the same class. Because I'm on the French side- -and she's on the Spanish side and-  Uh, well, currently, Spanish side and French side do not mix at all.
Has more friends in different years.	<u>10</u>	Um, an issue is that, um, apart from Molly, they're all younger than me. Yeah, they're, year 8.
Sees her friends outside of school sometimes.	<u>12</u>	Uh, we occasionally go out. Yeah. Um, sometimes to each other's houses.

Speaks to one friend individually outside of school (on phone)	<u>39-40</u>	<b>Maisy:</b> Uh, yeah I message them on WhatsApp. Very frequently. <b>Interviewer:</b> Individually or like in a group or both? <b>Maisy:</b> Uh, individually because like Molly isn't really to do with like Becky and in the-the group.
<b><u>Theme 6: Identity</u></b>		
<b>Experiential Statement</b>	<b>Page number</b>	<b>Quotes</b>
Compares her friendships to other friendships and the things that are expected to be done (e.g. shopping)	<u>12</u>	We haven't really been out in Wimbledon, or like-like out shopping or like whatever. But, um-- Because it's usually cold. It's not that good.
Has a shared interest of books with her friend.	<u>25-26</u>	Uh, I'm-- well, we both like basically the same thing. And I introduced her to a book series called <i>Warrior Cats</i> . Yeah. So this is actually a, uh, book that Molly got me for Christmas.
Is friends with people who are similar/ struggle with relationships too.	5	She's a suitcase bag. So-- Everyone makes fun of her for it.
Perceives others do not like her.	<u>15-16</u>	Yeah, I'm not friends with anyone in my year. It's literally none-out of like the 250 students. I don't know. They just don't like me. They just think I'm weird.
Stark contrast between how her friends and her classmates would describe her.	<u>36</u>	<b>Interviewer:</b> Um, okay. And how would- what about people in your class, how would they describe you?


	<u>33</u>	<p><b>Maisy:</b> Quiet.  <b>Interviewer:</b> Quiet. Anything else?  <b>Maisy:</b> Um, the word for not really liking a person and like the person is there but you just don't talk with them you just do-don't interact with them.</p> <p>I think she'd describe me as honest-  -playful-  -and silly.</p>
Has more in common with those in year below.	<u>16</u>	Because I guess we're kind of on the same wavelength I guess. We-We're all quite silly.
<b>Feels her key teacher views her positively – recognises her strengths/ efforts.</b>	<u>34-35</u>	<p><b>Interviewer:</b> Okay. So what, um, oh, how would Mr. Phillips describe you?  <b>Maisy:</b> In a good way. Consistent 'cause I go to Guitar club.  And I'm a part of the band, or at least I was before they disbanded it for <i>Six Musical</i> thats happening.</p>
Identifies as being part of a friendship group.	<u>6</u>	And I mean, we have a friendship group. But it's quite a few people.
Feels different and excluded from other students in her year groups.	23	I got to go to school 'cause I'm adopted. So special needs and yeah, stuff.
Has tried to make friends with others with little success.	<u>17</u>	I've tried to be nice to them- -but they just don't really care.

## APPENDIX E: Literature review

### E1: Databases searched

#### Literature Review:

Databases included in search with corresponding 'hit count':



### Databases

<input type="checkbox"/> Name	Hit Count
<input type="checkbox"/> MEDLINE	45
<input type="checkbox"/> Education Source	38
<input type="checkbox"/> CINAHL	29
<input type="checkbox"/> ERIC	27
<input type="checkbox"/> Directory of Open Access Journals	24
<input type="checkbox"/> SocINDEX with Full Text	11
<input type="checkbox"/> Supplemental Index	4
<input type="checkbox"/> JSTOR Journals	4
<input type="checkbox"/> Business Source Index	3





## Databases

<input type="checkbox"/> Name ↕	Hit Count ▾
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> All Providers	
<input type="checkbox"/> Complementary Index	60
<input type="checkbox"/> Academic Search Index	56
<input type="checkbox"/> MEDLINE	45
<input type="checkbox"/> Education Source	38
<input type="checkbox"/> CINAHL	29
<input type="checkbox"/> ERIC	27
<input type="checkbox"/> Directory of Open Access Journals	24
<input type="checkbox"/> SocINDEX with Full Text	11

## E2: Notes taken during critical analysis process

### Literature review notes on papers:

Key:

- 1- Butler et al., 2022
- 2- Long, Zucca & Sweeting, 2021
- 3- 2019
- 4- Oldfield, Humphrey & Hebron, 2016
- 5- Houlston, Smith & Jessel, 2011
- 6- Visser & Dubsky, 2009
- 7- Rothon et al., 2011
- 8- Garcia-Moya et al., 2015
- 9- Pomeroy, 1999

Language	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1- Mental wellbeing</li> <li>2- Mental health</li> <li>3- Mental health</li> <li>4- Mental health</li> <li>5- Social and emotional wellbeing</li> <li>6- SEBD</li> <li>7- Mental health</li> <li>8- Subjective wellbeing</li> <li>9- Excluded students- didn't actually state what the reason was or whether they had SEMH- interestingly didn't mention it at all.</li> </ol> <p>Relationship language-</p>
Type of SEMH need	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1- General wellbeing in all students in relation to their levels of support</li> <li>2- General wellbeing/ Psychological distress</li> <li>3-</li> </ol>
Gender	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1- Higher proportion of females had low mental wellbeing</li> <li>2- gender significantly associated with higher scores on the GHQ- representing worse mental health.</li> <li>3- Did adjust for it- but not significant? Not sure.</li> <li>4- Explored as a covariate</li> </ol>

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>5- Gender was a significant predictor of close friend and school peer support</li> <li>6- Discussed gender difference in peer perceptions. For example, aggression in girls is far less accepted by peers than in boys. Boys appeared far less tolerant of internalising behaviours than girls.</li> <li>7- Bullying had more of an impact on the mental health of boys than girls. For girls, bullying had a stronger impact on academic achievement.</li> <li>8- The positive effect of teacher connectedness on subjective emotional wellbeing appeared to operate regardless of gender with negligible differences between the boys and girls.</li> <li>9- Did not explore differences</li> </ul>
Age	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1- 8-15</li> <li>2- 15-16</li> <li>3- 11 year olds (transition to secondary)- follow up 1 year later at 12 years old</li> <li>4- 11-16- mean age 13.</li> <li>5- 11-12 years- year 7 students.</li> <li>6- Age 11-12- year 7 students</li> <li>7- 11-12 and 13-14 – yr 7 and yr 9s</li> <li>8- 11, 13 and 15 year olds- mean age 13.</li> <li>9- Year 10 and 11 students</li> </ul>
Interventions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1-</li> </ul>
<p>Samples Themes- Representative samples- 3</p> <p>Opportunity samples- 4</p> <p>Random Stratified (3, 5,</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1- 2074 children. (22 primary and 5 secondary schools). Represented 17% of all students in the participating schools. Equal number of males and females. No cultural information- could have differed?</li> <li>2- 2571 15-16 year olds from 22 secondary schools. 81% participation rate- much higher than 1. Neither included information/ reasons on those who didn't participate.</li> <li>3- 157 - 10 secondary schools. (selected to be representative of regions secondary schools in terms of pass rates, ethnicity and economically disadvantaged)-</li> </ul>

	<p>strength. Good data on those who didn't participate- reasons and numbers.</p> <p>4- 203- Opportunity sample- is this bias? E.g. those who have good parental support may be more likely to return permission slips? Not representative.</p> <p>5- 400- Quite high response rates and big samples. School A 91% B 87% C 63%</p> <p>6- 175 participants from one school. Small sample. Also, one of the researchers works at one of the schools therefore bias may have occurred.</p> <p>7- 2790 - Epidemiological study (23 schools in Hackney).</p> <p>8- 4404 (UK) and 5040 (spain) HBCS sampling procedure (cluster sampling)</p> <p>9- 33- All attending the 3 BSS centres in that LA- self selection. 33. Included information on how representative the sample is of the population.</p>

PAPER	STRENGTHS	LIMITATIONS
1	Variation between schools was accounted for in our mixed modelling analysis.	<p>Cross sectional so can't determine direction of relationship.</p> <p>Lack of contextual information e.g. data on deprivation and other child/ school factors which may have impacted on the relationship in the data.</p> <p>Controlled for age and gender- may have skewed data/ obscured potential differences in impact- would have been useful data.</p> <p>Two items were removed from the peer support scale (limits psychometric properties and resultant</p>

