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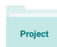

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An Exploration of the Experiences of Parents Who Seek to Resolve School Attendance Problems and Barriers

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Faculty of Health and Life Sciences

January 2022

A thesis submitted in fulfilment of the University's requirements for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy

DEDICATION

My biggest ‘thank you’ goes to my ‘A team’ at home – my husband Garry, my sons Joe and Jake, and Joe’s girlfriend Kaitlyn, who have cheered me on and volunteered many hours of practical help to allow me more time to focus on my research - you are superstars!

Thank you to my ‘Academic A team’ – my (very patient) supervisors, Professor Sarah Younie, Dr Sally Ruane and Dr Motje Wolf - you always seemed to have just the right words of advice and encouragement for me, when they were most needed.

I would like to thank the 40 parents who volunteered to tell me all about their experiences and allowed me to share their voices. Thank you to all the members of ‘Not Fine in School’ who have inspired and motivated me to keep going, because every day I see why their voices, and their children’s voices, need to be heard. We really must listen more closely to those who become ‘expert by experience’.

And a big thank you for your support and inspiration, also goes to Fran Morgan and Ellie Costello who are working hard to champion the ‘Square Pegs’ who don’t quite fit within our current education system.

Declaration

To the best of my knowledge I confirm that the work in this thesis is my original work undertaken for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in the Faculty of HLS, De Montfort University. I confirm that no material of this thesis has been submitted for any other degree or qualification at any other university.

ABSTRACT

School attendance problems (SAPs) have been framed in terms of ‘truancy’, ‘school phobia’, ‘school refusal’, ‘school withdrawal’ and a range of similar terms. This variation reflects the heterogeneity of both SAPs (Kearney *et al*., 2019), and the varied backgrounds of practitioners conducting SAPs research (Birioukov, 2016). This longstanding discourse suggests the behaviour of absentee children is deviant or neurotic, and their parents are in some way deficient, failing, or neglectful (Southwell, 2006; Donoghue, 2011). However, this fails to address the experiences of parents who actively seek to resolve SAPs, and perceive a child is unable to attend for reasons of anxiety and distress, possibly in relation to school-based influences (e.g., Mind, 2021; Ditch the Label, 2020). These aspects of SAPs have received scant attention in the literature. Therefore, to understand this phenomenon better, this study set out to investigate the perspectives and experiences of parents in this situation.

Email-based interviews were conducted with forty members of a social media-based support group for parents seeking support for their children’s SAPs. Thematic Analysis of data led to the concept of ‘Parents Journeys’ through SAPs, setting out an overview of common experiences. This indicated how social and systemic responses to SAPs act as barriers that prevent or hinder parents’ ability to comply with their legal duty to ensure children access an education (section 7, Education Act 1996). It was noted that a tension exists where parents who participated in this study have a shared understanding of SAPs which validates their experiences, yet this is at odds with the shared reality and understanding of school staff and other professionals.

Recent research highlights the importance of holistic assessment of individual circumstances to better understand the influence of school and wider systemic factors upon cases of SAPs (e.g., Melvin *et al*. 2019). In this study an adapted version of Bronfenbrenner’s Bioecological Model (1979, 1998, 2005) conceptualised the social and systemic complexity of the SAPs context from the parental viewpoint. This adapted model offers a new way to understand how the successful resolution of SAPs will require multi-level changes in school attendance related discourse, practice, and policy.

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List of Abbreviations and Acronym

BTEC - Business and Technology Education Council (qualification)

CAMHS - Child & Adolescent Mental Health Services

DfE - Department for Education

DfES - Department for Education & Skills

DfH - Department for Health

DfHSC - Department for Health & Social Care

EHCP - Education Health and Care Plan

EWO - Education Welfare Officer

GP - General Practitioner

iGCSE - international General Certificate of Secondary Education

IPA - Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis

LA - Local Authority

LSA - Learning Support Assistant

NHS - National Health Service

Ofsted - Office for Standards in Education

PRU - Pupil Referral Unit

SALT - Speech and Language Therapist

SAPs - School Attendance Problems

SATs - Standard Assessment Tests

SEMH - Social, Emotional and Mental Health

SENCo - Special Educational Needs Coordinator

SEND - Special Educational Needs & Disabilities

SENDIASS - Special Educational Needs & Disabilities Information & Advice Support Service

TA - Teaching Assistant

TAF - Team Around the Family

Chapter 1. Introduction

This chapter sets out the context of this study by explaining current expectations around school attendance, along with key aspects of the systemic response to school absence in England. The context of School Attendance Problems (SAPs) and the framing of parents within this context is also discussed. The chapter then highlights literature detailing a sub-category of parents who are proactive in trying to resolve SAPs. It is noted that the experiences of these parents have not yet been explored, and therefore this study aims to fill this gap, and contribute the voices of parents as stakeholders.

1.1 School attendance and school absence in England

Parents in England are assigned with a legal duty to ensure their children receive a suitable, effective, full-time education (section 7, Education Act 1996). Parents can choose to fulfil this duty by electively home educating or by enrolling children at a school. If enrolled at a school, children are expected to attend all timetabled sessions, unless they are absent for a reason that can be authorised by the school under the Registration (Pupil Registration) Regulations 2006. Whether or not an absence is authorised holds significance for parents as they can be subject to penalties including fines and imprisonment for unauthorised and persistent absence (section 444 (1) and (1a), Education Act 1996).

Since compulsory education was introduced in England in the late nineteenth century, various social and political discourses have instilled a strong belief in the importance of educating children through a system of mainstream schooling (Lees, 2014). The Department for Education (DfE) open their School Attendance guidance document with the following statement which reiterates the opinion that academic success is dependent upon regular attendance at school:

> Central to raising standards in education and ensuring all pupils can fulfil their potential is an assumption so widely understood that it is insufficiently stated – pupils need to attend school regularly to benefit from their education. Missing out on lessons leaves children vulnerable to falling behind. Children with poor

> attendance tend to achieve less in both primary and secondary school.
>
> (DfE, 2020a, p.5)

The DfE monitor and report on levels of authorised, unauthorised, and persistent absence (DfE, 2019b). Schools are expected to encourage and support high levels of attendance (DfE, 2022), with checks made on their performance within Ofsted inspections (Ofsted, 2021c, paragraph 227). The notion of persistent absence concerns children who attain less than 90% attendance in each academic year (DfE, 2019b). This level of absence is considered socially significant, seen in scale of school absence and challenges for policy makers who fear longer term social problems (Coles *et al.,* 2010). Persistent absence is also considered individually detrimental, seen in loss of social contact with peers and others, damage to wellbeing and to potential academic and career success (DfE, 2016; DfE, 2019b).

There are conflicting discourses, such as those expressing concern about the various harms being done to children within school environments (e.g., Harber, 2004; Fortune-Wood, 2007; Gray, 2020). Lees (2014) discusses these critical voices and suggests:

> The condemnation of the idea of compulsory schooling occurs because young people usually deemed as required by various forces to attend schools – be it legal, economic or because of social expectations – are being hurt. Schooling can cause physical, psychological, and emotional pain.
>
> (Lees, 2014, pp.143-144)

This hurt and harm has been linked to factors including school-based bullying, sexual assault, racism, excessive academic pressure, punitive behaviour policies, and a lack of effective school-based support for mental health difficulties, SEND, and long-term physical illness (e.g., Cowburn and Blow, 2017; Ditch the Label, 2020; Girlguiding, 2021; Mind, 2021; No Isolation, 2020). In addition, school-based practices such as off-rolling (Ofsted, 2019), and avoidance of taking responsibility for additional or alternative provision, are linked

to categories of children 'missing education' or the 'unexplained exits' of pupils identified with SEMH, SEND or persistent absence (Hutchinson and Crenna-Jennings, 2019a; 2019b). Others reject the claim that mainstream schooling is the best way to gain an education, and instead acknowledge success achieved through other methods including elective home education (Rothermel, 2000; Lees, 2019), democratic education (Hope, 2019), and self-directed education (Fisher, 2021).

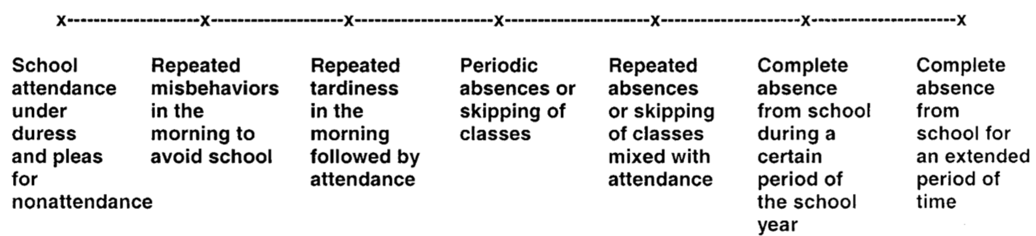
Absence from school without authorisation, or the awareness of parents, is linked to the concept of a child viewed as 'truant', or 'a child who stays away from school without leave' (Harper, 2021). The legislative response to truancy has reflected the belief that absence from school is indicative of parenting failure and/or children's disaffection from education, which are considered behaviours requiring punishment and correction (Wardhaugh, 1991; Arthur, 2005; Donoghue, 2011). However, it has also been argued that this punitive approach has proven over time to be unsuccessful in reducing levels of absence, and it fails to consider or account for school-based and wider systemic factors of influence (Southwell, 2006; Sheldon, 2007; Sheppard, 2011).

The umbrella term School Attendance Problems (SAPs) is used to describe types of absence from school which have been defined and constructed within clinical and academic fields (Heyne *et al*., 2019). SAPs have historically been framed in terms including truancy, school refusal, and school withdrawal, in discourses which suggest the child chooses non-attendance and the parents are in some way deficient. Again, it is argued that this discourse has failed to consider or account for school-based and wider systemic factors of influence to the same extent it considers child and family factors (Pilkington and Piersel, 1991; Lauchlan, 2003; Pellegrini, 2007).

It has been estimated that at some point in childhood, around 28% of children will experience difficulties attending school (Kearney, 2007). Evans (2000, p.183) also observes that 'school refusal' (as a type of SAP) is a 'common, perhaps even normal behaviour', that is practiced by most students at some point in their school years. It is also noted that individual children display varied reactions and

behaviours in relation to attending school for a range of different reasons (West Sussex EPS, 2004/2022). Kearney (2001) provided what he terms a continuum of school refusal behaviour (Figure1.1) to illustrate this range of difficulties with school attendance.

Figure 1.1 Continuum of 'school refusal behaviour' on the basis of attendance. Kearney (2001:7) School Refusal Behaviour in Youth: A Functional Approach to Assessment and Treatment. (Copyright 2001 by the American Psychological Association).



Considering this wide range of reactions and behaviours it can reasonably be stated that many families are likely to experience SAPs during childhood, with varying degrees of difficulty and impact. If parents do find themselves in this position, they have a legal duty to seek a resolution to enable a return to school or access to education, to avoid the possibility of fines or prosecutions. This study explores the experiences of parents who have tried to resolve the school attendance problems of children who suffer severe and chronic anxiety in relation to attending school.

1.2 Conceptualising School Attendance Problems

According to Berger and Luckmann (1966), expectations such as attendance at school have been socially constructed through a process of habituation and institutionalisation. To reinforce this expectation, absence from school has been constructed as problematic through a focus upon truancy as deviance, linked to the punitive legislative response, and supported by clinical research which has placed blame within the child and family, while failing to investigate other factors of influence (Kearney, 2007; Pellegrini, 2007). This is significant because those who are unable to conform to this constructed expectation are viewed as dysfunctional and requiring correction or punishment.

Miller and Rose (2008, p.14) discuss the process of problematisation, and suggest that to socially construct a problem ‘issues and concerns have to be made to appear problematic, often in different ways, in different sites, and by different agents’. When a problem is identified it needs to be framed in a common language that supports an ongoing narrative (such as the ongoing narrative around truancy). The problem needs to be analysed and assessed by those who claim expertise, utilising the norms of the bodies of knowledge involved. When relating this process to the problematisation of school absence and the current conceptualisations of SAPs, it is argued here that a common language has only partially been achieved based upon clinical, academic, and political discourse. This has created an unequal balance of expertise, meaning further work is still needed to contribute the voices of parents and other family members.

Political and legal discourse has constructed absence from school as a social problem linked to the term ‘truancy’. Truanting children have been portrayed as deviant or maladjusted, and their parents as ineffective or uncaring about their child’s welfare or education (Carlen, Gleeson and Wardhaugh, 1992; Southwell, 2006). This discourse developed with the application of psychoanalytic terminology such as ‘a form of truancy associated with neurosis’ (Broadwin, 1932), and ‘psychoneurotic-truancy’ (Partridge, 1939). The concept of ‘school phobia’ was introduced by psychiatrist, Burt in 1920 (Tyerman, 1968), and reiterated by clinicians, Johnson *et al*. (1941). The notion of ‘school refusal’ was introduced in the mid-twentieth century by psychiatrists such as Klein (1945) and Hersov (1960). Other clinicians have applied a variety of terminology including ‘school anxiety’ (Morgan, 1959) and ‘anxiety-based school refusal’ (Last and Strauss, 1990), each of which imply a within-child cause for the absence from school.

In some studies, researchers have defined overarching terms for absence, such as ‘school avoidance’ (Berg, 2002); ‘chronic non-attendance’ (Lauchlan, 2003); ‘school attendance difficulties’ (Sheppard, 2005) and ‘voluntary and involuntary absenteeism’ (Birioukov, 2016). Further, more recent terminology such as ‘emotionally based school avoidance’ (EBSA) (West Sussex EPS, 2004/2022);

‘extended school non-attendance’ (ESNA) (Gregory and Purcell, 2014); and ‘persistent school non-attenders (PSNA) (Tobias, 2018) has been used by educational psychologists to focus upon categories of behaviour, rather than implying a specific cause or directing blame.

This significant variation in conceptions is indicative of the range of backgrounds, objectives and approaches of the researchers involved (Birioukov, 2016). There have been suggested reasons why few clear definitions or explanations have been formed and these debates are difficult to resolve. For instance, it is noted that school absentees are a heterogenous group, which implies that they need to be understood on an individual basis rather than by trying to group them within categories (Elliott and Place, 2019). Kearney (2002) suggested that absence is best understood by considering the functions that it serves for the child, while others argue that distinctions need to be maintained between the constructs of truancy as a behavioural or conduct-based issue, and refusal as an emotional or anxiety-based issue (e.g., Lyon and Cotler, 2007). Carlen, Gleeson and Wardhaugh (1992, p.62) summed up the ongoing debate by observing that SAP terminology has been based upon a pathological model that views non-attenders as ‘either 'mad' ('phobic' and therefore psychologically disturbed), 'bad' (truant-delinquent' and therefore socially and morally disturbed) or […] 'sad' ('truant as victim')’.

This lack of any agreement in conceptualisation can be considered a barrier in itself to improved understanding, as Heyne *et al*. (2019, p.3) suggest ‘inconsistencies and ambiguity are obstacles to the advancement of assessment, intervention, and scientific knowledge surrounding SAPs’. To encourage a consensus, Heyne *et al.* (2019) propose an updated definition of three dominant ways of conceptualising SAPs - truancy, school refusal, and school withdrawal, and they add school exclusion as a fourth concept (which is significant as it now acknowledges that school-based actions can create and influence attendance problems). Heyne *et al*. (2019) apply Kearney’s (2008b) criteria for problematic absenteeism as a part of these updated definitions, whereby Kearney suggests that problematic absenteeism exists when the young person:

> (1) has missed at least 25 percent of total school time for at least two weeks, or
>
> (2) has experienced severe difficulty attending classes for at least two weeks with significant interference in a child's or family's daily routine
>
> (3) and/or was absent for at least 10 days of school during any 15-week period while school is in session (i.e., a minimum of 15 percent days absent from school)
>
> (Kearney, 2008b, p.265)

This criterion is then combined with the following definitions:

Truancy is absence from school for a whole day or part of the day, or absence from the proper location within school. This absence occurs without the permission of the school, and the young person tries to conceal it from their parents (Heyne *et al.,* 2019, p.16).

School refusal occurs when a young person is reluctant or refusing to attend school, and this occurs with emotional distress that hinders attendance. The young person does not try to hide the associated school absence from their parents and does not display anti-social behaviour. The parents have made reasonable efforts (currently or at an earlier stage) to secure attendance or express their intention for their child to attend school full-time (Heyne *et al.,* 2019, p.16).

School withdrawal is defined as absence from school that is not concealed from parents. The absence is 'attributable to parental effort to keep the young person at home, or attributable to there being little or no parental effort to get the young person to school' (Heyne *et al.,* 2019, p.16).

School exclusion is an absence from school or from specific school activities. This absence is caused by the school: employing disciplinary measures in an

inappropriate manner; 'being unable or unwilling to accommodate the physical, social-emotional, behavioural, or academic needs of the young person'; or 'discouraging the young person from attending, beyond the realm of legally acceptable school policy' Heyne *et al.,* 2019, p.17).

These terms are not without their difficulties and some controversy remains, for instance the researcher is aware that many parents object to the use of the term 'school refusal' as it is argued that children can be unable to attend and calling this reaction a 'refusal' unfairly implies children are making a choice. Provided terms in use are not associated with the apportionment of blame or cause in this way, they offer some conceptual clarity in a confused field, and provide a way of distinguishing different types of SAPs. 'School attendance problems' is the terminology chosen for use within this study to fit with current academic thinking, however the researcher refers to 'school attendance problems and barriers' in the study title to reflect her recognition of the significant influence of systemic barriers.

The following section discusses the current legislative context for monitoring and responding to school absence. This includes clarification of the terms used by schools and the DfE to define absence data.

1.3 School absence monitoring and data collection

As stated in Section 1.1, if enrolled at a school, children are expected to attend all timetabled sessions, unless they are absent for a reason that can be authorised by the school under the Registration (Pupil Registration) Regulations 2006. These acceptable reasons are that a child is too unwell to attend (and the school accepts this as valid); the parent has been granted permission in advance (for religious observation or a holiday in exceptional circumstances); or if a child has a medical appointment; is being educated off-site; or has been excluded. Authorised absence is defined as:

> Absence with permission from a teacher or other authorised representative of the schools. Counted in sessions, where each session is equivalent to half a day.
>
> (DfE, 2019b, p.45)

Whereas unauthorised absence is defined as:

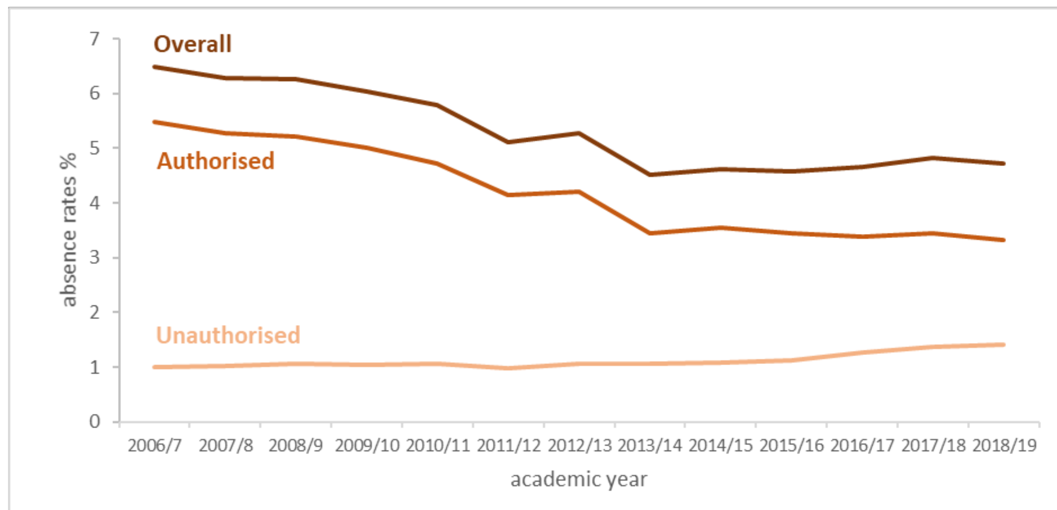
> Absence without permission from a teacher or other authorised representative of the school. This includes all unexplained or unjustified absences and late arrivals. Counted in sessions, where each session is equivalent to half a day.
>
> (DfE, 2019b, p.45)

Whether or not an absence is authorised holds significance for parents as they can be subject to penalties including fines and imprisonment for unauthorised absences under section 444 (1) and (1a) of the Education Act 1996. Unauthorised absences can also lead to the imposition of Parenting Contracts under section 19 of the Anti-Social Behaviour Act 2003, a School Attendance Order under section 437(3) of the Education Act 1996, or an Education Supervision Order under section 36 Children's Act 1989.

Unfortunately, comprehensive data about persistent absence do not exist because DfE statistics have not differentiated between categories or different types of SAPs. Additionally, prior to the standardisation of attendance data collection in 2006, schools had maintained differing ways of defining and coding school absence (Archer *et al*., 2003). Since 2006, standardised school attendance data have been collated by the DfE through the school's census.

Figure 1.2 provides an overview of authorised, unauthorised, and overall absence figures between 2006 and 2019. This illustrates how overall and authorised absence rates appear to have fallen, while unauthorised absence rates have seen slight but sustained increases since 2015/16. Figure 1.2 also indicates that unauthorised absence has increased as a percentage of all non-attendance and has increased as a percentage of all possible attendance.

Figure 1.2 Overall absence by authorised/unauthorised absence, England, time series (DfE, 2020b, p.4)



Persistent absence is currently defined as missing 10% or more of the sessions a student is expected to attend in each academic year (DfE, 2020a). Reflecting that it is a category of concern, the definition of persistent absence has been amended by the DfE to encourage schools to act at an earlier stage (in 2011 the threshold at which Persistent Absence was defined changed from pupils missing 20% of sessions to missing 15%, and in 2015 it was changed from 15% to 10%).

Figure 1.3 Percentage of pupils who are persistently absent by school type, Autumn term, 2016/17 to 2020/21 (DfE, 2021a)

	2016/17 Autumn term	**2017/18 Autumn term**	**2018/19 Autumn term**	**2019/20 Autumn term**	**2020/21 Autumn term**
State-funded Primary school	10.0%	10.1%	9.2%	11.2%	9.9%
State-funded Secondary school	13.4%	13.3%	12.7%	15.0%	16.3%
Special schools	27.8%	28.6%	27.6%	30.0%	29.2%
Total	**11.6%**	**11.7%**	**10.9%**	**13.1%**	**13.0%**

When the most recent percentage figures for persistent absence at 13.14% (DfE, 2020c) and 13% (DfE, 2021a) (see Figure 1.3) are converted into pupil numbers, it indicates that there have been between 916,000 (2021) and 921,927 (2020) persistent absentees. For 40% of these persistent absences there was no formally recorded reason (i.e., they were Coded O or 'other', as unauthorised absence in the attendance register). This means that close to one million children are persistently absent, and for many no data are collated to uncover the reasons why, and little is done to understand what they and their families are experiencing because of this persistent absence from school.

1.4 How does the education system provide for children who experience SAPs?

If a child is struggling with any aspect of attending school, it is expected they will be able to access support within their school (DfE, 2018a). This may take the form of pastoral support, or support for a specific learning need, disability, medical need, or an event such as bullying or assault. There is a general duty of care which is explained in relation to mental health difficulties in the following extract by the Coram Children's Legal Centre:

> Every school teacher owes a pupil a duty of care. This duty is *loco parentis* (that is, in the place of the parent). Broadly, this means the school has to do what is reasonably practicable to ensure they care for their pupils, as any reasonable parent would do. This duty is usually reflected in a structured pastoral system within schools that upholds key values related to well-being. The child's class teacher is usually an initial point of contact for the child. This means that if a pupil is experiencing mental health difficulties, they can speak to this teacher. Depending on the seriousness of the mental health difficulty, this teacher can either speak to the pupil themselves or refer them to the head teacher, who can call upon more specialist help
>
> (Coram Children's Legal Centre, 2022)

Various school and local authority policies, and DfE statutory and non-statutory guidance documents exist (see Table 1.4 below), alongside a range of professional roles and services that can be relevant when SAPs occur. However,

there is no specific SAPs policy, DfE guidance, or standardised pathway for parents or professionals to follow, meaning that parents and professionals need to identify which policies or guidance documents might be of relevance in individual cases, depending upon what they think the underlying triggers or causes might be. A parent will also need to locate information which helps them understand how to comply with relevant policies, and navigate systemic processes and requirements, before they can effectively proceed in attempting to resolve SAPs.

Table 1.4 DfE Guidance and Legislation with possible relevance to SAPs

Trigger	DfE Guidance document	Legislation
Illness – Physical	**Supporting pupils at school with medical conditions: Statutory guidance for governing bodies of maintained schools and proprietors of academies in England (DfE, 2015a)** 'The aim is to ensure that all children with medical conditions, in terms of both physical and mental health, are properly supported in school so that they can play a full and active role in school life, remain healthy and achieve their academic potential.'	**Section 100, Children and Families Act, 2014** - 'Governing bodies have a statutory duty to make arrangements to support pupils with medical conditions.' **Equality Act (2010)**
Illness – Mental	**Supporting pupils at school with medical conditions: Statutory guidance for governing bodies of maintained schools and proprietors of academies in England (DfE, 2015a)** 'The aim is to ensure that all children with medical conditions, in terms of both physical and mental health, are properly supported in school so that they can play a full and active role in school life, remain healthy and achieve their academic potential.' **Mental health and behaviour in schools (DfE, 2018)**	**Section 100, Children and Families Act, 2014** - 'Governing bodies have a statutory duty to make arrangements to support pupils with medical conditions.' **Equality Act (2010)**
SEND SEND includes learning difficulties, disabilities, and/or social, emotional, or mental health difficulties.	**SEND Code of Practice (DfE/DoHSC, 2015)** Paragraph 6.2 - 'Schools must use their best endeavours to make sure any child with SEN gets the support they need (this means doing everything they can to meet child's SEN'	**Children & Families Act 2014**. Every school is required to have systems in place to identify children needing support, and to assess, monitor and secure appropriate support for any SEN they may have. If the school takes appropriate action but the child is still unable to make the progress expected the school or the parents can request an Education, Health

		and Care Plan (EHCP) assessment for the child.
Bullying	**Preventing and tackling bullying: Advice for headteachers, staff and governors (DfE, 2017)**	There are legal duties on schools, academies, and Local Authorities to safeguard and promote the welfare of children, including preventing bullying and assault. - **Section 175, Education Act 2002; Section 89, Education Inspections Act 2006; Children Act 1989; The Education (Independent School Standards) Regulations 2014 (Part 3); The Equality Act, 2010.**
Sexual Assault	**Sexual violence and sexual harassment between children in schools and colleges (DfE, 2017)**	
Children who are unable to attend school	**Ensuring a good education for children who cannot attend school because of health needs: Statutory guidance for local authorities (DfE, 2013)** School and Local Authority policies state that extended absence requires medical evidence to be authorised. This is expected to come from a GP or referral to CAMHS or a Paediatrician. **Alternative Provision: Statutory guidance for local authorities (DfE, 2013)**	Schools should notify the Local Authority if children are absent due to illness for more than 15 days. Local Authorities have a duty to ensure that a child receives alternative educational provision whilst absent for any reason, - **Section 19, Education Act, 1996** Local Authorities are under a duty to identify children not receiving an education – **Section 436, Education Act 1996**
Additional documents	**Keeping children safe in education 2021 (DfE, 2021d)** **Behaviour and discipline in schools (DfE, 2016)** **School attendance parental responsibility measures (DfE, 2015b)**	**Equality Act (2010)** It is unlawful for an education provider to discriminate directly or indirectly against a pupil on the basis of their disability. An education provider is expected to take positive steps to ensure that disabled pupils have equal access to education and the provision of services.

1.5 Parental voices and perspectives of SAPs

Within existing literature, the importance of obtaining the perspectives of all stakeholders has been acknowledged in recent years, as it supports the development of a comprehensive and holistic understanding of SAPs. (Malcolm *et al*., 2003; Pellegrini, 2007; Gren-Landell, 2021). As discussed by authors including Myhill (2017) and Browne (2018), studies that include the voices and perspectives of parents are limited in number and have rarely explored parents' experiences in depth or considered the full impact of SAPs for families. This study considers this gap in the literature is of significance because the current legislative framework places a duty on parents to resolve SAPs and yet parents' voices are rarely heard. This study also recognises how the parental voice has

been problematised within the literature, yet the input of parents needs to be facilitated as a significant part of any solution (Aucott, 2014; Gren-Landell, 2021).

Once compulsory education was established, absence from school was framed as truancy, with the punitive legislative response indicating that parents were deemed to be a fault for failing to ensure their children attended school. Clinical research then attempted to categorise parents according to how they were perceived to influence and respond to children's SAPs. This led clinicians to label parents as neglectful (Hiatt, 1915), neurotic (Warren, 1948), ambivalent or ineffectual (Davidson, 1960), and irresponsible (Berg, 1997). These perceptions and labels have persisted over time and are still reflected in current definitions of SAPs.

Within existing literature discussing SAPs there is mention of sub-categories of parents who are proactive in trying to resolve barriers to attendance. Although mention of these sub-categories exists, they are rarely acknowledged and have not been investigated further. For example, Reid (2002, pp.149-154) defined five sub-types of parent-condoned absence which were listed as: Anti-education; Laissez Faire; Frustrated; Desperate; and Adjusting. The Frustrated parent category seems to represent pro-active parents most closely, as they are said to try everything to find help and support but feel let down by the system. Heyne *et al*. (2019, p.9) also refer to Reid (2002) and suggest the 'Frustrated parents' mentioned are likely to be those 'who have lost hope following unsuccessful attempts to help their child attend school'.

A further example is offered by Dalziel & Henthorne (2005, p.65) who identified four approaches adopted by parents in response to SAPs. Those approaches were: Parents who are trying hard; Powerless parents; Overprotective or dependent parents; and Apathetic non-engaging parents. The approach of 'Parents who are trying hard' was described in terms of parents who encouraged their child using various methods, and who worked co-operatively with professionals. It was also noted that the reasons for absence often related to illness, an educational need, or behavioural problems. These parents were

described as 'sometimes frustrated by delays with interventions and lack of tailored support for individual needs'.

A key factor of this study is that it enables and validates the voices of parents in situations involving SAPs, in recognition that some parents proactively seek a key role in influencing successful outcomes. This aspect of SAPs – where parents actively try to collaborate with teachers and other professionals in finding a way for their child to re-enter the classroom – has received scant attention in the literature. To understand this phenomenon better, it is necessary to investigate the experiences of parents in this situation and that is what this research sets out to do.

1.6 Defining 'systems' and 'agency'

Within this study reference is made to 'systems' within society and to parental perceptions of 'agency', therefore the application and relevance of these terms within the SAPs context are explained here, to offer clarity for the reader.

1.6.1 Systems within society

This study refers to *systems* as a range of patterns of interaction at different social levels. More specifically, systems are defined structures for organising and providing specific services, such as the nationwide system of school settings organised to provide an education for the population. This also highlights that there is a distinction to be made between the broader concept of 'education' and the more specific concept of 'schooling'. From a sociological perspective, education is defined by Giddens and Sutton (2017, p.81) as: 'the passing on of knowledge, skills and norms of behaviour so that new members can become part of their society'; whereas 'schooling' is defined as: 'the formal process through which certain types of knowledge and skill are delivered via a predesigned curriculum and is usually compulsory up to a certain age'.

A central argument supporting this study is that school attendance is a socially constructed expectation and requirement, which is maintained by various structures and systems of society, and therefore school absence is also a socially constructed problem. Consequently, the parental experiences under investigation

in this study reflect the impact of various interactions and responses within and between these social structures and systems. The study draws upon a perspective shared by Meighan and Harber (2007, p.15) who assert that a society is an ‘all pervasive entity’ with functional requirements and purposes. At the macro level such a society is structured in parts or systems (such as systems of education, health, or economy) which are closely linked. In this sense, individual people can act relatively independently within these combined social structures or systems, if they conform to the rules and accepted behaviours constructed through ongoing social practices over time. The corresponding micro perspective suggests that individuals ‘create society every day by their social actions’ (Meighan and Harber, 2007, p.15). Therefore, individuals can also inspire change within the structures of society through processes of debate and negotiation, which if successful, can change patterns of social action.

In terms of education, Meighan and Harber (2007) argue that ‘the effectiveness of any school structure can be measured only in terms of the needs of the system’. Moreover, they argue that for social order to be maintained, rather than aiming to have the agreement of all members, society requires ‘a few having the power to define social necessity and imposing their definitions on the less powerful’ (Meighen and Harber, 2007, p.297). These societal processes and structures feature within this study in relation to systemic and governmental influences upon individuals which are linked to the compulsion to access education, specifically through attendance at school.

To study and understand how complex interactions within societal systems impact upon people, Mills (1959) proposed that we need to develop a quality of mind which he named ‘the sociological imagination’ (1959, p.5). According to Mills, use of the sociological imagination requires us to connect the personal, social, and historical aspects of our lives and consider how they might influence us and influence any given situation. More specifically, Mills explains we should look beyond our individual problems and make a distinction between ‘the personal troubles of milieu’ and ‘the public issues of social structure’ (1959, p.8). According to Mills, *troubles* are viewed as ‘private matters’ which ‘occur within the character of the individual and within the range of his immediate relations with

others'. Whereas Mills defines *issues* as 'public matters' which often involve a 'crisis in institutional arrangements' and as such are complex to define and unpick (Mills, 1959, p.8). Mills' theory is applicable here as this study aims to understand experience at the micro-level of private matters, by considering how they are influenced by macro-level public matters.

1.6.2 The agency of parents

The researcher acknowledges that *agency* as a concept is likely to be a feature in many parents' experiences as they endeavour to navigate relevant systems to resolve their children's SAPs. Goodall and Montgomery (2014, p.4) relate agency to 'the capacity of parents to act (in a beneficial manner) in relation to their children's learning'. Therefore, a sense of agency is related to how much each person perceives they can take responsibility, and act in a given context. As such, agency is measurable in regard to whose terms things happen under, and to what extent each person can contribute and be heard and respected within a given context. It is suggested that in an education related context where parents and school staff need to work collaboratively, a sense of shared agency would require an understanding of individual roles and positions, and respect for the contribution each agent is able to offer from their perspective.

Section 1.7 will now explain the motivating factors behind the researcher's drive to undertake this study.

1.7 The researcher's motivation

The researcher's motivation for undertaking this study relates to her own experience of SAPs as a parent, and her awareness that other families are having similar experiences. Here she shares a summary of her experience:

> "Our son had hardly missed a day of primary school, but in September 2008 he managed one day at secondary school and then my family were suddenly plunged into a new world of 'school refusal'. This first term at secondary school became a period of anxiety, family arguments, tears, worry, confusion, shame, and fear. There was a succession of stressful meetings with school staff and GP and CAMHS appointments. We were

unsure why he had reacted so badly to secondary school but were repeatedly told "he just has to keep going to school and he will get used to it". The school told us they had never seen this type of behaviour before, so we questioned ourselves - what was it that we had done wrong as parents to cause this?

No one seemed to know how to help, and we felt very isolated and alone. Our son was not sleeping, not eating, extremely anxious, and whenever he was pressured to attend, he began self-harming. Deep-down, we knew there must be an underlying reason why he was reacting in this way. He had seemed happy at primary school, but something had drastically changed. Nothing we did as parents had changed, yet it seemed we were automatically viewed as the source of the problem. We also knew we could be fined or prosecuted, but desperately wanted to protect our son, so we sought a better understanding of why he found secondary school so difficult, and how we could improve things for him.

Initially we tried a part-time timetable, travelling in to school for one or two lessons a day, but it didn't really help. Then, after the Christmas holiday the pressure on him to attend increased, and it seemed the only option was to deregister him from mainstream school. We then signed him up with an online school, chosen because he desperately wanted to feel 'normal' and 'go to school' just like his peers. We desperately wanted that for him too (although we struggled to pay the fees). Despite the assumptions that had been made about him and us, his education mattered yet there was a conflict because we also cared about his health and welfare. It truly was a 'rock or a hard place' situation.

He continued with online education for six years, achieving passes in six iGCSE exams. All through this time we tried to find help. We suspected our son was autistic and repeatedly explained our concerns to clinicians at CAMHS, yet they dismissed this possibility. CAMHS became a frustrating experience with many delays, waiting for appointments and for reports (one took almost a year to be typed up).

When online school came to an end, our son tried to start a course at college, but again he became overwhelmed in the environment. He became depressed after this, and our search for help continued. At the age of 17 he was between child and adult's services and there were many 'dead ends' where no service wanted to get involved.

We returned to CAMHS and explained his situation. Finally, we found one Clinical Psychologist who listened to us, assessed him, and read through his notes in full. Eventually he was diagnosed as autistic. This diagnosis and his interest in attending college led to him being prescribed anxiety medication and offered Cognitive Behavioural Therapy. We arranged support for him to start at a college with a more suitable environment. He went on to complete a two-year BTEC with one 100% attendance award, a Student of the Year award, and Distinction* grades in all areas. He then went on to university and recently graduated with a First-class degree."

When her son's SAPs began the researcher searched everywhere for information and help, which led her to a locate an online support group for parents. This contact with other families provided the family with the knowledge, inspiration, and courage to deregister from the secondary school at the end of the first term. Following this, the researcher became increasingly involved with another online family support group. It became clear to her that there were many families facing similar experiences, and she did her best to offer help based upon everything she had learned. The longer this went on, the more committed and passionate she became about raising awareness. One day, a 'now or never' realisation came, and in 2012 she enrolled at her local university as a mature student, with a vague but burning hope, that she would somehow find a way to make a difference.

1.8 The structure of this thesis

The structure of this thesis is as follows:

Chapter 1: Introduction

This chapter set out the context of this study by explaining the expectations around school attendance, and key aspects of the systemic response to school

absence in England. School attendance problems were conceptualised, including a discussion of ways that parents have been framed within clinical and academic discourses. The chapter drew attention to literature detailing a sub-category of parents who are proactive in trying to resolve SAPs. It was noted that the experiences of these parents have not yet been explored within the literature.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

This chapter explores the development of compulsory school attendance as a societal expectation. This provides a background context to SAPs with a focus upon the framing of parental involvement in school attendance and school absence. The chapter then discusses various ways that parents have been involved within the study of SAPs. Following this, the chapter discusses studies that look beyond the child and their home context to consider the impact of numerous ecological and systemic factors. The chapter concludes with a summary of recent studies that promote the use of a systemic model to aid understanding of the wider contextual influences upon SAPs.

Chapter 3: Methodology

Chapter 3 presents a discussion of the methodological paradigm which was selected and applied to guide this research. An interpretive paradigm supports the idealist ontological assumption that social reality is made up of shared interpretations. The Chapter describes the methodological decisions made by the researcher and the processes used to collect and analyse data.

Chapter 4: Responding to emerging school attendance problems

Thematic analysis of data highlighted common themes and elements of parental experiences that were combined to form the concept of Parents' Journeys through SAPs. Chapter 4 describes the initial elements of Parents' Journeys where they recognise the emergence of school attendance problems and undertake complex interpretations and assessments of their children's difficulties and needs.

Chapter 5: Navigating the systemic context of school attendance problems

Chapter 5 considers elements of the Parents' Journeys in relation to their experiences when they attempt to access support within the education system, health services and local government.

Chapter 6: Managing the home context while experiencing school attendance problems

Chapter 6 discusses parents' experiences in managing various aspects of family life whilst also coping with SAPs. This includes the responses and reactions displayed by family and friends, the impact upon family relationships, and practical aspects such as fulfilling work commitments.

Chapter 7: Working towards a resolution for school attendance problems

Chapter 7 explores the resolving elements of Parents' Journeys and the peak of the Parental SAPs Predicament, which evolves as the full impact of SAPs on the child, parents and family becomes apparent. However, within their journey certain resources empower parents and this influences the decisions parents make to secure the best outcomes they can for their children.

Chapter 8: Discussion

Chapter 8 presents and discusses an adaptation of Bronfenbrenner's bioecological systems framework which aims to represent the structural context of the parents' experiences described in Chapters 4, 5, 6, and 7. Chapter 8 also offers a range of arguments that relate to the study findings and the ways they can be interpreted through the framework of a bioecological system.

Chapter 9: Conclusions and Recommendations

Chapter 9 discusses answers to the research questions that guided the study. In addition, the conclusions reached because of the study are stated. The chapter then shares the researcher's recommendations including a pathway to support informed by the adapted model discussed in Chapter 8.

Chapter Two. School attendance expectations, and consequential responses to school absence from a parental perspective

2.1 Introduction

This chapter sets out to provide an overview of the development of societal expectations and concerns around school attendance at both macro and micro levels, to establish the context in which individual parental experiences are explored. To achieve this, the chapter draws upon primary sources including acts of parliament and government documents, and secondary sources including socio-historical accounts and journal articles. Consideration is given to the timeline of political influence and social factors that mark out the evolution of a state funded and managed, legally enforceable system of mainstream schooling to educate the nation's children.

The chapter then considers two relevant aspects of the literature around school attendance problems (SAPs). First, a short discussion examines critical perspectives of England's legislative response to SAPs. Second, the evolution of clinical and academic discourses in response to SAPs is explored. The discussion then turns to consider academic research which upholds the need to look beyond the child and home context of SAPs. It is argued that this approach will advance a more holistic consideration of numerous ecological and systemic factors which influence children's ability to attend school (e.g., Lyon and Cotler, 2007; Gregory and Purcell, 2014). This section then considers recent studies (e.g., Nuttall and Woods, 2013; Melvin, *et al*., 2019), which support this argument by utilising Bronfenbrenner's bioecological systems model (1979; 2005).

Having set out aspects of the historical, social, and academic context of the study, the chapter then considers ways that parents have been involved in the study of SAPs. This draws upon articles in academic and professional journals, along with a selection of relevant recent doctoral theses. This discussion considers ways that parents have been problematised within definitions of various SAPs over time (e.g., Partridge, 1939; Johnson, *et al*., 1941; Berg, *et al*., 1978; Reid, 2002). This discussion develops further to consider parental

participation in recent studies (Myhill, 2017; Browne, 2018; Orme-Stapleton, 2018; Mortimer, 2019) where it is now acknowledged that the parent voice contributes to the understanding of SAPs.

2.2 The development of school attendance expectations between the mid-eighteenth century and mid-twentieth century

There was a sense of uncertainty and precariousness within English society during the mid-nineteenth century which Lawson and Silver (1973) attribute to a range of factors including substantial population growth, changes in agricultural practices, and the spread of urbanisation triggered by the Industrial Revolution. According to Gillard (2018, no page) by the start of the nineteenth century 'education was being organised, like English society as a whole, on a more rigid class basis'. By the mid-nineteenth century, significant growth in international industry and commerce triggered a growing demand for educated workers who were capable of clerical work. This international contact also prompted recognition that in comparison to the standard of schooling systems in countries such as Germany, Prussia, and France, England was lagging (Gillard, 2018). Chitty (1992, p.3) argues that the reasons for this backwardness were complex, but largely related to the opposition of the churches, and landed and middle-class suspicions about state-controlled education, which had led to a hostile reaction to the notion of mass educating the poor.

In 1870, the Elementary (Foster) Education Act (HMSO) began the process of establishing the state's responsibility for funding and providing a school-based education for children in England and Wales. According to Gillard (2018), the 1870 Act recognised that enforcing mass attendance would be inappropriate until there enough school places had been arranged for all children. Therefore the 1870 Act offered a compulsory school place for children up to the age of thirteen if they did not already have access to existing educational provision. The 1870 Act also began the process of establishing a statutory obligation upon parents to ensure children attended school once they had a place. However, initially the strength of enforcement of this obligation varied across local areas (Gillard, 2018).

The 1880 Education Act (HMSO) strengthened the law around attendance and made education compulsory for every child between the ages of five and ten (Gillard, 2018). Successive Education Acts empowered school boards (in 1870), and then local education authorities (in 1902) to enforce attendance using local byelaws, school attendance orders, prosecution of parents, and/or removal of children from the home to send them to 'truant schools' (Lawson and Silver, 1973, p.325).

According to Lawson and Silver (1973) in the mid-1890s it was reported to Parliament that there were:

> Nearly three quarters of a million children whose names ought to be on the books of some elementary school, and who do not appear at all… Of these who are on the books of the elementary schools, nearly one fifth are continually absent.
>
> (Lawson and Silver, 1973, p.325)

The reasons for this persistent absence are unclear, however, enforcement of mass education had been especially unpopular with poor and working-class families, as they relied on wages earned by children to supplement meagre household incomes (Gillard, 2018). Carlen, Gleeson, and Wardhaugh (1992) explain that costs associated with school attendance, such as school fees and suitable clothing and boots, were problematic for some families. Additionally, some families considered attending school was a waste of time because their children's likely employment would not require them to read or write. These family-based concerns indicate a conflict between what had become parents' legal duty to ensure children accessed education, and the financial and practical demands of family life and survival.

Lawson and Silver (1973, p.323) state that the 1870 Education Act had marked the point when education 'became a vital element in the development of social policy'. Between 1870 and 1890 the welfare of children became a greater priority, and by the start of the twentieth century there was 'a changing climate of opinion about the value of education' (Lawson and Silver, 1973, p.326). The successive

legislation passed between 1870 and 1902 embedded the concept of school attendance as 'parents and children became accustomed to 'the habit of schooling' (Cunningham, 2006, p.172).

Cunningham (2006) argues that this alteration in priorities, and the habituation of the population, was achieved through a combination of persuasion and court action (with 100,000 prosecutions a year for non-attendance in the 1880s). Once sending children to school had become a norm or a habit, it freed parents and wider society from the worry of arranging where children were during the day, especially while adults went to work. It also offered levels of stability and routine which, when combined with the political discourse concerning the benefit of education for children, would have made schooling seem a beneficial opportunity.

The process of integrating a system of compulsory education into society is considered by Zhang (2004), who explains:

> When compulsory education was introduced to Britain and the USA, the argument for compulsion was that only one generation of the population needed the attendance laws to enforce compulsory schooling. And it was believed that resistance to the full-scale institution of government compulsory education would only last for one generation. The second generation and the ones afterwards would accept it as a natural part of growing up.
>
> (Zhang, 2004, p.29)

This suggests there had been an assumption that once compulsory education had become a habit or a 'norm' within society, there would be no non-compliance and no need for punitive consequences for non-compliance. However, in England, and in other countries around the World, legislative enforcement still exists over a century later (Gren-Landell, 2021). Reflecting upon the necessity to continue with a mechanism to enforce compliance through threats of financial and legal penalties for school absence, Donoghue (2011) argues that having the power to imprison parents provides both 'the capacity to regulate and punish behaviour' and offers symbolic messages 'in the context of the social moralisation of 'flawed' parents' (Donoghue, 2011, p.219).

Sheldon (2007) claims that even after sending children to school had become accepted as a cultural norm, important continuities remained:

> A small minority of persistent absentees remained a problem and a much larger number of children continued to truant on an occasional or intermittent basis, on their own initiative, with parental approval or at the parents' behest.
>
> (Sheldon, 2007, p.267)

The following section provides a summary of the key developments that have occurred since the mid-twentieth century, in relation to school attendance and absence.

2.3 The evolution of school attendance expectations since the mid-twentieth century

Following the Second World War, the need for a reconstruction and further reform of the social and economic infrastructure was clear, and the 1944 Education Act was passed in the context of the emerging Welfare State (Wardhaugh, 1991). Gillard (2018) argues that the 1944 Act was one of the most important of all UK Education Acts as it defined the structure of post-war state education in England and Wales. Section 36 of the 1944 Education Act clarified that it was a parent's legal duty to arrange the education of their children, stating:

> It shall be the duty of the parent of every child of compulsory school age to cause him to receive efficient full-time education suitable to his age, ability, and aptitude, either by regular attendance at school or otherwise.
>
> (Education Act, 1944, p.29)

If parents failed to fulfil this duty the penalties were fines for the first two offences, and a fine and/or imprisonment for any subsequent offences (Wardhaugh, 1991). In addition, Section 37 of the 1944 Education Act set out how local education authorities could serve school attendance orders on parents who failed to comply with Section 36. The 1996 Education Act then updated this legal duty as Section 7 stated:

> The parent of every child of compulsory school age shall cause him to receive efficient full-time education suitable—
>
> (a) to his age, ability, and aptitude, and
>
> (b) to any special educational needs he may have,
>
> either by regular attendance at school or otherwise.
>
> (Education Act, 1996, p.4)

This duty means that parents are required to choose between a school-based education or a home-based education (as the 'otherwise' option), based upon their child's needs and abilities and parental preference (Bridges, 2010). This position is clarified in the Department for Education's *School Attendance Guidance* which states that 'parents have a duty to ensure their child of compulsory school age receives suitable full-time education, but this does not have to be at a school' (DfE, 2020a, p.9). However, as Lees (2014, pp.9-11) argues, education has been conflated with schooling and parents are often unaware that school is not the only option. Lees (2014) observes that the choice of 'regular attendance at school or otherwise' (Section 7, Education Act 1996) is not widely promoted by governments and isn't encouraged as a legal option if children experience SAPs.

The 1996 Act aimed to strengthen the enforcement of parental responsibility in relation to children's problematic behaviour and truancy. To achieve this the Act introduced a range of new legal powers to enforce attendance, including parenting contracts, parenting orders, school attendance orders, education supervision orders, penalty notices, and truancy sweeps (Donoghue, 2011). This legislation is still current and there are two offences for which a parent can be found guilty under Section 444 of the 1996 Education Act. Section 444(1) makes parents guilty of an offence if their child is absent without authorisation by their school. Penalties include a fine of up to £1,000. Absence without authorisation is a strict liability offence, meaning a lack of regular attendance is all that needs to be shown. Under Section 444(1A), if a child is absent without authorisation and it is judged that the parent knew about the child's absence and failed to act, then the parent is guilty of an aggravated offence. Penalties include a fine of up to £2,500 and a prison sentence of up to 3 months.

Between 1997 and 2004 the New Labour government spent over £885 million funding anti-truancy initiatives and reforms designed to improve school attendance. Total absence fell from 7.80% in 1995-1996 to 6.59% in 2004-2005. However unauthorised absences remained between 0.73% and 0.78% between 1994-1995 and 2003-2004, and then increased to 0.83% of available days in 2004-2005 (Commons Public Accounts Committee, 2005, pp.7-9). Moreover by 2010, truancy rates reached their highest level since 1997 (Donoghue, 2011).

The House of Commons Committee of Public Accounts (2005) report into the impact of these initiatives recommended ten key practices to help schools manage attendance more efficiently. Many of these recommendations have since been integrated into school practices, including communication of a clear policy on attendance, regular analysis of attendance data, and schemes to reward attendance. One further aspect that was highlighted in the report was that national absence data had been of limited use and was not completely reliable as it had been submitted annually as whole school data, and without standardised guidance. To address this the collection of absence data was transferred from the Absence in Schools Survey to the School Census in 2005/2006, and the DfE now publishes termly, standardised, pupil level absence data (e.g., DfE, 2018b; 2019a; 2020b; 2020c).

After 2010, the Conservative – Liberal Democrat coalition government continued to implement the neoliberal policies introduced by the Conservative government between 1979 and 1990 (Gillard, 2018). These neoliberal policies encouraged the marketisation of education, for instance by offering freedom of choice for parents, and making schools more efficient by monitoring and reporting on pupil achievement (Ball, 2017; Benn, 2012). As Secretary of State for Education, Gove extended the DfE's focus on standardisation of achievement and measuring the performativity of teachers and pupils, which included further crackdowns on attendance and absence figures. Gove (2011) referred to children who were persistently absent from school as the "missing million" and the "educational underclass" (who often did not achieve academically because they had not spent enough time at school). Gove instructed the Government's Expert Adviser on Behaviour to conduct a review of truancy. The resulting report, *Improving*

Attendance at School (Taylor, 2012), offered ten recommendations, most of which were brought into force in 2013. These included: publishing reception absence data to help schools intervene earlier; overhauling the fine system for school absence; and strengthening rules around term-time holidays. It is noteworthy that in the introduction to Taylor's report, the reasons given for the recommended actions were arguments made repeatedly over time in relation to disaffection, neglect, and parents not valuing education (Taylor, 2012). Yet, there is no mention of children who are persistently absent for other reasons such as illness, unmet educational needs, or other difficulties that do not originate within the child, parent, or home.

The 'austerity' programme initiated in 2010 by the Conservative – Liberal Democrat Coalition government triggered a reduction in state spending, which led to budget cuts and consequential changes to policies across many services (Hanley, Winter, and Burrell, 2017; Gillard, 2018). These included the reduction or restructuring of services linked to school attendance and absence such as educational welfare services (Henderson *et al*., 2016), and school nurses (Royal College of Nursing, 2017). The National Association of Headteachers (2019) reported that cuts to funding for schools have impacted upon all aspects of school provision, including numbers of pastoral and SEND support staff, who often work with pupils experiencing SAPs. Numerous reports have described the deterioration in Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services due to chronic underfunding, which continues to impact upon the support available to children experiencing attendance difficulties (STEM4, 2019; Office of the Children's Commissioner, 2020/21).

2.4 The changing role of parents within England's education system

This section will discuss the changing roles that have been constructed for parents through the political discourses and legislative demands discussed in Sections 2.2 and 2.3, in relation to children's attendance at school.

Dockett and Perry (2012) discuss family transitions that occur as children begin attending school, and how this is the significant point when a child's identity changes to *school-child*. They demonstrate that this is often a time of mixed emotion, when children need to 'adopt the symbols of school (such as the uniform), the language and habits of school, and new patterns of behaviour, and develop new skills' (Dockett and Perry, 2012, p.59). For parents this is also a time of transition as their role alters to *parents of a school child*. Sending a child to school then involves a range of accommodations, including an acceptance that other adults will become more influential in their child's life, and that these adults will also draw inferences about and make judgements about their parenting skills (Dockett and Perry, 2012; Cartmell, 2017).

Based on an ethnographic exploration of starting school, Cartmell (2017) argued that this transition to *school child* is socially constructed through narratives shared between parents, children, school staff, the wider community and Government policies and practices. Cartmell (2017, p.84) referred to the work of Handel (2014) who observed that once a child achieves the status of *school child*, s/he must start the process of becoming an *acceptable school child*. The notions of an acceptable school child, and a good school child, could be significant for children who struggle with attendance, as they may fail to achieve either status in the eyes of those around them. The requirement to become a *good or acceptable school child* also has implications for parents.

Once compulsory education was established through legislation, parents were primarily conceptualised as those responsible for ensuring daily attendance. Gradually the conceptualisation of parents in government policy documents widened, and more became expected of parents in terms of how they engaged with their children's schools, and how they supported their children's success as learners (Gibson and Simon, 2010). Bridges (2009, p.2) argued that one of the most significant ways that the English government had intervened in parenting is through the ways it constructed relationships between parents and schools. Bridges (2009, p.2) related this to regulation of how much say and agency parents had within the education system; how much information was shared about the school-based education children received; the choice of schools

available to parents; and the type of relationships parents and teachers could develop.

Politicians have attempted to address school non-attendance as persistent absence, often through what Furedi (2008, p.186) termed the ‘politicisation of parenting’. Evolving discourse through government policy and campaigning constructed a range of parental roles including parents as partners, parents as consumers, engaged parents, responsible parents, and failing parents. Suggested reasons behind the construction of these roles will now be explored in more detail.

2.4.1 Parents as partners in the provision of children’s education

David (1995) discussed the evolving discourse concerning a partnership between the state and parents in relation to education. David (1995) noted how the 1944 Education Act was underpinned by the notion of parental wishes, with Section 76 stating that Local Education Authorities (LEAs) had to ensure pupils were educated in accordance with the wishes of their parents (while balanced against unreasonable public expenditure). In effect this referred to LEAs providing a spread of schools that catered for differing ages, abilities, and aptitudes, which parents could then select from, or opt for private school provision or home education (as the ‘otherwise’ option).

The concept of *parents as partners* was first evidenced in 1967 when The Plowden Report into primary education encouraged closer links between school and home. The Plowden Report emphasised the importance of home-school communication and encouraging the establishment of regular meetings between school staff and parents, open days, and parent teacher associations (Alexander, 2010). Following this, in 1978 The Warnock Report into special needs education was published. Chapter Nine was titled ‘*Parents as Partners’* and the narrative promoted the ideal of equal partnership between parents and professionals. The Warnock Report recognised that an open dialogue between parents and professionals would facilitate the sharing of parental knowledge of children’s needs, alongside the sharing of professional expertise. However, Hodge and

Runswick-Cole (2008, p.3) argued that the term ‘partnership was often loosely defined’ leaving parents and professionals confused about how this partnership role should work in practice, especially when it is observed that the parent – professional relationship is often ‘a source of conflict and tension’ for both parties (Hodge and Runswick-Cole, 2008, p.3).

Mann, *et al*. (2020, p.339) highlight the ‘ambivalence towards partnership with parents’ which they identified within DfE policy documents, and they argued that ‘policies alone have not guaranteed positive parent-teacher partnership’. Reports of the difficult experiences of parents who attempt to work with professionals to access support through schools and local authorities include features of marginalisation and exclusion (Lamb, 2009; Hornby and Lafaele, 2011), epistemic gaps within communication (Hodge and Runswick-Cole, 2017), and blame linked to a default position of assumption of parental failing (Clements and Aiello, 2021).

2.4.2 Parents as consumers of educational provision

Gillard (2018) discussed how a narrative of giving parents more power was initiated by the 1980 Education Act where provision based upon parental wishes moved on to view parents as consumers. This was linked to the rhetoric of parental choice within the 1988 Education Reform Act. This Act introduced Conservative-led neoliberal policies, establishing school performance accountability, creating competition between schools, and encouraging school management modelled on business (Benn, 2012; Ball, 2017). Parents became educational clients and consumers, assigned with individual responsibility for choosing the best school for their child's needs (David, 1995; Ball, 2017).

The 1992 Education Act established Ofsted and introduced school league tables as mechanisms to help parents make informed choices about the school at which they enrolled their children. David (1995, pp.268-270) noted a change in education policy at this time, whereby the political concern about equal opportunity in terms of access to schooling shifted to parental or private rights

and responsibilities. David (1995, p.276) also highlights how this shift was represented by the switch in Conservative rhetoric from a children's charter to a parent's charter. David (1995) described this as 'a sea-change in the state – parental partnership in terms of rhetoric if not the actual practices', suggesting that the notion of parental choice needed to be balanced against the factor of compulsion to arrange children's education. Further, Benn argued that politicians only pretend that parents can choose schools, as the reality is that schools choose pupils through covert and overt selection processes (2012, p.88).

2.4.3 Parents who are responsible and engaged in children's education, or fail to meet professional expectations

From 1997, the New Labour government maintained education policies with a continuing focus upon home-school relationships and parental choice. However, Reay (2008) argued that New Labour education policies were increasingly aimed at turning family homes into extensions of the school learning environment, primarily using home-school contracts. This was deployed through the concept of the *engaged parent* who supports the work of the school by supervising the completion of homework to boost their child's achievements, and engaging with activities at school (Wyness, 2020). Wyness (2020) also suggested that government policies promoted the notion of *responsible parents,* who ensure their children conform to the behavioural and educational standards expected by schools and society, with a particular focus upon truancy being highlighted through media reports.

The discourse evolved to focus upon *failing parents* following concerns about the impacts of poverty and considerable social change upon family life, especially for working class families (Bridges, 2009; Gibson and Simon, 2010; Ball, 2017). This prompted a range of legislation and provisions aimed at educating parents and intervening in family life, including *Every Child Matters* (DfES, 2003), and *Every Parent Matters* (DfES, 2007). In the document *Every Parent Matters* (DfES, 2007) the government's intention was stated to be the provision of services to support and engage parents who were seen to need help to improve their children's educational outcomes and social mobility. However, Gibson and Simon

(2010) argued that *Every Parent Matters* failed to offer parents the practical empowerment it had promised. Instead, the focus of the document was clarifying parental responsibilities, along with communicating the consequences for non-compliance if these responsibilities were neglected.

The discourse that surrounded these New Labour policies and interventions was directed at parents who were seen to be failing to conform to professional expectations (Argent, 2007). Regarding school absence, Southwell (2006) argued that following the failure of New Labour's £885 million campaign (1997-2004) to reduce truancy and improve school attendance, the government changed their focus from 'defective' children to 'defective' parents. Further, Southwell (2006) maintained that the increasingly oppressive response towards truancy that followed this campaign failure was more about saving political face than about concern for children and their education (2006, p.92).

After 2010, the Conservative – Liberal Democrat Coalition government continued to make strong links between existing societal concerns and a lack of parental discipline in the home, and they used this narrative to introduce even more interventions for 'failing parents' or 'flawed parents'. This was evidenced when schools minister, Gibb responded to the Spring 2010 school absence figures by announcing measures to 'get tougher on parents and pupils who do not abide by the rules' (Donoghue, 2011, p.217). This focus on failing parents continued to encourage a general feeling of mistrust of parents and their capabilities to judge what was in the best interests of their children (Bridges, 2010). Goodall (2019) concurs, arguing that the focus on improving parenting skills had become combined with a process of judging and regulating parents, particularly in relation to mothers, single parents, and working-class families.

This section has aimed to highlight how political discourses have constructed various roles for parents who engage with the education system. This is considered significant because these discourses and roles have shaped thinking about parental influence upon attendance, often by encouraging suspicion,

judgement, and blame, which in turn is likely to have shaped the responses and support offered to parents and children.

The following sections explore research into two further aspects of school attendance expectations. Section 2.5 discusses law-based academic discourse that has been critical of the legislative approach towards school absence as truancy. Then Section 2.6 considers clinical and academic discourses which have contributed to the range of SAPs that have been constructed since the late nineteenth century.

2.5 The impact of English legal discourse on school absence

This chapter has evidenced how between 1870 and 1918 the system of mass schooling evolved in terms of widening the group of children provided for by the state, to achieve the current span between five and eighteen years of age. Since 1870 there has been a gradual tightening of the legal requirements to ensure children access full-time education, with a range of penalties that can be levied on parents. A literature base that sits alongside this legal discourse of Education Acts and legislation is research conducted in related disciplines including law, criminology, and education welfare (Heyne et al., 2019; Gren-Landell, 2021). Various studies have found there is no evidence to show that compulsion or legal sanctions have significantly reduced school absence (Carlen, Gleeson and Wardhaugh, 1992; Zhang, 2004; Sheppard, 2010; 2011; Donoghue, 2011; Epstein, Brown and O'Flynn, 2019). Moreover, Donoghue (2011) argues that legal sanctions can only be an effective deterrent if the parent is the only cause of a child's school absence; or if the child is of an age where a change in approach by the parent will be effective in resolving any problem or barrier preventing attendance.

Both Carlen, Gleeson and Wardhaugh (1992) and Arthur (2005) state that legislation, educational reforms, and legal judgements have all impacted negatively on parents' ability to enforce children's school attendance. For instance, Carlen, Gleeson and Wardhaugh are critical of the passing of legislation which 'does not specify how a child should be brought back into the

classroom if they are ‘refusing’ to attend’ (1992, p.25). They also argue that families are placed in ‘a double bind’ by English legislation, whereby ‘on the one hand it requires parents to ensure their children’s attendance at school while, on the other, paradoxically, it provides the child with legal protection from its parents’ (1992, p.26). This relates to the use of physical force, which professionals can expect parents to use to manhandle a resistant child from the home into the school, (which could conversely be viewed as causing physical harm).

Arthur argues that successive legislation has had ‘a powerful impact which tends to undermine rather than reinforce the ability of parents to offer their children help and guidance’ (2005, p.237). This refers to legislation such as the Anti-Social Behaviour Act (2003) which updated the use of parenting contracts, parenting orders, penalty notices and ‘fast track to attendance’ interventions to encourage parents to address poor attendance by engaging with schools and local authorities. According to Arthur, rather than penalising parents, without acknowledging the holistic context of their situation, parents should be assisted in guiding and nurturing their children, through the provision of resources and support services.

Epstein, Brown and O’Flynn (2019) studied the experiences of 126 parents of children experiencing difficulties attending school. Their findings indicated that ‘the punitive approach leads to harm for parents, children, and vulnerable families. It also appears to be ineffective in getting reluctant and fearful children back into the classroom’ (2019, p.61). They concluded that ‘the current law is cruel and discriminatory’ (2019, p.5). Donoghue (2011) and Epstein, Brown and O’Flynn (2019) posit that the use of criminal law is both inappropriate and ineffective, with the former arguing for an alternative civil, child welfare approach, and the latter for a social pedagogy based, holistic approach, as it ‘may provide a more effective framework for addressing the multifarious and socially complex problem of truancy’ (Donoghue, 2011, p.244).

From an educational psychology perspective, Apter (2017, p.3) argues that ‘punishment is rarely an efficient way of modifying an undesired behaviour, even

if they make the person doing the punishing feel better'. Research conducted by Kendall *et al*. (2004) explored the effectiveness of parental prosecution for school absence from the perspectives of parents who had been prosecuted, magistrates and court clerks, and Local Education Authority and Education Welfare Service staff. The findings suggested that the most beneficial aspect of prosecuting parents was the message it sent out to other parents. Kendall *et al.* (2004) found professionals observed that even if prosecution improved a child's attendance it tended to only be a short-term improvement, suggesting the underlying reasons or problems had not been addressed. It could therefore be argued that although there needs to be a systemic response to truancy as a social expectation that is going unmet, a rethink about the aims and appropriateness of the response is required.

Pellegrini (2007, p.67) argues that the existing legal discourse directs attention towards parents as the 'locus' of school attendance problems, but the child is viewed as a 'passive subject' only to be discussed, but not given a voice. Pellegrini (2007) then observes that legislation is constructed to allow the state to intervene in the parenting role if a parent is seen to have failed to provide a suitable education, and he states:

> Without denying the importance of legislation to protect children's rights, the legal discourse appears narrow in the way it constructs school non-attendance. It focuses on the family only, and does not appear to consider systemic factors, which may play an important role in school non-attendance.
>
> Pellegrini (2007, p.67)

This contributes a viewpoint to the question of to what degree parents can be expected to resolve school absence if it is caused or influenced by systemic factors, but existing legislation does not allow space to consider such influences.

2.6 Clinical and academic responses to school absence

Lawson and Silver (1973) observed how by the end of the nineteenth century there was an increasing emphasis upon the duty of English society to help its

individual members, alongside recognition of a collective responsibility for serious social problems, including truancy. Sheldon (2007, p.274) argued that by the early decades of the twentieth century levels of truancy had fallen to the extent that any cases of persistent truancy appeared abnormal, which were then thought to suggest 'deeper problems in the family'. At that time there was also an increased interest in the study of psychology (Lawson and Silver, 1973), and child development and educational practices (Gillard, 2018). This reflected both an increasing interest in the welfare of individual children, and the desire to boost the status of education and teaching practice. As these developments occurred, attitudes towards truants and their families began to alter, with suggestions of merging attendance monitoring with welfare roles and health interventions. As Sheldon (2007, p.272) explained 'there was increasingly an acknowledgement that truancy could be linked to the health and physical welfare of the child'.

Section 1.2 provided a brief overview of SAPs terminology which has developed over time and this section now consider the evolution of this discourse in more depth. One of the earliest published theories about truancy was shared in work by Kline (1897), who suggested truancy was linked to instinctual behaviour, and a migratory instinct within children (like that found in animals and birds). Kline (1897, p.26) theorised those children were compelled by this instinct to wander and 'maintain psycho-physiological activities in attune or rhythm with those of the organic and inorganic world'. This was echoed by Burt (1925) who drew upon the work of Kline and others when writing about '*Young Delinquents'*. Burt's chapter '*Temperamental Conditions: Instincts and Emotions'* included sections on Wandering as 'a blind impulse to roam or travel, a hunger for new scenes and new experiences' (1925, p.456). This theory is reflected in the aetiology of the word 'truant', which is defined as 'one who wanders from an appointed place', linked to the Old French word *truant* meaning 'beggar or vagabond' (Harper, 2021). Burt (1925, p.500) also considered the treatment of truancy in terms of running away from home and school. Here he suggested that a full study should be made of the child and their character and abilities, and a study of the child's home, social and school circumstances, to 'search for the secret instigating factor' or 'look where the limitations press most severely – whether home or school cramps him the most'.

Kline (1897) and Burt (1925) appear to display an open mindedness to understanding truancy which was subsequently diminished by a narrower focus upon the family and home that developed once education became compulsory and attendance needed to be enforced. These developments in thinking about truancy were reflected in the growth between the 1930s and 1970s in clinical studies conducted by psychologists and psychiatrists, both in the UK and internationally, which medicalised absence from school. Early debates about truancy as a conduct disorder (Williams, 1927; Warren, 1948), branched out to consider 'sub-groups' of truants who displayed "neurotic behaviours". This pathologising discourse created a range of psychoanalytical terminology such as 'a form of truancy where a child is suffering from a deep-seated neurosis of the obsessional type or displays a neurotic character of the obsessional type' (Broadwin, 1932, p.254).

Further work led to theories about school phobia or school refusal - considered as neurotic illness or a psychoneurotic disorder (e.g. Johnson, *et al.* 1941; Coolidge, *et al*., 1957; Hersov, 1960; Berg, Nichols and Pritchard, 1969; Berg, *et al*., 1985) or as separation anxiety - reflecting a problematic relationship between child and mother (Johnson, 1957); or as school withdrawal, which is viewed as parental complicity in absence (Tyerman, 1968; Berg, *et al*., 1978).

Some clinicians worked on comparisons between the conduct-disorder type of truancy, and the neurotic-disorder type of truancy as school phobia or school refusal (Kahn and Nursten, 1962; Tyerman, 1968; Hersov and Berg 1980; Berg *et al*., 1985; Elliott 1999). Other work focused on defining and redefining existing concepts, such as that of Berg, Nichols, and Pritchard (1969) who produced the first set of defining features for school phobia, which have been widely cited and utilised as the basis for further adaptation (e.g., Heyne, *et al*., 2019).

Literature from the 1980s onwards reveals a growth in the involvement of a wider range of disciplines, including educational psychology (e.g., Blagg, 1987; Conn 1987), education (e.g., Reid and Kendall, 1982; Cooper and Mellors, 1990), and criminology and law (e.g., Pratt, 1983; Carlen, Gleeson and Wardhaugh, 1992).

This expansion of disciplines helped to support the developing interest in the environmental and social context of SAPs.

In the 1990s the debate about SAPs was extended by Kearney and Silverman (1990; 1993) who suggested that rather than focus upon symptoms, it would be more helpful to consider the functions served by school refusal. It was suggested that these differing functions would then indicate differing forms of intervention in response. This reflects the earlier viewpoints of Kline (1897) and Burt (1925), where their analysis also focused on the function rather than the form of truancy. The four functions of school refusal Kearney and Silverman (1990, p.1993) identified were avoidance of negative affectivity-provoking objects or situations related to a school setting; escape from aversive social or evaluative situations; attention-getting behaviour; or positive tangible reinforcement. According to Lauchlan (2003), this functional analysis approach has helped draw more attention to the influence of the school environment, and the responsibility schools could bear for pupil absence.

Research related to SAPs has broadly been conducted following either a medical or social model of understanding (Heyne *et al.*, 2019). The medical model links SAPs to problems that lie within the child, possibly as an illness or behavioural deficit. Therefore, responses focus on the use of medication or therapy to treat the disability caused by within-child issues (Giddens and Sutton, 2017). This individualistic approach directs thinking towards a deficit or deviant aspect of the individual that requires treatment and fixing (Beresford, Nettle and Perring, 2010). Alternatively, the social model approach views the individual within their social context, as part of an extended network of people and other influences. This network and the individual both have an impact upon each other. The social model considers aspects of disability are created by organisations not making the right provisions to adequately support people's needs (Giddens and Sutton, 2017). The existence of these contrasting models highlights the need to consider the ontological and epistemological position of those involved in research and in professional practice, as their chosen approach will create differing interpretations of data and observations (Pellegrini, 2007; Birioukov, 2016).

Blagg (1987) critiques the results of earlier clinical research into truancy and school phobia, and considered the work was hampered by a range of methodological weaknesses including vague, inconsistent use of terminology, a general lack of controlled statistical studies, sample bias and skewed samples. Similarly, Wade (1979) talks of clinicians' theoretical prejudices being maintained in write ups, and narrow, potentially dangerous assumptions being made. Pilkington and Piersel (1991) presented a critical analysis of the theory of separation anxiety as a reason for school phobia, and they turned their attention to the lack of emphasis on external factors, and de-emphasis of school-related fears.

Pellegrini (2007) also highlighted the bias towards a clinical construction of SAPs that had been formed by clinical and academic discourses since the 1930s. Pellegrini (2007, p.66) identified 'a range of interpretative repertoires used to construct extended school non-attendance pathologically, by using an overtly clinical language', which he considered had contributed to an extremely limiting view of the problem. Elliott and Place (1998, p.44) argued that many studies of SAPs were produced by researchers with a medical background who had little expertise or professional experience in educational matters; they suggested that 'it is perhaps for this reason that the literature makes little reference to examining the ways by which the school can help a child to overcome a reluctance to attend'. Similarly, Shilvock (2010, p.40) argues that clinicians will 'have a limited knowledge of the child's education context, which may hinder the reliability of their judgements, and reflect a tendency to position young people's distress into clinical categories of illness'.

Shilvock (2010, p.56) also suggested that it was appropriate to recognise how 'school staff may have had an element of bias in their responses' and may have 'been more willing to attribute the reasons of school refusal to external influences, as opposed to suggesting school-related factors directly'. This is significant because, as Torrens Salemi (2006, p.57) observes 'the theories that frame school refusal research, and their ontological and epistemological orientations, have hidden assumptions, which can lead to unknown implications for students, their families, and their futures'. Similar criticisms were shared by

Reynolds *et al*. (1980) who suggested studies conducted by researchers involved in educational services tended to have a restricted focus upon truancy, which led them to locate the causes in either microsystem level factors such as the family, or macrosystem level factors such as the class system. These differing or restricted perspectives were also noted by Kearney (2003) to be a contributory factor in the lack of consensus around SAPs, as he concluded:

> Such disparity has been manifested by the presence of different sets of professionals who often evaluate a particular aspect of problematic school absenteeism at the expense of viewing the population as a whole. As a result, practitioners, researchers, and others are often "not on the same page" when addressing students or clients, examining research samples, or classifying absentees.
>
> (Kearney, 2003, p.57)

A further contribution to the task of unravelling the complexity of the phenomenon has been offered by researchers who have investigated how children (e.g., Baker and Bishop, 2015), parents (e.g., Havik, Bru, and Ertesvåg, 2014), or professionals (e.g., Torrens Salemi, 2006) construct and understand SAPs differently. Malcolm *et al*. (2003) investigated how a sample of children, their parents, and education personnel understood school absence. Malcolm *et al*. (2003) found it was common for children to attribute school factors as reasons for non-attendance, but they rarely identified home factors as a cause. The parents in the study believed that bullying was the main reason for children's reluctance to attend school, followed by problems with teachers or schoolwork. However, Malcolm *et al.* (2003) found the school and local authority staff constructed school absence as behaviour triggered by home based influences, including negative parental attitudes towards education, domestic violence, and children needing to act as carers for younger siblings. Some possible school factors were also acknowledged by the professionals, including difficulties with school staff or other pupils, or the primary to secondary school transition.

Similar differences in the perception and construction of school absence are echoed in other studies, such as Clissold (2018) who interviewed three pupils, four parents, and three members of school staff. Clissold (2018) found pupils

attributed attendance problems to negative school experiences, mental health difficulties, a lack of understanding or lack of support at school, and unsuitable support strategies and provision. Parents saw anxiety as the most significant factor, which they related to a range of triggers and problems. Parents also noted the influence of unsuitable support or provision in school. School staff also focused upon anxiety; however, they placed more emphasis on the influence of within child and within family factors (Clissold, 2018).

Reflecting a different approach, Davies and Lee (2006) interviewed 48 young people (school non-attenders and attenders), some of their parents, and several education professionals. Their study attempted to understand why some students stop attending and others keep attending. Davies and Lee (2006, p. 208) viewed their task as researchers was to develop understanding by 'standing back from the assumption that non-attendance is a problem'. Instead, they viewed young people as self-withdrawers who 'offer a critique of the school and the system and solve their personal problems by refusal to engage' (Davies and Lee, 2006, p.208). They suggested that self-withdrawal is evidence of a contractual breakdown. The contract being one where the young person attends and complies at school, and in return the school offers 'a safe environment, meaningful and relevant learning, opportunities for association with friends, and dignified and respectful treatment' (Davies and Lee, 2006, p.208). This contractual breakdown occurs when the young person does not feel safe, protected, respected, or dignified. As a result, Davies and Lee (2006) acknowledged that rather than being a problem for the student, non-attendance can be a solution to a problem, and the problem exists for schools, local authorities, and the political community instead.

The first decades of the twenty-first century have seen further developments, with an increasing number of educational psychology and social science-based studies of SAPs in the UK. These studies have often been critical of the existing body of clinical discourses, for instance Lauchlan (2003, p.138) claims that there had been an inclination to play down school-related factors. Instead, there are arguments for greater multi-disciplinary collaboration, and a more holistic consideration of individual SAPs contexts (e.g., Lauchlan, 2003; Southwell, 2006:

Davies and Lee, 2006; Pellegrini, 2007; Reid, 2008; Lees, 2014; Gregory and Purcell, 2014; Baker and Bishop, 2015).

Other alternative arguments have been put forward to challenge dominant clinical narratives. These perspectives also suggest some conflict in opinion in terms of where, and how, the actual problem is sited and constructed. Birioukov (2016, p.341) argued that the 'fairly arbitrary definitions of absenteeism employed in the international literature' fail to reflect the complexity of SAPs. Birioukov (2016) proposed that the concepts of voluntary and involuntary absenteeism more accurately represent factors that motivate a student to attend or reduce a student's ability to attend school. Knage (2021) has also argued that although SAPs have been described as a multifactorial phenomenon, the response within research has been to simplify this multiplicity by maintaining a focus on one aspect or factor of influence. Offering an alternative perspective, Knage suggests there is a need to engage with socio-cultural perspectives and theories that can more effectively help to account for the complexity of the phenomenon. Furthermore, Knage (2021) suggests that although school absence is framed as the problem, it may not be the absence from school that is problematic, as depending upon how a child is engaged while not in school, as it is possible they could still be gaining an education elsewhere. To reflect this, it is suggested that we consider the statement:

> Absence is not the problem itself, it may only be the sign of one. And sometimes it is actually just we the adults that have a problem with children not being in school.
>
> (Knage 2021, p.12)

This perspective is an antithesis to the dominant political discourse that an appropriate education can only be gained through attendance at school. This contrasts with reports of home education and self-directed learning leading to successful outcomes (Knox, 1990; Rothermel, 2000; Fortune-Wood, 2007; McIntyre-Bhatty, 2008; Morton, 2010; Wray and Thomas, 2013; Lees, 2014; Cunningham, 2021; Fisher, 2021). For instance, both Fortune-Wood (2007) and Wray and Thomas (2013) reported on case studies where children's symptoms

had indicated cases of school phobia and school refusal, however, once those children were removed from schools and home educated, they either immediately or gradually regained their wellbeing, confidence, and interest in learning.

Echoing Davies and Lee (2006) and Knage (2021), Frydenlund (2021) argues that the absence from school is not the true problem we need to resolve, even though it has been constructed as problematic through its causal links to other concerns. Frydenlund suggests this is faulty logic, and it is the way people respond to a child being absent from school that creates the negative impacts of school absence. Therefore, Frydenlund (2021, p.90) urges 'we need to take a closer look at the consequences we make absence have'.

Section 2.7 will now consider further arguments for the need to look afresh at what are commonly considered to be the underlying causes of school absence.

2.7 Looking beyond the child and their home setting

As discussed in Section 2.6, the clinical and political responses to truancy and other types of school absence since the late nineteenth century have entrenched the belief that SAPs reflect within-child (emotional, behavioural, or psychological) factors, while Section 2.8.1 will highlight how SAPs have been linked to parenting failures and/or home-based problems. This has deflected attention away from school-based and systemic factors that impact upon a child's ability to attend school. However, a growing number of researchers have drawn attention to the relevance of considering the impact of the school environment as a trigger for SAPs, and to consideration of the influence of the wider systemic context (e.g., Blagg, 1987; Pilkington and Piersel, 1991; Lauchlan, 2003; Archer, Filmer-Sankey, and Fletcher-Campbell, 2003; Pellegrini, 2007; Lyon and Cotler, 2007; Kearney, 2008a).

A model which has relevance here is Bronfenbrenner's (1979; 1998; 2005) bioecological systems model which describes a child as being nested within numerous contexts including individual, peer, family, school, and community, with the child interacting within and across these multiple social contexts,

accumulating both risk and protective factors for behavioural and mental problems across time. A sociocultural framework such as this recognises the relationships and influences between micro (individuals), meso (organisations, groups, communities), and macro (structures and policies) level systems.

Lyon and Cotler (2007) suggested that an interesting aspect to consider is the connections and interactions between home and school environments, as they observed that previous SAPs related research at the time had not considered the relationships between the two. It was argued that the mesosystem component of Bronfenbrenner's (1979; 1998; 2005) model offers a useful tool for analysis of the relationship between home and school. Lyon and Cotler (2007, p.558) argued that 'links between the family and school settings are the most widely studied type of mesosystem in the ecological systems literature but have never been applied to school refusal behaviour'. Investigation into these links between the home and school settings could yield valuable information as both are central to the experience of SAPs as a whole.

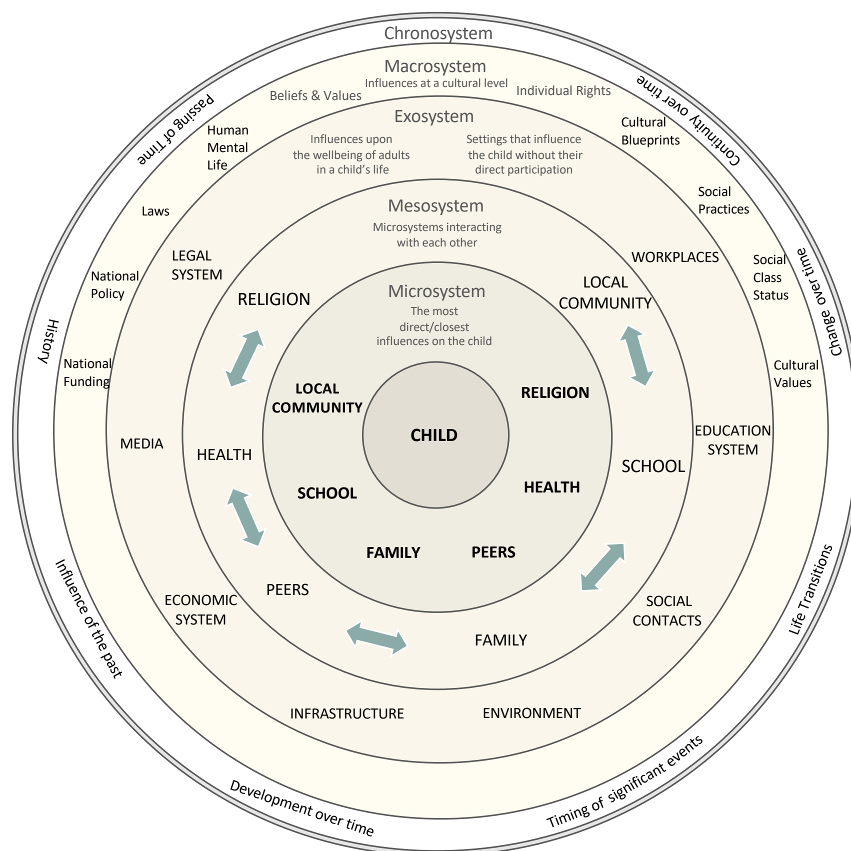
A growing body of work has applied Bronfenbrenner's (1979; 1998; 2005) model to support consideration of systemic influences within the SAPs context (Nuttall and Woods, 2013; Myhill, 2017; Browne, 2018; Clissold, 2018; Mortimer, 2019; Melvin *et al*., 2019). This approach assesses the roles of the key people involved, along with factors at all levels of a person's environment so that their whole context can be understood and analysed. The following section explores the relevance of Bronfenbrenner's (1979; 1998; 2005) model in more depth and discusses relevant work where researchers have applied Bronfenbrenner's (1979; 1998; 2005) model to support and extend understanding of SAPs.

2.7.1 Research utilising Bronfenbrenner's (1979; 1998; 2005) Bioecological Systems Model

Bronfenbrenner studied the social and ecological contexts of human life. As his work evolved, Bronfenbrenner acknowledged how people undertake a dynamic role in their own development through interactions with their surrounding environment. His ongoing observations inspired Bronfenbrenner to combine ecological and biological factors to form a bioecological systems theory (1973;

1979). Bronfenbrenner noticed how reciprocal interactions between people are developmentally influential mechanisms, and he named these mechanisms *proximal processes* (Bronfenbrenner and Ceci, 1994). Bronfenbrenner also observed how each person's direct environment is influenced by many *distal factors,* or distant aspects of society such as political, economic, and cultural influences. These varied influences at close and more distant levels are represented in Bronfenbrenner's model (1979; 1998; 2005) using concentric circles surrounding a child, or any person, at the centre (see Figure 2.1).