		findings, as this is not how its been standardised)  Sample- No data on those who did not participate
2	Expands on future research and makes suggestions for interventions as its focus's in malleable aspects of school rather than uncontrollable variables.	Cross sectional-  Correlational -limits interpretation as can't determine causality.  Date- 2006- no information on influence of social networking
3	Nonetheless, this study provides useful preliminary data indicating directions for future research on how school- level characteristics might influence the stability of children's friendships	SAMPLE- Participation rate at baseline was lower than follow up.  Participating children came from a small number of secondary schools- limited generalisability.  Reliability of scales- teacher estimates. Also reports from students regarding friends- how reliable are they?
4	Sample sizes. Cross sectional information	Correlational design. Cant determine direction.  Self- report measures- reporting bias, reliability? Multi informant approach would have added value.  Sample- relatively small  Validity- is it actually measuring what it claims to? Criticisms around concepts used around attachment.
5	Provided additional qualitative data. This helps provide information where the cross	DESIGN- cross sectional

	sectional/ correlational is lacking.	<p>SAMPLE- larger more homogenous sample would have added value.</p> <p>More detail/ contextual information would have added value- would also be useful to explore the effects of different types and elements of peer support schemes on student well-being.</p>
6	Qualitative data Useful topic of peer attitudes (something which impacts inclusion etc)	Old research. Outdated language. Case studies rather than real life
7	<p>Sample- representative</p> <p>Used standardised measures (were they standardised on a similar sample ethnicity wise?)</p> <p>The data is also unusual in that it provides comprehensive measures of psychological distress alongside information on educational achievement; few British datasets provide this.</p>	<p>The bullying items do not provide a definition of what bullying is. However, the term "bullying" is more familiar in English than in a number of other languages and has been in usage for a long time (Smith, Cowie, Olafsson, &amp; Liefhoghe, 2002). Smith et al. (2002) found that fourteen year olds in their sample were able to clearly separate physical "aggression" and physical "bullying" using cartoon depictions. However- they cannot determine consistency in what the children perceive bullying to mean- it's a subjective term.</p> <p>MEASURES- self report</p> <p>ANALYSIS/ sample-</p> <p>A final issue is that of missing data. There was evidence that those who did not reach the academic benchmark and who had depressive symptoms were less likely to have data on bullying. This may have led to an over- or underestimation of the association between bullying and the key outcomes. Sensitivity analysis was carried out whereby it was assumed in the first set of analyses that all pupils with missing data on bullying had experienced being bullied and in the second set of analyses that they had not. The main findings were the same.</p>
8		<p>DESIGN- cross sectional.</p> <p>Measures- self report- could be bias- even asked students to report on their own school performance- loads of room for invalidity.</p> <p>More detail/ Lack of context- could have explored what the</p>

		characteristics of teacher connectedness were to make distinctions between different kinds of teacher support. Could have also looked at detail in relation to subjects/ gender/ age/ cultural differences.
9	Insight from excluded students- give them a voice when potentially underrepresented in research	Lack of context in relation to exclusion.

Example of appraisal for Butler et al. (2022) paper using critical appraisal tool:

### ***Critical appraisal checklist for a questionnaire study***

<b>Research question and study design</b>	
Was a questionnaire the most appropriate method?	
<b>Validity and reliability</b>	
Have claims for validity been made, and are they justified? (Is there evidence that the instrument measures what it sets out to measure?)	<p>Not for all measures- Inclusion were drawn from public health england guidance- demonstrated to be feasible with school age and in a school setting.</p> <p>The Student Resilience survey validated in a population of UK primary and secondary school children, with good internal consistency for all subscales.</p> <p>The WEMWBS (wellbeing scale) has only been validated for students 13 and above, not been validated for all secondary students (e.g. 11 and above). However, it has been used in another study with 11 year olds- doesn't make it okay. Information</p>

	on the amount of responses from each year group was not collected, therefore we do not know if 99% of the secondary students who answered were below 13 and their questionnaire had not been validated for them.
Have claims for reliability been made, and are they justified? (Is there evidence that the questionnaire provides stable responses over time and between researchers?)	Yes- findings demonstrated the scale had good internal reliability ( $\alpha = 0.85$ ), construct validity and external reliability, and appeared to be a robust measure of wellbeing in younger children (Liddle & Carter, 2015).
<b>Format</b>	
Are example questions provided?	Yes
Did the questions make sense, and could the participants in the sample understand them? Were any questions ambiguous or overly complicated?	Yes. Questions seemed suitable. However, words like 'believes I will be a success' etc. – study does not say extent to which supervising teacher could help them e.g. offering definitions to words that an 8 year old might struggle to understand. (ethics- was the questionnaire distributed in any other more accessible format e.g. for children who struggled with reading comprehension- does it gather their views clearly?) The 8 year old also has to understand how to use the likert scale and maintain attention.
<b>Piloting</b>	
Are details given about the piloting undertaken	No