Figure 2.1. Bronfenbrenner's (1979, 1998, 2005) Bioecological Systems Framework



Surrounding the central circle, the *microsystem* contains the environments within which the child spends most time – such as the home, school, and local community. Around the microsystem, the *mesosystem* represents the interactions (or proximal processes) between the elements of the microsystem. The next layer is the *exosystem* which contains the settings that the child does not experience, but they have influence over what happens in the microsystem

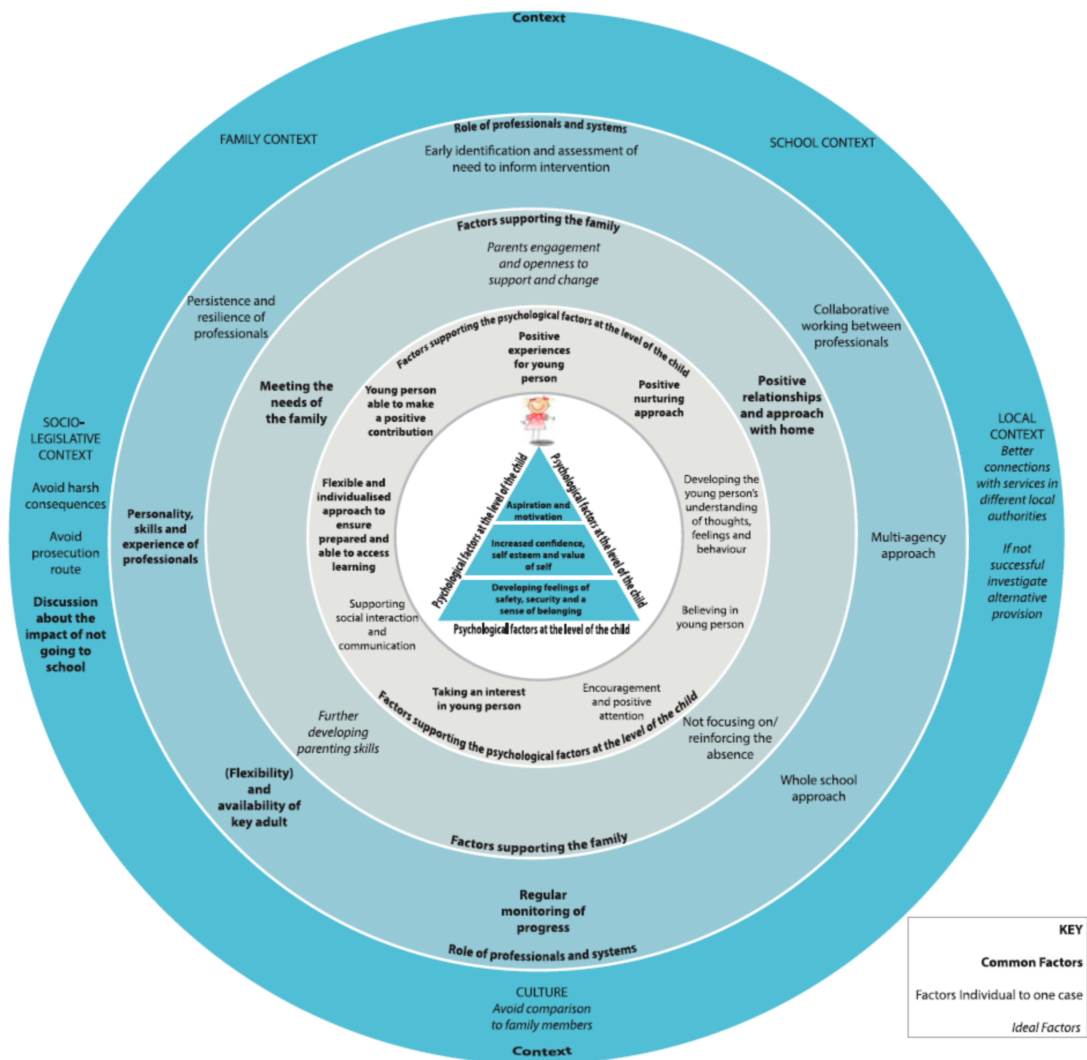
and mesosystem. Therefore, this could include local health services, transport services, and parents' workplaces. Next, the *macrosystem* represents the distant but still influential elements of a child's environment, such as cultural norms and beliefs. Bronfenbrenner also added an additional outer circle called the *chronosystem* which represents how the passing of time has influence upon the different elements within the whole model (Bronfenbrenner, 1977; 1979; 1986; 1994; 1998; 2005).

Throughout his career (1973–2005), Bronfenbrenner refined and adapted his theories and framework. Other academics have since extended this process by proposing further interpretations and adaptations (e.g., Swick and Williams, 2006; Neal and Neal, 2013; Rosa and Tudge, 2013; Tudge, 2016; Tudge, *et al*., 2016; Elliott and Davis, 2018; Xia, Li, and Tudge, 2020). Recently several educational psychology researchers have applied Bronfenbrenner's framework to support and extend understanding of SAPs (Nuttall and Woods, 2013; Myhill, 2017; Browne, 2018; Clissold, 2018; Mortimer, 2019).

Nuttall and Woods (2013) examined two individual case studies of intervention for 'school refusal behaviour', with the aim of providing a dynamic view of factors associated with 'successful involvement'. They interviewed young people who had been considered school refusers, but their attendance had improved. They also interviewed the parents and practitioners involved in both cases. The authors concluded that any intervention should consider the range of systemic interactions and bi-directional influences within each child's specific context. Nuttall and Woods (2013, p.357) reported that 'practitioners suggested that "parents' engagement and openness to support and change" would have led to earlier success'. The context of the two cases also suggested the importance of factors including 'further developing parenting skills' (2013, p.357), 'collaborative working between professionals' and 'a multi-agency approach' (2013, p.358). Nuttall and Woods (2013, p. 359) suggested that a 'whole school approach' and support which focused on the needs of families was vital for a successful return to school.

Nuttall and Woods (2013) observed how their findings related well to the ‘multi-faceted components of Bronfenbrenner’s (1979) ecological systems theory’ (2013, p. 359), and they proposed a synthesised model influenced by this theory (see Figure 2.2).

Figure 2.2 Nuttall and Woods (2013) Synthesised Model



Nuttall and Woods (2013, p.360) described how the synthesised model allows us to see how positive outcomes can be gained through changes made in the systems contained within the model. This synthesised model aimed to support further practice and research by suggesting aspects within the contexts of individual cases where support and intervention could be implemented (Nuttall and Woods, 2013, p.361).

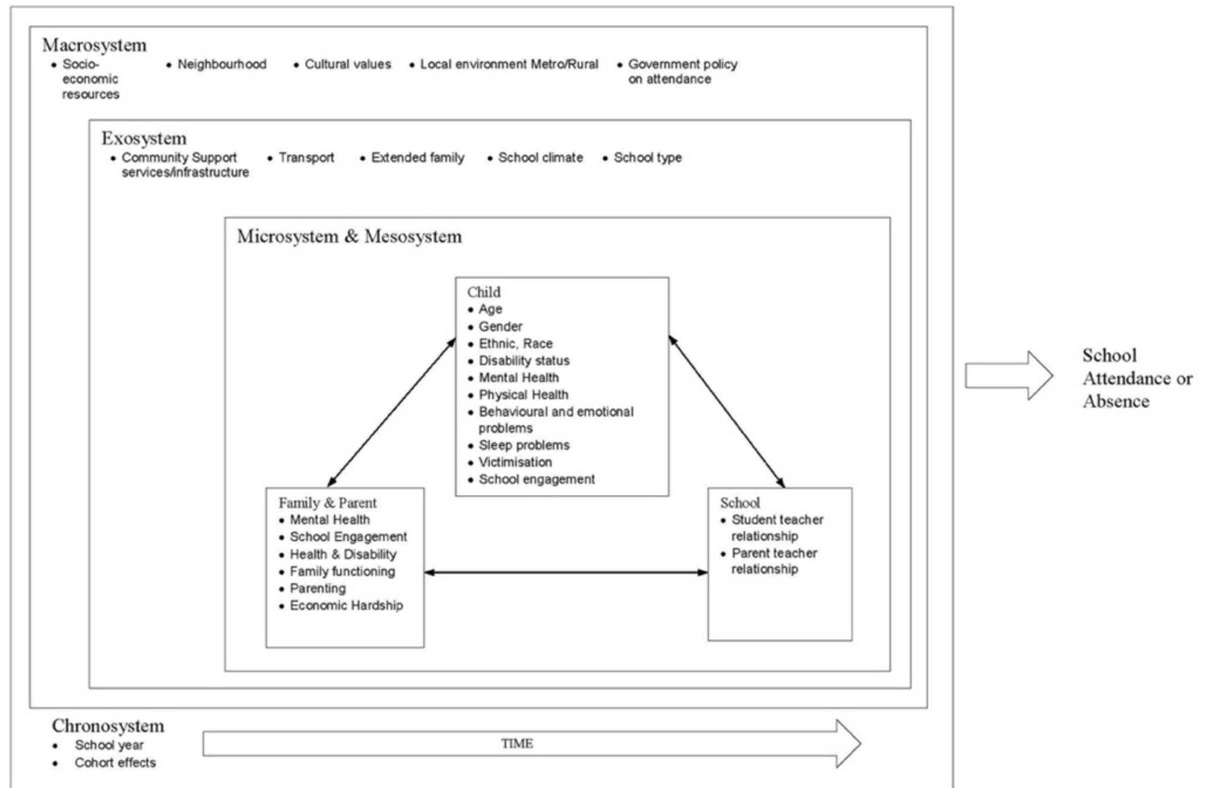
Myhill (2017) considered each of Bronfenbrenner's systemic levels and applied findings from SAPs literature to structure a review of factors within a child's environment that may affect their attendance. Myhill (2017) combined this with a review of research evaluating the impact of parents' involvement in their children's education, and interviews with eight parents. The findings focused upon the mesosystem and the interactions between parents and children, and parents and school staff. Browne (2018) also utilised Bronfenbrenner's ecological model to support her understanding of the interactions between home and school/professional systems, and the impact of those interactions on the individual. Mortimer (2019) applied Bronfenbrenner's model to consider the connected systems around a child and their family, to help identify the most effective support intervention. Again, Mortimer (2019) focused upon the significance of interactions at the mesosystem level after interviewing two secondary-aged young people and three parents.

In 2019, Melvin *et al*. presented the Kids and Teens at School (KiTeS) Framework, stating that it 'builds on recent calls to apply bioecological systems frameworks when studying risk factors for school absenteeism and attendance problems' (2019, p.1). The KiTeS framework is described as an adaptation of Bronfenbrenner's bioecological systems model which utilises the different systems as a structure to present the wide range of factors which have been claimed to be influential in cases of SAPs (see Figure 2.3). In terms of parental factors this includes parenting styles, attitudes towards education, and parent mental health. Family related factors include family functioning and composition. Schools are considered influential in regard to school climate, levels of support, and feelings of safety and inclusion. It is frustrating that more factors are listed in the article than are included in the framework diagram, which seems to detail more parent and family factors than school factors in the micro- and meso-system sections.

The intended purpose of this model is that it provides guidance and context for researchers when they set out to investigate school absence. Heyne *et al*. (2019, p.6) argue that a strength of this framework is that it is relevant to many disciplines and can therefore 'inform the development of a multi-disciplinary

research agenda for absenteeism and SAPs which the field is currently lacking'. This is a significant development as it clarifies the wider context of influence around the child and their home situation.

Figure 2.3 The KiTeS (2019) Bioecological Systems Framework for School Attendance and Absence.



These examples indicate how Bronfenbrenner's framework can be utilised in differing ways. For Nuttall and Woods (2013) it offered a way to present their findings which drew attention to the systemic context of future intervention planning; whereas for Myhill (2017), Browne (2018) and Mortimer (2019) the framework helped them to construct their approach to researching SAPs; and for Melvin *et al*. (2019) it offered a framework to guide a holistic approach for further research. A key strength of the framework is that it represents a person as the central element within a specific context, and then includes a hierarchy of layers of complex human interactions and environmental factors that impact upon that person. Equally as Bronfenbrenner noted, the person at the centre can be seen to impact upon people and elements within their environment at differing levels,

which duly reflects the impact a child's SAPs has on others (Bronfenbrenner, 1977; 1979; 1986; 1994; 2006).

In addition to the need to address the gap in existing literature relating to the influence of factors in the school and wider environments, some researchers have noted gaps in terms of the inclusion of the voices and perspectives of children and parents (e.g., Gregory and Purcell, 2014; Havik *et al*., 2014; Baker and Bishop, 2015). This study aims to contribute one of these missing perspectives by contributing knowledge of the experience of parents who take a proactive stance. Therefore, the following section will consider how parents have previously been implicated or involved in SAPs related research.

2.8 Parents and SAPs research

So far, this chapter has explored how the introduction of compulsory education has impacted upon the lives of children and parents, and how academics and clinicians have sought to explain SAPs. This section will now reflect upon two significant aspects of parental inclusion in SAPs related research. Section 2.8.1 explains how parents have been assessed and categorised within SAPs related research studies. The discussion in Section 2.8.2 then relates to research studies where the parental voice has been directly facilitated and included. These aspects are considered significant because they evidence the types of discourse that have existed and influenced thinking about parents with children who experience problems with school attendance.

2.8.1 The representation of parents within existing SAPs research

Existing research has attempted to categorise parents according to how they influence and respond to children's SAPs. As discussed in Sections 1.2 and 2.6, the wide range of SAPs terminology reflects the way school absence has been conceptualised differently over time (Lauchlan, 2003; Pellegrini, 2007; Birioukov, 2016). These conceptualisations have carried with them various evaluations of parental motivations and influence. Examples of terminology and categorisation include 'absence resulting from parental neglect' (Hiatt, 1915, p.7); 'a neurotic and adoring mother is a common figure in the background' (Warren, 1948,

p.266); ‘maternal ambivalence (the mother who gives with one hand and takes away with the other) and passive and ineffectual fathers’ (Davidson, 1960, pp.276-277); ‘parents [who] are quite irresponsible where school attendance is concerned and make feeble excuses’ (Berg, 1997, p.91); ‘enmeshed, overinvolved relationships which exist between parent and child’ (Place et al., 2004, p.8). Tyerman (1968, p.76) stated that a parent who cares about their child will ensure that they are educated, and he suggested that any interested parent who wants their child to go to school regularly will rarely have any difficulty over attendance.

In 2005, Dalziel and Henthorne conducted a telephone survey with 2,000 parents and interviewed 22 parents whose children had been poor attenders, to ascertain parental attitudes towards school attendance. They found there were no significant differences in the attitudes examined between parents of children with good attendance compared to parents of children with poor attendance. These findings conflicted with the longstanding belief that parents of children with SAPs do not value education, and do not recognise the importance of their child receiving a good education. The parents of poor attenders were noted to want more help, information, and support. They said they had been proactive in trying to seek help from their child’s school but ‘had not received the necessary support from either the school or other agencies when it was needed’ (Dalziel and Henthorne, 2005, p.4).

Heyne *et al*. (2019) discuss the ways in which parental effectiveness has been assessed; for instance, some researchers have attempted to evaluate the input and motivation of parents in securing a child’s return to school. They refer to a range of observations, including Agras (1959) describing mothers of school refusing children as overprotective in shielding them from painful experiences; Davidson (1960) describing mothers who, she claims, subconsciously stop a child attending because they believe the return to school will fail; and Berg (2002) suggesting ‘school withdrawal’ reflects an irresponsible permissiveness on the part of parents, and ‘school refusal’ relates to parents being overprotective through fear of pressuring the child too much. Each of these evaluations is made

by a psychiatrist or psychologist and demonstrates how they have tended to pathologise parental involvement.

As these examples show, one notable commonality within most SAPs related studies is that they conceptualise parental and family environments as the cause of SAPs and then set out to investigate them. However, the findings of some studies demonstrate that this hypothesis is not always proven. For instance, Berg *et al*. (1981) conducted a study based upon the hypothesis that families of school phobic children would display distinctive features of functioning, and an abnormal pattern of family life that could be influential. However, they found no evidence to suggest that family life activities differed in any way from families with no 'school phobic' children. While Carless *et al*. (2015) explored the role of parental self-efficacy in adolescent school-refusal and found no connection between the two. These findings also contrast with dominant clinical narratives and suggest that judgements and assumptions made about families of children with SAPs may not be justified in all cases. This, therefore, supports the suggestion that a starting point in any case should be a careful evaluation of underlying triggers, to build a holistic understanding of individual situations. This type of approach would encourage professionals and families to work in partnership more effectively.

2.8.2 Hearing the voices of parents with lived experience of children's school absence

There are several studies where parental involvement has been orchestrated by researchers with a specific aim to better understand parents lived experiences, and possibly extend understanding of SAPs as a result (e.g., Berg *et al*., 1981; Knox, 1990; Fortune-Wood, 2007; Havik, Bru and Ertesvåg, 2014). Knox (1990) experienced a case of school phobia as a teacher, then after her own child became school phobic, she contacted other families with children who had experienced SAPs and then opted to home educate their children. Knox (1990) collected family case studies and wrote her book to expose what she considered to be the inhumane treatment of children who experience SAPs. Knox (1990) argued that because a return to school is deemed a successful outcome, very few long-term studies have been conducted on the outcomes of different responses and treatments for SAPs. Knox (1990, p.182) noted two studies which

had followed up school phobic children who had been forced back to school. Firstly, Waller and Eisenberg (cited in Hersov and Berg, 1980) found after 21 years, 74% of forty-nine children were still experiencing psychiatric problems as adults. Similarly, Berg (cited in Hersov and Berg, 1980) reported on ten school phobic children who had spent seven months in a psychiatric unit, and three years later only a third were developing normally. Knox (1990) compares this with her own follow up of 30 children who had been home educated after experiencing school phobia, and three years later none of them were experiencing mental illness, although two were reported to be afraid of people as a result of their school-based experiences.

Fortune-Wood (2007) also reported upon the lived experiences of parents who had made contact through his work supporting both home educating families, and families with children experiencing SAPs. The research involved questionnaire responses completed by sixty families, and twenty-three full case studies. Both Knox (1990) and Fortune-Wood (2007) reported that parents told them bullying was one of the main triggers for SAPs. However, many parents were said to say the schools involved had denied they had a problem with bullying and instead argued the problem must lie in the home. Like Knox (1990), Fortune-Wood (2007) is critical of the common approach of forcing a child experiencing SAPs to attend school against their will. It is argued that a return to school may be considered a success, however if the underlying problems have not been addressed the use of force could create longer-term problems, both with mental health difficulties and damaged relationships if a child loses trust in a parent to protect them from the real problems they faced. Fortune-Wood (2007) concurs with Knox (1990) in that professionals can express concern about families who opt to home educate as a response to SAPs, yet they have no evidence that it is the wrong solution because a longitudinal study of various outcomes has not been conducted.

It is notable that in the most recent decade much of the research involving parents as participants has been conducted by Educational Psychologists in the trainee/doctoral student stage of their career (Nuttall, 2012; Aucott, 2014; Myhill, 2017; Clissold, 2018; Browne, 2018; Orme-Stapleton, 2018; Mortimer, 2019).

The increased involvement of Educational Psychologists seems significant due to their knowledge of educational environments and practices, combined with clinical practice in psychology. Myhill (2017) interviewed eight parents and Browne (2018) explored the experiences of five parents. Mortimer (2019) explored the perceptions of two secondary-aged young people and three parents, while Gregory and Purcell (2014) interviewed five mothers and three young people. Aucott (2014), Clissold (2018), and Orme-Stapleton (2018) interviewed a combination of children, parents, and professionals. Mortimer (2019), Myhill (2017), and Gregory and Purcell (2014) noted the emotional impact of SAPs-based experiences on parents, including feelings of isolation, desperation, being judged, and feeling blamed. Myhill (2017) and Mortimer (2019) recognised a perceived lack of support, and of parents feeling powerless and desperate because they had no one to turn to.

Myhill (2017) concluded that a successful resolution was dependent upon a supportive relationship between home and school. However, a key finding for Browne (2018) was parents' perception of uneven power dynamics between themselves and professionals, whereby parents felt 'their knowledge, experience and contribution was not valued and held less influence than that of the professional' (Browne, 2018, p.119). Aucott (2014) argues that a shared understanding could be gained by facilitating the input of pupils, parents and school staff, and this shared understanding could then be utilised to identify barriers and solutions. Gregory and Purcell (2014, p.44) note how family accounts highlighted the impact of school environments on children's behaviour, which they said, 'shifts the focus from a within child perspective of extended school non-attendance, to include the impact of the child's environment'.

Orme-Stapleton (2018) reports that parents overwhelmingly held negative views of using a legal route to deal with persistent absence, and it was noted that it had not helped increase attendance in any of the cases studied. Orme-Stapleton (2018) argues that non-attendance related to mental health or unmet learning needs should not invoke a punitive response as families have limited control over those issues. Furthermore, Orme-Stapleton (2018) suggests that if a child is in a setting that cannot provide the support they need in these circumstances,

alternative provision should be offered, although she makes the following observation about the systemic implications of this suggestion:

> This approach would however put pressure of the local authority and schools to provide more flexible options to provision and not assume that standard educational environments are suitable for all. A further implication of such an approach may also be increased collaborative working between health, care, and education, so that the responsibility is not just on the parent but the system as a whole, to ensure adequate educational provision is available and accessible to all.
>
> (Orme-Stapleton, 2018, p.119)

Myhill (2017) recognised the significance of what she learned as it had altered her own perceptions:

> The findings of the study initiated a new way of thinking about the factors involved in ESNA [Extended School Non-Attendance]. Firstly, it changed the researcher's perceptions regarding the efforts made by parents to support their children through ESNA before involving other professionals. In addition, the parents' views regarding why they did not involve professionals, even after the extent of the child's difficulties had been realised, highlighted the stigma attached to non-attendance.
>
> (Myhill, 2017, p.90)

This change in perception reflects the observation made by Waller, Farquharson, and Dempsey (2016) that participant's interpretations have the potential to influence or change the researcher's pre-existing viewpoints.

Myhill (2017) suggested that the increased emphasis on parents' views within her study could help to initiate a positive change in attitude towards parents because people would better understand the supportive factors and the barriers that affect parents' motivation to seek help and support. Mortimer (2019) also argued that an improved understanding of parental experience could inspire a more flexible, compassionate, and personalised approach to offer support for families.

2.9 Chapter summary

This chapter has evidenced how truancy-based political discourses have constructed school absence as a parenting failure which has been punishable under criminal law. This understanding is considered alongside the dominance of clinical research perspectives supporting the notion that children and parents are to blame for school absence. Both factors have ignored any wider environmental influences upon a child's ability to attend school, along with parents' ability to influence a resolution for SAPs. It has been argued that this combination of influences has hindered understanding of the holistic context of SAPs. Political and clinical discourses have also encouraged the vilification of parents and children, whilst failing to consider all applicable reasons why children may struggle to attend school.

However, existing literature is now featuring a broadening range of clinical and academic interpretations of child and parental involvement in SAPs (e.g., Pilkington and Piersel, 1991; Lauchlan, 2003; Southwell, 2006; Davies and Lee, 2006; Pellegrini, 2007; Sheppard, 2011; Nuttall and Woods, 2013; Gregory and Purcell, 2014; Lees, 2014; Baker and Bishop, 2015; Melvin *et al*., 2019). This understanding must be explored and developed further to include a greater range of parental perspectives, as fundamental contributions to the argument that the perspectives of all stakeholders are significant.

This chapter has considered various ways that parents have been problematised as contributors to the creation and maintenance of the various SAP types defined over time. Nonetheless it is now being acknowledged that 'parents are of central importance in understanding and intervening with school attendance problems' (Gren-Landell, 2021, p.33). This argument is a fundamental driver for this study with its aim of highlighting the voices and experiences of parents, and more specifically the voices of parents who actively seek to address and resolve their children's SAPs, as this form of parental response has rarely been explored.

This gap in the literature suggests that it is also relevant to better understand whether existing systemic responses to SAPs offer support to parents in reaching the resolution for their children's school attendance difficulties that is required

through legislation and social expectation. The aim of contributing towards filling this gap in the literature sits alongside the researcher's recognition that the implementation of a systemic model such as Bronfenbrenner (1979, 1998, 2005) is necessary to support a more holistic understanding of SAPs.

Chapter 3. Methodology

3.1 Introduction

This chapter discusses the researcher's rationale for her choices and selection of procedures to develop the study's research design. The researcher's ontological and epistemological perspectives are elucidated, as they underpin the study and justify the research methodology. The final research design is then described and explained, to clarify the methods that were utilised for data collection and data analysis. Following this, the process used to recruit the participants is described, and related practical and ethical considerations made by the researcher are discussed. The researcher then explains the methods she used to consider and maintain the quality of the research throughout the study.

The study pursues answers to four questions which were formulated following the discussion of the historical and social context, and the academic literature, which feature within Chapter Two. Bryman (2016) explains that research questions provide explicit statements to indicate what it is that a researcher wishes to investigate. Therefore, with the overall aim of the study in mind, the researcher asked the following research questions to help her understand what parents experience when they seek to resolve their children's school attendance problems:

1. What actions do parents take to resolve a child's difficulties with attending school?
2. What do parents experience when they engage with various professionals in the education, health, and local government systems?
3. What barriers do parents encounter in trying to achieve a resolution for school attendance problems?
4. What is it that assists parents in reaching a resolution for a child's school attendance problems?

Here, the first question acknowledges that a contingent of parents do seek to resolve school attendance problems, and it is those parents who are the focus of the

study. This question seeks to understand the actions proactive parents take both to comply with their legal responsibilities, and with societal expectations that children attend school. The second question acknowledges that to seek a resolution parents may need to engage with a range of professionals who work in relevant services. This question seeks to identify the features of those experiences, and to understand how participants construct and interpret these experiences. The third question aims to build an understanding of any factors that might hinder parents as they seek a resolution for school attendance problems. Then the fourth question seeks to understand any factors that may assist parents to resolve school attendance problems. The findings may indicate whether existing systemic responses to school attendance problems support parents in reaching the resolution for their children's school attendance difficulties that is required through legislation and social expectation.

To answer these research questions the researcher needed to identify the most suitable methods to gather relevant data, and then to analyse and report on that data. The following section discusses her first steps, which were to identify the philosophical assumptions that would guide these methodological choices.

3.2 The philosophical approach underlying the study

Creswell (2007) explains how qualitative researchers need to clarify the beliefs and assumptions that have influenced the decisions they make about the research process undertaken. To do this, it is necessary for a researcher to reflect upon and identify the paradigm of philosophical assumptions that best reflects their worldview. As Cohen, Manion, and Morrison (2011) explain, a worldview reflects a researcher's beliefs about the nature of reality (ontological assumptions), and ways of enquiring and researching into the nature of reality (epistemological assumptions). This research design process also leads the researcher to consider the relevance or fit of various interpretive and theoretical frameworks within their philosophical paradigm, which help to shape how they conduct their study. The researcher can then consider the most appropriate methodology and methods that will allow them to collect and analyse relevant data (Hitchcock and Hughes (1995), cited in Cohen, Manion, and Morrison, 2011).

According to Hammersley (2012, no page), a methodological paradigm can thus be described as ‘a set of philosophical assumptions about the phenomena to be studied, about how they can be understood, and even about the proper purpose and product of research’. A range of differing paradigms have been constructed over time, and the approach determined by each separate paradigm will provide different types of explanation, hence the necessity for a researcher to identify the most fitting paradigm to match their worldview, and answer their specific questions (Cohen, Manion, and Morrison 2011). Positivism and interpretivism are two key contrasting paradigms which have been utilised within social research (Cohen, Manion, and Morrison, 2011; Bryman, 2016; Gray, 2018). To illustrate the contrasts between these paradigms the methodological assumptions for each are summarised in Table 3.1 below.

Table 3.1 Comparing Positivist and Interpretivist Paradigms

	Positivism	**Interpretivism**
Ontology: *How do we know what is real?*	▪ The world / reality exists externally to the individual – it is beyond our influence. ▪ There is one objective reality that we need to discover ▪ Natural reality – ‘realism’	▪ The world / reality exists however it is interpreted individually by people ▪ Multiple realities are constructed and revised by social actors ▪ Social reality – ‘relativism’
Epistemology *How is knowledge obtained and justified?*	▪ Reality is objective ▪ Knowledge is gathered through the senses – by observation and experiment. ▪ Researcher is a detached objective observer ▪ Looking for consistencies in the data to deduce universal laws of society and human conduct.	▪ Reality is subjective ▪ Knowledge is socially constructed, and understandings are co-constructed ▪ Researcher understands the subjective world of participants taking an ‘insider’ stance ▪ Meanings are multiple and varied, so the researcher looks for the complexity of views
Methodology *How can we discover and build knowledge?*	▪ Theory testing – a hypothesis is proposed and then tested ▪ Experimental research ▪ Abstraction of reality	▪ Theory building – inquiry builds on understanding. ▪ Analysis of language and meaning. ▪ Representation of reality
Methods	Quantitative methods, e.g.	Qualitative methods, e.g.

for data collection	Quantitative surveys Statistical analysis	Interviews Focus groups Case studies Textual data collection

A positivist paradigm has a basis in the natural sciences, which contrasts with the social science basis of an interpretive paradigm. Reflecting upon this difference, Bryman (2016) argues that ‘the study of the social world therefore requires a different logic of research procedure, one that reflects the distinctiveness of humans as against the natural order’ (Bryman, 2016, p.26). Cohen, Manion, and Morrison (2011) concur, stating that a positivist paradigm will generally be less successful when applied to the study of human behaviour, due to the complexity of human nature and social phenomena. Positivist assumptions of universal laws of human conduct do not correlate well with human variance, as Cohen, Manion, and Morrison (2011) explain, ‘This difficulty in which positivism finds itself is that it regards human behaviour as passive, essentially determined and controlled, thereby ignoring intention, individualism and freedom’ (Cohen, Manion, and Morrison, 2011, p.15).

However, as Bryman (2016) argues, in contrast an interpretive paradigm supports a strategy that recognises and respects the differences between people. An interpretive paradigm directs researchers to seek to understand the subjective meaning of social action. Bryman (2016) further explains that interpretivism developed through the influence of intellectual traditions such as hermeneutics (understanding human actions) and phenomenology (understanding how individuals make sense of the world around them, while putting aside any preconceptions). An interpretive paradigm supports ontological assumptions that social reality is made up of varied interpretations constructed by individuals. This then supports a constructionist epistemology where these versions of social reality are discovered through analysis of participants use of language, which describes their constructs and understanding of their world.

In addition to positivism and interpretivism, there are a range of other paradigms, for instance a post-positive viewpoint sees that reality exists independently of human

consciousness, but unlike the positivist view, post-positivists accept that we cannot have a full understanding of this reality (Waller, Farquharson, and Dempsey, 2016). With similarity to a constructionist paradigm, a critical paradigm sees reality as a product of human consciousness. A critical researcher views social realities through a critical lens, considering a wide range of human biases, assumptions, and values including gender, ethnicity, or economics. A critical lens would be applicable to the researcher's approach to this study as it aims to challenge conventional social structures (Gray, 2018), however her intended focus upon interpreting participants' accounts of their experiences drew her towards the constructionist paradigm as most applicable to this study.

3.2.1 Identifying an Ontology

As Braun and Clarke (2013) explain, identifying our ontological position requires us to decide how we evaluate reality:

> Whether or not we think reality exists entirely separate from human practices and understandings – including the research we conduct to find things out – or whether we think it cannot be separated from human practices, and so knowledge is always going to reflect our perspective
>
> (Braun and Clarke, 2013, p.27)

A positivist ontology assumes we accept the same rules and beliefs about one reality. Whereas an interpretivist ontology, as adopted by the researcher in this study, considers that there are multiple realities, each of which are constructed through individual interpretations of everyday life (Cohen, Manion, and Morrison, 2011). Any notion of reality can be difficult to discern because of the taken-for-granted acceptance that our world, as each of us knows it, simply exists without any deep analysis of how we know what reality is. In terms of social research, Cohen, Manion, and Morrison (2011) explain that a decision about reality will involve consideration of 'the nature or essence of the social phenomena being investigated' (Cohen, Manion, and Morrison, 2011, p.5).

The researcher aligns herself with the view shared by Berger and Luckmann (1966) whereby this taken-for-granted reality exists through a shared understanding of the world, influenced by social and cultural contexts. Berger and Luckmann (1966) describe a process of socialisation which is referred to as internalisation, where people form an objective reality which enables them to participate within their society. Within this process, reality is based upon people's individual interpretations of their interactions on the world (externalisation). People then internalise their interpretations and enact them with others through social actions, e.g., verbally, in writing, or through behaviours. Some interpretations become sustained through shared social practices (objectivation), until they become taken-for-granted and are accepted as a part of reality. Then when future generations are born into a world where these interpretations already exist, they also accept them as a part of reality (internalisation).

Berger and Luckmann (1966) see this process occurring on two levels, firstly primary socialisation relates to 'the socialisation an individual goes through in childhood' when they encounter and internalise the social structure and social world of their significant others as reality. They also describe secondary socialisation as 'any subsequent process that inducts an already socialised individual into new sectors of the objective world of his society' (Berger and Luckmann, 1966, p.150). This secondary socialisation relates to the internalisation of institutional or institution-based sub-worlds, which often involve specific roles or knowledge (e.g., a career role, or as a student in education). Through awareness of how shared understandings are socially constructed in this way, we can consider how and why the things we take-for-granted or accept as norms of society – such as school attendance, or the concept of truancy – have become part of reality. This awareness also brings into focus the likely impact of a situation where someone finds they are unable to conform to these societal norms they have internalised. Here it is possible to see how this may link to the experience of parents if children encounter school attendance difficulties, through their own reactions along with any responses from others to their deviation from socially constructed norms.

3.2.2 Identifying an Epistemology

Along with an ontology, a researcher also needs to identify her epistemological assumptions. This requires consideration of what she understands relevant knowledge to be (regarding a specific study), along with how it could be acquired and then communicated to other people (Cohen, Manion, and Morrison, 2011). These epistemological assumptions will then guide which analytic and theorising approaches are most suitable, and guide how a researcher reports their data analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2013; Braun et al., 2019).

Braun and Clark (2013) argue that an experiential qualitative research study should be driven by the participants' experiences, and the meanings they derive from those experiences. A researcher will seek to make sense of those experiences, along with the meanings their participants report as realities. Therefore, the researcher needs to gather, absorb, and interpret the descriptions and opinions their participants share with them. Braun and Clarke (2013) advise this will involve the researcher 'retaining a focus on people's own framing around issues, and their own terms of reference' (Braun and Clarke, 2013, p.24). This suggested approach reflects the researcher's objective of constructing knowledge through the voices of her parent participants, especially in recognition that the parental voice has been restricted in number, frequency, and range within existing literature and within the wider understanding of SAPs.

An interpretivist paradigm is closely linked to a constructionist epistemology (Gray, 2018) and the researcher chose to adopt a constructionist approach to investigate how the actively engaged parents individually construct the problem of school absence. This constructionist approach guided the researcher's focus towards socio-cultural contexts, and towards the structural conditions that are integral within parental accounts of their experiences (Braun and Clarke, 2013). A constructionist approach acknowledges that all viewpoints are individual, local, and specific (Waller, Farquharson, and Dempsey, 2016), meaning that it is relevant to consider how the data collected will be interpretive and selective. The involvement of the researcher in designing the study, then analysing and reporting the participant's interpretations, will add an additional level of interpretation (Braun and Clarke, 2013). Moreover, anyone who reads the study report will make their own interpretation of the

research, adding to the multiple viewpoints that are possible (Cresswell, 2007). Any interpretation by the researcher in this study will be formed from an 'insider' perspective, which is of epistemological significance as the relationship between the researcher and participants will impact upon the knowledge they co-create (Griffiths 1998, cited in Hayfield and Huxley, 2015, p.2). The researcher's position as an insider is discussed in more detail in Section 3.2.3. below.

Within a social constructionist framework, our epistemological assumptions suggest that knowledge can be found through the discourses people use (Burr, 2015). As discussed in Section 2.6, the discourses relating to SAPs have varied over time, and according to the social actors involved, as they reflect a range of differing perspectives (e.g., teacher, psychologist, administrator, parent, media journalist, politician, or student) (Pellegrini, 2007). Braun and Clarke (2013) note how the evolution of socially constructed reality changes our perceptions of truth over time, meaning that rather than one truth and one knowledge, there are multiple truths and knowledges; thus, indicating that we need to consider competing discourses and conflicting versions of knowledge. Braun and Clarke (2013) argue that 'knowledges are viewed as social artifacts, and are therefore seen as social, cultural, moral, ideological, and political. A critical stance tends to be taken regarding perceived truths and taken for granted knowledge' (Braun and Clarke, 2013, p.30). The researcher therefore aimed to adopt a critical stance to develop an awareness of underlying influences upon the knowledge we often accept as real, or as social norms, without questioning why it is accepted by society, or rejected by certain groups of social actors.

3.2.3 The involvement of the researcher

A researcher makes interpretations of what they observe and find out from participants, and these interpretations will be shaped by their own experiences and background (Braun and Clarke, 2013; Bryman, 2016). It is acknowledged that making sense of meanings others have about the world is a significant aspect of interpretive research (Creswell, 2007). Therefore, researchers need to 'position themselves' within their research to acknowledge how their interpretations are influenced by their own personal, cultural, and historical experiences. It is suggested

that a constructivist researcher positions themselves as ‘an orchestrator and facilitator of the inquiry process’ (Guba & Lincoln, 1994, p.114).

In this study the researcher was in the insider position of facilitating the research process, while also having lived experience of the phenomena being studied. Although this insider position is not straightforward to navigate, the researcher recognised that this insider perspective needed to be clarified and discussed in recognition that it will have shaped the research study (Braun and Clarke, 2013). Hayfield and Huxley (2015) explore how this ‘insider’ position offers both advantages and challenges. The suggested advantages include the researcher’s familiarity with the topic and context, which can assist them with making relevant research design decisions, interpreting, and analysing data, and through a heightened awareness of any ethical issues. However, although a shared understanding can be advantageous as it may lead to richer data, it is also argued that a challenge may occur if participants do not share useful details with the researcher because it is taken-for-granted those details are already known by the researcher.

Hayfield and Huxley (2015, p.4) argue that a degree of commonality does not guarantee a researcher will understand every participant’s perspective, as their lives in general may be very different. Moreover, Hayfield and Huxley (2015) observe that a researcher in an insider position may feel a connection with their participants that can make it more difficult for them to look at data with a critical stance. It is suggested that a researcher in an outsider position might interpret participants’ data in ways that a researcher in an insider position will not consider, however the opposite argument is equally valid. Interestingly, Hayfield and Huxley (2015) reflected on their own perspectives of conducting research from insider and outsider positions. They acknowledged that from either perspective there will always be subtle ways that a researcher is both an insider and an outsider within the same study. It is noted that this can lead to feelings of both alienation and empathy for the researcher in relation to their participants.

After considering these arguments, the researcher’s approach was to recognise her insider position and take steps to minimise its impact, for instance by emphasising in

the email exchanges that she was interested in each participant's individual experience and opinions. The researcher also clarified her position in the Participant Information Sheet (provided when people first enquired about becoming a participant), where she explained that she understood that having had similar experiences did not guarantee that all people would hold similar opinions and beliefs, nor make the same choices, and she was interested in hearing about and including all points of view and types of experience. The ethical approach to managing the existing relationship between the researcher and participants is discussed further in Sections 3.5.1 and 3.6.2.

Creswell (2007) explains that once a researcher has identified their methodological paradigm, they can then devise a research design or methodology, as they select the most appropriate practices and methods that will allow them to collect and analyse data. The following section will discuss the researcher's choice of data collection method.

3.3 The research design

The research design for this study was devised to follow the interpretive paradigm and constructionist epistemology discussed previously. The choice of email interviewing as a method of data collection is discussed in Section 3.3.1, and the email interview process is described in Section 3.3.2. The choice and process of thematic analysis is then discussed in Section 3.4. The research design process also required the researcher to consider a range of practical and ethical considerations relating to the needs and involvement of the participants, and these are discussed in Sections 3.5 and 3.6.

3.3.1 A method of data collection

When deciding about the method of qualitative data collection the researcher understood that face-to-face interviews are a popular choice as they can provide rich and detailed data. Conducting interviews, researchers have flexibility to probe and direct the conversation, or they can take a more unstructured approach, depending upon their epistemological assumptions (Waller, Farquharson, and Dempsey, 2016). It is recognised that face-to-face interviewing can be less suitable

for discussing sensitive issues, as participants may feel uncomfortable about disclosing sensitive information in this context (Gibson, 2017; Salmons, 2016). King and Horrocks (2010, p.28) suggest that researchers 'think about the different ways that qualitative interviews can be conducted, rather than automatically taking the default option of the individual face-to-face option'.

The researcher found that there were some concerns about the use of email-based interviews rather than face-to-face interviews. Following some discussion and consideration of the advantages and disadvantages of face-to-face or email-based interviews. The researcher noted that opinion in the literature recognises the value of both methods, along with advantages and disadvantages for both. For example, Burns (2010) compares the use of email and face-to-face interviewing in research and found email interviews are beneficial in allowing for analysis, reflection, and extension of thinking for both interviewer and interviewee. They note a disadvantage of email is the loss of sound, gesture, and spatial setting within the exchange. However, Burns (2010) states 'face, body, and room are not the basis of interaction, but there is still a live quality in the expectation of reading and replying to somebody's previous conscious effort to explain' (Burns, 2010, p.7). Burns (2010) concludes that the best approach is to evaluate how each option would work in any specific circumstances, and then decide whether face-to-face or email interviews will offer the most suitable opportunities in relation to the study being planned.

Gibson (2017) suggests that the control and flexibility participants gain through email interviews makes the data different to those produced in other ways. This is linked to the opportunity for contemplation, reflection, and editing which participants have before they submit their responses. Gibson (2017, p.218) argues that this is especially advantageous when researching people's past experiences where they are relying on memory recall. Hawkins (2018) also notes that email interviewing allows for concurrent interviews with several participants, which aids the process of thematic analysis because it is possible to simultaneously verify emerging themes between participants and confirm findings.

The researcher was keen to utilise online methods of data collection because she recognised that the study participants were already familiar and comfortable with

this type of communication, having been recruited from an online social media forum. This seemed particularly significant as the subject discussed is emotive and sensitive in nature, and therefore participants might appreciate the flexibility and familiarity of the online environment, along with a greater degree of anonymity and less physical intrusion (Hooley, Marriott, and Wellens, 2012; Gibson, 2017). Braun, Clarke, and Gray (2017, p.19) concur, suggesting that 'as a self-administered tool, participants can control the pace, time and location of their involvement' with an online survey or email exchange, which can be especially useful for sensitive subjects'. Additionally, Gibson (2017) suggests that asynchronous email interviews offer participants more control in that they can avoid over-disclosure and making comments they later regret sharing. The researcher was also aware of potential difficulties in communicating with people who are widely geographically dispersed, and who can be 'hard-to-reach' due to complex personal circumstances. Her understanding was that these difficulties could be resolved using asynchronous email interviews as a more flexible, and convenient method of communication (Salmons, 2016).

3.3.2 Conducting email-based interviews

The email interviews in this study featured open questions which aimed to explore parents' perceptions of their experiences. Two or three questions were asked within each email to facilitate a more conversational style of interaction. An introductory email shared several points to clarify the aims of the research, the process, and any expectations for the participants, with the intention of building rapport, familiarity, and trust. The researcher adopted recommended practices to build rapport and trust, including disclosing details of her relevant background or personal experience (Hooley, Marriott, and Wellens, 2012). To achieve this, she included an account of her own experiences as a parent with a child experiencing significant school absence within the introductory email.

The initial open interview question at the end of email one was *please tell me your story*. This was included as the first question to gather overall accounts of the participant’s individual experiences. Subsequent interview questions then asked about more specific aspects of each parent’s overall experience. This included asking about the impact of the situation, both on parents as individuals, and as a

family; asking how other people around them had reacted to their child's school absence; and asking how they had developed an understanding of what was happening to their child and how they needed to respond.

Once the email Interview stage had been completed,

- 40 participants answered the first question – writing an account of their story.
- 34 participants answered the second set of questions
- 33 participants answered the third set of questions
- 28 participants answered the fourth set of questions
- 17 participants answered the fifth set of questions
- An additional set of questions was shared with six participants who worked, or had worked in a relevant professional capacity/role

3.3.3 Critique of the data collection method

The use of email interviewing allowed the researcher to collect participant accounts that varied in length from 150 lines to 1208 lines of text, many of which were rich in detail and reflection about the situations people had experienced. This provided the researcher with a significant body of data for thematic analysis.

The asynchronous nature of the data collection meant that the period when emails were being exchanged lasted for six months, as participants varied in how quickly they returned responses. The researcher had attempted to establish a timeframe for the turnaround of emails, however she understood that many people were negotiating complex situations, and she did not feel it was appropriate to pressure them for responses. For instance, here Parent 1 explained her delay in replying to the researcher's email:

> Apologies for the delay in responding. My 13-year-old is still off school and has a diagnosis of chronic fatigue syndrome now after 18 months and I'm battling with the Local Authority to get him a home tutor. I've taken my complaint to the Local Government Ombudsman now and a national newspaper is running the story in a week or so, after they heard about my situation from a charity I've used previously, so it's been pretty hectic.
>
> (Parent 1)

As the researcher had expected, the participants fitted in their responses around their family responsibilities, and the gaps between responses were preferable to a cancelled face-to-face interview. In addition, some participants appreciated the space to type responses at convenient times, or space to pace themselves if the process became emotionally difficult. This is evidenced in this comment from Parent 15:

> There's more I could say but it's too painful to type out right now. Maybe later when current circumstances have eased off a bit. I know you understand. Here are my answers to the 3 questions - sorry I've only been able to answer one so far.
>
> (Parent 15)

The emotional impact of revisiting experiences that had caused trauma was something that participants needed to negotiate, and again the email exchange appeared to be supportive in allowing participants to pace their responses (rather than withdraw from a face-to-face interview if they had become overwhelmed), which is evident in Parent 37's comment:

> The first email telling the story was the worst, and I tended to write it before sleeping, so it churned things up and I could not sleep. So I decided not to do that before sleeping again! I tend to over analyse things. I wrote as I was feeling at the time. It is I think helping me to put some of it behind me.
>
> (Parent 37)

Regarding the questions asked through the emails, it is noted that fewer than half of the participants responded to the fifth set of questions. Gibson (2017, p.228) notes that a risk with asynchronous email interviews is that participants may lose interest over the time span. This drop in participation could have occurred due to a drop in interest, a lack of time, or because some participants found that revisiting their experiences was too difficult. However, the researcher appreciated that the responses to her first email meant that she had data from forty full experiential accounts to analyse. It is also important to note that the received responses to the second, third and fourth emails also contained rich and useful data.

The researcher had planned to use a semi-structured approach to asking questions in response to individual participant accounts, however she found she relied upon the pre-prepared email questions more than she had intended. Upon reflection it is thought that this may reflect a mix of inexperience on the researcher's part along with the researcher finding the pre-prepared questions helped her to manage the forty ongoing email conversations. A range of ethical issues and challenges regarding conducting the email interviews were considered and addressed, and this is discussed further in Section 3.6.

The following section will describe and explain the method used to analyse the data collected during the email interviews.

3.4 The use of thematic analysis

Data were analysed using thematic analysis as described by Braun and Clarke (2006; 2012; 2022), and by Braun *et al.* (2019) who discussed their reflexive thematic analysis approach, developed to 'emphasise the active role of the researcher in the knowledge production process (2019, p.848). Thematic analysis can take a variety of forms depending upon the researcher's epistemology, however the overarching feature is 'an interest in patterns of meaning, developed through processes of coding' (Braun and Clarke, 2022, p.4). Thematic analysis was an appropriate choice as it offered the flexibility to develop inductive analysis and capture both semantic and latent meanings, to support descriptive and interpretive accounts of the data (Braun and Clarke, 2022). This method supported the researcher to subjectively 'make sense of collective or shared meanings and experiences' (Braun and Clarke, 2012, p.57).

Braun and Clarke (2006; 2012; 2022) and Braun *et al.* (2019) set out six stages for thematic analysis which involve systematically searching across a data corpus to find repeated patterns of meaning. The first step involves the researcher reading through data to build a general impression and understanding of the content, then reflecting and noting down initial thoughts, ideas, and questions that develop (Braun and Clarke, 2022). In the second step the researcher begins to engage with the data in a more systematic and critically engaged way, looking at each sentence, group of

sentences or paragraph, and marking them with an initial code to represent the key features and meanings of what was said.

3.4.1 Generating initial codes

Within this study, the researcher's intention was to remain as close to the voices of the participants as possible. Therefore, it was decided that the most appropriate type of coding would be Process Coding where the codes reflect social actions taken by the participants (Saldaña, 2016). Therefore, the researcher based the codes on wording that identified human actions or activity, or what people were describing or feeling (as shown in Figure 3.2). Saldaña (2016) explains that process coding often entails the use of Gerunds (words ending in '-ing'), for instance *Recognising times of progress*; *Feeling frustration at the lack of help*; and *Reflecting – with hindsight would act differently now* are examples of this form of coding used by the researcher. According to Saldaña (2016) 'processes also imply actions intertwined with the dynamics of time' (Saldaña, 2016, p.111), meaning the coding can reflect change, or a sequence of actions.

Figure 3.2 A sample of the initial process coding (using TAMS Analyser software)

Having been in the system 19 months and after chasing regularly we were no further up the list {Experiencing delays due to NHS waiting lists} and I could see [child's] mental health failing. At age 6 he was refusing to go to school often, didn't sleep, didn't have an appetite, and had constant headaches & tummy aches. {Observing a decline of child wellbeing}

I took him to GP, and they agreed anxiety {Consulting GP – supportive response} I explained this to school, and they said they see no anxiety in school, his t-shirt came home soaked everyday where he'd chewed the neck of it plus his fingers bled where he'd chewed the skin and nails off. {Experiencing dispute of diagnosis by school staff}

Once each process code had been created the researcher used it at other times if it was applicable to another sentence or paragraph. For instance, if more than one parent wrote about being blamed, the code *Experiencing blame for parenting* was applied in each case. According to Braun and Clarke (2022) the aim of this initial coding of the dataset is to capture specific meanings with relevance to answering

the research questions. The process coding used in this study led to mostly descriptive codes which then aided the researcher's understanding of what actions and responses occur as parents take action to resolve SAPs.

This coding process was conducted using a combination of TAMS Analyser (a qualitative coding and analysis program available at: https://tamsys.sourceforge.io) and paper and pen-based methods. This initial coding of the participant accounts resulted in the creation of many initial process codes. The TAMS analyser provided a count of the frequency that each code had been applied, which the researcher utilised to identify the dominant codes, and gain an initial impression of the dominant features and factors.

3.4.2 Generating initial themes

The researcher used the process codes to generate ideas for initial themes, and as a basis for the coding of the responses to the questions asked in emails two to six. This allowed the researcher to 'test' the validity of the initial themes within the responses to the more focused questions about parent experiences. The researcher reflected upon the different processes that had been identified through the identification of process codes, and she considered the range of actions that had occurred within parents' descriptions. These actions were then considered in more depth, in terms of what the parents were observing and experiencing, and how they were reacting and responding. The researcher then merged these actions and factors into six overarching themes which were judged to represent key features of parent's experiences:

Parental concern for a child
Professional responses
Systemic failures
Empowerment of parents
Emotional impact on parents
Impacts on family life

Taking the first theme, *Parental concern for a child* as an example, further reflection upon this group of codes suggested there were steps that parents described taking, that related to how they responded to their concerns for their children. The researcher then used this knowledge to form several sub-themes for the main theme of *Parental concern for a child*:

Observing child's distress
Making sense of observations
Identifying child's needs and difficulties
Observing effects on attendance
Observing/experiencing child's reactions
Recognising anxiety
Taking action
Identifying own reactions
Reactions of others
Professional Actions

The researcher then combined these initial themes and sub-themes to create a set of focused codes that represented each theme, along with the common features within the theme. Braun and Clarke (2020, p.39) describe this process of coding as the development of 'patterns of shared meaning underpinned by a central organising concept'. This same process was carried out in relation to the other five initial themes, (i.e., Professional responses; Systemic failures; Empowerment of parents; Emotional impact on parents; Impacts on family life), which created a full list of focused codes (see Appendix 1). These focused codes were then used to code the participants responses to the questions asked in emails two to six. Refinements were made to the focused codes during this part of the process if any new data did not fit an existing focused code.

3.4.3 Revising the themes

At this stage, the researcher needs to 'begin to explore the relationship between themes and to consider how themes will work together in telling an overall story about the data' (Braun and Clarke, 2012, p.65). The researcher reflected upon each

of the six main themes identified during the initial coding process and considered how the analysis of responses to the questions asked in emails two, three, four and five had further informed her thinking. This resulted in some revision to the initial themes as connected codes were clustered and meanings explored with the aim of addressing the research questions (Braun and Clarke, 2022). A summary of the overall themes generated from the data can be seen in Appendix 2.

To achieve a full analytical account and answer the research questions, it was necessary for the researcher to identify and present a full account of the parental experiences described. Further analysis and reflection supported the researcher in capturing a range of common elements as actions, responses, impacts, and influences those parents had described. This range of elements were defined through the central organising concept of representing *Parents' Journeys* through school attendance problems and barriers. These Parents' Journeys are defined through four linked contexts which are explored in the following order: Chapter 4 explores how parents respond to the emergence of children's school attendance problems; Chapter 5 explores parents' experiences of navigating systems in response to ongoing attendance problems (e.g., school, NHS, local authority); Chapter 6 explores parents' experiences of home-based difficulties and responses to ongoing difficulties (e.g., child, family, peers, employer); and Chapter 7 explores how parents respond to these ongoing concerns and difficulties and work towards identifying a resolution.

3.4.4 Writing up the thematic analysis

Researchers need to make decisions during the thematic analysis process regarding the claims they want to make about their data set. Braun and Clarke (2006) suggest researchers may need to make a choice between producing a rich, thematic description of the whole data set, or a more detailed and nuanced account of specific themes within the data. In thematic analysis, the aim is not to produce a summary of topics presented as themes, but instead to discuss themes capturing shared meaning which are united by a central organising concept (Braun and Clarke, 2022). The decision may be based in part on the word limits the researcher has to adhere to, and the depth and complexity of the account the researcher needs to achieve. For instance, if the researcher intends to report on the whole data set,

the resulting account may contain less depth and complexity in comparison to an account that focuses on several selected themes. Braun and Clarke (2006) advise that a report of the whole data set may be especially useful if the research topic is under-researched, or if the perspective of the participants was unknown prior to the study. The perspectives of this study's participants were largely unknown, and therefore an aim for the researcher was to produce a comprehensive thematic account around a central organising concept, that reported on the whole data set.

The writing up process involves selecting extracts to quote and analyse within a structure, to form a narrative setting out 'a story of the data' (Braun and Clarke, 2012, p.67). The story of the data explains why the chosen extracts are of interest and discusses how this relates to the research questions and the wider scholarly context. Braun *et al.* (2019) position the researcher as 'a storyteller, actively engaged in interpreting data through the lens of their own cultural membership and social positionings, their theoretical assumptions and ideological commitments, as well as their scholarly knowledge (2019, pp.47-48). Braun and Clarke (2012) advise that the researcher must decide whether to incorporate this discussion into the results of the analysis, or whether to have a separate discussion section. This decision can be guided by the requirements of the researcher's academic context, as it was for this study.

3.4.5 Critique of the use of thematic analysis

Thematic analysis was considered the most appropriate method to use for data analysis in this study because it is a theoretically flexible approach that can incorporate a range of approaches and frameworks (Finlay, 2021). Therefore, it is a method which allowed the researcher to adapt a systematic approach to coding and analysis, and then link the results to broader concepts or theories as their relevance was identified. This contrasts with other pattern-based analysis methodologies that are linked to pre-existing theoretical frameworks, such as grounded theory or interpretive phenomenological analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006; 2020;2022). Grounded theory (Glaser and Strauss, 1967) involves identification of categories of meaning from qualitative data and making links between these categories. It is an inductive approach, and the literature review is left until after data analysis so that prior knowledge of the topic influences researcher perceptions as little as possible

during the analysis (Charmaz, 2013). The researcher considered this method, however there was concern that the level of prior knowledge that she had might impact upon the validity of forming a grounded theory in the expected sense. Braun and Clarke (2020) also advise that thematic analysis is a better choice if the researcher does not intend to develop a grounded theory or sample theoretically.

Consideration was also given to the use of Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) (Van Manen, 1990; Smith, Flowers, and Larkin, 2009) as a method of analysis as it would have offered a similar opportunity to identify the features of parents' experiences and their understandings of possible underlying beliefs and attitudes which impact on their experiences (Braun and Clarke, 2020). Both Grounded Theory and IPA adopt an iterative approach where qualitative data are continuously compared and assigned to categories developed as the researcher makes links and comparisons between the categories. It was decided that IPA would not be the most suitable method of analysis as it is recommended that IPA is conducted with fewer than ten case studies (Gray, 2018, Braun and Clarke, 2020) as the researcher needs to conduct in depth analysis of each case, in addition to an analysis of the whole data set. Braun and Clarke (2020, p.42) also advise that thematic analysis is chosen over IPA 'if the analytic interest is on how personal experiences are located within wider socio-cultural contexts'.

According to Braun and Clarke (2006) using thematic analysis as a constructionist method of analysis supports the examination of 'the ways in which events, realities, meanings, experiences and so on are the effects of a range of discourses operating within society' (Braun and Clarke, 2006, p.9). This appeared to correlate most closely with the researcher's methodological paradigm.

Once the concept of Parents' Journeys was constructed during the thematic analysis process, it became clearer that the study participants were at differing stages of this journey and an outcome was not clear in every case. This had not been considered prior to the commencement of the study as the concept of Parents' Journeys had not been constructed at that point. With hindsight, it could be that a criterion for selection should have stipulated that all participants would be sharing

retrospective accounts to ensure accounts of the complete experience or journey for each participant.

Having considered and discussed the methods used to collect and analyse data, the next section of this chapter will discuss the recruitment of the participants in the study.

3.5 The study participants

The study participants are illustrative of a particular type of social actor – as the parents of children who experience significant problems with school attendance. As the study has a particular interest in parents' experience, perceptions and knowledge in this specific context, the researcher required a purposive sample of parents who fitted those criteria (Braun and Clarke, 2013). The researcher therefore recruited participants who were members of 'Not Fine in School' - an online (Facebook) support group for parents of children experiencing significant school attendance difficulties. The researcher has been involved in running social media based, parent peer support groups since 2009, following her own experiences as a parent in the same situation. This support group was established by the researcher in November 2017, and by January 2022 it had 22,200 members, with membership numbers increasing daily.

3.5.1 Recruiting the study participants

Some researchers in the field have described their difficulties in recruiting parent participants who are willing to be interviewed about their family experiences of school absence (e.g., Carless *et al.*, 2015; Gregory and Purcell, 2014; Wray and Thomas, 2013; Orme-Stapleton, 2018). These difficulties with recruitment may relate to factors discussed in Section 3.3.1, for instance, Gregory and Purcell (2014) tried to locate families to participate in their study. They asked the Educational Welfare Service and Home Tuition Service to write to thirty families on their behalf. Ten families responded and six agreed to be interviewed. One of the six subsequently dropped out. The researchers deduced that the most likely reason for this low response rate was 'children and families experiencing extended school non-

attendance are reluctant to discuss this sensitive topic' (Gregory and Purcell, 2014, p.39).

Orme-Stapleton (2018) also found that parents were reluctant to participate in her study, and she observed:

> On reflection I feel that my experiences of struggling to engage with families, is mirrored in other professionals' experiences and therefore highlights the challenges that working with such families presents. If I was to conduct this research again I feel that alternative methods of recruitment would need to be sought. I found that recruiting participants from my own caseload was the most successful and therefore this would be how I would approach this. While this does present its own challenges, in terms of possible bias of data, I believe that a pre-existing relationship was a major factor in engagement and that this may also be the case for other professionals wishing to work with families experiencing persistent non-attendance.
>
> (Orme-Stapleton, 2018, p.42)

Similarly, in this study the researcher hoped her pre-existing relationship with the parents in the peer support group would be significant in terms of recruiting participants, because she was already recognised and trusted as an 'insider' with shared, lived experience. As discussed in Section 3.2.3, and as Orme-Stapleton (2018) suggests in the extract above, recruiting research participants from an insider perspective, and possibly through pre-existing relationships has advantages and disadvantages which the researcher considered in her ethical evaluation (see Section 3.6.2).

3.5.2 The recruitment process

A 'flyer' (see Appendix 3) was shared within the Facebook support group, inviting people to email the researcher via her DMU account if they wanted to receive more information about being involved in the study. Interested applicants were sent the Participant Information Sheet (see Appendix 4) and invited to ask any further questions they might have in response.

Each applicant was contacted again after seven days to ask if they were willing to volunteer as a participant. If they were, they were asked to answer an initial questionnaire (see Appendix 5) to obtain a simple outline of their experience.

There were 56 requests for the Participant Information Sheet, then 53 people replied and were sent the Initial Questionnaire. Of those, 32 people completed and returned it to the researcher.

Several participants did not respond to the request to begin the interview stage; therefore, a second phase of recruitment was undertaken to maintain the target number of participants at between 35 and 45 people. A second call-out for participants gained a further 46 requests for the Participant Information Sheet, 30 people returned the Initial Questionnaire, and 25 then returned the Consent Form. In total forty parents took part in the email interview process described in Section 3.3.2.

3.5.3 Participant selection

The study included every participant who completed the recruitment phase, as the researcher considered each person who volunteered had a valid perspective and could offer an account of valid experiences. Therefore, this was a purposive sample as the participants were existing members of the Facebook parents support group; that they lived in England; and they had confirmed that they were a parent of a child who was experiencing problems attending school.

Either currently or previously, nineteen of the participants worked in roles that were relevant to school absence and attendance barriers: three parents had worked in early years education settings, four parents were schoolteachers, six parents had worked in school learning support, one parent worked in higher education, one parent had worked as a lawyer, one in nursing, one in midwifery, and two in social work. Therefore, a small number of additional questions were formulated to explore whether there were any differences in the experience of these parents, when compared with those of parents who did not work in relevant roles. The findings in relation to these questions are discussed in Section 5.8.

3.5.4 Critique of the recruitment process

The research design formulated by the researcher created some limitations within the sample, for instance, the use of the Facebook group for recruitment, and email-based interviews for data collection, meant that any participant needed to be literate and own or have access to a device with internet access. The researcher made the decision to recruit through the Facebook support group as it offered a set of participants she had a unique access to, and the study was specifically designed to understand the experiences of this group of parents. Their existing membership of the Facebook support group also indicated that they were literate and had internet access. It would be necessary to design a follow-up study to seek contact with parents who try to resolve children's SAPs but don't have access to the internet and/or may have difficulties with literacy.

The researcher considered that the sample of parents who participated in the study are illustrative of the group of parents who seek to resolve SAPs, rather than being a representative sample of all parents in England. This means that the sampling was purposive in that the participants were selected because they had experience that would enable them to answer the research questions (Waller, Farquharson, and Dempsey, 2016). Chapter Two indicated how parents of children who experience SAPs have been assumed to fulfil certain criteria however no extensive official data exists about the demographics of families with children who encounter attendance difficulties, therefore it is difficult to identify whether any sample is fully representative or not.

When designing the research study and recruiting and involving the study's participants it was crucial that the researcher addressed all ethical considerations, and these considerations will now be discussed in Section 3.6.

3.6 Addressing ethical considerations

This study adhered to De Montfort University's Research Integrity and Ethics, which provides a comprehensive framework for good research conduct. The British Psychological Society (2017) Ethical Guidelines for Internet-mediated Research were consulted regarding the use of email interviewing. The research also adhered

to the British Educational Research Association (2011) Ethical Guidelines for Educational Research; this specifies that all participants are to be treated fairly, sensitively and with respect for their choice, privacy, and confidentiality. Codes of conduct stipulate that research participants must be treated fairly, sensitively and with respect for choice, privacy, and confidentiality. When planning research these are aspects of the work that researchers need to consider and address. Cohen, Mannion and Morrison (2011) describe this as the need to achieve a balance between the professional demands on the researcher to pursue the truth, and the participants rights and values, that may be threatened by the research. Salmons (2016, p.73) explains that a researcher needs to consider and explain how they will protect human subjects; obtain appropriate informed consent from participants; safeguard participants identities and data and respect the research site.

3.6.1 Emotional distress

There was an awareness that participants may find what they were discussing upsetting. The researcher ensured that participants did not feel pressured into answering her questions and they were reminded that they could tailor their responses to the times they felt able to continue. If a participant wished to withdraw from the interview process, they were able to do so without needing to give a reason. As the researcher had previous experience in supporting parents, she was able to offer participants a list of sources of information and support they could locate or contact if necessary.

It was also acknowledged that as a parent with lived experience of the topic being studied, the researcher may experience emotional thoughts and feelings in the process of conducting the research. The researcher was aware that she could obtain support and advice from her supervisory team and the welfare services at De Montfort University or elsewhere if needed.

3.6.2 Researcher and participant familiarity

There was an existing relationship between the researcher and the participants because they were already shared membership of the Facebook support group.

This meant each person may have previously discussed their personal experiences and opinions within existing group posts. To prevent participants from feeling they should not express their individual, personal opinions about aspects such as school attendance practices and children's mental health or emotional difficulties, the researcher clarified within the Participant Information Sheet and all pre-interview discussions that all points of view, experiences and interpretations were relevant and valid, as they all hold significance in relation to the aims of the study.

To minimise the influence of the researcher's personal opinions she determined that she would approach the study with an open mind and with the aim of considering all viewpoints without making judgements based upon her own experiences.

3.6.3 Informed consent and the right to withdraw

According to Salmons (2016, p.78) informed consent consists of three components which are adequate information, voluntariness of participation and competence to sign the agreement. To ensure participants gave their informed consent to take part in the study, potential participants were provided with a Participant Information Sheet (see Appendix 4) and were invited to email the researcher if they wanted to ask any questions about the study. A period of seven days was allowed for the participant to read the information and respond with any queries. Informed consent was then obtained when the researcher emailed the consent form to each participant, and they were invited to type 'yes' or 'no' as a response to each point asked on the form and type his/her name as a signature. Participants then returned the consent form by email to the researcher if they had decided they were willing to volunteer to take part.

The Participant Information Sheet informed participants that they have the right to withdraw at any point prior to, or during the interview without them needing to explain why, and without their role and participation in the Facebook group being affected in any way. Participants were also informed that if wished to withdraw from the study his/her data could be removed at any point up to the start of Phase 2 analysis.

3.6.4 Confidentiality and data protection

To maintain confidentiality all records were stored on a secure hard drive which was only be accessible to the researcher. Each interview participant was assigned a code name (e.g., Parent 1, Parent 2, Parent 3 etc) to protect their identity. These code names were used in the transcripts and in the analysis write up. All email interview files were stored on a password protected laptop and backed-up on a secure hard drive.

Data protection was addressed through the researcher conducting all research activities on a password protected laptop. All data files and documents were stored on a password protected USB storage device and back-up device. Online access took place either through the university WIFI or the researcher's home WIFI, both of which use password protected access. Any data held within the study has been stored securely and will be retained for 5 years following completion of the study, and then destroyed in accordance with the Data Protection Act 1998 and the DMU Research Records Retention Policy.

3.6.5 The internet as a site for research

There can be concerns about internet-based research in relation to verification of participant identity, use of private or public domains, anonymity, data security, practicability, and quality. These issues have been considered in relation to this study.

The verification of participant identity can be an area of concern because there are no face-to-face contact offering visual indicators of identity. Individual identity will be difficult to fake in this study, as it requires each participant to relay in-depth knowledge and experiences of the school refusal situation which are difficult to fabricate (Gibson, 2017).

The participants were recruited from the 'closed' (i.e., the contents are not accessible to non-members) Facebook group where people have already been questioned about their relationship to the school refusal situation prior to being granted access. The group tries to restrict membership to parents of school refusing

children and administrators enquire about this before allowing a person access to the group. Once participant recruitment had taken place there was no further research related contact through Facebook and all correspondence or online data gathering took place through the researcher's secure university email account.

The British Psychological Society (2017) Ethical Guidelines for Internet-mediated Research considers email interviews to be relatively private since data are not extracted from public forums. A concern can be that hackers and potential fraud can occur with email accounts, therefore the use of a university email account for all email correspondence provided encryption back up for security. The use of email communication and IP addresses could potentially lead to the identification of participants. However, once the email correspondence has been copied and pasted into Word files and the emails deleted, any identifying features were removed, and data used in the study was anonymised from that point.

3.7 Ensuring the quality of the research

Common criticisms of qualitative research are that it is 'unscientific' anecdotal and based upon subjective impression' (Gray, 2018, p.181). Waller, Farquharson, and Dempsey (2016) argue that the criticisms of qualitative research reflect a confusion about what it is that the different types of research are aiming to achieve. Waller, Farquharson, and Dempsey (2016) suggest that rather than aiming for one objective and valid version, qualitative research 'acknowledges that there may be many valid and objective versions of the research' (2016, p.24). They argue that trustworthiness is a more appropriate quality than reliability, and the researcher aimed to achieve this through the rigorous application of the standards expected within the paradigm they utilised. Cohen, Manion and Morrison (2011) advise that the solution is to consider the types of validity and reliability that are applicable to the paradigm in use. Moreover, they suggest that in qualitative research the notion of validity should be replaced with notions of authenticity.

Grey (2018) also discusses criteria for validating constructivist research and suggests that self-reflexive criticality of the researcher is an important factor. This suggests that a researcher needs to adopt critical and reflexive practices to acknowledge their own influence upon the construction. In relation to this study the

researcher maintained an awareness that her interpretation of the data will be influenced by her own experience of SAPs. Having this awareness meant the researcher aimed to balance the impact of her influence by staying as close as possible to the content of the participant's accounts in her analysis and reporting, therefore establishing internal validity (Gray, 2018). One method she used to achieve this was to use Process Coding during the thematic analysis to focus on the actions the participants were describing (as discussed in Section 3.4.1). The researcher also followed suggestions made by Gray (2018) who maintains that validity can be demonstrated if the researcher actively records, analyses and reports cases of discrepant data that are an exception to patterns (Grey, 2018, p.183). A further suggestion adopted involved 'asking participants to read the analysis report to check if they have been heard correctly' (Waller, Farquharson, and Dempsey, 2016, p.26).

Furthermore, within this study, as with the subjective nature of qualitative research in general, it is recognised there is a likely element of bias in the responses of participants and in the researcher as parents, and therefore a part of the world being researched (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2011). However, this study was designed specifically to introduce an unacknowledged parental viewpoint, and an element of bias is considered both unavoidable and applicable. This indicates that the findings will only be generalisable in other similar situations or circumstances yet will 'represent the phenomenon being investigated fairly and fully' (Cohen, Manion and Morrison 2011, p.181). Moreover, Clarke and Braun (2021, no page) argue that rather than thinking in terms of 'bias' - as 'a distortion of objective knowledge', qualitative researchers should 'think in terms of subjectivity […] as an inevitable component of qualitative research'.

If this study was following a positivist point of view, the research design would aim to 'conceptualise and measure human behaviour in terms of key variables, and to discover causal relationships amongst these' (Hammersley, 2012, no page). However, the interpretivist point of view has guided the research design to understand 'the links between perspectives and actions, and between behaviour and its effects' (Hammersley, 2012, no page), which are most likely to lead to

statements about relationships which are variable and complex, rather than fixed and generalisable.

This chapter has explored the researcher's methodological considerations and her choices of email-based interviewing as a method of data collection, and thematic analysis as a method of data collection. The following four chapters will discuss the results of the researcher's analysis of the data generated because of these considerations and choices.

Chapter 4. Responding to emerging school attendance problems

4.1 Introduction

This chapter is the first of four chapters that present analysis of the email-based interviews. First, this chapter sets out a summary of the characteristics of the parents and their experiences. Following this the chapter considers *Parents' Journeys* as the overarching concept through which the analysis is presented. These Parents' Journeys are considered through four contexts where key themes describe the elements of parents' experiences as they seek a resolution for children's SAPs. Chapter 4 explores how parents respond to the emergence of children's difficulties; Chapter 5 explores parents' experiences of navigating systems in response to ongoing difficulties (involving schools, the NHS, and local government); Chapter 6 explores home-based difficulties and responses to ongoing difficulties (involving the child, family, peers, and employers) that parents' experience; and Chapter 7 explores how parents respond to these ongoing concerns and difficulties and work towards achieving a resolution.

These Parents' Journeys begin when parents first recognise concerns, and they attempt to make sense of ongoing observations to build a clearer understanding of their child's difficulties and needs. When concerns and difficulties continue and possibly increase, parents begin navigating relevant systems to locate advice and support. Success in finding useful and appropriate support is influenced by a range of factors including professional responses; positive and negative working relationships; systemic failures; and locating sources of support and information. Within and through their journey parents experience a range of dilemmas, duties, emotional responses, and elements of empowerment which collectively form a practical and emotional *Parental SAPs Predicament* which specifically relates to a situation where parents are trying to resolve SAPs.

4.2 An overview of parents' experiences

This first section of Chapter 4 provides a summary of the study participant's circumstances and experiences. The details shared here have been collated

through analysis of the email exchanges between the researcher and each participant.

4.2.1 Forty mothers with twenty-nine sons and eighteen daughters

The parent participants in this study were forty mothers who volunteered in response to a request shared in a Facebook support group (as described in Section 3.5.2). One parent provided a retrospective account of her daughter's difficulties which began eleven years before the interview, while the other thirty-nine parents described experiences which were ongoing, or which had concluded within the previous two to three years. The families are located across twenty-five different counties within England.

Either currently or previously, nineteen parents worked in roles related to education, health, law and social work, meaning they had existing professional knowledge of systems with relevance to school attendance problems: three parents had worked in early years settings (including one who was a SENCo), one was an Ofsted inspector, four parents were school teachers, six parents had worked in school learning support, one parent worked in higher education, one parent had worked as a lawyer, one in nursing, one in midwifery, and two in social work.

The accounts parents shared featured forty-seven children (as some parents had more than one child experiencing SAPs). Amongst these children there were twenty-nine males and eighteen females.

The parents of seven children reported their children struggled to attend early years settings (nursery, pre-school, or childminder). Seventeen children were reported to have first experienced attendance problems at primary school (aged 5-11), whereas twenty-four children were reported to have first experienced attendance problems at secondary school (aged 11-16).

4.2.2 The duration of children's school attendance problems

The parents reported that they had been supporting their children and trying to resolve their school attendance problems for between one and twelve years at the point when they took part in this study.

Figure 4.1. Length of time individual children or young people were reported to have experienced SAPs

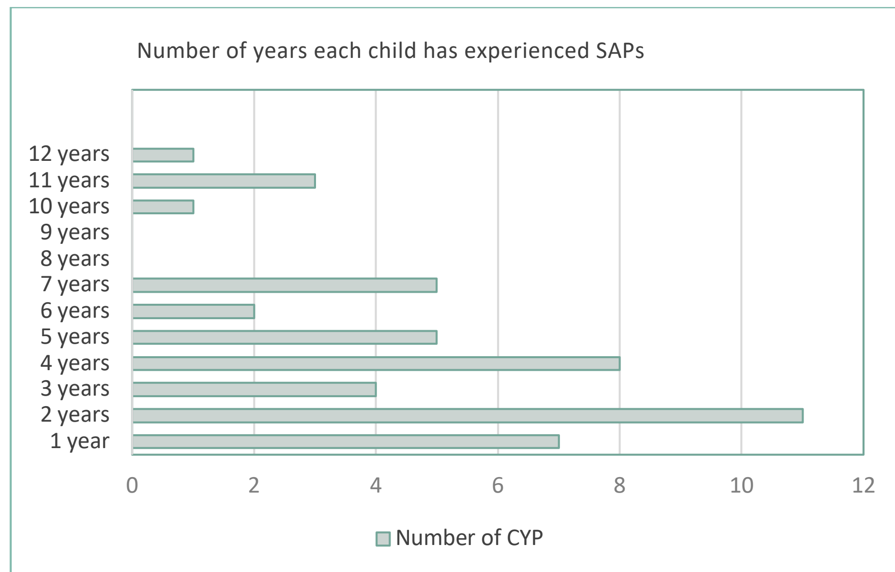


Figure 4.1 illustrates this range of time and the number of children whose school attendance problems had lasted for each length of time. This indicates that once school attendance problems had begun parents struggled to find a quick resolution and the problems often became entrenched and therefore more difficult to resolve.

4.2.3 Influences and triggers for attendance problems

The parents who participated in the study reported a range of factors which they believed had influenced or triggered their children's attendance problems. These factors were as follows:

Special Educational Needs and Disabilities

The existence of special educational needs or disabilities (SEND) appears to be particularly significant, with forty of the forty-seven children who featured within parents' accounts having a SEND that had been diagnosed prior to, or during, the period described in parental accounts. These diagnoses included Autism (n=22), Pathological Demand Avoidance (PDA) (n=2), Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) (n=6), Avoidant/Restrictive Food Intake Disorder (ARFID) (n=2), Dyslexia (n=5), Dyspraxia (n=3), Dyscalculia (n=1), Dysgraphia (n=1), Sensory Processing Disorder (SPD) (n=5), Obsessive Compulsive Disorder (OCD) (n=2), Tourette's Syndrome (n=2), Mutism (n=2), Sleep Disorder (n=1) and being identified as Gifted and Talented (n=2). A further seven children were awaiting diagnostic assessments for suspected SEND.

Autism

For a significant number of children discussed in the study (n=30), parents expressed concerns about autism either as a suspected or diagnosed influence upon their difficulties attending school. Of these thirty children:

- Four children had been diagnosed as autistic before they started school.
- A further five children were diagnosed as autistic within the period described in parent responses.
- Four children were suspected of being autistic and were waiting for diagnostic assessments to be carried out
- One child was suspected to be autistic and supported in school as if he was, without needing a diagnosis.
- Thirteen parents had tried to raise concerns about a possible link to autism, and all had their concerns dismissed by school staff, however all thirteen children went on to receive an autism diagnosis eventually – ten through the NHS and three through a private assessment. Three parents suspected Autism traits but had not sought assessments.
- Five parents described their autistic child as 'masking' their autism in school. Parent 35 has twin boys who are autistic – one twin masked his difficulties in school, one twin didn't mask his difficulties. The twin who didn't 'mask' was supported by the school, while the twin who masked

wasn't supported and the school insisted he was 'fine in school' even when Parent 35 tried to advocate for him.

- One parent reported that her autistic daughter had explained that she wanted to be in a school with children who were like her, suggesting that she felt that she did not fit into, or belong in the mainstream school environments she had experienced.

Physical Illness

Physical illnesses were also a factor that had impacted upon fourteen children's abilities to attend school, either because they were too unwell, or the support they needed to manage their conditions while in school was unavailable or inadequate. These illnesses were as follows: Asthma (n=1), Cystic Fibrosis (n=1), Migraine (n=1), continence issues (n=2), heavy and painful periods (n=2), Irritable Bowel Syndrome (n=1), Postural Orthostatic Tachycardia Syndrome [PoTS) (n=1), Ehlers Danlos Syndrome (n=1), hypermobile joints (n=3), Cerebral Palsy (n=1), Trigeminal Neuralgia (n=1), and Chronic Fatigue Syndrome (n=1).

Mental Illness

Regarding mental health difficulties, parents reported that they perceived a main cause of twenty-six children's SAPs was a form of anxiety, including social anxiety (n=5), separation anxiety (n=3) or anxiety triggered by a traumatic experience (n=4). Parents described their child experiencing a mental breakdown (n= 3) or a decline in their wellbeing after being forced to attend in a state of distress (n=16). Ten parents described their child saying they wanted to die, while two parents reported children making a suicide attempt, and three parents described a child as suicidal. One parent described their child as 'terrified of school' however the underlying cause was unclear. Some of these children had a related formal diagnosis:

- Three children had a diagnosis of depression
- Fourteen children had a diagnosed anxiety disorder, and
- Five children were experiencing attendance problems because of traumatic experiences

Parents linked some of these difficulties to children having SEND or physical illnesses that were not being adequately supported in school, for instance through the implementation of reasonable adjustments (under the Equality Act, 2010), or SEND support (under the SEND Code of Practice, 2015).

The School Environment

The following aspects of the school environment, climate or ethos were considered by parents to be contributory factors:

- Parents reported that twelve children experienced sensory difficulties or overwhelm within the school environment, which would often be experienced by those children who are autistic.
- Four children were reported to have experienced bullying that then triggered their school absence.
- Twenty-five parents attributed their child's difficulties in part to the school climate or ethos. Parents perceptions of this were related to: children having a fear of doing something wrong or making mistakes at school and then being punished or shouted at; children feeling under pressure to perform well academically; children expressing a fear of doing tests; children expressing they felt trapped, unsafe, or overwhelmed in school.
- Five parents linked children's attendance problems to the transition between primary and secondary school.

4.2.4 Reported outcomes for the children of the study participants

Within the period of the study, the outcomes parents reported for the forty-seven children were:

- Only one out of the forty-seven children discussed by the participants had been able to return to their mainstream school and re-establish a normal pattern of attendance. This happened after he spent some time at home having been signed off as too unwell to attend. This was followed by an eighteen-month period where he made tiny steps of progress, as he was allowed flexibility and the focus was on him feeling safe and in control. He

then spent a further six months in a medical needs unit, taking further small steps of progress.

- Seven children remained enrolled at mainstream school with reduced/low levels of attendance
- Six children had a place in a SEND school arranged through an Education Health and Care Plan (EHCP)
- Five children were being educated through alternative provision arranged by their Local Authority such as forms of home-based tuition, online schooling, or hospital school
- Seven children were being home educated by their parents
- Thirteen children were not accessing any type of educational provision
- Eight children had reached the age of 16; of those, four had gone on to college, two were being home educated while taking A levels, and two were too unwell to be involved in any educational activity

These outcomes are not all representative of a finalised resolution, as the families were at differing stages of their journeys. It can also be the case that an individual child's situation is ongoing and develops further as time progresses, for instance a decision may be taken to try a new type of provision or additional problems are identified. Within their accounts, parents reflected upon aspects and factors that they perceived had influenced these outcomes. These included:

- Fourteen parents who attributed the progress they made in achieving a resolution to the input of specific professionals who offered advice and support. The roles of these professionals were: GP (n=1), Private therapist (n=2), CAMHS therapist (n=3), Educational Psychologist (Local Authority) (n=2), Educational Psychologist (Independent) (n=2), School staff (n=3), SENDIASS staff (n=2), Private psychiatrist (n=2), Local Authority SEND Officer (n=1).
- Ten parents attributed the difficulties they experienced to inadequate funding and resourcing of schools and CAMHS
- Eight parents attributed the difficulties they experienced to a lack of appropriate teacher training

- Twelve parents attributed the difficulties they experienced to a lack of child mental health awareness
- Eleven parents attributed the difficulties they experienced to detrimental attitudes towards SEND and autism in schools
- Nine parents attributed the difficulties they experienced to a lack of any respect for parental input or expertise

It seems relevant to consider that these are factors parents have a very limited ability to influence, yet they have a significant impact upon their agency and ability to resolve attendance problems as required by current legislation and policy.

The following section will explain in more depth how the concepts of *Parents' Journeys* and the *Parental SAPs Predicament* in relation to school attendance problems and barriers were revealed through the process of thematic analysis (as described in Section 3.4). Section 4.3 and 4.4 will provide an overview of these concepts in greater detail. Section 4.5 will then explore the beginning of Parents' Journeys when parents respond to the emergence of their children's SAPs.

4.3 Parents' Journeys and the Parental SAPs Predicament

When considering how best to describe the experiences that were common amongst the accounts shared by parents, the data revealed that some parents (n=9) referred to being on a journey. They used terms such as "*their journey*"; "*a long stumbling journey*"; "*their school refusal journey*"; and Parent 10 talked of the help she received from "*fellow parents who are at different stages of their journey*". These journeys started when parents began to note initial concerns. They then navigated through a range of similar difficulties and experiences until they eventually reached a resolution to the school attendance problems. The resolution individual parents achieved varied depending upon a range of factors and may or may not have involved children returning to full-time attendance at mainstream school.

It is important to note that the elements identified within Parents' Journeys did not always follow the same sequence for individual families with their differing contexts. Instead, individual elements may have been repeated, backtracked, or restructured, resembling a game of 'snakes and ladders'. These variations occurred due to differing influences and consequences within individual journeys, for instance, parents may have tried different strategies with varying success; or mental health service referrals may have been declined or delayed by extensive waiting lists (n=18) and then attempted again later; or Education Health and Care Plan applications or reviews were declined, then appealed, or were delayed by systemic issues (n=16).