Was the questionnaire adequately piloted in terms of the method and means of administration, on people who were representative of the study population?	Doesn't include this info so have to assume no.
<b>Sampling</b>	
Was the sampling frame for the definitive study sufficiently large and representative?	Represented 17% of students in participating schools- high drop out rate. No info on year groups apart from primary and secondary. Even numbers of gender. Does not talk about ethnicity or any other details than gender and primary/secondary.
<b>Distribution, administration and response</b>	
Was the method of distribution and administration reported	Yes- via head teachers and questionnaires administered on computers in school time.
Were the response rates reported, including details of participants who were unsuitable for the research or refused to take part?	Did not record details of those who opted out.
Have any potential response biases been discussed?	No response bias has been discussed.
<b>Coding and analysis</b>	
What sort of analysis was carried out and was this appropriate? (e.g. correct statistical tests for quantitative	Yes-correct statistical tests supported with citations/models for quanti analysis.

answers, qualitative analysis for open ended questions)	
<b>Results</b>	
Were all relevant data reported?	Didn't give details of what the support looked like- could have been helpful- this is what my study will bring (more rich data)
Are quantitative results definitive (significant), and are relevant non-significant results also reported?	No- Only significant results are reported.
Have qualitative results been adequately interpreted (e.g. using an explicit theoretical framework), and have any quotes been properly justified and contextualised?	N/A
<b>Conclusions and discussion</b>	
Have the researchers drawn an appropriate link between the data and their conclusions?	Yes. No qualitative answers so extent to which detailed conclusions (e.g. about features of the relationships) can be drawn are limited. There are relevant findings about combination of adult and school support.
Have the findings been placed within the wider body of knowledge in the field (e.g. via a comprehensive literature review), and are any recommendations justified?	Yes. Recommendations justified- promoting mental health through re-establishing positive, trusting relationships amongst peers and between students and teachers should be an important priority going forward.

## APPENDIX F: Reflective Processes

### F1: Research Diary Exerpts

#### Reflections after 1<sup>st</sup> interview – 2/2/23

I felt particularly anxious as I began my first interview. Firstly, I was anxious about the practicalities and making mistakes such as forgetting to turn on the voice recording. However, I believe I was also anxious because I was entering the school in a new role/context, with a different purpose. During the interview I found myself asking lots of questions and making jokes, perhaps in an attempt to make the participant feel at ease and build rapport. I have reflected on the difficulty that comes with the change in role (from TEP to researcher). Although I found this difficult and I spoke more than I intended to, I feel that the outcome was good and I gave space for the participant to share her views. I feel that my ability to strike this balance was supported by the skills I have developed in my role as a TEP.

#### Reflections after final interview- 6/2/23

I have found that I have grown more confident after each interview. As a result of this, I think I have come across as more 'natural' during the interviews. The contrast in my feelings between the initial and final interview struck me and led me to think about why I felt so apprehensive going in to this process. I think my previous experiences have definitely played a role. Specifically, my experience in year 2 of running a group for girls with ASD. I found this group really challenging as many of the participants were very reluctant to speak. I think that my experience of this made me worry that the same would happen in my research interviews. Perhaps this is why I was so set on having a strong interview schedule as well as a 'backup' option of the draw-talk framework. I am so pleased that this process was not how I anticipated and that the participants felt comfortable to speak to me about their experiences. As with many other aspects of this process, the use of supervision really supported my confidence and reassured me that I was capable of carrying out the interviews. For example, my supervisor reassured me by saying "even if the participants don't say much, meaning can be taken from the silence". This was such a helpful thought and really reassured me when going in to the first interview. After the first interview was successful, I felt more and more confident to take on my role as researcher and interviewer. This also made me really reflect on my decision to use the IPA approach to my research, as it allows me to analyse factors beyond words e.g. body language, silence and more nuanced aspects of the interviews. I am now really looking forward to getting emersed in the data and revealing some interesting findings.

#### Reflections during the Analysis Process – 31/03/23

I have been finding peer and personal supervision particularly useful at this stage of the research process (analysis). I have found that speaking to others about my findings has helped me to notice patterns and think more deeply about certain quotes. As well as this, I have felt reassured as I have used the space to explore the possibility of my own valences and the impact on findings. Additionally, through speaking to my supervisor, I feel more confident that others are able to follow my findings and interpretation of them and that they aren't simply a result of my own beliefs or ideas relating to what I thought I would find. I suppose that this was one of the ways in which I tried to 'bracket off'.