Each parent had a direct influence upon how their individual journey evolved, as progress in every element of their journey was dependent upon them taking actions, making responses, or making decisions. Furthermore, for every action, response or decision taken, each parent needed to evaluate all possible consequences and outcomes and identify what their priorities were, as evidenced in the following extracts:

> Every day somehow, I dug down deep and researched about what to do, the main driving force was that I was not going to give up on my son, he deserved a future, and it was becoming apparent that this was down to me.
>
> (Parent 4)

> Basically, having to force my children to go to school has been a horrendous experience, especially for [son A], as he has little support in school. You know that you are damaging both their mental health and your relationship with them, but you feel under such pressure to "get them in" because "they're fine once they're here".
>
> (Parent 35)

Chapters 6 and 7 explore how these circumstances created difficult dilemmas as parents juggled with supporting a distressed child, managing day-to-day family life, their awareness of the need to comply with legislative duties related to

children and education, and their awareness of evaluations of their parenting being made by people around them. Parents often felt blamed and criticised, and this range of difficult experiences throughout each journey had an emotional impact on parents, triggering powerful feelings including shame, guilt, frustration, and anger. This emotional impact can be gauged in the following extracts from parents' accounts:

> So, the guilt comes from so many areas: guilt that you did the wrong things, guilt that you made it worse, guilt that you didn't pull the plug on school sooner, guilt about your other child, guilt that you weren't strong enough, patient enough, assertive enough. And even when people tell you not to feel guilty, clearly you still do.
>
> (Parent 5)

> It's made me doubt any skills I might ever have thought I had as a parent. When she shuts down and refuses to talk to us or do anything I really don't know what to do. I have read endless books, googled for hours, and sought advice from all sorts of people but nothing we have tried has worked. I don't know how to parent a child like this.
>
> (Parent 13)

> I think about whether I'm being judged when I can't get him in that day, some days I feel utterly sure I am right not to force him in and others I doubt myself and wonder if I should push him more (but I know deep down I shouldn't and that I'm letting others influence me again)
>
> (Parent 40)

The responses and reactions displayed by professionals, family and friends are key to the development of each parents' journey in terms of its complexity and emotional impact. One key aspect of the developing predicament relates to parents' attempts to ensure there is a shared understanding of their child's needs, along with recognition that their child had a significant difficulty with school attendance. Another key aspect relates to each parent needing to manage

their developing predicament and being in genuine need of information, guidance, and systemic support as a result.

For the parents in this study, their experiences included their involvement in the Facebook support group (as this was the site of recruitment). Thirty-two parents commented upon how this peer contact often influenced their access to common elements of empowerment within their journeys – with the availability of ongoing peer support, advice based upon lived experience, and sharing of relevant information. This peer group empowerment combined with other empowering sources and influences, to help parents navigate and overcome the difficult dilemmas they encountered. The following extracts evidence this empowerment:

> I have found that Facebook groups have been invaluable, as what the hive mind doesn't know is miniscule. Plus, there is so much emotional support as well.
>
> (Parent 35)

> The moment we found 'Not Fine in School' it all changed. They were a lifeline for us. Finally, we were surrounded by an online community shared by parents, carers and professionals who understood, who could offer advice and empower us.
>
> (Parent 20)

To describe this combined influence of specific duties, dilemmas, emotional impacts, and empowerment within parents' experiences the concept of a *Parental SAPs Predicament* was chosen as it describes the range of worrying and confusing difficulties that are not easy for parents to navigate. The situation-specific legal duties that parents become aware of are combined with the contextual dilemmas, empowering factors, and emotional impacts that the data revealed. Each of these elements contribute to create the full Parental SAPs Predicament that is experienced when children experience SAPs, as summarised in Figure 4.2.

Figure 4.2 The Parental SAPs Predicament

Legal Duties	Dilemmas	Empowerment	Emotional Impact
•Set out in: •**Section 7, *Education Act 1996*:** The parent of every child of compulsory school age shall cause him to receive efficient full-time education suitable— (a)to his age, ability and aptitude, and (b)to any special educational needs he may have, either by regular attendance at school or otherwise. •**Section 444, *Education Act 1996*:** if parents register their child at a school and the child then fails to attend regularly, the parents may be guilty of an offence and may be issued a penalty notice or be prosecuted.	•Consisting principally of: •Ensuring the health and wellbeing of children in distress •Ensuring children receive suitable, efficient, full-time education •Understanding relevant policies and laws •Avoiding fines and prosecution for non-attendance •Fulfilling commitments - employment, family, financial •Being judged as a parent in the community, family & by professionals. •Worrying about the consequences of being considered a 'bad parent' •Growing awareness of current systemic problems that will delay or hinder a resolution	•Influenced by: •Taking a proactive approach •Peer support •Professional support •Third sector support •Increased knowledge of SAPs •Increased knowledge of systems/policy/law /SEND/health •Increased self confidence •Listening to a child's opinions •Identifying progress of child	•Parents reported experiencing feelings of: •blame; frustration; guilt; anger; isolation; being judged; stress; regret; failure; being lost; dread; resentment; inadequacy; despair; exasperation; weakness; being conflicted; fear; concern; heartbreak; intimidation; overwhelm; hurt; shame; paranoia; sadness; vulnerability; helplessness; anxiety; distress; pressure •relief; pride; gratitude; hope; being lucky

4.4 The elements of Parents' Journeys

The elements of Parents' Journeys and the related Parental SAPs Predicament will be described in further detail throughout this chapter (Chapter 4), and the following three chapters, with extracts from parent accounts to evidence and elucidate their experiences. The objective for these four chapters is that they highlight salient features of parental experience of SAPs, explained in four contexts. Chapter 4 explores how parents respond to the emergence of children's difficulties attending school. Chapter 5 explores parents' experiences of navigating relevant systems in response to ongoing difficulties (e.g., school, NHS, local authority). Chapter 6 explores parents' experiences of home-based difficulties and responses to ongoing difficulties in family and social circles (e.g., child, family, peers, employer). Chapter 7 then explores how parents respond to

these ongoing concerns and difficulties, and how they work towards identifying a resolution. The predicament that parents encounter throughout their journeys (as a combination of awareness of legal duties, contextual dilemmas, emotional responses, and empowering factors) is then explored further within the discussion chapter (Chapter 8). An overview of the full Parents' Journeys can be found in Appendix 6.

The start of Parents' Journeys concerns the initial triggering of elements of the Parental SAPs Predicament. Parents' initial concerns are raised as they observe their children's distress and/or reluctance in relation to attending school. Parents then begin to undertake sometimes complex interpretations and assessments of children's difficulties, to identify any underlying triggers or understand any causes. If difficulties continue, parents respond by raising their concerns with frontline professionals (most commonly a teacher and/or GP), in the hope of obtaining advice and arranging appropriate support for their child's ongoing difficulties.

Figure 4.3 Responding to emerging school attendance problems

Here, the data reflected the themes *Recognising initial concerns*, *Making sense of observations, Applying parental knowledge,* and *Experiencing reactions of*

others. These contextual elements are illustrated in Figure 4.3 (above), and Section 4.5 discusses them in greater detail.

Figure 4.4 Navigating the Systemic Context

Chapter 5 then explores how parents navigate the systemic context of finding a resolution for their children's attendance problems. The elements of this part of Parents' Journeys are represented in Figure 4.4 (above). Here, the data reflected the themes *Professional responses*, *Working relationships, Barriers to support*, and *Systemic failures.* These themes relate to parental experiences in accessing support through the education system, plus relevant health services and local government services.

Chapter 6 considers the home context and discusses the effects of the SAPs on children, parents, close family members, and on home life, including problems fulfilling employment commitments, financial commitments, and changes and damage to family relationships.

Figure 4.5 Managing the Home Context

Figure 4.5 (above) represents the main elements of this aspect of Parents' Journeys. The themes *Ongoing impact on child*, *Coping with the emotional impact*, and *Family crisis* were revealed through thematic analysis of data.

Figure 4.6 Working towards a resolution

Chapter 7 explores the elements of Parents' Journeys which led them towards a resolution. Parents may reach a point where their ongoing concerns; or a crisis point; a change in priorities; or locating or being offered suitable educational provision, prompts them to take decisive action to resolve their child's school attendance problems. Thematic coding of data revealed the themes *Parental Empowerment* and *Reflecting upon Experiences* which are evidenced in this chapter. The elements that formed parents' experiences while achieving this resolution are illustrated in Figure 4.6 (above).

The peak of the Parental SAPs Predicament often evolves as parents observe ongoing, escalating, or additional concerns relating to their child and family. This combines with the ongoing emotional impact upon the parents themselves; any family consequences; any crisis points; any change in priorities; and any elements of empowerment they experienced throughout their journeys. The overall combined effect of these elements influences the decisions they make regarding the best way to resolve the attendance difficulties, to the benefit of the child and the family.

4.5 Responding to emerging school attendance problems

When school attendance became problematic, parents were in a key position to intervene as they were usually the individual most closely involved with their child; and were directly affected by their behaviour. They may have also been aware, or were reminded by school staff, that they had a legal responsibility to ensure their child was attending school full-time. In this key position, parents instinctively recognised they needed to make sense of any initial concerns or observations to identify what the underlying triggers or problems were. Through this investigative and reflective process, parents attempted to develop a clearer understanding of the situation and identify ways to manage any triggers or resolve problems. This parental need to understand what is happening to their child and identify how they can best be supported relates to the development of the Parental SAPs Predicament, as parents began to understand the initial implications of the SAPs situation and their role within it.

The range of elements that feature within this initial stage of Parents' Journeys will now be explored in more depth to describe and evidence how parents respond when school attendance becomes problematic.

4.6 Recognising initial concerns

At some point in each parent's account, they described circumstances where they first noted relevant concerns about their child. Some parents mentioned identifying concerns with relevance during infancy (n=10), while others began to feel concerned when issues or difficulties emerged when children were enrolled at nursery, primary, or secondary school.

Early concerns often related to children's reactions including getting ready for school in the mornings, making the journey to school, being left by the parent at school, reactions after returning home, completing homework, and preparing for the following day. The more distressed children became about school, the more significant their difficulties became, and times of disruption and distress in the home became more extensive. Descriptions of difficult mornings, evenings, nights, and weekends, all featured in parent accounts and these aspects of parents' experiences will now be considered in greater detail.

4.6.1 Difficult mornings

A child's reactions to preparations for each imminent school day provided strong indications that they were troubled and distressed about attending school. Children were often extremely reluctant, or unable to complete morning rituals such as washing, dressing, or eating breakfast. Leaving the house and making the journey to school was often difficult and traumatic. The following account indicates the levels of difficulty some families experienced each morning, as Parent 8 describes the emotions she felt when observing her daughter's distress, and in managing the intense transition between home and school:

> Trying to get [my daughter] into school every day was the most stressful and upsetting experience I've ever lived through.
> Every day I would dread waking her up for school, knowing

> she'd be tearful and exhausted from anxiety and lack of sleep. As soon as she opened her eyes, she'd beg me not to make her go, but would eventually comply with getting dressed and leaving the house, I never had to physically force her. We would do 4-7-8 breathing together in the car all the way. If the smallest thing went wrong - such as she'd forgotten a piece of homework or left something at home - her anxiety would rocket from 10/10 to a 100. It took everything I had to stay organised, calm, and 'together' - from getting her out of bed to eventually leaving her at school. The whole thing took intense, careful coaxing and encouraging, and could sometimes take hours, depending on the morning. We were more often late than not, which was stressful for her as well as me. I'd have to go in with her and stay for a while, which made me late for work, adding to the pressure. Sometimes the person who was supposed to meet her wasn't available - especially if we were very late – which made it more difficult. Seeing the other kids run in, smiling and laughing without a backward glance, just like [my daughter] always used to do; was hard too.
>
> (Parent 8)

Parent 8's final comment is poignant, as seeing the ease with which other children entered the school triggered memories of her daughter doing the same and were in such contrast to her present situation.

The mornings Parent 9 experienced preparing for school also exemplified the frustrating practical struggle encountered by many families as children tried to delay or resist the journey to school:

> The mornings are hard work, up & downstairs all morning trying to get him up, then it's what do you want for breakfast? Getting dressed takes a while too. Once downstairs he'll find excuses not to put shoes on or to leave house. Walking to school he'll either run off & hide or trail behind, we use to have running in the road, swearing & kicking things all the way there. He will also say throughout the morning he wishes he was dead.
>
> (Parent 9)

Recognising the distress felt by children as they faced a school day was also a feature of Parent 9's account, as she recalled observing her son's inner battle with his feelings:

> [My son] would force himself to get up and get ready for school, it was like dragging a heavy weight out of bed. Sometimes he would sit on the end of the bed dressed for school, tears rolling down his face – saying he couldn't go in – he would go back to bed.
>
> (Parent 9)

Parent 24 also described how her son struggled to face school to the extent that his personality seemed to change to enable him to cope with the transition from home into school:

> If he got up ok, I would be met with a lot of resistance about eating and shoes and stuff, lots of swearing and then I would see his personality change before my eyes from a very volatile, depressed, and anxious boy to a loud, hyper, silly smiling other person. He had to change into a different person to cope with going in.
>
> (Parent 24)

Similarly, Parent 37 described the way her son had to prepare mentally to find the strength to leave her car and enter the school grounds:

> On arriving at school, […] he would hang on to the dashboard with both hands and deep breathe, sometimes he would bash his forehead on the dashboard, he would then count, and say 'ok' and leave. If he saw a friend outside it was worse, he wasn't ready for them and it would set things back. Awful times.
>
> (Parent 37)

Each of these accounts offers insight into the level of concern that parents felt when observing their child's mental battles and emotional turmoil. For parents,

the personal impact of having to watch and manage their child's distress, and to battle to get them to school each morning seemed especially significant. As time went by parents would struggle with the recognition that the same battles had to be faced every morning. The accounts indicated how much time parents spent thinking about these daily events and what could be done to make things better, or easier the following day. In addition, after each difficult journey to school parents battled with constant worry and guilt about how their child had coped during their day at school.

4.6.2 Difficult evenings and night-times

Equally, parental descriptions indicated how time periods after school and in the evenings were just as difficult as mornings, creating significant struggle and concern. Parents described children's reactions upon returning home at the end of a school day. For instance, following her descriptions of difficult mornings, Parent 9 noted her son's reactions after school too:

> He would return from school and get undressed and get into bed. He was struggling to wear clothes. He struggled to sleep, he was up until the early hours tossing and turning
>
> (Parent 9)

Disrupted nights were common if children were upset about events of the day, or anxious about the day to come. Parents 28 and 12 described night-time difficulties their child experienced, involving trouble getting to sleep, fitful sleep, or nightmares:

> Getting the girls settled at night was an extremely challenging time, feeling poorly, tummy aches etc would start, crying for hours at a time with the worry of school
>
> (Parent 28)

> He was waking with nightmares every night, clingy at night and in the morning and his violent and challenging behaviour a standard event rather than a surprise.
>
> (Parent 12)

Parents also experienced sleep difficulties themselves because of the worry and stress they felt. Parent 32 explained how this affected her, along with the efforts she went to, to hide her emotions from her son:

> While [my son] was attending school, I would spend most of the nights awake; he would not sleep well, and I would not sleep well either, fretting about how the following morning might go. I would dread the morning school run. Trying to remain calm for him was exhausting. Any display of emotion from me made him react more violently, more distressed, more scared, so I tried to remain calm and neutral to get us through it.
>
> (Parent 32)

This echoes Parent 8's earlier description of the mornings with her daughter and offers insight into the significant effect of the situation on both child and parent.

4.6.3 Difficult weekends

The respite of a weekend was often blighted by the build in tension on Sundays, induced by impending Monday mornings and another week of school. Parent 37 described an occasion when her son outwardly communicated his anxiety:

> Sunday nights where awful, one Sunday he was lying on the floor rocking from side to side as we tried to get him ready for the morning.
>
> (Parent 37)

Parent 23 also described the difficulty she experienced, in seeing her daughter's distress on Sunday evenings:

> I used to dread Sunday evenings, her sadness, the begging to not go to school. I dreaded even more the words, "I don't feel good, my tummy hurts" and the tears whether they happened at the weekend or during the week.
>
> (Parent 23)

Parent 7 described her similar concerns:

> By now weekends were getting to be a terrible time with anxiety about going to school on the Monday. I just couldn't believe at the age of 5 my daughter was already living for the weekend and much of that was being ruined by worrying about Monday
>
> (Parent 7)

These extracts highlight the impact that thoughts of a new school week had on children, and the various ways children communicated their feelings of anxiety and reluctance to attend school.

A dilemma for parents when facing these situations at different times of the day or week related to them knowing how to respond or intervene to support their children. Equally their accounts reflected concern about how they would be judged by others in relation to how they did react. To identify a best course of action, parents needed to understand what might be causing such an emotional and physical reaction in their child and identify what options they had for accessing support.

4.7 Coping with the reactions and responses of others

Whenever any problems first became apparent, parents tended to focus on maintaining school attendance in the assumption or hope that any distress was temporary and would diminish over time. For some parents, the overwhelming reaction was one of panic and fear about their child missing school because it is something they do not expect would happen. As Parent 5 notes in the following extract – it is accepted and expected within our society that children go to school. To then have a child who refuses to do so, triggers a range of overwhelming

emotions including shame, panic, and failure (as a parent), which can affect how a parent initially reacts:

> I remember being in complete shock. This didn’t happen. Children went to school; there was no other option. I remember thinking (and being told) “I have to get her to school; somehow, anyhow” We tried everything. We tore her pyjamas trying to get her dressed. Carried her kicking and screaming to the car. Activated the child locks to stop her opening the doors (at which point she put her hands over my eyes to stop me driving). She simply couldn’t do it, if she had been an adult, society would have recognised it as a nervous breakdown. At the time, I was in such a panic I couldn’t step back and see how important it was that I stayed calm and just showed her how much I loved her. I only saw that in hindsight, and my panic and lack of patience definitely made things worse.
>
> (Parent 5)

Parents were highly aware of the expectation that all children go to school as a normal part of childhood, and they felt significant pressure to comply. In this situation it was unclear what actions they should take, or where they should go for help, yet their accounts showed how aware they were of the need to do something to resolve their child’s school absences. This realisation is mentioned by Parent 16 as the significance of her son’s distress became clearer to her:

> [My son] was in a total mess, his tics had increased, and he started having odd behaviour. I was so worried about him. After a few weeks of refusing days each week, I began to realise that he wasn’t playing up and something quite serious was going on with him, and we needed to get to the bottom of things.
>
> (Parent 16)

When a child appears defiant, rebellious, uncooperative, or badly behaved it is common for a parent to feel embarrassed, frustrated, and angry, and to try to correct such behaviour with reasoning and discipline. Parent 16 went on to describe how she had initially reacted with anger and frustration at her son’s lack of compliance, and the effect that reaction had on them both:

> When [my son] started refusing to go in on certain days, I got angry with him and shouted at him, stopped him watching TV and playing on his Xbox. He would get so upset, lock himself in the bathroom sobbing or sit in the corner of his room shaking and rocking. I felt very alone, uptight and sad ringing in to school each morning as felt I had failed yet again to get [my son] to school.
>
> (Parent 16)

The sense of failure and isolation described by Parent 16 was common for parents and compounded by having to telephone the school daily to report absences. Parents recognised that school staff were likely to make critical judgements of their parenting, with each day of failure to comply with expectations. Added to their sense of failure and shame, was a sense of fear about what the consequences would be, with knowledge of possible legal action. Parent 5 described the range of feelings she experienced in this situation:

> How did I feel as a mum? Initially, panic, I think. I had never known anyone whose child suddenly refused to go to school. I am an anxious person anyway, so my anxiety levels instantly went up. Quite quickly, after the first few conversations with her primary school, I also started to get frightened because it was clear that this needed to be resolved quickly and I hadn't even come to terms with what was happening.
>
> (Parent 5)

In addition to feelings of shame, fear and anger, parents also acknowledged their guilt, and concern for their child. Parent 8 described how she felt having to comply with the expectation that she delivered her child to school, when she knew how much her daughter was struggling:

> But the worst part was leaving her there - knowing how she felt. I would walk away with a wave and a smile (trying my best to be the calm, positive mum I thought she needed to see) but with my heart in a million pieces. I still have the image of her small, pale, pinched face - trying so hard to be brave, not to show how scared and upset she was - forcing a small smile at

> me when I left, or some days not even managing that, but looking at me with these pleading, desperate eyes, silently begging me not to leave her (she couldn't bear to show her true feelings or distress in front of anyone at school, which I think contributed to it going on longer, because she wouldn't shout, cry, lash out or cling on to me – she would just, sadly, comply).
>
> (Parent 8)

Parent 8's description exposes the emotional conflict and dilemma felt by both parent and child as they felt under pressure to comply with school attendance expectations, and therefore conceal or mask their true feelings.

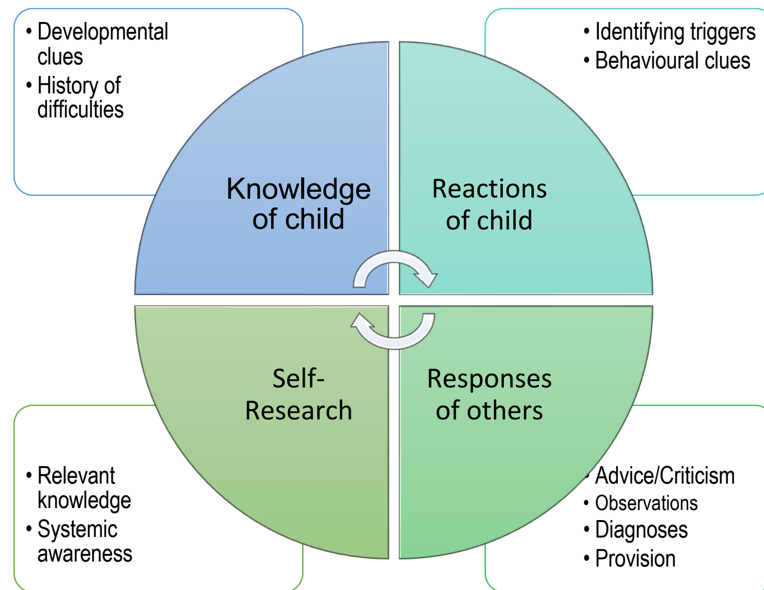
4.8 Making sense of observations and applying parental knowledge

The in-depth knowledge that parents build of their children was demonstrated within the accounts through reflection about links between symptoms, behaviours, and difficulties. This was an ongoing process throughout the time each child was experiencing attendance difficulties. During the initial development of the 'Parents' Journeys' and the 'Parental SAPs Predicament' described in this chapter, parents were making initial attempts to understand what was happening and how they needed to respond to resolve their child's attendance problems. Chapters 5, 6, and 7 will discuss how this ongoing process of analysis and understanding evolved further over time.

As school attendance problems developed, parents tried to make sense of their observations and experiences through a process of investigation and reflection (illustrated in Figure 4.7 below).

Parents pieced together relevant evidence in the form of behavioural and emotional signs and symptoms; their knowledge of their child over time; feedback and responses from others; and information they had gained through their own research. Parents then reflected upon this evidence with the aim of building up an overall picture of their child's needs, difficulties, and any barriers preventing their attendance at school.

Figure 4.7 Process of investigation and reflection as parents make sense of children's difficulties



In this study parents identified a range of influences that they perceived were influential. It was thought that children's difficulties often related to sensorial responses within an educational environment, unidentified or inadequately supported SEND, stress or anxiety, or physical illnesses. Sometimes, concerns and attendance difficulties developed when children responded to specific events that triggered trauma or distress. These trauma inducing events involved bullying, a relative's death, or seeing something traumatic such as an attempted suicide, or car accident. For some children their trauma was triggered by a school-related event such as the loss of a supportive staff member, actions by school staff that caused a loss of trust or respect, or times of significant academic pressure such as the lead up to taking SATs; or times of transition such as the move from primary to secondary school.

Often, parents did not know at first why their children were so reluctant or unable to go to school. Parent 9 describes how at first, she was unsure what to think, but after observing her son's out-of-character reactions, it was clear to her that something had changed his attitude and reaction towards attending school, and she consequently responded by trying differing strategies to find a solution:

> Initially when he started to school refuse, I didn't know what to think but I could see he was scared and frightened which was quite unusual for him as he had always embraced primary. I also tried lots of strategies including involving different people, but the result was always the same.
>
> (Parent 9)

4.9 Identifying a child's difficulties and needs

When attempting to identify children's difficulties and needs, some parents already had existing concerns about aspects of their children's development, behaviour, or wellbeing prior to the beginning of any school attendance problems. If this was the case, they were able to consider whether those existing concerns may have relevance and these considerations are discussed in Section 4.9.1. A further influence upon parents' attempts to understand what was causing children's attendance problems was their instinctual perceptions as parents and this aspect is discussed in Section 4.9.2. These parental instincts are influential within the Parental SAPs Predicament as the dilemmas parents faced often involved a conflict between the actions parental instincts indicated were needed, and their awareness of systemic duties and social expectations.

4.9.1 Relating longer-term concerns to attendance problems

For many parents, concern about their child had begun prior to the start of the school attendance difficulties and the experiences they wrote of are summarised as follows:

- Fifteen parents had acted upon concerns about their child's behaviour or development before their child was school age, but they encountered denial from teachers when difficulties began at school
- A further eight parents had acted upon concerns about their child's behaviour or development before their child was school age and experienced supportive school responses when difficulties began at school, but wider system limitations meant no suitable provision was made available
- A further seven parents identified early concerns, but being unsure what else to do, they had continued to monitor their child's wellbeing and progress to ascertain whether their concerns would be resolved or continue. Eventually

these parents, and in one case a child's teacher, raised concerns when difficulties increased, again, systemic issues meant each school involved did not take action to support them

Other parents had relevant concerns that first developed during their children's school years and their experiences are summarised as follows:

- Three parents raised academic, behavioural, or emotional concerns that had developed after their child started school, however, they encountered denial from the school that such difficulties existed, as school staff claimed they had not observed those same difficulties within the school environment
- Two parents had experienced SAPs triggered by illness, and one by traumatic events, however in each case their children's school refused to offer any support
- Three parents experienced SAPs triggered by illness and/or traumatic events and their schools were supportive, however systemic issues meant no suitable provision was made available for them.
- Three parents had noted concerns which did not seem severe enough to act upon until a later traumatic event triggered children's attendance difficulties; in response two schools were unsupportive, and one school was supportive

Parents and professionals (if involved early on), often needed to monitor a young child's wellbeing and progress to see how things changed over time. For some parents the use of hindsight was significant as it allowed them to reflect upon their child's developmental history and make sense of early observations, often by connecting them with later observations and knowledge, or vice versa. Parent 7 illustrated this where she explained:

> As soon as she could talk, she was considered a shy child, she often wouldn't speak to people or answer and if she did need to talk would cup her hand and whisper in my ear and I would talk for her. She was like this with her grandparents, aunties and family friends and strangers - it was only years later I realised it was selective mutism
>
> (Parent 7)

The following statement by Parent 23 offers a similar perspective, demonstrating how some parents had adapted their parenting approaches to manage early differences in behaviour:

> Initially I was exasperated. As I said before, her reluctance to go to school appeared to be just that - reluctance/would rather stay at home/laziness. Because it was something I'd always experienced with her from nursery age onwards it was just "business as usual". Annoying and exasperating but just part of the daily routine.
>
> (Parent 23)

This illustrates how some parents managed earlier difficulties by accepting that they were 'normal' behaviour for their child – a part of their personality or individual characteristics. Sometimes those difficulties did not seem particularly significant until later when they escalated, or until less flexibility was possible within new situations or circumstances (such as going to school). Some parents described their child as being 'quirky', 'different', 'clingy' or 'sensitive' and described adjusting their parenting in response. Parent 22 made a relevant observation to explain how families accept or adapt to what seems to be a child's individual traits:

> When behaviours and difficulties are familiar because they are NFF (Normal For Family) again, you accept that these things are nothing to worry about - after all, you/your family members were ok weren't they? You / they led 'normal' lives as adults, didn't they?
>
> (Parent 22)

These accounts indicate that parents may notice differences and individualities in children that they are able to accommodate at home, possibly because there are other family members with similar traits. This indicates how some individual characteristics become more problematic when a child is expected to adapt to the role of 'school child' (as described in section 2.4), but the school environment is less adaptable and accommodating of difference than the home environment.

4.9.2 Parental instincts versus attendance expectations

> I knew from when he was 15/18 months old, he was 'different' but everyone used to tell me he was fine and I went against my instincts for years.
>
> (Parent 40)

Here, Parent 40 talks of ignoring her instinct as a parent when recognising there was something 'different' about her son. Parents sometimes kept their concerns to themselves as they were unsure how other people would respond, or they were not sure if their concerns reflected other factors such as a lack of wide experience as parents. This situation was reflected in observations by Parent 19 and Parent 37 which demonstrate how some parents adopted a 'concerned-but-hopeful-that-things-would-settle-down' approach:

> [Our daughter] didn't want to go on a few occasions, and her after-school behaviour was often explosive, but she was young, she was our first child, and we ploughed on regardless because, despite her many quirks, she seemed generally ok.
>
> (Parent 19)

> My son has always been a quirky child, but he is an only child, so I had nothing to compare with. He was happy, and we adapted in the same way I felt all parents adapted to their kids needs
>
> (Parent 37)

In making these assessments of observations about their children, parents were weighing up the overall wellbeing of their children, to decide whether it was necessary to take further action or not. However, parents found these instinctive decisions became more difficult when attendance difficulties occurred, as even if it appeared that children's wellbeing was negatively impacted, parents were aware of the legal requirements and social expectations related to attending school. They described the turmoil this inner conflict provoked as they faced

these difficult dilemmas each day. Here, Parent 10 describes her dilemma in feeling under pressure to force her son into school, even though it went against her instincts as a parent which told her that she needed to protect him from harm:

> Trying to get [my son] into school every day is like an emotional rollercoaster. It goes against everything my motherly instincts tell me I should be doing, I should be protecting him, and instead I'm doing what feels like the equivalent of somebody locking me in a room full of spiders and telling me I'll be ok!
>
> (Parent 10)

Similarly, Parent 36 describes her dilemma in relation to the inner conflict between her knowledge of legal (*systemic response*) obligations and the need to protect her child's deteriorating mental health (*parental instinctual response*):

> As a mum I felt completely torn between my legal obligations as a parent (both the school had made it clear to myself and my daughter that prosecution was possible if she was viewed as not attempting to attend school) and my responsibility to protect my daughter's deteriorating mental health. My memories of this time are that it felt very much like I was colluding with the school system to participate in the torture (albeit legal) of my daughter. This pressure and the enormous amount of guilt that accompanied it felt like a huge and ever-present weight around my neck. I felt that I was being placed in an impossible situation, alone with no one by my side, where I either cooperated with the system or trusted my gut instincts to support my daughter's health and face the wrath of the school system, a fine and potential prosecution.
>
> (Parent 36)

Parent 27 offered a description of how it felt to contend with this dilemma of choosing whether to conform to societal expectations or respond protectively to her child's distress. Parent 27 also had to manage the additional awareness that she had no support to follow her parental instincts as everyone around her prioritised school attendance, making her scared of the consequences of not conforming:

> Although I suspected [my son] was autistic from infancy, I didn't understand things enough to stand up for him in the way I should have. Instead, I tried to make him conform, hide his differences (not intentionally though). I made him attend school places that clearly traumatised him. That was one of the worst parts, making him go somewhere that caused him to not want to live anymore. At the time, I was just trying to do my best, do what was expected of us as parents. Society, schools, mental health workers, Drs, friends, family etc expect you to send your child to school. So you take them. But nobody sees the deep distress. What they might occasionally witness is a young child who is upset being carried across the park to school, but as soon as they cross the school gates the child's head goes down, the shoulders slump, they stop crying and they might walk in defeated. Occasionally they might witness the child being restrained by staff to stay in school. But that is occasionally. And when in school, 99% of the time they see a quiet child, who follows rules, gets on with work, then leaves to go home. [My son] tells me he was too terrified to do wrong, speak out, ask for help or draw attention to himself in anyway at all. That's why school see him as 'fine in school'.
>
> (Parent 27)

In facing these dilemmas, parental accounts highlighted the recognition that their role was to advocate for their children, as there was an urgent need to resolve the attendance difficulties. To advocate effectively, parents needed to identify who to approach within the relevant systems, what they needed to say to them, and what requests for support might be applicable. Even when parents did advocate for their child in this way, they often found that they faced opposition from their child's school. For instance, Parent 1 encountered this when her son was diagnosed with anxiety by his GP. The school staff disagreed with this medical diagnosis as they said that they did not 'see his anxiety in school' (even when signs were apparent):

> At age 6 he was refusing to go to school often, didn't sleep, didn't have an appetite, and had constant headaches & tummy aches. I took him to GP, and they agreed anxiety. I explained this to school, and they said they see no anxiety in school, his T-shirt came home soaked everyday where he'd chewed the

> neck of it plus his fingers bled where he'd chewed the skin and nails off.
>
> (Parent 1)

This type of response from school staff was representative of the difficult working relationships between school staff and parents that are explored in greater detail in Chapter Five. When parents experienced these barriers to obtaining support they needed to identify how best to respond, especially if there was no reduction in the difficulties the child and family were experiencing.

As time went on, the combined effects of anxiety, stress, practical difficulties, disrupted sleep, and systemic pressure, increased in significance for children and parents. This often meant that difficulties at home and school escalated and more time each day was taken up trying to manage emotions, behaviours, and practical aspects of family life. As an example, Parent 19 described how difficult times with her daughter before school, had escalated to impact upon family life after-school, in the evening, and at bedtime:

> It was extremely upsetting for me to try to take [my daughter] to school, some days she would cry and hang on to me and beg me not to send her. After school she would meltdown and the whole evening would often be difficult. We had periods of time where she didn't sleep and wouldn't want me to leave her in her room. I couldn't go out in the evening because she would get so upset. She was extremely clingy.
>
> (Parent 19)

For Parent 19 this indicated how much her daughter was struggling, and her description indicates how much of an impact the situation had on Parent 19's own life too. Parent 29 also wrote about the significant affect her sons' difficulties had on the family as the situation escalated:

> The struggles to get the boys to school were terrible. Mostly so with my eldest as we just couldn't understand why he wouldn't go and didn't know what to do. He became so angry with us. It

> was quite frightening and very distressing. We felt very out of control. We had never met anyone at that point whose child wouldn't go to school. The battles between my husband and my son were huge. My husband would refuse to go to work until [our son] had gone to school. He was often there all day. My husband and I also disagreed on how best to handle the situation and we were increasingly falling out. When I look back at how much stress we caused [our son] in those early days it breaks my heart. We didn't have a clue! It wasn't until he was severely depressed and suicidal when he was obviously too unwell to attend school that we stopped trying to get him in and the pressure eased.
>
> (Parent 29)

Similarly to Parent 5 previously, Parent 29 was influenced by her awareness of the expectation that all children attend school, and of being unaware of anyone who did not comply with this expectation. This increased the pressure on the family to prioritise their son's attendance at school, leading to additional conflict between parents as they disagreed about the best approach to take. This highlights the dilemma that parents experienced in making their choices between prioritising attendance or recognising their children's distress needed to be taken seriously as a sign that significant problems might need addressing.

These collective descriptions illustrate how even when parents tried to implement strategies to keep children attending school, they often failed because the underlying triggers and influences were too powerful and continued to cause difficulties while they were not being addressed. These experiences suggest that provision of guidance and a comprehensive assessment of children's needs and difficulties in the early stages of SAPs could help prevent the escalation in difficulty that occurs while families struggle to access early recognition and support.

4.10 Seeking professional advice and support

Initially when a child shows signs that they are unhappy or unwilling to go to school or in some cases in earlier days, to be left at nursery, parents described feeling uncertain how to react. It could have been valid for parents to assume that

the child's anxiety and distress was temporary and would soon be resolved. Once similar difficulties were experienced repeatedly over time, parents needed to decide what action to take. Parental accounts showed that this decision was not easy to make, as the following extracts illustrate:

> I also felt completely lost. I am analytical person - I problem-solve and I do desk research as part of my job. But with this there were so many variables that could indicate an underlying cause (an intrinsic condition e.g., PDA, trauma, diet?) that it was impossible to know where to start.
>
> Did I need a clinical psychologist? Educational psychologist (what's the difference even?), a psychiatrist, a nutritionist? You can't get help until you know what you're dealing with, so I felt completely stuck. I remember really wishing there was someone who could advise on who you should seek for expert help, but there isn't such a person (health visitor maybe?)
>
> (Parent 5)

> I felt completely isolated as I was embarrassed to speak to anyone about my situation how do you explain that your son simply won't go to school.
>
> (Parent 4)

These extracts epitomise the parental dilemma in identifying the point where it was appropriate to involve others. These decisions were influenced by concern about how people would respond to their child's situation. They were also influenced by recognition that without a clear understanding of the problem, it was difficult to identify who they should turn to for help. Commonly, parents would approach either their GP, or their child's teacher to establish whether they had concerns too. In doing so, parents hoped to work as a team with professionals to establish why the child was struggling and what could be done to help. The following extracts from Parent 37's account illustrate how parents try to identify what actions they should take.

Parent 37 described the inner conflict she initially experienced as she tried to identify how to respond to her son's school absence. At first, she assumed her parenting was at fault:

> I just didn't understand it. I had never come across this before. I presumed it was my fault, I had been too soft/kind on him as he had grown up. Letting him get away with things
>
> (Parent 37)

Parent 37 then noted how the responses she encountered in her social circle reflected a general acceptance that children must go to school even if they don't like it:

> Friends I spoke with, didn't quite say that but hinted it. People said things like 'I hated school' but followed it up with the fact that they did go in because they had to.
>
> (Parent 37)

Then Parent 37 explained how she had expected that professionals would know what to do to help them. However, she found that the school's advised approach did not make sense to her, although she tried to comply with their expectations:

> An educational psychologist had advised school to allow him a reduced timetable, but they wouldn't do it. I just was bewildered and feeling that they are the professionals, they should know. They just kept repeating, 'get him in to school and we can help, we can't help if he isn't in school', but that didn't make sense to me as it was obviously school that was causing him angst. I will admit that I sometimes ignored his pain because I felt I had to get to work as well. I think that's one of the things that most upsets me now. How could I have done that???
>
> (Parent 37)

Parent 37 explained how lost and conflicted she had felt without access to what she considered was appropriate advice and support. The extract below illustrates

the range of reactions many parents reported as they tried to respond to the emergence of their child's attendance problems:

> I was lost and panicking, trying to be a good gentle mum, trying to be a reliable employee, trying to be seen to be the sensible mum to the outside world. I just wanted someone to tell me what to do, I think some friends probably thought I handled it very badly, and I did. […] But I kept talking to my son, listening, and hugging, never lying. Tried bribing but that was pointless. But I was also shouting.
>
> (Parent 37)

Parent 37's experience illustrates some of the dilemmas that parents encountered that contribute to the Parental SAPs Predicament. There is a complex mix of decisions that need to be made daily about what is best for the child involved (along with any siblings), along with worry about how the child will react to attempts to get them to school each morning. This is combined with awareness of the judgements that will be made about parenting capacity by family members, peers, and professionals, and any implications that may arise from these judgements. Parents also needed to consider any implications for their own work or other practical commitments if a child did not go to school as expected. Furthermore, parents also needed to manage their own emotional responses to this combination of dilemmas and experiences.

4.11 Chapter summary

This chapter introduced the concept of a journey experienced by parents when their child encountered SAPs. The chapter also described the initial stages of the related predicament for parents, where a range of concerns were triggered by a child's reaction towards school, combined with awareness of the practical, and legal implications. Parents observed their children's reactions and reflected upon the development of the SAPs to try to better understand each child's needs, strengths, and difficulties. Some parents identified concerns with possible relevance before a child began school and may already have sought professional input and advice to help identify underlying reasons for those concerns. If problems arose during school years, parents looked for clues to aid

understanding of what was happening to their child and tried to identify triggers and underlying reasons for any difficulties. They applied this in-depth knowledge of their child to identify strategies and solutions to overcome problems or barriers to attendance. If these strategies failed and/or concerns continued, parents recognised the need to take further action to seek help and advocate for their child. Parents therefore involved professionals such as teachers and GPs in the hope that their responses would reflect relevant knowledge, training, and expertise, combined with helpful policies and if applicable, suitable provision that could met the needs of their child.

Chapter 5 will now discuss how the data revealed that parents struggled with similar difficulties and barriers in accessing support, and experienced similar attitudes expressed by professionals working within the systems they needed to navigate.

Chapter 5. Navigating the systemic context of school attendance problems

5.1 Introduction

Chapter 4 described the beginning of Parents' Journeys through school attendance problems and considered how parents respond to emerging school attendance problems. Chapter 5 will now consider what parents experienced when they contacted professionals and attempted to navigate relevant systems to seek advice and support.

In Section 1.5.1 the relevance of systems within society was discussed and this chapter holds most relevance to this concept. In England the systems that become most relevant when school attendance problems occur are the education system, the health system, and the local government system. In terms of this study, reference to the education system relates to mainstream primary and secondary school settings as they provide education when it is compulsory (for children between the ages of 5 years and 16 years).

The National Health Service (NHS) often becomes involved when school attendance problems occur as under The Registration (Section 6, 2(b), Pupil Registration) Regulations, 2006) the main defence parents can use for a child's absence is that the child is too unwell to attend. Furthermore, following a combination of DfE guidance (DfE, 2020a) and local school and LA policy, parents are commonly instructed to obtain medical evidence to prove that ongoing school absences should be authorised. Therefore, a GP assessment of possible physical and/or mental health difficulties is required; although it is also problematic as GPs argue that it is not in their remit to assess whether a child is too unwell to attend school (LWMC, 2017). A further service within the NHS that children experiencing attendance problems are often referred to for assessment is CAMHS (Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services). Some children may already be under the care of various NHS services if they have illnesses, conditions, or diagnoses that have been previously identified, and these services may become further involved in response to the attendance problems.

The English system of local government is involved when school attendance problems occur because local authorities are responsible for monitoring attendance at schools in their area. Local authorities are responsible for enforcing school attendance by issuing fines and prosecutions for school absence (section 444, Education Act, 1996). Local authorities also have duties under legislation to arrange alternative educational provision if children cannot access school-based education (section 19, Education Act 1996). Local authorities are also responsible for funding and arranging SEND provision if a child has needs that require an EHCP (Education Health and Care Plan).

Once parents recognised the need for further professional input, they began to navigate the education, health, and local government systems. Initially if they had not already done so, this involved discussing concerns with a teacher (or other appropriate member of school staff) and/or their GP (or another medical practitioner already involved with the child). Parents expected that as education and health professionals, the people they approached would know what actions to take to help their children, as exemplified by Parent 5, who recalled:

> I had thought the professionals would step in, tell us what was going on with [child] and draw up a plan to help her get better.
>
> (Parent 5)

It was apparent that parents expected the professionals they approached would have 'frontline' experience of school attendance problems and be aware of policies, pathways, services, or provisions that may help. This chapter considers whether the accounts shared by parents indicated that these expectations of professional awareness and expertise were fulfilled. Parents' overall experiences of professional responses within the relevant systems of education, health and local government will each be considered in turn. The chapter then explores more in-depth features of these experiences by referring to themes that were revealed through thematic analysis which included *Professional responses*, *Positive and negative working relationships*, and *Systemic failures*.

5.2 Experiences within schools

Parents reported both positive and negative experiences of contact with schools; however, by far the greater part of parents' accounts consisted of negative experiences. The positive responses that were experienced related to schools empowering children and parents by offering help at an early stage. Parents appreciated help provided by professionals who were knowledgeable about school attendance problems, SEND, mental and physical health, navigating policy and legislation. Parents looked for kindness, empathy, and support which allowed children a degree of control within their attendance context, so that they had some flexibility to make small steps of progress with minimal pressure. To facilitate this, schools needed to manage their own expectations around attendance data and policies, and parents found that this could be a significant barrier to achieving a positive resolution.

Positive experiences with schools were mentioned by five of the forty parents and this related to children's difficulties being recognised, with responses that demonstrated empathy and kindness, and the reliable provision of appropriate individualised support. Parent 33 and Parent 39 wrote of relevant experiences:

> The school staff we dealt with initially were in student support and they were fantastic, nothing was too much trouble, and they were extremely helpful and never once made me feel bad about ringing them or emailing them when the problems first began. […] [child's] form tutor was also fantastic, nothing was too much trouble, and she regularly rang us to check in.
>
> (Parent 33)

> School are great, we have meetings. They have pushed for help from a specialist teacher. They have put things in place to help [my daughter] and have an excellent SENCo unit where she can go anytime.
>
> (Parent 39)

Parent 34 also experienced an empathetic response, however she stated:

> School were very good and gentle and kind to us both but they admitted they did not know what to do with him.
>
> (Parent 34)

This evidences how the emotional elements, and the practical elements of school-based responses might differ, as although Parent 34 perceived the staff were gentle and kind, they were unable to offer any help on a practical level.

In contrast, most of the participants described negative school-based experiences. This included Parent 20 who tried to take a proactive approach by sharing her concerns and asking for referrals to appropriate services:

> School: I am not even sure where to begin. There were so many missed opportunities. I was crying out for help. I reported every incident. I shared with them my concerns for [my son] […] I asked for family support. It took almost a year for school to make this referral.
>
> (Parent 20)

Parent 20’s despair at missed opportunities and slow responses that hindered a resolution is clear. Her frustration is also apparent in the following extract where she considered how the school had failed to respond appropriately by assessing his needs, as specified in the SEND Code of Practice (DfE & DfHSC, 2015):

> Playground discussions with teachers escalated to written letters requesting clarity and information. In the meantime, [my son] continued to attend a school that was not capable of assessing him adequately, could not recognise his needs, ignored his signs of struggle, continued to use strategies that were not effective.
>
> (Parent 20)

In a further observation, Parent 20 expresses regret that she did not follow her intuition and instincts when the school failed to act on her

concerns. This reflects the discussion in Section 4.9.2 about the dilemma parents faced in deciding between following their instincts, or complying with systemic expectations and prioritising attendance at school, even if it seemed detrimental to a child's wellbeing:

> We shamefully and regrettably bowed to the pressure that was placed upon us from all those services that were there to "help" ... we ignored our parental instincts, ignored our intuition, and placed pressure on [our son] to go to the place that caused him so much anguish.
>
> (Parent 20)

Parent 40 also described how her concerns were dismissed by her son's schools:

> [My son's] two primary schools were both dismissive and again sometimes patronising. I would get told he'd grow out of things, he was fine when he was there, they didn't see anything, lots of 'oh yes but loads of kids do that'.
>
> (Parent 40)

The intention behind these school-based responses seemed to be to offer reassurance, however to parents with concerns it also demonstrated a reluctance to listen to their concerns, and a lack of recognition of potential clues indicating a problem exists. For the parents in this study, it was frustrating to hear these dismissive comments when they were experiencing significant difficulties at home and needed further input and advice. Parent 12 found her son's school also denied that there was a problem, even when she had the backing of other professionals who recognised her family needed additional support:

> As the school refusal escalated, we had a family support worker involved, who tried to negotiate with school to make some adjustments and to acknowledge [our son's] needs. The school persisted with their opinion that [our son] was making good academic progress and was always fine in terms of his behaviour and what they witnessed. Once the Occupational

> Therapist had been in and testified that she saw signs of anxiety, I began to lose confidence that the staff at school were able to meet his needs and became quite frustrated and angry that it was constantly placed back in the family and home, in terms of managing him - even though the support services who were coming to us from Early Help had assessed me at home and agreed that we already had everything in place that they would recommend.
>
> (Parent 12)

This frustration at the lack of support was also echoed by Parent 6 who, as a teacher, was aware of what her colleagues could do to help her son. However, she related their lack of action to a change in the school's culture as they had recently converted to an academy:

> I was dismayed to find that there were only brick walls, despite working with people who should have had the power to support my child, but the change of culture only had room for academic and data issues.
>
> (Parent 6)

The perception of whether the professionals who became involved held the power required to intervene in a practical and effective manner was something which was also observed by Parent 36 who wrote of her frustration in finding:

> Those that seemed to have some level of empathy appeared powerless to act.
>
> (Parent 36)

It was therefore possible that school staff dismissed parental concerns because of an awareness that they lacked the power or capacity to act in response to children's difficulties. These extracts might also suggest that school staff attempted to downplay the seriousness of the problems parents reported. This may indicate that school staff defined or interpreted each situation in a different way to the parents, reflecting the different ways that parents and professionals

have been noted to construct SAPs in the research literature (as discussed in Section 2.6.).

From the perspective of parents, their experiences mostly indicated a lack of empathy, compassion, and little interest in supporting them and their children. Responses appeared critical, punitive, and hostile, and a general feeling of indifference was apparent. Parents questioned why these attitudes might prevail, and whether they might reflect a lack of relevant training; issues with the funding of support in schools; or were reflective of dominant narratives around attendance, absence, and truancy (such as those discussed in Chapter 2).

There were elements of school-based experiences that parents wrote about which appear to create significant barriers to accessing support and achieving a resolution that will now be explored in the following two sections.

5.2.1 School senior leadership priorities

It became apparent within the accounts parents shared that the lack of empathy or support offered to children in schools was often driven or influenced by school senior leadership. The following extracts offer evidence of this observation:

> In year 3 her form teacher whispered to me at parents evening that she thought she might be dyslexic, she couldn't act on it because the head didn't believe in SEN and she would risk losing her job(!) In year 5 I paid for a private Educational Psychologist assessment. The head refused to allow the school or any teachers to participate so the report was limited and inconclusive.
>
> (Parent 3)

> In our case it was clear the SENCo knew that senior leadership would have zero tolerance of school refusal, to the point where I was told "let's just keep this between us for now". She was later banned from talking to me.
>
> (Parent 5)

> I think senior members of staff are generally more concerned with the school's overall performance and how a child who is struggling to attend will affect their attendance figures, plus the impact on limited resources (for support) in school.
>
> (Parent 8)

> The assistant head told me “We can't have parents dictating to us" when I asked for a minor change - very reasonable adjustment
>
> (Parent 8)

> I still don’t trust the senior management, but I am no longer afraid of them. I did complain to their faces, and went to the governors, but the senior management tried to push my children out of the school. I printed lots of legal documents and pointed out what they did wrong, what they should have done for a child with medical needs, mental health needs etc. The governors swept the whole thing under the carpet. I have since learnt that they systematically do this to children with special needs who don’t conform. Others have moved area because of what senior management put them through.
>
> (Parent 27)

The issues highlighted here are complex and could reflect a range of factors that might influence the actions of senior management in schools, including a need to maintain power and conformity; school funding deficits; the pressure to maintain high attendance rates and account for attendance data during Ofsted inspections; a lack of adherence with relevant legislation; a lack of training and awareness of relevant factors such as SEND and mental health; and a lack of understanding of how to effectively respond to attendance problems. Parent 12 made the following observation which suggests that the responses of school senior leadership are governed by the needs of the school as an institution, and this will have an impact on how teachers respond and how support is managed:

> Power dynamics: professional versus layperson. It is to do with institutional thinking, and how a school is a body or entity, with its own value system, needs and social agenda. Teachers

> seem rarely allowed to act on their own initiative but are always managed from above.
>
> (Parent 12)

5.2.2 Threats of legal action used to manipulate children

Some participants described how they believed threats of fines and prison terms for parents, and of children being 'put into care' were used by school staff to frighten and intimidate children, for example Parent 20 stated:

> They told him he was breaking the law and that mommy could get into very big trouble. She told him some parents even go to jail 'and then who would care for you? When our son sat there with no words, she added, "if you don't go to school, mommy can't go to work...and if mommy can't go to work, she won't be able to pay for you to live in this house...and then where would you live?
>
> (Parent 20)

Similar comments were made to Parent 28 and Parent 22, as they reported:

> The Education Welfare Officer proceeds to tell me I will get fined and sent to prison, all the while [my daughter] was listening, great this will really help her anxieties.
>
> (Parent 28)

> Together with the LA, [school] repeatedly threatened both [my daughter] and myself that she would be put into care, and I would go to prison if she didn't improve her attendance.
>
> (Parent 22)

Parent 8 also described how she felt her daughter was emotionally manipulated while in school to frighten her into attending:

> Whilst waiting for CAMHS to see her, we requested that [my child] be allowed to attend school for as much or as little as she

> could cope with, with no pressure. However, school did pressure her when she was there, including the Learning & Behaviour Mentor telling her, on a day when she couldn't manage more than an hour in school, that if her attendance didn't improve 'mummy and daddy could go to prison.'
>
> (Parent 8)

Parents questioned whether using such an approach was conducive to resolving school attendance problems, or whether it was more likely to exacerbate children's feelings of anxiety and guilt, and consequently make attendance more difficult for them. As discussed in Section 2.5 this punitive legal discourse was established to punish parents for truancy, but it is now viewed by many as ineffective in resolving school absence as it fails to consider more current understandings of factors that influence attendance.

5.3 Experiences within the health system

Positive support was offered by NHS professionals who recognised that the child and family needed help, and they then advocated for families in attempts to source further support. For example, Parent 23 expressed gratitude to her GP, Paediatrician, and Accident & Emergency staff who she found were supportive and non-judgemental as they responded in ways that:

> Didn't make me feel as though [child] wasn't important and didn't make me feel like a failure in way.
>
> (Parent 23)

Parent 20 also expressed gratitude for her GPs attempts to help, even while experiencing systemic barriers to accessing support, whereby no service wanted to take ownership of the problem leading to a cycle of signposting elsewhere:

> Our GP surgery is amazing. The GP's have gone above and beyond to support us as a family. They have witnessed the ping pong of referrals, where numerous agencies returned the referral signposting to another agency only for that agency to

> do the same. They wrote several letters explaining [child’s] needs and advocated for an EHCP.
>
> (Parent 20)

Similarly, Parent 39 explained how her GP tried to help, but also noted that there were few options available for him to try other than to write to the school:

> Firstly, our GP has been brilliant, very understanding but other than referring to CAMHS it doesn't feel like there is much else he can do. (Also, he wrote to school, explaining more about [child's] problems to them)
>
> (Parent 39)

Parents accounts of negative experiences within the NHS mostly related to staff who had demonstrated unhelpful and obstructive approaches. An example was provided by Parent 3 who described her GP as:

> Very unhelpful and unknowledgeable in relation to Autism and school refusal. Wouldn’t do a referral to home tuition team saying CAMHS had to do it, even though they knew an appointment for CAMHS would take months to organise. No subsequent follow-up even though they knew the extreme nature of the situation.
>
> (Parent 3)

Parent 26 expressed her gratitude for the support from her daughter’s paediatrician but also noted:

> She got bogged down with the system a few years ago and took early retirement. Her replacement was nice but totally worn down and overwhelmed and maybe even depressed by the lack of services
>
> (Parent 26)

This suggests that some negative experiences were linked to systemic issues such as low staff wellbeing; a lack of clarity about referral options and referral pathways; a lack of clarity regarding the responsibilities and scope of an agency's work; a lack of capacity both in terms of staffing, and in term of the numbers of patients who can be cared for within different parts of the health system.

5.4 Experiences within CAMHS

Some parents recounted valuable input from CAMHS, this included Parent 19 who was grateful for her CAMHS worker's respect for her as a parent and for her acknowledgement of her daughter's difficulties:

> The CAMHS caseworker who saw us when [my daughter] was 9 was amazing. She could see the distress that [my daughter] was in and also appreciated that I was doing everything I could to try to support her. She took self-harm and suicidal ideation very seriously and didn't dismiss it as childish manipulation or hysteria.
>
> (Parent 19)

Parent 23 also felt reassured by the empathetic and non-judgemental feedback she received from CAMHS:

> The CAMHS anxiety and depression team staff we saw were lovely, didn't try to make us feel we were at fault, really clear about how common anxiety is and reassured us that the steps I was taking to secure alternative education provision were the right steps.
>
> (Parent 23)

Parent 29 found the support and understanding offered by CAMHS through a home visit, medication, a care co-ordinator, and a medical sign off provided the respite from pressure to attend school that her son needed:

> CAMHS visited us at home within a month and he was started on Fluoxetine and Melatonin, but we still had to wait a further 3 months for a care co-ordinator. They told us that he was not well enough for school and signed him off. This took the pressure off and allowed him time to start to recover.
>
> (Parent 29)

These extracts indicate that parents' interactions with professionals were judged to some degree on how they were made to feel by the response of the professional. It was important for parents to find that their child's difficulties were taken seriously by the professionals they met with. The notion of blame was also significant for parents who often felt judged and vulnerable in the context of school absence. Professionals who acknowledged the validity of a parent's definition of the situation became empowering by promoting the parent's sense of self-worth, as their integrity was not being threatened by blame and dismissal.

However, in contrast, other parents described negative experiences, including Parent 1 who described CAMHS as 'one of the most frustrating services in this whole battle'. This opinion was the result of CAMHS initial refusal to see her son as they decided his difficulties related to him being autistic, meaning he was not considered eligible for help. Parent 20 also experienced CAMHS refusal to work with children with neurodevelopmental differences including autism:

> CAMHS? After battling for an appointment (and I mean battling) our son was turned away as he was not mentally ill but had neurodevelopmental difficulties (ASD). His self-harming and severe anxiety and depression were not enough for him to receive a service.
>
> (Parent 20)

Parents expressed their disappointment at delays in being offered appointments with CAMHS, for instance, Parent 29 explained, 'I was told repeatedly of the extensive waiting list for children that are chronically in need'. Further problems within CAMHS included the lack of capacity for long-term support, and a focus upon skewed priorities, as described by Parent 33:

> CAMHS were initially helpful, but we felt they were too keen to get her signed off and despite her self-harming they didn't see this as an issue because she was "coping" i.e., being in school even though she wasn't actually attending lessons.
>
> (Parent 33)

Parent 6 found that CAMHS were supportive of her son and recognised his difficulties, however again, they could not offer any practical help:

> CAMHS staff again reinforced the fact that I was doing the right thing, they supported his absence but again, they couldn't offer any practical support – I felt abandoned again.
>
> (Parent 6)

Parent 39 shared her thoughts on a range of problems following her CAMHS experiences:

> They are grossly underfunded and under-experienced and undertrained. Again, you have an overworked staff who have a poor understanding of diversities. There is often a blatant lack of respect or willingness to help or be useful. Staff morale is rock bottom. They don't seem to be helping anyone as everything is long into crisis before they agree to see you.
>
> (Parent 39)

These extracts from parents' accounts indicated perceptions that there is a disparity between the help that CAMHS need to provide for children, and the practical capacity that exists to provide that help due to underinvestment, a lack of resourcing, and the impact of low staff morale. Overall, this situation impacted upon parents' abilities to achieve a resolution by preventing or delaying access to services. It also limited children's access to support through the restricted criteria for access, or by signing them off too quickly, especially when problems had become entrenched by the delay in access to help.

5.5 Experiences within local authorities

There was one single mention of positive experiences with local authority staff or services, which was Parent 4's comment about verbal support she received:

> I did get support from the LAs specialist service we had countless meetings and phone calls nothing was ever initiated by them, but they were there for me to talk too, a support worker was assigned to [child] but it was sporadic, and he failed to make a connection.
>
> (Parent 4)

Otherwise, parents described their frustration and anger at the lack of support, communication failures, and deliberately obstructive tactics used by local authorities, mostly to avoid or delay arranging and funding provision for children with additional needs. Local authorities were reported to regularly fail to follow relevant legislation (e.g., section 19, Education Act, 1996; section 100, Children and Families Act, 2014) which should ensure that any child who needs it is offered appropriate support or alternative provision. Parent 35's account exemplifies these experiences:

> As for the LA, don't get me started! With [my child] it was horrendous from the start. First, they refused to assess for an EHCP because his needs were "well documented and understood". They caved before tribunal. Then they refused to actually do any of the assessments needed, even though they were perfectly reasonable. They used out-of-date private reports they knew weren't suitable. Then they refused to acknowledge my private SALT report because it stated specialist school. There was a massive lack of communication, even after several formal complaints to the Director of Children's services. I was blatantly lied to and even when I corrected them they claimed ignorance, saying they could only go by local policy. […] It took 49 weeks and 3 threats of Judicial Review to get a final plan. Which named his current junior school who had already said they couldn't meet needs.
>
> (Parent 35)

Parent 29 summed up the way many parents felt about their experiences with local authority staff:

> How do I feel about the LA? Angry! And I'm not an angry person. But I am so angry that they have such disregard for my sons needs and don't seem to care that whilst they have refused to provide a suitable provision for my son, that his mental health has steadily deteriorated. It's like a bizarre game that we have all been playing and my son is the one suffering. Angry is still the word!
>
> (Parent 29)

Parent's accounts indicated a range of problems within their interactions with local authorities which acted as barriers to achieving a resolution. These problems included a refusal to conduct assessments of needs; a lack of effective communication; dishonesty and a misuse of information; a failure to provide suitable provision; and the failure to follow relevant legislation.

This range of parental experiences highlights how working relationships between families and professionals are of great significance, especially in terms of how successful parents can be in achieving a resolution and fulfilling their duty to ensure children receive an education. When parents were engaging with professionals within the education, health and local government systems, certain features of their experiences were widely shared, and it is to these we now turn. These features related to the nature of the working relationships parents were able to establish with the professionals they encountered (which is explored in Section 5.6), and the problematic character of the systems as a whole, which obstructed a satisfactory resolution (which is explored in Section 5.7).

5.6 Working relationships between families and professionals

Professional responses featured heavily within parent accounts, and they were often described by parents as negative, judgemental, dismissive, and intimidating. Parents recognised the significance of these working relationships between families and professionals. Parent 18 construed how influential the approaches of both individual practitioners and systemic cultures can be:

> Constantly wading through the unhelpful people in order to find someone who does help is tiring. While adults who are employed to work with our children continue to blame the children for not “coping” instead of looking at their practice and working out how to help vulnerable children to stay in school nothing will change. This has to come from the top and the current system which continually puts vulnerable people down and blames them for being vulnerable is making everything worse.
>
> (Parent 18)

Here, it is suggested that the helpful professionals are those who recognise the possible impact of systemic factors, and who reflect upon whether it would be beneficial to alter their professional approaches, rather than insist that children adapt to environments they find distressing and overwhelming.

The relationship between schools and families was central to the Parents’ Journeys, as school is the site of children’s difficulties and therefore the focus of many interventions. It was therefore crucial for parents and school staff to work in partnership to identify and overcome the barriers stopping each child attending. The success or failure of these working relationships depended upon the beliefs, knowledge, and approaches implemented by those involved. Thematic Coding revealed five instances where *Positive Working Relationships* were described, which centred around empathy, flexibility, a willingness to listen and learn from each other, and a willingness to work in partnership to find a solution for the child. Whereas instances of *Negative Working Relationships* were coded fifty-five times within parent accounts, and these involved the perceived breaking of trust; poor communication; not following through on agreed actions; and being dismissive of information provided by families.

5.6.1 Positive working relationships

Parents recognised the benefits gained from the input of school staff who did demonstrate an understanding of SAPs and supported beneficial practices such as offering patience and flexibility. One such professional was acknowledged by Parent 16 who recalled:

> [My son's] SENCo was very understanding and is experienced, and she has seen it many times. She said some children managed to come back, some do not. She said she is there, when he is ready to return, and he can go back in on a reduced timetable at his own pace.
>
> (Parent 16)

The approach taken by the SENCo here may reflect her experience of working with numerous children experiencing attendance problems. The SENCo also indicates how she had learnt what works or doesn't work, and that children need time, space, and flexibility to be able to have some control over their return to education.

School staff who responded with empathy and positivity, and demonstrated appropriate knowledge and understanding were often individual staff members in pastoral roles, such as the support worker Parent 13 encountered:

> The best professional was [my daughter's] Support Worker at her second school. We call her Saint Nicky! She not only supported [my daughter] but she made me feel that I was actually a good parent. She always told us how brilliantly we were doing and constantly told us that she would always be there for [my daughter]. I remember her saying 'You haven't given up on her and nor will I.' She made me cry because she was so kind.
>
> (Parent 13)

The benefits of a positive working relationship between parent and professional are clarified in Parent 13's account. There was recognition and acceptance that there was unlikely to be a 'quick fix', yet the school was still willing to offer ongoing support without resorting to threats of legal action and excessive pressure to always force attendance. The mutual respect that is apparent in Parent 13's experience is something that many parents had hoped to experience but then struggled to find. According to Parent 12, this mutual respect could be

achieved through positive acknowledgement of, and respect for parental knowledge and input:

> Some practitioners seem to be open to accepting parents as experts. I know there will always be things I can learn but I also know my stuff. I am qualified and experienced in this area of work and have a good understanding of [my child's] needs. When practitioners have responded to this, I felt hopeful that services might move forward to support [my child] - after all, if I give a detailed account of his needs, haven't I reduced someone's workload?
>
> (Parent 12)

Parents often noticed the impact of the individual personalities and approaches of teachers. Some families found that their children coped better at school during the academic years when they had a specific teacher, or the support of a specific member of staff. However, attendance problems would then increase during other years when different staff members were involved. For example, Parent 19 noted that in pre-school:

> Although [my daughter] had refused a couple of times her teacher was amazing, had 30 years' experience and was loving and supportive, so soon made her feel secure and happy to go in again.
>
> (Parent 19)

Here again we can see mention of the elements of extensive professional experience and a loving and supportive manner. Parent 14 also noted that her son benefitted from relationships with specific professionals:

> He started in a small primary school where he felt safe and formed a strong relationship with the head teacher who took him under his wing. He was a lovely kind man and made [my son] feel safe and whom he trusted. However, in Year 5 the head retired and another key TA who he really liked died suddenly. […] He started to get lots of stomach aches, sickness and his behaviour started to change.
>
> (Parent 14)

Parent 14's observations highlight the importance of children feeling safe and of feeling a sense of belonging through the relationships they have access to in the school environment. It is also apparent from the extracts in this section that for parents, positive working relationships involved empathy and respect for children's feelings; acknowledgement that their difficulties were valid; and acceptance that resolving attendance problems would involve the school and family working in partnership, rather than through forcing children to attend and threats of punitive action, criticism, and dismissal of concerns.

5.6.2 Negative working relationships

Negative working relationships dominated parent experiences. The features of negative working relationships included school staff ignoring concerns and diagnoses; not honouring plans and agreements; and breaking children's and parent's trust. An example is offered by Parent 27 whose son was under medical investigation for ongoing severe pain and had been absent for two weeks. When he returned, he was still in pain, however school staff were unsympathetic, and decided his absence reflected learnt behaviour because his brother was also absent in relation to a different type of difficulty. Parent 27 explained:

> When [my son] was in year 5, he had a terrible time of continuous stomach pains, day and throughout the night for months non-stop. The school didn't believe him. They said they knew what a child in pain looks like, and he is not a child in pain. He had the stomach issues investigated but this took months of referrals and appointments with different doctors/hospitals. Meanwhile, the school offered a phased return with [my son] in control but as soon as he was in, they went back on everything they had promised him.
>
> (Parent 27)

Similarly, Parent 12's son had long-term difficulties and was extremely anxious and scared about returning to school for a new term. Parent 12 had negotiated with her son and school staff that he would have a gradual return and stay until morning break on his first day. She explained:

> When I came back at breaktime they told me he had been absolutely fine, nothing to worry about - so I went away until the end of school - when I finally picked him up, he was emotionally in pieces, and furious with me for not fetching him. I explained that I had come but had been told he was fine. He broke down and said that the school were liars, they lied to him, he can't trust them, he's never going back. I was also angry and hurt by the deception: not only had they not cooperated with me or believed me, or [my child], they had made things so much worse in doing so.
>
> (Parent 12)

A further example of broken trust was shared by Parent 14 who explained:

> [Our son] then went on the residential and on the first day had a migraine and we realised after, a panic attack. A teacher - head of year - from the school rang us and said she could manage him if we were happy for him to stay, and we said if he was ok then we didn't want him to miss out. Unfortunately, she wasn't totally honest, and he was actually really struggling. She lied to him and said our car had broken down, the bridge was broken etc, so he felt we'd abandoned him, and he really struggled for 5 days and was absolutely exhausted and depressed when he got back.
>
> (Parent 14)

Almost a third of parents in the study (n=14) mentioned that when they reported concerns to school staff, they were told the same thing – that their child was 'fine in school'. Although school staff may have intended to reassure parents, this response acted to invalidate and dismiss their concerns rather than acknowledge and explore what might be going on. Parent 10 experienced this scenario in a succession of settings, beginning in nursery:

> Each morning on arrival my son, who was 3 years old would cling to me or his dad. He had to be pulled away from us kicking and screaming. The nursery always assured us he was 'fine' 5 minutes after we left.

He then started at primary school, and she observed:

> We noticed an instant decline in his behaviour at home, but school consistently reported he was 'fine' in school.

As time went on her son was being restrained each morning to keep him in school, he was also self-harming and being violent towards family members, yet:

> School was still reporting that [child] was fine in school.
>
> (Parent 10)

Similarly, Parent 35 described her son being seen by four professionals from different disciplines, who each expressed ongoing concerns about his school-related trauma and deteriorating mental health; yet his school consistently insisted he was 'fine', ignored medical opinions, and continued to do so even after he was diagnosed with autism, dyspraxia, sleep disorder and severe anxiety.

The frustration parents described feeling when school staff insisted a child is fine in school was triggered by the disparity between what the school staff said, and what parents were seeing and hearing from children at home, for instance, Parent 27 explained:

> School always said he was fine once in, but I knew he wasn't. They said he didn't need any help as he was so able, yet I saw the struggles with attending school, mental health and his struggles with homework and any academic tasks. I was also told he was so quiet and well behaved at school
>
> (Parent 27)

Again, this indicates that there are differences in the ways that parents and professionals understand or interpret what they experience and observe. Equally some parents believed that children's distress was often missed within classroom settings, especially if a child 'masked' or hid their feelings, to avoid drawing

attention to themselves, being teased, or getting into trouble at school. Parent 5's account illustrated how different a child can appear at school, in comparison to how they appear at home:

> Along with the blame was quite a bit of disbelief because [our daughter] masked so well. We even went to a parents' evening when one of the teachers thought she had the wrong child's details because the [child] they knew at school was so different from the [child] we knew at home (stubborn, challenging, defiant, never slept, etc).
>
> (Parent 5)

This lack of recognition from school staff that anxious children, and autistic children can often hide and 'mask' their difficulties while in school often created significant difficulties. Conflicting opinions about a child's state of mind contributed to misunderstandings and breakdowns in communication and trust between school staff and parents. When these differing interpretations and conflicts of opinion occurred, it created situations where professional judgements of parents were reported during systemic administration processes, and then challenged or disputed by parents. As a professional and a parent, Parent 13 wrote of her frustration about the way that professional judgements can be problematic when they are based upon an individual practitioner's interpretation of a situation:

> The Deputy Head at the school [daughter] is registered at now has been very supportive but when I insisted on seeing a CAMHS referral that she had completed I found she had said: [Daughter's] parents have co-operated fully with the school but we have to repeatedly revisit principles relating to the management of [daughter's] (and their own) anxiety in order for strategies to be effective and they are in need of some intervention in order to move forwards with [daughter's] attendance.' I think this is a good example of how professionals can 'judge' parents (and I say this as a 'professional' myself who gives parents advice and attends 'Team Around the Child' and 'Children in Need' meetings about other families etc). Although this woman has been really helpful and sympathetic in many ways, she still obviously thinks we are overanxious, don't always take her advice and need further

> professional advice in order to help our own child. It's hard for professionals not to judge and therefore it's hard not to feel judged as a parent of a child involved with them.
>
> (Parent 13)

It was also noted that attitudes towards mothers specifically could seem problematic. Three parents shared their frustration at the common professional practice of referring to them as 'mum' in meetings, rather than using their formal name (as used for other attendees), this included Parent 12:

> I absolutely hate being referred to as Mum - my identity has not been stripped by my child's existence!! Many of the services do not take time to understand my position and make assumptions. It has led me to be very circumspect about what I reveal and now have a tendency to hold back my opinions and observations. Overall, it has felt that I am not trusted to be objective, and there is rarely any possibility that I might even be better informed, trained, or experienced than the practitioners.
>
> (Parent 12)

Referring to someone as 'mum' can feel disrespectful, and this was viewed by some parents as a tactic to disempower mothers in meetings, especially when all professionals were referred to by their formal names. Similarly, Parent 40 noted the difference in the way she was treated in comparison to her husband:

> One thing I have noticed though, is that if my husband comes to meetings people hang off his every word. It infuriates me because if I say the same thing I'm ignored! I don't know if this is a common thing, I imagine it's mostly mums who do all the advocating. A prime example was my daughter had some playtime removed. School were a bit non-committal about dealing with the person who removed it when I mentioned it. When we had a meeting and my husband brought it up, they were falling over themselves to sort it. It's the second time it's happened, misogyny is still alive and kicking!
>
> (Parent 40)

These observations again reflect the often-complex working relationship between professionals and parents, indicating underlying conflicts relating to power, gender, and perceived expertise. It was apparent within parents' accounts that these factors also influenced approaches and attitudes towards the management of SAPs and Chapter 8 includes further discussion of these influences.

5.7 Systemic failures

Parent accounts featured a spectrum of experiences regarding the problems they encountered navigating the education, health, and local government systems. This spectrum ranged from being completely ignored by any services they contacted, to facing the overwhelming involvement of numerous services, and threats of prosecution and child protection proceedings. For example, Parent 4 described how she struggled to find anyone who was willing to become involved in offering help or support:

> I would go round in circles every few months I would try the GP, Paediatrician. CAMHS to help with his mental health. I was usually fielded with an understanding ear but told that [child] was on a waitlist, he wasn't a priority, he would need to attempt to take his life a couple of times, if we got really desperate take him to A&E and get him sectioned […]. On the news parents were being fined for taking their children out of school to go on holiday, mine wasn't going, nobody checked it was like he didn't exist or anyone cared. I did wonder if I wasn't fighting and he was neglected whether anyone would of bothered with him. I came to the conclusion that it was down to me. I was put out of my comfort zone and made to feel like I was a nuisance and [child] was not eligible for any help.

(Parent 4)

In contrast, Parent 22 faced the ongoing involvement of school staff, social services, services within her local authority, GP, and CAMHS with ongoing threats and intimidation:

> The family coach and social worker repeatedly threatened us both, putting me in the position of having to submit to their control. Autonomy was taken away from us both. I felt helpless and afraid for [my daughter's] life. As the forced attendance

> continued, her mental and physical health deteriorated. Medical and CAMHS reports made no difference to the relentless harassment, gaslighting and abusive behaviour of school and LA staff.
>
> (Parent 22)

These variations may reflect the lack of a standard policy or pathway to access support for SAPs. It often appeared to be 'pot luck' whether a family encountered indifference or intense scrutiny, and this seemed to relate to the attitudes of the individual professionals involved; the policies enacted in local areas; and how the family circumstances and school attendance problems were interpreted by those who worked within the services involved.

Other parents shared thoughts about the systems and services they encountered which offered further insight. Parent 34 noted a lack of understanding of 'invisible disabilities', and a lack of appropriately trained health service staff with enough time to spend with children, and she suggested there was a 'one-size-fits-all' expectation that hinders the provision of individualised support. While Parent 7 observed 'a massive elephant in the room' which was a failure by schools to admit they could not meet the needs of all children. Furthermore, Parent 19 and Parent 24 shared their evaluations of systemic issues:

> Overall though, my faith in our society and our education system has been obliterated, despite, or even because of my victories with [my child]. I believe there are still very good, dedicated professionals working in mainstream education and health, but they are fighting within a system that is fundamentally broken, dangerous and corrupted
>
> (Parent 19)

> I am flummoxed at the aggressiveness of services and schools, their obstructiveness, the fact that professionals will give opinions that amount too lies to stop children getting the support they need. The services club together to gaslight us parents.
>
> (Parent 24)

Analysis of accounts such as these contributed to the creation of codes which were combined within the themes of *Systemic failures* and *Barriers to support*. These themes therefore identified influential features which were apparent within education, health, and local government systems, and these will now be discussed in turn.

5.7.1 A lack of effective guidance to access support

> I didn't find anyone with a knowledge of this situation for years. I searched, googled, phoned, emailed every professional body/organisation I could think of. No one would help.
>
> (Parent 22)

As Parent 22 highlights, many parents found their attempts to resolve their children's attendance problems were hindered by the lack of official guidance, or policies that informed them (and others) how to access help. Parent 5 perceived that she struggled to find help because no one knew how to help, but she also noted how damaging the lack of help was for the children involved:

> It really felt (and still feels) as though no one knew what to do - such a danger when it's left untreated for so long as [my daughter] was busy building a brick wall around herself so the longer it was left, the harder it was to get her to engage (she never did).
>
> (Parent 5)

These observations indicating that it is difficult for parents to find help for SAPs echoes the situation professionals also experienced, (as evidenced in Section 5.2.). Even when individual practitioners were supportive and wanted to help, there was nothing they could signpost families to that made a significant difference to their situation.

Parent 24 surmised that the reason it is difficult for parents to find help is that professionals working within the systems can find themselves in positions where they need to avoid taking on the responsibility for helping children and families:

> On the whole, I am appalled that we really had no real help and have been ignored. I waited for someone to say this is bad, it is not right, and the right thing to do is this.... but I realise now no one can say that and they are all covering their own backs and their budgets, and actually they have no duty of care.
>
> (Parent 24)

Some parents attributed the lack of appropriate guidance or services to a lack of funding. The following observations made by Parents 1, 4, 18, and 22 argued that the reasons different services and systems deny children access to support, or try to direct blame towards the child and family as the cause of their problems is to save their resources in terms of time and finances:

> I think the reason behind the mainstream school not wanting to help with support is financial, being a small school of only 68 kids at the time they had no budget to do this, so it was easier to say neither child needed help
>
> (Parent 1)

> When I started engaging with the SENCo we had meetings, but nothing was done. I felt like I was imposing on their time that they were far too busy to be here. The TAF meetings that followed felt much the same, they were too busy, school had no money, and they wanted [my son] off rolled ASAP, which I refused to do.
>
> (Parent 4)

> It's all about money and gatekeeping, hard to reach kids are expensive but if they say "Will not engage with the service" they can remove them from the list with no negative impact on data.
>
> (Parent 18)

> Local authorities similarly do not want these children because they don't want to pay the additional funding they are legally obliged to, nor do they want lower academic grades in their schools as it may affect their funding from Central Government. Government directives condone the unlawful practices, which invariably centre on blaming the parent, denying the children's difficulties, and pushing the child out of the school.
>
> (Parent 22)

Moreover, Parent 3 expressed frustration about the false economy of systemic avoidance of funding support, especially at an early stage before problems become entrenched and possibly more costly to resolve:

> Why do our kids have to reach crisis before anything is done? Does no-one see that providing early support saves money in the long-term as it avoids crisis? Yet another fight [...] Sadly I believe much of this comes down to resourcing. Schools don't have the money or time to really try to understand the struggles of individual children who become a burden to them, and who affect their figures, which ultimately reflect badly on the school. HOWEVER, it costs nothing to listen to parents and be supportive and ultimately neglecting the needs of children at an early stage will only create the need for additional support later on.
>
> (Parent 3)

Although parents were proactive in terms of seeking help, they often came to a realisation that they could not rely on the systems to provide a suitable solution. Instead, parents concluded they might need to identify a solution to help their child without professional assistance, as Parent 6 reflected:

> I have quickly learned that I could access more information than [professionals] knew and that my gut instinct was the one to follow – which I always have done. Initially there was the suspicion that it was a family issue – easy conclude when professionals did not know family dynamics. The GP I saw was very sympathetic, she had a close GP friend in exactly the same situation, however, there was little that she could do. Family Support Workers were supportive to a degree but could

> only call on the same people / services that I had already tried, and they experienced the same closed doors. In reality, they had no training, recognised that I was trying my best, but they couldn't offer any other solutions. At no point did anyone say that actually it might just be a question of taking the pressure off and waiting for things to improve.
>
> (Parent 6)

The suggestion offered by Parent 6 that sometimes the best solution is to remove the pressure to attend and allow the child space to recover and improve is one that is difficult for professionals to suggest in their official role, because they are required to follow policies and legislation that are strongly focused upon full attendance.

5.7.2 A lack of working partnerships between services and systems

There is a legislative expectation that different services will work in partnership to support children (e.g., Children and Families Act, 2014). Parents noted the problematic nature of this expectation, for instance Parent 13 found that CAMHS and her child's school had no effective working partnership, and the lack of respect and cooperation between them became a barrier for her and her child in making any progress:

> It's often felt to us that CAMHS staff despaired of some of the stuff that the school did with [my child] but they didn't have the power to change anything. The school could ignore advice from a psychologist with no come back. Both services need to work in genuinely close partnership to support children, young people, and families.
>
> (Parent 13)

Parent 19 described a similar situation, whereby her child's school was dismissive of a CAMHS professional's attempts to help:

> [The CAMHS caseworker] was very supportive of [child] and of me, she put things in place that gave me evidence to present to the school, she came to meetings with me and was

> subsequently treated absolutely abominably by the head teacher, SENCo, and class teacher of my daughter's second school. It was shocking to see the way a fellow professional was treated by my daughter's school, but it was also eye-opening. I realised after that meeting that the school would do or say ANYTHING to defend their position even if it meant behaviour that was totally unprofessional towards medical staff.
>
> (Parent 19)

Parent 22 was grateful for a Paediatrician's efforts to inform the school and local authority of her child's needs and difficulties, although she noted that rather than act upon this information the school and local authority ignored his report:

> Paediatrician was helpful, wrote a lengthy report confirming the physical health issues (migraine, IBS, mobility issues, tip toe walking) as being very real physical outcomes of severe anxiety, triggering by sensory issues, all relating to school attendance. His opinion was that CAMHS should assess her and would be best placed to help her. School and LA totally disregarded his report.
>
> (Parent 22)

Parent 40 also found that her son's school acted as a barrier to him accessing help, as they dismissed the input of an Educational Psychologist:

> We had a recent Educational Psychologist report saying [child's] voice needs to be heard. It hasn't been heard by the LA because when school get his views, they dismiss them because it's not what they want to hear.
>
> (Parent 40)

A similar situation was described by Parent 18, with the school SENCo influencing the input of a speech and language therapist:

> We have met so many professionals over the years, the ones who let us down mostly were the school staff and those who were influenced by them, for instance a speech and language

> therapist who was supposed to monitor [my daughter] in school but only ever spoke to the SENCo and never observed her. The SENCo kept telling her that [my daughter] was "fine" when clearly, she wasn't. We eventually got a verbal apology from the manager of the Speech and Language Therapy service.
>
> (Parent 18)

The extracts shared here appear to indicate a lack of effective and respectful working practices between education and health system staff, especially regarding school staff choosing to ignore or dismiss medical opinion and diagnosis. This can create significant barriers for parents and children in being able to access the support they might need to resolve SAPs.

5.7.3 A lack of child mental health awareness and support

The ways that people understand and respond to children experiencing anxiety and other mental health difficulties was seen by parents as a barrier for children to access support. As Parent 8 describes below, this can relate to common beliefs about anxiety and irrational fears:

> I think a common view of anxiety (and I used to share this view) is that if you face the fear it will diminish, if you avoid what causes you anxiety you will never get over it and it will get worse. The problem is it depends on what someone is anxious about. Sometimes it's an irrational fear, sometimes it's very rational, e.g., bullying, fear of failure, SEN not being met, etc. And in all cases, people who are overwhelmingly anxious need the right support if and when they take steps to expose themselves to their fear. Above all, they need to feel in control, but schools cannot accept children being put in control or having their own power - their whole system relies on THEM being in control, and children doing what they're told without question.
>
> (Parent 8)

When these common beliefs are combined with the power dynamics within school-based relationships it can create situations where

children's anxiety is dismissed because it is considered inconvenient to acknowledge or is viewed as a normal part of life. Parent 23 observed:

> There seems to be a general lack of acknowledgement or concern about children experiencing anxiety in schools and CAMHS – it is quickly dismissed as 'just anxiety' or assumed that a child will learn to cope, or will just manage, if they are struggling with anxiety. I would like to understand why this is the case. This point is most frustrating. And also, the thing at the heart of why we (society) struggle with mental health issues. I think we're still hard-wired to fall into the trap of thinking "everything is hard/we all had it hard/you know nothing about anything." That sense that because the generations before us "put up with" terrible things we shouldn't talk about how hard it is to leave the house, go to work or school or socialize.

(Parent 23)

Parent 13 offered the theory that an underlying problem is that children's mental health and wellbeing is not a priority for schools:

> I am not sure schools feel accountable. They feel accountable for educating children. They are therefore obsessed with grades and attendance as part of achieving the results they want. They don't feel responsible for children who don't attend school other than for trying to get them into school to achieve those results. I think school talk the talk about mental health and wellbeing but, in our experience, they haven't embraced it as central to everything they do. Policies on websites mean nothing if senior leadership don't completely buy into those policies and ensure that everybody else in the school does too.

(Parent 13)

Frustration was also expressed by parents about the apparent failure of health services to assess and identify the underlying reasons why children were anxious and then respond appropriately:

> Social misconception over what anxiety is, how it occurs in children. Absolute lack of resource to investigate properly and even if they could assess and diagnose, no facility to support and treat. I am on a low income and have had to sacrifice a lot to be able to pay for play therapy and psychology assessments for my children. They haven't ever met thresholds for support via CAMHS or other statutory or even charitable services.
>
> (Parent 12)

The situation described by Parent 12 illustrates how some parents were forced to fund their children's mental health assessments and therapies themselves, because they found a barrier to their child accessing CAMHS or other services was the very high thresholds for access.

5.7.4 A lack of inclusivity in schools

Parents reflected upon the concept of inclusivity and legislation requiring schools to make reasonable adjustments to support individual needs and disabilities. Parent 13 pointed out how schools appear to struggle to accommodate children who require more individualised support:

> I think schools can only operate successfully if all children fit the required mould. They are underfunded and understaffed so it's very hard to support children who don't fit
>
> (Parent 13)

Parent 12 used a metaphor to express her concerns about the way she perceived that the children who do not fit comfortably within our education system are those that become anxious and unable to participate:

> "Our education system is clearly failing society in multiple ways. The children who end up with anxiety are the grains that sit in the sieve. Nobody knows what to do with them - they won't fit through the usual route into the dish, you can keep on shaking the sieve and with force, a few more grains might be assimilated. But what happens to the rest?"
>
> (Parent 12)

Parents therefore queried why the current education system appears to adopt a ‘one-size-fits-all’ approach that fails to respond appropriately to differences in children’s needs, abilities, and circumstances. For instance, Parent 23 commented on the discriminatory practice of rewarding high levels of attendance:

> Yep. I personally hate the lip service paid to addressing inclusivity (including mental health needs) that is then swept aside by awarding treats and rewards to children with 100% attendance.
>
> (Parent 23)

5.7.5 A lack of compliance with DfE guidance and legislation

Parents reported that guidance and legislation relating to the support a child should receive, or how their attendance and absence were recorded, was not always followed correctly. For instance, Parent 40 found that her son’s absences were not coded correctly or consistently in the school attendance register:

> With [child] they were fairly good about his difficulties attending school and absences were mostly authorised until we appealed his EHCP then they stopped authorising them. His head of year got very flustered when I said it hadn't gone unnoticed when they stopped doing so. I don't know why they did that, the EWO sorted it out in the end. But since then, they've been okay.
>
> (Parent 40)

Parent 20 also had ongoing difficulty with her son’s absence being coded correctly, until the last day of term when the headteacher had a change of heart:

> The head approached me and gave me a revised attendance sheet “on reflection, we recognise that [your son] has been unwell, so we have changed all his unauthorised absences to illness”. This was on the last day of term!!!!!!
>
> (Parent 20)

Parent 2 identified difficulties which were created for her son because his primary school had failed to follow the SEND Code of Practice (DfE & DfHSC, 2015) correctly. This led to him being inadequately supported during the transition to secondary school, triggering attendance problems:

> At the end of primary school however it was clear what the way they had managed [son's] differences was to accept him as he was. Which I know is 100% a good thing but it didn't set him up to go into Secondary successfully when he didn't have a diagnosis.
>
> (Parent 2)

Parent 13 found that the headteacher at her daughter's school had no awareness of The Equality Act 2010:

> At the beginning we listened to staff at the school, who I now know didn't have a clue! Their lack of knowledge is scary really. They were especially ignorant about unlawful discrimination against a child with a disability. When we met with the Head she really had no idea about the law on this.
>
> (Parent 13)

Good practice recommendations suggest schools maintain contact with absent children, keep them informed of their class's activities and news, and provide work for them to do at home to prevent additional anxiety building up about missed work. It is thought that this helps keep children connected to their school and encouraged to accept help and keep trying to overcome their difficulties. Parents found this rarely happened in practice because school staff viewed this support as 'condoning absence', when seemingly they assumed children were making choices not to attend, and were misbehaving or lazy, and therefore deserved to be punished rather than supported. The following extracts indicated the reluctance of school staff to assist children while unable to attend school, even when government guidance suggests they do so:

> We requested school send work out, [my daughter] still wanted to learn, but they refused saying it meant they were agreeing with [my daughter] being off school and they thought she was perfectly well enough to attend.
>
> (Parent 28)

> School refused throughout to provide any alternative educational support, despite repeated requests from me to send work home. Their response was "she had to attend school to access her education". I provided a copy of the legislation 'Providing an education for children unable to attend school' and pointed out their legal obligation to provide appropriate educational support. They pretended never to have heard of this legislation and then dismissed it.
>
> (Parent 22)

> We tried to do schoolwork at home, but the school wouldn't give us anything (we were on unauthorised absence so that would apparently have constituted endorsing the absence)
>
> (Parent 5)

These examples demonstrate the apparent variation in awareness of legislation and how individual settings apply or ignore DfE guidance and government legislation. The extracts also illustrate how children and parents can be thwarted in their attempts to maintain educational activity and progress by the influence of professional's attitudes towards absence from school.

5.7.6 A lack of accountability

Some parents believed that what they saw as lies, misinformation and unprofessional conduct suggested many of the professionals they encountered were not adequately held to account or appeared to be accountable to no-one. The following extracts evidence these perceptions of parents:

> The level of lies, misinformation and outright illegal practice across the board is shocking and is only exposed when parents find the energy, headspace, and finances to fight it.
>
> (Parent 5)

> The loss of any trust in the system, or in people that are supposed to be public servants is mind blowing. To be lied to and misled purely in an attempt to get you to shut up and go away and stop costing them money is dreadful. If these people worked for anywhere else they would be sacked and or sued. But it seems there is no accountability.
>
> (Parent 35)

> Accountability would be a game changer. If these heads/teachers/LSA's had to be held accountable for their words and actions, it would at the very least make them think. If they could challenge and change the way they thought of diversities, children, parents, and their roles in other people's lives, they might just change their opinions and actions.
>
> (Parent 27)

When parents found themselves in situations where it appeared that a lack of accountability was hindering them in helping their children, they were frustrated and angered because there are few ways they could take action if professional practices did not comply with legislative expectations. This lack of accountability can therefore lead to children missing out on access to the help they need.

5.7.7 Differing interpretations of school attendance problems

As revealed within this chapter, a factor that seemed to significantly influence the ability of parents and professionals to work together was that they had differing interpretations and understandings of children's' behaviours and the reactions they observed (which could be different in the home and school settings). These differences in perception were then exacerbated by other factors which have been discussed in this chapter such as the lack of a pathway or guidance for

school attendance problems. Parent 3 recognised this and pointed out that many parents don’t have the answers either, however she went on to say:

> I do however know that working collaboratively is much more likely to create a successful outcome. Blaming and prosecuting parents (most of whom are desperate to get their kids into school) is never the answer.
>
> (Parent 3)

Through her job as a social worker, Parent 20 noticed her colleagues were: “supportive (theoretically)” of her attempts to seek help for her son and his attendance difficulties, however she noticed that:

> There was not one professional however that could relate or appreciate the barriers in my son’s way to accessing an education that was suitable for his needs.
>
> (Parent 20)

Parents thought the lack of understanding of the child and family perspective, along with the dominant expectation that all children must be in school, influenced the common practice of pressuring parents to physically force children to attend school, as evidenced in the following extract:

> I was told to ‘drag her into school in her pyjamas and we will deal with her’.
>
> (Parent 3)

Parent 13 exemplified parents who found that physically forcing a child into school did not lead to an improvement in attendance:

> The advice from the school was to get her in every day. They reassured us that once she was in, she was fine. So, we forced her to go, holding her hand and pulling her to school. As time went on, she got more and more hysterical, and we had some horrendous times when she would run away from us and one

> particular day when she ran out of school and several members of staff ran after her. […] Some days she would go in ok, some days she ended up staying at home and sometimes we forced her in. Our relationship with her fell apart and at Easter we told the school we were no longer prepared to force her in.
>
> (Parent 13)

Parent 2 was advised to take a punitive approach by not allowing her child to do things they enjoyed while unable to attend school:

> One of the things school staff told me to do to 'encourage' [child] to come to school included not allowing him to go to Rock School - a Saturday band practise he did regularly attend. I couldn't believe they would suggest taking away his only time he got out of the house and enjoyed himself.
>
> (Parent 2)

These approaches reflect the dominant underlying assumption that children who do not attend school are misbehaving or truanting and therefore need to be punished to teach them to conform. The following comments made by professionals to parents indicated that they believe the children concerned were making a choice about attendance at school. They also imply that they think it is important for adults to maintain a level of control over children and enforcing attendance is a part of this dominance over children:

> "He's choosing to behave that way." (School staff)
>
> "Your son needs to be in school and he needs to know he doesn't have a choice about this." (School staff)
>
> "You can't set a precedence." (Pastoral manager)
>
> "You can't give your son the message it is Ok not to go to school." (Social worker)
>
> "It's a phase" (Pastoral manager)

These differences in perception and approach could be representative of the differing levels of understanding of individual children's underlying needs,

difficulties, and triggers for school attendance problems. For instance, in the situation Parent 2 describes (above) the school staff might assume that if the child can attend Saturday band practice, they should be able to attend school too, however Parent 2 argues that this fails to recognise that the attendance problems relate specifically to the school environment.

5.7.8 A lack of knowledge and awareness of SEND

In Section 4.2.3 it was stated that the existence of special educational needs or disabilities (SEND) appears to be particularly significant within this study as forty of the forty-seven children who featured within parents' accounts have a SEND that had been diagnosed prior to, or during, the period described in parental accounts. In addition, fourteen children have a diagnosed physical health condition, and twenty-two children have a diagnosed mental health condition. A systemic failure that exists as a barrier to support, and that may impact upon the differences in understanding of children's attendance difficulties between professionals and parents is the lack of knowledge and awareness of SEND in schools, along with a willingness and knowledge of how to support children with physical and mental illness, as noted by Parents 40 and 13:

> I think schools don't have the knowledge or training when it comes to Special Educational Needs and have a lot of catching up to do. It astounds me how little they know when schools are full of kids with Special Educational Needs.
>
> (Parent 40)

> It's interesting at the moment as my son is in being assessed for SEN and we have been very lucky with some of the professionals involved, but some of his teachers lack even basic knowledge of what it's like for a child like him and I find that terrifying. All those who work in education should have basic SEN and mental health training, otherwise they can end up taking decisions about children that can have massive implications.
>
> (Parent 13)

As demonstrated by the study participants, when children experience difficulties, their parents often must take a proactive approach. This can mean they gain a significant amount of knowledge about their children's specific needs, difficulties, diagnoses, or conditions because they need to research and understand how to help and support their child on a daily basis. In comparison, Initial teacher training courses include a bare minimum of training in SEND and any further knowledge is gained through experience and Continued Professional Development, so is therefore variable. These varying levels of knowledge and experience may have an influence upon the differing interpretations of individual children's difficulties and support needs that has been apparent throughout this chapter. If this was a factor in individual cases it created further problems for parents who found their agency was diminished because their input was less valued than the input of professionals. Parent 5 observed:

> I think there's an element of not having to listen to parents, plus an attitude that whilst a parent may be the expert on their own child, a professional will have their specific area of expertise which often 'trumps' the parent's. And where there are several professionals involved, the parent view is marginalised further, so 1 against 3 or 4 or 5 'experts'.
>
> (Parent 5)

5.8. Parents working in related professional roles

Six parents answered questions about their experiences of resolving their children's SAPs while also working as teachers or in social work. None of these six parents found their professional standing or experience helped them to find support or achieve a resolution. They all reported extended periods of difficulty, systemic failings, and negative school responses. Senior colleagues were judgemental and displayed little willingness or knowledge of how to help them. Parent 6 explained:

> They [senior staff] take a very subjective view of the situation, which is counterproductive and even undermines parents further, there is an assumption that parents are not doing all that they can to help their child. Few colleagues really understood the stress involved in dealing with a child who

> cannot get into school. I suspect some felt that I was a 'soft touch' – difficult to justify, however, when they knew my other very academically successful children.
>
> (Parent 6)

All six parents stated their professional training had not included supporting children with anxiety, attendance difficulties, or SEND. Four teachers noted how their professional knowledge helped them in that they could use the correct terminology - what Parent 6 referred to as 'school speak'. Knowing how the systems work and what support should be available was seen as a positive in aiding negotiations, but also a negative because it added to levels of personal frustration.

As a social worker, Parent 20 found that her professional training empowered her, as she explained:

> My profession has enabled me to have the confidence, experience, capacity, and insight to challenge/question/argue and fight for our son at every stage. Without my professional experience, I truly believe we would not have achieved positive outcomes we have. My familiarity in chairing/attending meetings/presenting in court, with many multi-disciplinary professionals gave me the confidence to apply this as a parent during the meetings/tribunals we attended for him.
>
> (Parent 20)

All six parents compared their own experience to the experiences of other parents in the support group, and expressed concern about how those parents would be at even more of a disadvantage, for instance, Parent 24 explained:

> I didn't feel confident, but I knew the front I had to put on from the off. The stuff I read about mothers being cut off from school communication because they challenged something or said something is unbelievable. I was often quite challenging and demanding more so than many, perhaps I did it in a professional manner, it's hard to say. I feel that knowing secondary schools so well, and the teacher characters that you

> encounter, and the different teaching styles, enabled me to get a very clear picture of what was happening to my son.
>
> (Parent 24)

While Parent 20 observed:

> The Local Authority relies heavily on the naivety and ignorance of parents and many parents, who do not have the capacity, ability, understanding, curiosity to question, are ultimately at a distinct disadvantage.
>
> (Parent 20)

There was also recognition of professional benefits gained through their experiences:

> I would also say that what I have gone through with both my children has made me a better professional as I have a real insight into what it's like on 'the other side. […] Equally with what's happened with our daughter, I would never judge somebody else's parenting.
>
> (Parent 13)

However, five of the six parents made career changes because of their experiences of the systems as parents. Parent 20 needed to take sick leave and then resigned from her job as a social worker to be at home while her son was unable to attend school. Parent 6 explained that she handed in her notice from her teaching job saying, ‘I could not reconcile my role as a parent and that of being a teacher’ and ‘I am bitter that we have had to fight to be believed’. Parent 24 found that her experiences changed her opinion of the education system and CAMHS, as she explained:

> It was a curse knowing what was going on. Very distressing for me. I have left a job in mainstream secondary, and I don’t think I could ever go back.
>
> (Parent 24)

These experiences suggest that any systemic barriers that hinder a resolution for SAPs are significant enough to impact upon parents even if they have an inside knowledge of those systems.

5.9 Chapter summary

This chapter explored parents' experiences when they attempted to navigate relevant systems in search of advice and support. Within each journey, parents needed to negotiate with professionals in education, health, and local government, and in doing so, they experienced a range of mostly negative attitudes and beliefs. These experiences suggest that when parents do take a proactive approach and seek to resolve SAPs, the systems they engage with are not structured or prepared to support their efforts.

Chapter 6 will now explore the difficulties that parents experienced in the context of the family and home setting. These difficulties relate to practical aspects of family life, along with the interactions that occurred between the child, family members, peers, and employers. Although the systemic and home contexts are being explored in separate chapters it is important to highlight that parents were managing both contexts simultaneously.

Chapter 6. Managing the home context while experiencing school attendance problems

6.1 Introduction

Following the exploration of parents' experiences of navigating the education, health, and local government systems to seek a resolution in Chapter 5, Chapter 6 now explores parents' experiences in managing various aspects of family life whilst also coping with the ongoing SAPs.

6.2 The impact on family life

Family life continued while parents supported children and navigated relevant systems, however parents described difficulties in coping with their regular responsibilities including employment obligations and household management tasks. Extended difficulties each morning or throughout the day meant some parents had to reduce working hours or leave employment to be at home with their child or children. Financial pressures increased for many if they stopped working, worked fewer hours, or had additional costs to cover funding private provision or assessments for a child. The stress of trying to manage all these difficulties affected relationships within families. Individual parents reported feeling resentful that they shouldered all responsibility for managing the SAPs situation while their partner was at work or was unsure how to help. The situation was often made more difficult by the reactions of other people if they made critical or judgemental comments. Analysis of parents' accounts revealed codes clustered into the themes: *Family Disruption, Family Relationships, Employment* and *Finances*, and *Reactions of Others,* which will now be explored in more detail.

6.2.1 Family disruption

Daily family routines were disrupted if a child who would normally have been at school remained at home for extended periods of the day. Making plans and keeping to schedules became problematic due to difficulties leaving home or transporting and leaving a distressed child at school. Parent 27 described the

problem encountered by many parents who had to remain in the school building for extended periods if their child was too distressed to be left, or if they were called in to meetings with staff, as she found that:

> Nothing could be planned as every plan was at risk of being scrapped due to having to support children in school
>
> (Parent 27)

Parent 27 also explained the complexity of her home situation when children made conflicting demands of her:

> It was particularly difficult on the practical side when you have one child clinging to you, pleading with you, threatening things etc, but other siblings who needed support or transport themselves.
>
> (Parent 27)

Time at home was often taken up with accommodating children's specific needs in the SAPs context, which often disrupted the schedules and needs of other family members, for example Parent 19 described her daughter's distress and the impact it had:

> Our whole lives revolved around [our daughter's] anxieties about school, from the moment she woke up in the morning until she went to sleep (which was usually after 11.30 because she was so anxious she couldn't sleep, and we would spend hours trying to get her to sleep. She also frequently wet the bed and so was either up in the night with that or had to be carried into the bath first thing in the morning exhausted, upset, and angry.
>
> (Parent 19)

These difficulties often created a negative atmosphere within the home, as family members tried to cope with complex daily events and emotional responses. Parent 5 described how people were affected in her family:

> [Our daughter] didn't sleep so life at home became very difficult – it was rarely calm and [Husband] struggled to keep his cool when he was tired from yet another day at work on no sleep. I would start every day promising to be patient and calm, only to find that most days I would descend into anger and frustration.
>
> (Parent 5)

Similarly, Parent 20's account described the unpredictability, uncertainty and heightened anxiety that were features of their home-life:

> Often, home was a scene of chaos. We stopped talking, it was just too much to relive the events that had unfolded and as we had no answers or support available, there was nothing to be said. We just knew we had to keep going, doing the best we could each day.
>
> (Parent 20)

Parent 24 offered some insight into her family life and the impact of the pressure to achieve a resolution:

> Just incredibly difficult for me to make sure the whole family was ok let alone myself and the regular school meetings and dealing with CAMHS. The whole situation has put enormous pressure on the marriage. All we ever talk about is stress and dealing with all this nonsense.
>
> (Parent 24)

Accounts such as these projected a sense of families in crisis, where they were struggling to function, with everyone coping as best they could.

6.2.2 Family relationships

The parents who participated in the study reported an unequal division of responsibility. There would often be one parent who held the main responsibility for supporting the child to attend school, for communicating with professionals,

attending meetings, and trying to navigate and manage the situation. If there was a second parent they would often be less involved, possibly because they were the main wage earner, or had less engagement in morning routines. The parent that held the main responsibility often became resentful and struggled not to feel envious of the parent who was able to ‘escape’ from the situation at home and school. Parent 40 explained how she felt in this situation:

> I get really resentful of my husband if I'm honest and wish I could go to work and come home and not deal with any of it! He often gives me advice which winds me up as he doesn't actually know what he's talking about and tells me what to do when he does nothing! He has no idea what I'm on about half the time, he doesn't research anything himself. He has Autism too. It makes me feel like I might as well be on my own as I do it all on my own 99% of the time.
>
> (Parent 40)

The resultant stress affected the dynamic of the adult relationships as parents struggled to communicate or agree how to manage their children. Parent 13 shared her frustration about such difficulties:

> It’s also affected my relationship with my husband, at times it has put a big strain on us. He is supportive and empathetic but doesn’t really get anxiety, so I won’t discuss her feelings with him. On the odd occasion when she has, he doesn’t know what to do or say, and has often said the wrong thing by mistake. This has led to him detaching himself to some extent and leaving me to deal with it all.
>
> (Parent 13)

There would often be an impact upon the relationship between parents as they struggled to agree upon a coping strategy, such as the experience Parent 24 shared:

> All this stress and never really knowing what to do for the best had our marriage in tatters and stress often manifested in

> arguments or one of us would get defensive if the other said don't do this technique on him try this.
>
> (Parent 24)

Siblings often remained in the background as parental attention was focused mostly on the child experiencing SAPs. In some cases, siblings became directly involved in supporting, or coping with the behaviour of their brother or sister, such as Parent 16's son:

> My oldest son who is 16 seem to take everything in his stride. He was given less attention at the time as all the focus was on [his brother] and his behaviour. He was at college so still had his routine. I would often ask him to look after the dog in his room when [his brother] was having a meltdown. He has been helpful in trying to get [his brother] out by walking round the shop with him. [His brother] is unpredictable and can bolt home if he gets scared. [Sibling] would have to turn around and follow him home.
>
> (Parent 16)

Parents described how for some siblings the situation triggered feelings of resentment, as Parent 3 found:

> Her elder sisters were initially sympathetic but now do resent the fact that they have to go to school and work hard and she doesn't. We all struggle to understand to be honest. One sister is doing A' levels and her relationship with [her sister] is now becoming very strained. She blames me for not forcing [her sister] to school and trying hard enough to sort out the situation. This is really hurtful as obviously I would give anything to get [her sister] well and back to school and I do my best.
>
> (Parent 3)

Some siblings expressed their bewilderment as they struggled to understand what was happening to their brother or sister and in some cases, why they felt differently about school, as described by Parent 10:

> Our daughter couldn't understand why her brother got to stay home some days, but she didn't, she also couldn't understand why he didn't like school as she loved it.
>
> (Parent 10)

For some parents, the situation triggered feelings of guilt because their attention was focused upon the child experiencing SAPs, to the detriment of their siblings. Sometimes, as Parent 20 realised, this meant that the impact on siblings went unrecognised for a while:

> The impact on our younger son, [sibling] was huge. Sadly, we were so consumed with [his brother's] needs and behaviour that we didn't recognise the impact it had on [sibling].
>
> (Parent 20)

Parent 13 noted the reaction of her younger son which indicates how much resentment he felt:

> He is very angry with her, and their relationship is difficult. He often throws insults at her about not going to school. He says that she ruined our family etc. So much of our attention was on her that I feel guilty that he got neglected for a long time.
>
> (Parent 13)

Because parents time was often subsumed with supporting individual children, siblings had to adapt how they managed their daily activities, which was something Parent 6 reflected upon:

> Siblings had to become very independent very quickly and regardless of them perhaps needing support, would have to

> problem-solve for themselves. Siblings have all been resentful at one time or another of the way that their brother is treated, and allowances are made.
>
> (Parent 6)

Some siblings were negatively affected by family environments with such high levels of stress. Parent 24 found this, as she explained:

> The little one was brought up in a house with lots of stress, we tried to shield him from it as much as possible, but the little brother became highly anxious at 3 years old - the same time as my eldest was unable to go into school. The little one became really manic and also began refusing. It was incredibly difficult to get him into nursery and he wouldn't get dressed and screamed and cried and didn’t want to go and cried when he was there. He was fine before that. I had to pull him out of nursery for a term because he was too distressed.
>
> (Parent 24)

Parents indicated that the impact upon all members of the immediate families was often significant. Relationships between parents were often under great strain, possibly reflecting differences in opinions and approaches. Relationships between siblings in the family, and between parents and siblings of the child experiencing SAPs were also under strain as each person held a personal viewpoint about school attendance and opinions concerning how the family should respond to the situation. These personal viewpoints often seemed to conflict with the viewpoint of the child and the parent at the centre of the SAPs, meaning that parent had to act as a mediator or advocate for the child within the home context as well as in the systemic context.

6.2.3 Employment and finances

Parents expressed sadness and frustration at needing to reduce working hours or give up jobs and careers if the SAPs were not resolved quickly through early intervention. In some cases, the impact upon a parent’s life was significant, as indicated by Parent 8’s experience:

> The biggest impact, other than on [child], has been on me. I've had to change my work to a lower paid role with less hours. I am partway through studying to qualify as a counsellor / psychotherapist and it's likely I will have to put the next stage of my studies on hold now.
>
> (Parent 8)

In some cases, the impact came through the loss of stability and increased likelihood of future career impacts, because of the detrimental effect upon a parent’s professional record and reputation:

> My time off and reduced hours has made me particularly vulnerable at work with redundancies to be announced over the next few months.
>
> (Parent 36)

Sometimes the impact was more wide-reaching than the immediate family, as parent 22 explained:

> I had to give up my work as a carer for a 98-year-old, who I had looked after for 12 years, thereby forcing him to go into a home, something he had always dreaded. This added to my feelings of guilt and failure.
>
> (Parent 22)

Parental concern about the financial costs in relation to SAPs and the difficulties encountered when navigating systems was apparent within the accounts they shared. The following extracts demonstrate some of the financial impacts parent’s experienced:

> I had paid out thousands of pounds in private reports and going to tribunal for education needs. […] I’m also livid my children receive little to no support unless I pay out privately each time.
>
> (Parent 1)

> We were lucky to have the money to pay for a private psychologist and solicitor, which many don't have. But it cost us (probably - never dared to add it up) 40K in psychologist, tutor (for about a year?) and solicitor.
>
> (Parent 5)

> My mum was very supportive financially. She has had to bail us out many a time and pay for assessments. This situation has financially cost her a fair bit, I think we would have lost the house without her.
>
> (Parent 24)

These experiences demonstrate how the financial cost of supporting a child experiencing SAPs is borne by the family. Moreover, the constraining of public budgets to support such children in education resulted in more of the cost being borne by the family because assessments of child's difficulties and needs sometimes had to be funded privately due to problems accessing services within the education, health, and local government systems (as discussed in Chapter 5).

6.2.4 Reactions of others (wider family and friends)

The code *Reactions of Others (wider family and friends)* was the second most frequently allocated code, being used 78 times within the accounts of 33 participants. Therefore, it became clear that the reactions of others had a significant impact because people had strong opinions about the need for children to be in school and were mostly judgemental about participants' parenting abilities and their management of SAPs. This is apparent where Parent 27 reflected upon her experience:

> Relationships with other family members were ok but very strained at times as there was lots of judgements made during the time and even afterwards. Parenting skills (or lack of) have been blamed, mainly from the school but also from those close family members, Most now understand, but it has been tricky, some relationships have changed perhaps permanently.
>
> (Parent 27)

Parents reported a range of comments about their child’s school attendance problems which were shared by a mix of friends and family members. These comments illustrated the beliefs people have about the importance of schooling; a need to control children’s behaviour; and the judgements which are made about families and children in this situation. Responses tended to reflect a mix of concern, bewilderment, annoyance, and discomfort at the suggestion that children ‘choose’ not to go to school, rather than empathy and curiosity about the reasons why a child might find school attendance problematic and distressing.

The comments made by a range of people were discussed by parents and they noted that Grandparents appeared to show a strong belief that attending school is not optional and must be enforced by parents. The use of force was condoned by some grandparents as they appeared to view the attendance problems as misbehaviour, and the following comments were experienced by participants:

> “Don’t be silly, you need to go to school”
>
> “He has to go to school. You just need to make him.”
>
> “School is not optional”
>
> “You have to break her”
>
> “I think you just need to be more forceful...he doesn’t have a choice.”

Parent 13 considered why grandparents may feel or think in this way and she observed:

> I think it's harder for the older generation because they were very much of the 'stiff upper lip' generation who grew up during WW2. My Mum finds it hard to talk about her feelings and therefore can't quite accept the anxiety that her granddaughter experiences.
>
> (Parent 13)

Comments made by friends of parents indicated that they believed they would take a firmer stance than they perceived was being taken, and enforce a child’s attendance if they were in a similar situation:

> “You are such a good mom, there is no way I would allow my child to miss school” (Friend. Age 42. Nurse)
>
> “What do you mean, he won’t go to school? If it was me, I would make him. He wouldn’t have a choice. (Friend. Age 40)
>
> “I always send my kids to school even if they say they have a stomach-ache - they soon learn they have to go”

Other general comments made by friends, family and professionals included:

> “She is playing you”
>
> “He’ll grow out of it.”
>
> “It’s down to the family dynamics”
>
> “Oh, he’s putting it on”
>
> “Just make him go to school”
>
> “You’re too soft on him”
>
> “He’s manipulating you”
>
> “I wouldn’t have that going on in my house”

These comments imply that people thought there was a parenting-based problem, and the solution was for parents to be firmer with their child and implement stricter, more consistent, boundaries and expectations for behaviour. This advice was also offered to Parent 19 by support workers she had contact with, and she also found her husband believed a similar approach would be effective, by saying they:

> Just had to "push on through” and present a firm, united front to [their daughter] and she would then “get over it” and accept our boundaries.
>
> (Parent 19)

The suggestions that children who experience SAPs need to be ‘broken’ seems significant because it mirrors the systemic no-tolerance approach that is seen to be appropriate and necessary in schools. In Section 5.7.7 professionals were reported to suggest the use of physical force to make children attend, and Parent

3 found that friends and close family also thought physical force and punishment for non-compliance were appropriate ways to respond:

> Numerous people have suggested I should just drag her to school in her pyjamas and asked why I didn't – including school secretaries, educational welfare officers and some close friends. A number have also said I should be tougher on her e.g. withdrawing electronics (including her 17-year-old sister) suggesting punishing her for mental health problems is the answer!
>
> (Parent 3)

Here, Parent 3 disagreed with these suggestions because she interpreted her daughter's reactions as signs she had problems with mental health, rather than displaying bad behaviour that should be punished.

This range of reactions and comments parents encountered indicated a general assumption that the child or home was the cause of the problems, reflecting the dominant discourse around school absence discussed in Section 2.6. Fewer people tended to question or even consider whether there were other underlying reasons for a child's difficulty with attending school. These thoughts were evident in Parent 20's reflections about people's responses:

> It was very hard to discuss with family and friends as they couldn't possibly understand the trauma that our son had experienced at school. They could not understand that his behaviour was his way of telling us, when the words failed to come, that he just couldn't cope. I do not feel it is possible for anyone to understand unless they have experienced this themselves, or know of and can empathise with another person. The responses we received varied greatly, from the smiles and nods of sympathy that hid their unspoken words, to those that spoke openly and freely, causing so much anguish.
>
> (Parent 20)

However, some parents did find people who demonstrated or developed this recognition of the difficulties being experienced. This was because they had

personal experience themselves, or they recognised that rather than misbehaving, children had a genuine problem with attendance at school, as the following extracts suggest:

> Friends and family did not understand the difficulties that we were having. That said, one person did, my Mum, who had found school very difficult herself. She left school with few qualifications, couldn't tell the time at 16 and had been made to repeat a year at school as she was underperforming, her twin was very academic. She has talked more about this in the light of my son's problems.
>
> (Parent 6)

> I discussed with my mum whose advice was not to take [my daughter] in when she was stressed and to wait until she was calmer. I don't know how I could have coped through all of this without my mum. She has been incredibly supportive and non-judgmental.
>
> (Parent 19)

Parent 10 found that her mother's views changed when she saw how real her grandson's difficulties were:

> My mum had initially thought that children who struggled with attendance were 'skiving' or that parents couldn't be bothered to take them. When [son] began having difficulties she instantly got that his difficulties were real, seeing videos of [son's] distress and seeing him have a meltdown after school completely changed her view. She no longer automatically assumes that a child not in school is skiving, she sees the bigger picture.
>
> (Parent 10)

The reality parents perceived was that many people did make assumptions and failed to consider the wider context of the situation, and this lack of understanding and empathy contributed to the isolation many parents felt. Often parents

described how their experiences prompted them to withdraw or distance themselves from contact with friends and family:

> Family/friends don’t understand, and I am now feeling very isolated and have withdrawn from many of my friends. It is easier that way.
>
> (Parent 3)

> I have spoken to loads of family and friends over the last two and a half years but the circle of those I speak to about it has got smaller and smaller. People just don't understand. People judge. I now find that I confide in those who 'get it' and just don't mention it to others. I worry about boring people with it too.
>
> (Parent 13)

Furthermore, parents noted that people around them avoided talking about their child’s school attendance difficulties, as Parent 24 explained:

> […] generally no-one wants to discuss it, we have no friends in the community now because of it, they just cleared off, ignored, walked to the other side of the street. No one was there for me in this difficult time. I feel a great sadness in society generally now. It has changed the way I view people for the worse.
>
> (Parent 24)

Similarly, Parent 36 shared her experience:

> All of my daughter’s friends’ parents very much distanced themselves from us as [her] school refusal became worse and worse, and her friends distanced themselves more and more. Any friends I spoke in confidence to about what we were going through also looked very much uncomfortable and out of their depth.
>
> (Parent 36)

These extracts indicated parents perceived how uncomfortable people felt at the thought of children not attending school, and parents considered whether this general difficulty understanding, accepting, and empathising with children when school attendance is a problem has an impact upon the support that was, or was not provided for them.

6.3 Observing the impact of attendance problems on children - "we watched his spark go out"

As the complexity of identifying triggers and needs, and sourcing appropriate support meant each family's SAPs often took many years to reach any sort of resolution or conclusion, their circumstances evolved over time (Figure 4.1 shows participants had spent between 1 and 12 years trying to resolve SAPs). Educational provision could alter as different strategies or types of provision were organised and tried: children may have attended school with difficulty; been on roll at a school with reduced attendance; or not attended school at all; they may have been home educated for periods of time or accessed alternative provision. For children who were unwell mentally or physically, their symptoms may have improved or worsened as circumstances changed. Parents watched for signs of improvement or deterioration, recognising that they needed to be ready to react in response to new difficulties. Parents wrote of their concern for children regarding the ongoing impact of this evolving journey. Analysis of their accounts revealed several codes that reflected these ongoing concerns: *Child wellbeing*, *Child withdrawal and isolation*, *Child loss of motivation & ambition*, and *Child fear of the future*, which will now be discussed in more detail.

6.3.1 Child wellbeing

Parents observed how being unable to attend school had a detrimental impact upon their children and seeing the consequential changes in their children had an emotional impact upon them too. Parent 19 conveyed how watching her daughter's wellbeing deteriorate impacted upon her as a parent:

> As a mum it's been hell, it's been harder than anything I've ever faced in my life, including life-threatening illness. Watching your beautiful, enthusiastic, funny, clever, and creative child

> deteriorate in front of your eyes over a period of time is absolutely heart-breaking.
>
> (Parent 19)

Other parents also noticed their child's demeanour had changed significantly, strongly indicating that they were struggling mentally and emotionally, for instance Parent 20 stated:

> We watched his behaviour deteriorate, his mental health suffer...we watched his spark go out.
>
> (Parent 20)

When describing the impact upon her son, Parent 11 stated:

> His light dimmed is the only way to put it
>
> (Parent 11)

Parent 24 made a similar observation when she reflected upon the way her son was affected by the attendance problems he experienced:

> He wasn't in there anymore. It's like he was gone, nothing left.
>
> (Parent 24)

These observations indicated how profound the changes were in some children, as the positive aspects of their personality appeared to diminish, and their behaviour appeared very different to how it had been before their attendance problems developed. These changes were echoed in other accounts, such as Parents 5, 13, and 19 who explained:

> She became a completely different child. As a toddler she was a real extrovert, had no fear and was very strong-willed. When the school attendance difficulties started, she became very frightened, withdrawn and fought like a tiger when we tried to make her attend.
>
> (Parent 5)

> [My daughter's] whole personality changed. She had always been a happy child who liked school. She was easy going and popular amongst her peers. She got very low and very anxious after starting secondary school though.
>
> (Parent 13)

> This has mirrored my daughter's decline from a very sporty, active little girl who loved swimming, diving, and climbing trees to a child who became afraid and overwhelmed by everything.
>
> (Parent 19)

This loss of self-confidence and a positive outlook and enjoyment of life was clearly noted. Furthermore, parents identified a range of negative emotional reactions, including:

Sadness:

> Sad all the time, never smiling or laughing.
>
> (Parent 28)

Fear:

> My child described himself as 'scared' all the time.
>
> (Parent 34)

Anxiety:

> He was more anxious and just wanted to be at home where he felt safe.
>
> (Parent 10)

Anger:

> He became irritable and very angry with us about everything.
>
> (Parent 29)

Aggression:

> He was aggressive, smashed furniture, smashed his wardrobe, doors.
>
> (Parent 37)

> [My son] became very physical and this was directed at me and his younger brother. This resulted in numerous injuries (broken rib, black eye, strangulation etc).
>
> (Parent 20)

In some cases, parents observed how children appeared to shut down emotionally, or appeared to 'freeze', or stop communicating verbally, possibly because they felt overwhelmed by difficult emotions:

> He shut down one day and swore never to go back. He went into instant depression and had three weeks off school. He didn't go in much after that.
>
> (Parent 24)

> The most emotionally challenging times were when [my son] froze. He would appear vacant, unable to speak, expressionless.
>
> (Parent 20)

> By the time we removed her from the system in 2015 she was selectively mute all day at school most days. She was shut down and was surviving. She was 12.
>
> (Parent 18)

Parents also noted changes in children's sleep patterns, for example Parent 22 stated:

> [My daughter] was awake most of the night.
>
> (Parent 22)

Some parents indicated that children struggled to sleep at night because of their emotional distress:

> Every evening she was terribly anxious and unable to sleep which meant both she and I were exhausted.
>
> (Parent 3)

Some physical changes were also observed, with children appearing to be physically unwell or generally unhealthy because of their emotional distress, for instance, Parent 15 stated:

> [My son] often would look very pale and started saying he was ill some mornings and wouldn't get up and ready for school.
>
> (Parent 15)

While Parent 12 assessed her son's physical decline:

> Pre-school he was a fit and healthy child - since his difficulties in school began and he has been depressed and seemingly unaware of his appetite - just keeps eating - he has become quite unhealthy.
>
> (Parent 12)

The descriptions shared by parents often mentioned a combination of signs and symptoms indicating a decline in children's wellbeing. For instance, Parent 9 described the impact she saw in her son's emotional and physical wellbeing:

> He now seems to suffer with low moods, selective mutism, his eating has not been good. Sleeping more too. Not wanting to leave the house just not interested in anything.
>
> (Parent 9)

Children were affected in multiple ways, both mentally and physically, which indicated the significant impact of ongoing SAPs. Parents shared their sadness at how their children had become affected by their experience of school, and of being unable to attend school. Parents also expressed frustration at how their

children's difficulties had not been recognised, or supported in ways that improved their situation:

> I hope the damage cause by the school can be reversed, but sadly I fear this is too late, my daughter is left a broken girl.
>
> (Parent 28)

> Not coping in secondary school completely destroyed him. It's not like it's just one thing in your life and everything else is just fine. It destroyed him. Took a long while after de-registering to begin to build his self-esteem up again. It's like the school broke him as a human.
>
> (Parent 24)

The use of wording such as 'damaged', 'broken' and 'destroyed' is notable if we think back to Section 6.2.4 where it was suggested that children's perceived defiance needed to be 'broken' to make them attend school. Parent 28's comments also reflect her concern that the damage to her child was permanent. Furthermore, Parent 24 highlighted how the significant impact of SAPs extended beyond school into all aspects of her son's life. This became apparent in the accounts of other parents too, when it was observed that children isolated themselves from family life, hobbies, and out-of-school activities, and become socially isolated with the loss of friendships and peer contact (discussed in Section 6.3.2).

Children often could not verbalise any reasons why they could not attend school as expected, as Parent 29 observed:

> [Our son] was unable to explain to us why or how he was struggling.
>
> (Parent 29)

Similarly, Parent 5 explained how her daughter avoided talking about school or her difficulties attending:

> She couldn't talk about school or her difficulties at all – she would hold her hands over her ears and shout so she couldn't hear us, turn, and face the wall, or hide under the duvet. In public (because she wasn't naughty) she'd just pretend she hadn't heard it if someone asked her about school.
>
> (Parent 5)

Parent 13 explained the effect on her daughter of having to talk about her difficulties:

> Various professionals got involved. […] [My daughter] had to talk to all of them and she gradually shut down. She said 'Why would I want to talk about the thing that I most hate about myself?
>
> (Parent 13)

A difficult aspect that parents reported was times when a child or young person displayed self-harming behaviours. Within parent accounts there was mention of eleven children who had self-harmed, including those of Parents 10, and 36:

> [My son] soon started to threaten to harm himself in order to not have to go to school, he has gone for knives, wrapped things around his neck, threatened to jump from windows and throw himself off the dining room table in attempt to injure himself.
>
> (Parent 10)

> [My daughter] began self-harming regularly.
>
> (Parent 36)

Nine parents reported that their children would say that they wanted to die, or that they didn't see the point in being alive. This included Parents 15, 19, and 36:

> He became very sad and said 'I want to die' all the time.
>
> (Parent 15)

> She eventually said that she didn't want to live anymore because school went on for so long and therefore, she didn't see any point to being alive.
>
> (Parent 19)

> [My daughter] talked of ending her life just to stop the torture of having to go to school.
>
> (Parent 36)

Parents found it very difficult emotionally to hear their child say they want to die. Parents 36 and 20 expressed how distressing it was for them:

> To hear my daughter tell me that she would rather die than face this ongoing situation destroyed me completely.
>
> (Parent 36)

> For me, it was excruciating. My first-born son was so traumatised he wanted to die rather than go to school. All of a sudden I felt very scared and alone.
>
> (Parent 20)

Two parents described their experience when their children attempted suicide. Parent 23 experienced her daughter making two suicide attempts following an extended period of SAPs, and she observed:

> On the day she tried to take her life everything became more charged.
>
> (Parent 23)

It is clear how much this adds to the dilemma for parents who are aware they have a legal duty to ensure a child receives an education, yet the prospect of being in a school is one a child cannot face. Three additional parents also identified that their child felt suicidal or had suicidal ideation. For Parent 29 it was

this knowledge that triggered a change in priorities, and empowered them to end their attempts to maintain school attendance:

> It wasn't until he was severely depressed and suicidal when he was obviously too unwell to attend school that we stopped trying to get him in and the pressure eased. I feel we lost our boy then for a while and it has taken many months to get him back.
>
> (Parent 29)

Parent 22 described how difficult the situation was for her in trying to protect her daughter, and cope with becoming the target for her feelings of frustration, anger, and distress:

> I was on suicide watch for over a year - I slept only two to four hours because [my daughter] was awake most of the night. She was no longer speaking to me except to scream and shout she wished she was dead, she wished I was dead, she hated her life, she hated me.
>
> (Parent 22)

Experiencing and observing these significant signs of deterioration in wellbeing of children added to the impact of the Parental SAPs Predicament. Parents faced further dilemmas in deciding how to respond to their children's distress and protect their wellbeing, especially with awareness of the ongoing systemic and social pressures to prioritise attendance and protect a child's education.

6.3.2 Child withdrawal and isolation

Parents reported that their children felt the need to hide from the world and isolate themselves from people they know. Children showed much less interest in family life and avoided interaction with their family, and they often retreated to their bedrooms for extended periods of time:

> [My daughter] became extremely detached from the family, life and it appeared the whole world, isolating herself spending all her time alone in her bedroom, not communicating
>
> (Parent 28)

> [Our son] became more withdrawn, he spent less time with us as a family and more time alone in his bedroom.
>
> (Parent 10)

The following two extracts suggest that children felt unsafe or threatened and attempted to avoid contact with anyone and withdraw from life outside their bedroom:

> She locked herself in her room, pulled the blinds down and often barricaded herself in so we couldn't get into the room.
>
> (Parent 13)

> He built a tent in his room and retreated to this whenever he felt threatened.
>
> (Parent 20)

If they could not retreat to their bedroom, some children tried to hide under blankets or clothing, again suggesting that they felt ashamed and wanted to avoid any interaction with other people:

> He would lie on the sofa with his hoody up or hide under his covers.
>
> (Parent 15)

> At secondary school when we had to drop [her sister] at the same school [our daughter] would wear her coat back to front with the hood over her face. Sometimes she would hide in the footwell of the car.
>
> (Parent 5)

Parents also noted another type of withdrawal and avoidance where children stopped taking part in activities, hobbies and interests they had previously enjoyed:

> She stopped taking part in hobbies she loved, like horse riding. I remember one occasion when she sat sobbing outside the riding stables because she couldn't go in. She wanted to give up piano but her wonderful teacher persuaded her to stick with it.
>
> (Parent 13)

> Slowly anything and everything that he once liked or was interested in was no longer, he stopped doing everything, looking at books, drawing, photography. We tried to keep the rugby going but it eventually fizzled out.
>
> (Parent 24)

> For a while she took refuge in playing guitar, singing, and drawing but towards the beginning of year 9 she stopped having any interest in these things and by the time she was suicidal was finding everything a struggle.
>
> (Parent 23)

For parents these acts of withdrawal were further signs that something was wrong, which triggered further dilemmas about what to do to help their children. A further aspect parents expressed concern and sadness about was observing their children withdraw from social contact with their friends and peers, and seeing them become increasingly isolated, as evidenced in the following extracts:

> She stopped going out and interacting with friends.
>
> (Parent 13)

> Friends that turned up at the door he could not see, he felt too bad.
>
> (Parent 24)

> She is now isolated and withdrawn, and her friends no longer contact her.
>
> (Parent 3)

These observations illustrate how children's absence from school became a barrier to maintaining friendships. Their physical absence was compounded by the emotional absence parents saw their children needed to establish, as they felt they no longer fitted in with peers and did not know how to respond to questions about their absence at school.

For the child and for parents, when school attendance stopped, they often became ostracised from their school community, both because they were no longer there physically, and because others reacted critically and the family felt judged and uncomfortable. The wider consequences of this perceived rejection were reflected in Parent 34's account:

> No card from the class saying they were missing him, nothing. We received a request to donate for the Leavers Party, but nobody actually asked him to go. That was very hard. I can't imagine how he felt. I had no parents contacting me to ask how we were doing. Not one.
>
> (Parent 34)

Parent 34 recognised how both she and her son became ignored or ostracised by the school and school community. Her son's difficulties with attending school meant they were no longer included in the community, and there was little effort made to maintain contact with them, adding to the isolation they felt.

6.3.3 Child loss of motivation and ambition

Parents observed changes in children's relationship with education, through their negative attitudes towards school, learning, and education. Their aversion to school-like activities extended into the home environment where children were

reluctant to do anything that reminded them of school. Parents 29, 34, and 3 reported how they perceived their children had communicated their feelings:

> He said he didn’t care about school and there was no point to anything, such was the stress that he was experiencing.
>
> (Parent 29)

> He would say ‘I don’t like school’ in a particular tone of voice. It was very quiet and devoid of any emotion.
>
> (Parent 34)

> She has a phobia of education and professionals and struggles to come out of her bedroom for her home tuition lessons refusing them more often than not.
>
> (Parent 3)

Parent 24 described her son’s extreme reaction to words he associated with school:

> The school he was in destroyed his human will and need to learn. Saying the words, learn, school, education, teach, teacher, GCSE, exam, would lead to instant meltdown, like violent house trashing meltdown. I still can’t say those words now to him or in any part of my life and I am a teacher, saying teacher makes me squirm now.
>
> (Parent 24)

Parents sometimes noted specific aspects of school that children found difficult to face following negative experiences, such as a mistrust of both teachers and students as noted by Parent 28:

> But then school/teachers became something she no longer trusted and wouldn't talk about, they told lies and let her down” […] she said school would be manageable if there were no other students there!
>
> (Parent 28)

As a result of their negative experience, some children experienced a loss of self-belief, self-esteem, and self-confidence in relation to education and their learning abilities, as noted by Parents 6 and 24:

> He has a very low opinion of his abilities in 'traditional' education. He's really reluctant to put himself in that situation.
>
> (Parent 6)

> He thought he could do nothing, was thick and was told by teachers he would not get any GCSE's. He is tested to have mid to high intelligence.
>
> (Parent 24)

Some parents considered how their children had abandoned previously held ambitions, including Parent 31 who explained:

> He'd got to 11 assuming he would go to university. He began refusing at 11, and is now 14, out of education for almost three years, and knows he is unlikely even to get to college and will never get to university.
>
> (Parent 31)

Parent 28 also recognised how her daughter's ambitions were less likely to come to fruition because of the negative effect of their school-related experiences:

> [My daughter] is an extremely intelligent girl with aspirations to be an engineer, unfortunately how she has been mistreated has resulted in total fear, extreme anxiety around education and schools.
>
> (Parent 28)

6.3.4 Child fear of the future

Parents found that as the attendance related difficulties continued children lost hope that anyone would help them. Parents reported that their children had

become increasingly despondent about their value as people, and about their future, as recounted by Parent 5:

> She felt she was a burden, I'm quite sure she felt hopeless and I doubt she could see any future worth living for.
>
> (Parent 5)

Similarly, Parent 13 noted that her daughter avoided thinking or talking about her future:

> She stopped planning for the future at all and still finds that very difficult. She gets upset if we talk about any future plans.
>
> (Parent 13)

Parent 8 expressed her concerns for her daughter's future and wellbeing in recognition of the extent of her unhappiness:

> Will she ever get over it? Will she ever be happy in herself? Will she ever stop feeling like she doesn't want to be here anymore? Will she ever do the unthinkable, as she frequently tells me she wants to? And if she does, how will I possibly survive it?
>
> School pales into insignificance alongside these worries, but at the same time I worry about that too: Will she ever get back to school? If not, how will she get her education? What will she do when she's grown up? Will she fulfil her potential, of which she has so much?
>
> (Parent 8)

Each child's ongoing difficulties also led parents to question their prior expectations regarding what their children would achieve. Parent 4 provided an example of this when she reflected upon her sadness at being unable to celebrate the normal milestones of childhood and watch her son progress through the education system and into employment:

> The future did not look bright it looked unclear. Most parents can enjoy the little normal milestones, of primary school, secondary, GCSE's, college, employment. My son struggled to leave the house.
>
> (Parent 4)

This highlights the impact in terms of loss of identity as the parent of a school child. When parents enrol a child in school, they expect to watch them progress through Key Stages, and take part in the traditional aspects of school life such as assemblies, nativity plays, school trips and parent's evenings. Parents often value being part of school communities and do not expect this 'membership' to end, especially in circumstances where a child becomes too anxious to step foot in school; or equally because there is little help offered if their child experiences difficulties attending. Parent 20 expressed her thoughts on this situation:

> We never realised this could happen, that a child can just 'not go to school'. That schools can fail to recognise need, support needs, and acknowledge the reasons behind school anxiety. My opinion now is one of empathy for any child who is experiencing such acute anxiety that they are not able to attend school. Deep sadness for all the children who have reached this point where they just can't go on any longer. Anger at the local authority's response, or lack of it and shame that, in 2019, there are so many children without an education.
>
> (Parent 20)

This reflection illustrates the emotional impact which was triggered when parents reflected upon their lived experiences and recognised that there are many families in similar situations, which was apparent through their access to peer support (described in Section 7.2.2). The features of parents' experiences discussed in this section illustrate the ongoing legacy of school attendance problems which had potentially long-term impacts for parents and their children.

6.4 The emotional impact upon parents

The accounts parents shared explicated the powerful emotional impact of their experiences. This was conveyed through data analysis as *Emotional impact*

became the 5th most frequently allocated focused code. This code represented parent descriptions of the emotional affects they recognised in themselves and others. Furthermore, a wide range of feelings and emotions were identified and coded including frustration (n=55), judgement (n=39), anger (n=29), blame (n=28), isolation (n=27), stress (n=26), guilt (n=23) conflicted (n=18), distress (n=15), anxious (n=13), intimidated (n=13), worried (n=13); heartbreak (n=12), fear (n=11), pressure (n=11), regret (n=11), desperation (n=9), overwhelm (n=9), gratitude (n=8), relief (n=8), helplessness (n=7), lucky (n=6), pride (n=5), hope (n=4), shame (n=4), sadness (n=3) and paranoia (n=2). The following extracts are representative of the mix of intense emotions that parents described as their journeys evolved:

> It was heart-breaking, frustrating, and terribly upsetting. I felt as if I was failing as a Mum […] I felt the school blamed me which made me feel even more guilty. There were no answers on what to do to change the situation which made it even harder. I felt I dreaded every evening and morning and felt anxious myself as to what I would face every morning. But my overriding feeling was sadness that she was so very upset and out of control and I couldn't do anything to help her.
>
> (Parent 3)

> I felt guilty that we were in this situation, his condition was my fault was it my genes and the struggles he would have and I struggled everyday with whether I should go to work I felt I was letting my work colleagues down and my son for not being with him 24/7 and not being able to engage him. I blamed my husband that he couldn't make things right and mine and husbands' family for not supporting [our son] by trying to engage him in anything. As my time was completely absorbed with appointments, work, etc I felt guilty for not giving my other children the time.
>
> (Parent 4)

Parent 30 described the emotional impact of forcing her son to attend school, along with the lasting damage it caused to their relationship:

> The school said [my son] needed tough love (but this goes above and beyond tough love) my child blamed me and still does for sending him to school. It has destroyed his trust in me. I am trying to build that trust back up. It has destroyed my relationship with my son. I would take him to school, and I will never forget the fear on his face and him begging me so desperately first of all and then gradually hitting out at me. I felt like I was sending him to a prison and turning my back on my child. My emotional state went into major depression. Since taking him out of school the relief I felt was absolutely tremendous, but still I question myself that I have let him down.
>
> (Parent 30)

In the following extract Parent 13 analysed the impact of seeing her daughter's emotional distress on her confidence and approach as a parent:

> It's made me doubt any skills I might ever have thought I had as a parent. When she shuts down and refuses to talk to us or do anything I really don't know what to do. I have read endless books, googled for hours, and sought advice from all sorts of people but nothing we have tried has worked. I don't know how to parent a child like this. We have lost all sense of appropriate boundaries because of what we went through when she said she wanted to die. If she gets really upset, she still tries to barricade herself in her bedroom sometimes and I can't face going back to the days when she wouldn't get out of bed and lay in a dark room for hours. Sometimes I feel like she controls us, manipulates us, while at other times when she sobs and gets in a panic, I see how anxious she really is. However, she copes with that by having to be in control and that makes parenting her very difficult.
>
> (Parent 13)

Although negative emotions dominated parents' accounts, positive emotions were expressed too, particularly in relation to what had been achieved in finding a resolution. For example, in Parent 19's statement below, the successful application for an Education Health and Care Plan (EHCP) and the successful complaint to the Ombudsman's would have helped to validate Parent 19's definition of her situation:

> Gaining the specialist place with the EHCP and the Ombudsman fining our LA did go a long way to making me feel resilient and capable, I am proud of what I've achieved for my daughter and our family.
>
> (Parent 19)

6.5 Chapter summary

Parents accounts highlighted their concern for their children as they observed the impact of ongoing SAPs on their wellbeing. These concerns for children combined with frustration regarding the lack of help and support that could be accessed through education, health, and government systems. These two factors combined with the practical and emotional impact of SAPs on the family, and critical responses of others in family and social circles to impact upon many aspects of family life. This created additional stress for parents and increased the isolation and emotional impacts they experienced.

Chapter 7 will now explore in greater detail how the resolving elements of Parents' Journeys were achieved. A resolution was sometimes decided upon during the peak of the Parental SAPs Predicament which evolved as the full impact of SAPs on the child, parents and family became clear. However, within their journey certain resources and experiences also empowered parents and this experience of empowerment influenced the decisions parents took to secure the best outcomes they could for their children.

Chapter 7. Working towards a resolution for school attendance problems

7.1 Introduction

Chapter 4 explained how parents respond to the emergence of children's school attendance problems. Chapter 5 then explored parents' experiences of navigating systems in response to ongoing difficulties with school attendance. Chapter 6 explained the home-based difficulties parents needed to manage, along with the responses parents experienced in their social circles during their interactions with family, peers, employers. Chapter 7 now explores the stage of Parents' Journeys where parents try to reach a resolution, having considered the ongoing impacts of their children's SAPs. These considerations may have involved parents evaluating the likelihood they will gain support through the school, health, and local government systems, and find an educational setting that meets their child's needs. These considerations may have been influenced by knowledge they gained about alternative pathways to a resolution, and their experience of possible resolutions that had been attempted during the journey so far.

Analysis of parents' accounts revealed codes clustered within the theme of *Parental Empowerment* and it may be useful first to consider the concepts of empowerment and learned hopefulness. These constructs support understanding of how parents who participated in this study appeared to navigate through the Parental SAPs Predicament that developed because of their experiences within both the systemic context (described in Chapter 5) and the home context (described in Chapter 6). Rappaport (1987, cited in Zimmerman, 1995, p.581) defined empowerment as 'a process by which people, organizations, and communities gain mastery over issues of concern to them'. According to Zimmerman (1990, 1995), individual empowerment occurs when people learn skills, develop a perceived sense of control, and become motivated to act. Moreover, psychological empowerment occurs when in addition to these cognitive features people also develop a critical understanding of related socio-political, contextual factors. Individual and psychological empowerment is

considered significant as it helps people to find solutions for stressful problems in their personal lives. Furthermore, 'Learned hopefulness' is the process whereby individuals learn and utilise skills that enable them to develop a sense of psychological empowerment (Zimmerman, 1990, p.73). This process can be particularly relevant to any social involvement people have within community organisations, including mutual support groups, which helps them to problem solve and make decisions. Empowerment processes and outcomes vary according to contexts and populations (Perkins and Zimmerman, 1995). In the context of this study, these empowerment processes are related to participant contact with others within social media support groups, and other forms of peer contact, which supports people to develop resource mobilisation skills and situation specific perceived control.

Further themes were also revealed through analysis of data, and they related to parents' *Reaching a Resolution,* and parents' *Reflection upon the journey,* which will also be explored in more detail throughout this chapter.

The resolutions that were reported by the participants within their accounts were summarised in Section 4.2.4. where it was noted that these outcomes were not necessarily representative of a finalised resolution, as the families were at differing stages of their journeys, and it was possible that further developments occurred after data collection ended. To recap:

Only one out of the forty-seven children discussed by the participants had been able to return to their mainstream school and re-establish a normal pattern of attendance. This happened after he spent some time at home having been signed off as too unwell to attend. This was followed by an eighteen-month period where he made tiny steps of progress, as he was allowed flexibility and the focus was on him feeling safe and in control. He then spent six months attending a medical needs unit, taking further small steps of progress.

Seven children were still enrolled at a mainstream school however their attendance remained lower than expected.

Some children had been able to access an education after their parents had negotiated a place for them in a different setting. This included six children who were attending a SEND school arranged through an Education Health and Care Plan (EHCP); five children who were being educated through alternative provision arranged by their Local Authority (such as forms of home-based tuition, online schooling, or hospital school).

Seven children were being home educated by their parents after being removed from the roll of the school they had attended.

Thirteen children were not able to access any type of educational provision due to their poor mental and/or physical health.

Eight children had reached the age of 16; of those, four had gone on to attend college, two were being home educated while taking A levels, and two were too unwell to be involved in any educational activity.

Although parents had set out on their journey with the aim of resolving whatever issue they thought had triggered their child's problems with school attendance, the lack of support many of them encountered as their journey progressed meant the resolution they ultimately had to achieve was to arrange or choose an alternative form of educational provision for their child. This chapter will now discuss the range of factors that influenced parents as they came to the realisation that the resolution their child needed was different to the resolution they had set out to find.

7.2 Parental empowerment

Parents' accounts featured instances where they experienced a range of factors that contributed to a sense of empowerment that helped them to feel more in control of the situation. This gradual empowerment enabled families to gain a better understanding of their situation; recognise unhelpful approaches; recognise any mistakes made; identify options available to them to achieve a resolution and identify any steps they needed to take to try to achieve a

resolution. The factors that contributed to this sense of empowerment were revealed through the coding process as: *Being Proactive*; *Access to peer support*; *Professional support and validation*; *Third sector support*; *Listening to the child's voice*; *Rethinking priorities*; *Listening to parental instincts, and Self-confidence as a parent.* These codes will now be explained in more detail.

7.2.1 Being proactive

Chapter Four discussed how parents observed children's difficulties and attempted to make sense of those observations to assist them in identifying what the underlying issues were, and how best to resolve them. This process was ongoing as the situation evolved and the search for support triggered new demands and contexts to navigate. Parent 35 explained the approach she had taken involved two types of action, as she sought knowledge and information, and advocated for help for her sons within the systems:

> I have been very proactive in trying to get help for both boys. I have educated myself as much as possible, and made as much noise at school and with the local authority as I can.
>
> (Parent 35)

Parent 24 also recognised the need for a proactive approach having realised there was no one else willing to offer help to her children:

> No one has taken charge with either of my boys' difficulties. I have had to hunt everything out myself.
>
> (Parent 24)

Parents described how they developed a greater understanding of school attendance problems:

> It was a case of researching school refusal, just learning along the way, the more I researched it became blatantly obvious my daughters had these issues, headaches, stomach-ache,

> anxiety, separation anxiety, meltdowns, shutdowns, refusing school due to emotional distress.
>
> (Parent 28)

Parents often needed to learn more about their child's specific difficulties so that they were better informed, for example Parent 18 explained how she increased her knowledge:

> I went on courses and two conferences to learn about [my daughter's] autism, demand avoidance and selective mutism so that we could begin to support her better
>
> (Parent 18)

In being proactive, parents undertook a range of activities to search for helpful information and sources of advice and support:

> Research! Hours, days, weeks spent at the laptop, finding organisations that could offer support.
>
> (Parent 20)

> I searched and searched for any articles I could find on school refusal and anxiety in every spare moment I had and read as much as I could on the subject. I purchased book after book and downloaded article after article.
>
> (Parent 36)

> Google – articles, research, books. I did buy A LOT of books on anxiety etc. […] But it felt like a blind man's stumble through cliffs. No plan, no strategy, the occasional 'find' and lots of dead ends.
>
> (Parent 5)

Parent 5's mention of 'dead ends' highlights how difficult it was to locate information when parents were unsure what information they needed, or where

they needed to search. When parents were searching for information and support they were often doing so alone, however, during their online searches and face-to-face or telephone enquiries and discussions the study participants located support groups on social media, and this enabled them to contact other parents in similar situations.

7.2.2 Finding peer support

In locating support from peers on social media, parents often expressed their relief in contacting others who understood how they felt and sympathised with what they are experiencing, as Parent 28 explained:

> Finding groups on social media has helped, connecting with people who are going through similar experiences, being able to reach out and not be judged. Learning so much more along the way. Support and understanding is highly important
>
> (Parent 28)

Peer contact was helpful in allowing parents to exchange advice and information, however it also benefitted them in other ways. The impact of contacting peers with lived experience can be profound in terms of the sense of isolation that builds up, especially if, up until that point a parent has only experienced criticism and blame from professionals and friends or family members. Parent 13 expressed how contact with peers with shared experience was meaningful because they saw that their family was one of many in the same situation, rather than being an isolated or unusual case:

> Just knowing that we are not the only family going through this has meant so much
>
> (Parent 13)

Peer support also facilitated the exchange of practical information that parents needed to understand how to navigate relevant systems, such as appropriate legislation and links to sources of specialist advice:

> However, the knowledge and information in respect of the law has been essential as we have battled for our son. The Facebook support group files contain so much information that has helped us advocate for our son, it has informed us of the appropriate legislation that we have needed to refer to and has given us so many helpful templates (saving many hours of our time).
>
> (Parent 20)

Parent 8 explained how contact with peers on social media taught her strategies for managing meetings with professionals – situations that were necessary but difficult for parents who often reported feeling inadequate and intimidated in such meetings:

> As a result of reading people's experiences and advice in the Facebook group, I have always made sure I'm super-professional, calm, and almost detached when dealing with professionals, taking notes, following up meetings with emails, quoting the law, when necessary, etc. and I think that's why they have mostly responded to me respectfully, or should I say 'carefully', even if they haven't agreed with how I was handling things.
>
> (Parent 8)

Peer support groups offer inspiration and information through shared, lived experiences. Parent 37 evidenced this in her answer to the question: 'Did you find any people who had a good knowledge or understanding of school refusal?' when she wrote:

> Only really mums. You have to have lived it to understand it.
>
> (Parent 37)

This mention of mums in particular reflects the dominance of mothers in the social media groups, (for instance in the 'Not Fine in School' group the membership is 96% female). The crucial point being made by Parent 37 is that having lived experience of school attendance problems gives parents insight into

the specific and related issues and feelings that cannot be fully understood by people without lived experience. For instance, Parent 10 explained how the information other parents shared about their experiences gave her additional insight, which helped her to understand her son's difficulties:

> It was through the experience of others that I began to join the pieces together along with snippets of information or 'worries' that [my son] was able to share. It was then I realised that [my son's] refusal was directly related to unmet needs and a lack of working together between myself and his school - They wouldn't accept he wasn't fine, and I wouldn't accept he was.
>
> (Parent 10)

Similarly, Parent 19 accessed advice about following her instincts, and about being persistent that she found insightful and empowering:

> Other parents seemed to have the best understanding of school refusal and it was their advice to "trust my gut" and not take the advice of professionals who didn't understand my child that I found most empowering. It was also the advice to not give up with services that kept me going back to CAMHS despite getting very little help at first.
>
> (Parent 19)

Likewise, Parent 36 gained information that helped her to identify alternative educational provision and recognise the choice she needed to make between waiting for support through the relevant systems, or self-funding online schooling:

> It was there that I discovered the possibility of withdrawing my daughter from school and self-funding online schooling which was a huge turning point for my daughter. After reading through so many parent's experiences I realised that it may be years until my daughter received any meaningful support and I would have to take things into my own hands if I didn't want to further sacrifice her health or education.
>
> (Parent 36)

Parent 37 found that she could not discuss her situation with existing friends as they did not understand the impact of the SAPs. Instead, she found support through contact with other parents with similar experience:

> Kept away from friends because it was too painful talking to someone who did not understand. I had tried to talk to friends, I felt that by talking I could make sense of it all, but they would tell me all kids react like this, or similar, I felt they thought I was exaggerating, I tried to explain, but then when I went home I would think over what I had said and what they had said. I felt I must sound mad!! so stopped talking to them. I phoned the Samaritans, useless. But I did find help. PDA society, although I had to book the phone call in advance. I was starting to meet other mums locally, Facebook pages, DIAS (Devon Information and advice service).
>
> (Parent 37)

These extracts from Parents 10, 19, 36 and 37 evidence the shared definitions and constructions of the school attendance problems that informed parents that their opinions were valid. This shared understanding also helped them to identify information and strategies that might be helpful as they could learn from the experiences of others.

7.2.3 Finding third sector support

In addition to the benefits gained through peer support, parents also described the help they received from charities including IPSEA (Independent Provider of Special Education) and Young Minds (which focuses on child mental health), as mentioned by Parents 4 and 36:

> IPSEA were a lifeline in advice and getting the EHCP and into the correct school.
>
> (Parent 4)

> When my daughter first became ill (with both depression and anxiety and was often miserable at school) I called the Young Minds information line. They were extremely helpful and

> arranged for a mental health professional to phone me back. They listened to me and gave me some really useful advice about a request for a referral to CAMHS via my GP.
>
> (Parent 36)

These charities offered specialised advice to parents and were found to be better informed about attendance difficulties than schools and other related services. However, this was not universal and criticism of some third sector organisations was expressed by parents, including Parent 16 who expressed her frustration at the support offered to her family:

> The Barnardo's Buddy made me feel annoyed and I lost my faith in CAMHS. She was putting some blame on my parenting and telling me to punish [my child]. She didn't really understand what [my child] was going through.
>
> (Parent 16)

This suggests that sometimes the support offered by charities was not beneficial if the underlying approach was not as well-informed as parents hoped. This tended to occur, as Parent 16 indicated (above) if it was apparent to parents that they and the support workers did not share the same understanding of the child's difficulties. The involvement of support workers could also create more difficulties for parents if those differing constructions of the situation led to additional criticism and possibly referrals to social services and more pressure to force attendance.

Although it is not a charity, SENDIASS (Special Educational Needs and Disability Information, Advice and Support Service) is a network of local services funded by the Department for Education to offer impartial advice and support to children and young people with SEND and their parents. Parent 23 expressed her gratitude for the practical support she received which was empowering because it reflected her own beliefs about what her daughter needed:

> SENDIASS staff, particularly the case worker I had were amazing. Supported me all the way to gain a place with the

> PRU, pointing out to school that [my daughter] should be in their SEN register (we got blank looks every time that came up), attended all but one meeting with me and assured me along the way that alternative education was the right thing to push for. In my first conversation with my case worker she said, "I think your daughter has made a very strong statement about how she feels about school, you all obviously need more support than you're currently getting and if she were my daughter I would make sure she never went back there." I cried with relief at that.
>
> (Parent 23)

Parent 24 also found SENDIASS were helpful as they provided the systemic backing she needed to influence the approach the school adopted:

> The school had just turned nasty on me but when SENDIASS came in they were nice as pie and said they had to admit they needed advice on this from their communication and interaction team.
>
> (Parent 24)

7.2.4 Finding professional support

Chapter Five indicated that professional support was not easy to locate, however, some parents reported encounters with professionals who offered support that contributed towards or enabled them to achieve a resolution. Parent 5 listed a mix of seven school and private practitioners she considered had supported her family to achieve a positive resolution for her daughter. These practitioners were:

A **Teaching Assistant** who built a close relationship and a support plan with Parent 5's daughter. Parent 5 said:

> I just felt huge relief and gratitude that here was someone who was supportive and trying to help, and it took the heat off us since it was 'a plan'.

A **SENCo** who tried to be supportive put the family in touch with a **Tutor** who was described by Parent 5 as a saviour. Parent 5 explained:

> The tutor was equally experienced in dealing with children who had a whole range of problems, having run PRUs and taught several children with 'special needs'. She spent most of the first year gaining [my daughter's] trust, helping her separate herself from me and getting her out of the house and interacting with the world again.

A **Private child psychologist** who was said to have helped enormously. Parent 5 explained:

> 'The psychologist visited for several months before telling us that [my daughter's] walls were so high, so deep and so strong that she really couldn't help her anymore. However, it was incredible to see someone who knew what they were doing.
>
> […] I think the overriding feeling when you find someone who gives you confidence and you think you can trust is relief and gratitude.

A **counsellor. Parent 5 said she** did not agree with the counsellor's approach however she pointed out the effect that her own anxiety was having on her daughter and explained: "Waves of calm must come from you!"

A **solicitor** who helped them get a Statement and that supported Parent 5's daughter to access education with a home-based tutor linked to a school.

A **Deputy Headteacher** who allowed Parent 5's daughter to enrol at the school but work at home (and take exams at home) with a tutor.

> I will never forget what the Deputy Headteacher said to me when he offered to take [my daughter] on roll: "If she never sets foot in my school, that's OK". Like a great black cloud being lifted off my shoulders. I think I just broke down and wept.

(Parent 5)

This support meant that Parent 5's daughter was able to complete her school-based education, and she then went on to attend college and university. The input of these seven people provided professional input that Parent 5 stated was beneficial to the family. There was a range of factors that combined to create the outcome where the resolution protected the child's wellbeing and allowed her to access a suitable education. Between them, the professionals provided reassurance, and inspired the family's trust and confidence. The professionals used their skills and knowledge to build a greater understanding of the SAPs and helped to create a plan to resolve them. The professionals were prepared to 'think outside the box' and to follow a child-centred approach, to achieve this. The outcome was achieved while prioritising the child's wellbeing and attendance was not forced.

Professional validation also came through the assessment and confirmation of diagnoses that validated parent's concerns. When Parent 22 and her daughter received her diagnoses from a psychiatrist, she described their reaction:

> He was direct and professional. I finally felt vindicated. [My daughter] finally felt validated. We both felt a huge sense of relief.
>
> (Parent 22)

A further form of validation came when professionals recognised and recorded the views of children. This was valuable for parents as it offered evidence that was additional to their own descriptions and opinions and provided by a professional. Parent 40 described her experience of this:

> CAMHS have been the only ones who managed to get him to talk, and he was quite clear about how school made him feel and why. Our CAMHS report is the only independent record of his views that we have and I'm so glad he spoke to them so we have it all recorded by someone other than me.
>
> (Parent 40)

These examples indicate that parents felt empowered by professionals who shared a recognition of the problems that parents had identified and therefore a shared understanding of the context and required actions was established.

7.2.5 Listening to a child's voice

Some parents were empowered to act and make decisions when they recognised that it was important for them to take notice of what their child was communicating to them either through their behaviour or verbally. This may have occurred after the parent had spent time trying to conform with the dominant narratives shared by adults, insisting upon school attendance as a priority, but without success. Parent 8 described how she felt when she realised that she had not taken notice of her daughter's voice:

> So many times, I wanted to run back and put my arms around her, reassure her, take her home with me. I'm still heartbroken, knowing the damage it caused her in the long run - I'm not sure I'll ever get over it. Rationally, I know that I only did it because I thought it was what was needed to help her face and overcome her anxiety, and I know it's not helpful to blame myself; but at the same time, I feel I will never fully forgive myself for not understanding or realising sooner that it was the wrong thing to do. [Child] and I have talked about it a lot since then, and she mostly understands and forgives me, but out of everything that has happened on this journey - making her keep on going when she told me over and over how she felt, and eventually had so little resilience and ability left to cope - is by far my biggest regret.
>
> (Parent 8)

Parent 18 also recognised how she had failed to acknowledge what her daughter was trying to communicate to her:

> When [my daughter] was screaming and begging me not to send her she was trying to tell me that the system was harming her. […] We invalidated her voice because we did not listen to her, we kept sending her to the places that were breaking her. Although we did do it for the right reasons.
>
> (Parent 18)

Here, Parent 18 strongly demonstrates a dilemma represented within the Parental SAPs Predicament as she recognised, they had failed to hear what their daughter was communicating, but they had done so for what she felt were the right reasons.

It was noted by Parent 20 that her understanding of what her son was experiencing did not begin to form until she really took the time to listen to him:

> We first began to understand what was happening to our son when we stepped back and listened to him.
>
> (Parent 20)

It is apparent through these observations that where some professionals had invalidated the parents' voices by not responding to their concerns, some parents realised that they had invalidated their children's voices by prioritising the opinions of adults, possibly including their own.

7.2.6 Rethinking priorities

Some parents reached a point in their journey where they had developed a clearer understanding of what they needed to prioritise, or they felt they had a better understanding of their child's difficulties, and/or the systemic context. It was possible that any sense of empowerment they had gained then assisted them to make difficult choices which could reflect a realisation that a different approach was needed, or a focus upon recovery was needed. Two extracts from Parents 27 and 24 offer examples of this:

> We no longer push her in to school like school is the most important thing and we have to conform. We know that it isn't, and there are other options. We have told her that we will home school her, and she can choose. But we think about it carefully and weigh up the pros and cons much more pragmatically. I no longer have respect for our education system (or CAMHS) in the way I had before and realise that we have to listen to and respect our children much more.
>
> (Parent 27)

> I have learnt that connection to your children and love comes before any of societies pressures and demands.
>
> (Parent 24)

Sometimes this related to making choices between conforming to expectations within society concerning how children receive an education; or prioritising the relationship between parents and children; or prioritising respect for a child's opinions and needs.

7.2.7 Following parental instincts

As discussed previously in Section 4.9.2 it often became apparent to parents at some stage that they needed to pay more attention to their parental instincts when deciding what action they needed to take. Parent 19 recognised that she had been ignoring her 'internal voice' that recognised her daughter was genuinely struggling:

> It was only when she started to make herself physically sick in the mornings aged 8 that I started to listen to my internal voice that had been telling me for years that something was very wrong and that she was not playing us, but desperately trying to communicate with us and we were not listening.
>
> (Parent 19)

Parent 40 explains how she learnt to listen to her instincts and challenge things she did not agree with:

> I now have the courage to follow my instincts and stick to my guns, I know my kids best and I learnt (the hard way) my instincts are usually right. I'm less afraid to ask questions or challenge school/professionals if I think they've got something wrong.
>
> (Parent 40)

7.2.8 Self-confidence and recognition of expertise as a parent

The sense of empowerment and growing confidence in themselves as parents, helped participants feel more able to voice their opinions and fight for what they believed was right for their children. Often this was through necessity, but also because parents had recognised where their priorities lay. Some parents had also learnt that they offered valuable input as experts in their own child's difficulties and needs, as demonstrated by Parents 8, 35, and 20:

> I think it has made me a stronger person, more able to stand up and fight for what I believe is right and necessary. I'm a naturally conflict-avoidant person, and not demanding or assertive by nature - but with all the meetings, phone calls and email-writing I've had to do to explain / request / demand / follow up / nag / advocate, etc, I've become much more confident in myself and my dealings with the full range of professionals. I no longer care what they think of me, it really doesn't matter if I'm a nuisance to them, or if they think I'm misguided. I know that I probably know a LOT more than they do about 'school refusal', and certainly more than they can ever know about what's best for my daughter.
>
> (Parent 8)

> The one positive I can take out of the situation is that I'm not afraid of taking on authority, I'm ready and willing to fight for my children and if that means taking on some hugely expensive barrister the Local Authority has hired, by myself, then so be it.
>
> (Parent 35)

> I have become a warrior! I have a strength and resilience I never knew existed! I will fight for my children with every breath in my body. Always, no matter what barriers we face.
>
> (Parent 20)

As a result of their experiences, parents such as Parents 3, 12, and 20 were inspired to offer support to other parents, and to become involved in bringing change and improvements to the systems they had encountered:

> I now represent parents and carers in ****** and sit on various leading-edge groups and CAMHS boards so feel I can use our experiences to bring about positive change for all. This at least makes me feel as if some good will come out of the situation.
>
> (Parent 3)

> It has made me want, with even more passion, to set up a county wide parents union, not just for parent carers of SEND and to also become a school governor.
>
> (Parent 12)

> I have embraced learning with a passion, for knowledge is power. I feel able to help others and willing do so, even if just signposting. Especially those at the start of their journey.
>
> (Parent 20)

The extracts in this section and this chapter suggest that some parents were altered possibly permanently by their experiences, and they have become much more confident and assertive people as a legacy of the process they have been through.

7.3 Reaching a place of resolution and reflection

The Parental SAPs Predicament revolved around parents observing the negative impact the school attendance problems context had on their child and family. While advocating for their children and coping with the conflict and frustration which often ensued, parents needed to make difficult decisions linked to relevant legal duties and societal expectations, while they also coped with their own emotional reactions. This predicament was managed through the application of relevant knowledge and the self-confidence gained through research and peer support; factors which often led to an increased sense of empowerment and changes in priorities. As parents' sense of empowerment increased, they reflected upon aspects of SAPs such as the focus upon a one-size-fits-all system of educating children; the impact of academic pressure brought about by a constant focus on measuring attainment; and the lack of appropriate SEND provision. The combined influence of observing ongoing impacts on the family, recognising systemic failure, and gaining knowledge about alternative options

and the lived experience of others, often influenced families to reach a place of resolution. A range of factors were influential in this decision-making process, depending upon each child and family's situation. The following extracts evidence how parents experienced changes in their perception of the situation and changes in their thinking which then led them to make decisions which helped to resolve the situation.

Parent 5 found she had to develop an acceptance that her child was genuinely unable to attend a school at that time:

> There was a turning point when I saw a counsellor and she helped me see that my anxiety was making things worse, and we finally accepted that what we were being advised to do was counter-productive, [our daughter] couldn't do school and she couldn't explain why. We told her we believed that she couldn't, and she couldn't explain why either.
>
> (Parent 5)

There was an element of acceptance of the situation for Parent 5, which is also apparent for Parent 30 who realised that she needed to accept that appropriate help was not available and to continue fighting for it was going to be too damaging:

> I gave up fight, not worth all the stress it caused. We have been much happier with that acceptance.
>
> (Parent 30)

Parent 16 also realised that she needed to accept the need to prioritise her son's health and wellbeing in his best interests at the time:

> I know I have got to do what's best for [my son] so feel less stressed right now. He is not ready to go back to school so haven't got that stress every morning. Just the worry of getting him well.
>
> (Parent 16)

While Parent 20 reached an acceptance that they needed to ignore the pressure to physically force their son to attend school:

> We stopped bowing to the pressure that was placed upon us to 'drag' him to school and stopped. Just stopped.
>
> (Parent 20)

Parent 29 explained how they needed to accept her son needed to be supported to be himself, rather than try to change to fit traditional expectations:

> He now knows that we understand his needs and he no longer is expected to comply with traditional expectations. He knows we love him just how he is and will do everything we can to support him.
>
> (Parent 29)

Similarly, Parent 27 described how they had to accept that they needed to focus on educational alternatives to mainstream school:

> It was seeing the total breakdown of his mental health that made me realise that we didn't have to follow what society expected of us and that school didn't mean education. Once we realised that, and offered my first child an alternative, (that he had been asking for all his life) his SEN officer and teachers, and a CAMHS psychiatrist all supported us (and then got rid of us!!!).
>
> (Parent 27)

While Parent 4 explained that her friend had advised her that she needed to accept her son could not go to school:

> My friend who was going through the same thing, she said that you would start to feel better if you accepted that he was not going to go to school, which was kind of correct.
>
> (Parent 4)

Parent 28 accepted that she needed to prioritise wellbeing on days when anxiety levels were too high:

> Eventually deciding against sending them to school if they were completely anxiety ridden days, forcing, and dragging them to school wasn't working and I just didn't agree with it. School didn't agree with me but tough, I was doing what I knew was best for my girls and their mental health.
>
> (Parent 28)

Protecting her daughter's wellbeing also became a priority for Parent 17, as she accepted that how she was judged as a parent was less important:

> As a parent I felt stressed and anxious, knowing that I would be judged for not getting my daughter into school. But at the same time I knew that my daughter felt more stressed and anxious than I did and so it wasn't right to force her in.
>
> (Parent 17)

Parent 13 found that she needed to learn to accept that academic success was not the only way for her daughter to be successful and happy, and that academic success can be achieved outside of mainstream schooling:

> She is bright and creative. She doesn't fit the school box but maybe she will eventually find a place where she does fit. She's a gifted musician, great at photography and art, she is imaginative and dreamy. She is a great baker and talented at make-up. She wants to be a photographer or a professional make-up artist at the moment and I think that she will end up doing something creative.
>
> (Parent 13)

While Parent 24 realised that her experiences had changed her thinking and beliefs about education and schooling, and she had to accept that she could no longer work as a teacher:

> I have had to reconsider all that I thought I knew about education as a teacher which has been interesting. […] I know I could never work in a mainstream school again. Professionally as a creative teacher of the arts I feel this experience has changed the direction of the work I will do in the future. I feel like I have been through a massive ordeal and education shouldn't have to feel like this.
>
> (Parent 24)

7.4 Chapter summary

The parents who participated in this study gained access to peer support which helped them to develop a shared meaning of SAPs which helped validate their experiences. However, this was at odds with the shared reality and understanding of school staff and other professionals. These differences in perception were reflected in the difficult working relationships between parents and school staff, where child and parent blame and shame were dominant features, and school staff were often reluctant to acknowledge parental concerns about children's SAPs. Parents shared meaning of SAPs was also at odds with the understanding and perception of other family members and people in their social circles, sometimes leading to criticism and isolation.

Parents became empowered by their own proactive approaches and activities and inspired and influenced by peers with lived experience. The insights and knowledge gained through these activities improved their ability to navigate systemic difficulties and to identify, understand, and respond to their children's SAPs. Parents also became better able to recognise unhelpful or damaging approaches, thus leading to reflection and a re-evaluation of priorities and decision making about the best courses of action for children's wellbeing and educational progress. As time passed, parents experienced changes in their perception of the situation, and changes in their thinking which led them to make decisions which helped them to resolve the situation to the best of their abilities.

The following chapter will explore the findings discussed in Chapters 4, 5, 6, and 7 through the lens of Bronfenbrenner's bioecological systems theory (1979; 1989; 2005).

Chapter 8. Discussion: “They wouldn’t accept he wasn’t fine, and I wouldn’t accept he was”

8.1 Introduction

As discussed in Chapter 1, if any child experiences problems attending his or her school their parents are expected to comply with existing attendance policies drafted by individual schools and local authorities based upon government legislation and DfE guidance documents (e.g., DfE, 2020a; DfE, 2017). These policies expect parents will enforce a child’s attendance or provide specific medical evidence which states their child is ‘unfit to attend school’. If these existing policies and legislation are not complied with, parents can be fined and/or prosecuted under criminal law for their child’s absence from school.

Section 2.8.2 described how aspects of parental lived experience of the SAPs situation have recently been explored and discussed within doctoral research conducted by Educational Psychologists, Myhill (2017); Clissold (2018); Browne (2018); Orme-Stapleton (2018); and Mortimer (2019), and by law and human rights researchers Epstein, Brown and O’Flynn (2019) regarding the prosecution of parents. However, it was noted that this body of work had not yet included an in-depth exploration of the experiences and perspectives of parents who take a proactive approach to resolving SAPs, and therefore this study aimed to fill this gap in the literature. The findings of this study indicate that parents in this situation are hindered by the systemic responses and barriers they encounter (as described in Chapter 5), which frustrates their agency when they try to resolve SAPs. The parents who participated in this study described how they needed to engage in long and complex battles to seek a resolution. Chapters 6 and 7 described how the impact of these experiences often led to a range of negative consequences for the child, for parents, and for other close family members.

Although the forty parents in this study had set out to seek a resolution whereby children were able to return to attending their school as expected, with any difficulties resolved or needs supported, only one parent in the study was able to achieve this during the period discussed. As discussed in Section 4.2.3, a range of SEND, and mental or physical health problems were influential in most cases

of SAPs in the study, however Chapters 4 and 5 shared evidence of parental experiences that suggest suitable support for these difficulties was hard to arrange. This indicates that, as discussed in Section 2.6, there are within-child factors that influence SAPs. However, the medical model approach to viewing problems as 'within-child' is shown to be problematic in the SAPs context when the support needed by children is not forthcoming from schools and local authorities. This study indicates that the systemic responses to within-child factors can become barriers in terms of resolving SAPs, and this aspect is not being acknowledged in existing SAPs literature, nor in policy or legislation. This may suggest that the social model approach is more applicable in the SAPs context, however Guldberg (2020, p.18) highlights the need to move away from the linear social or medical models of understanding as they 'create a sense of cause and effect and blame' which hinders thinking about disability, impairment, and diversity. Instead, Guldberg (2020, p.19) suggests a focus on a bio-psycho-social model supports a more holistic consideration of 'how the medical, psychological and social interact in a person's life'.

This study supports previous findings that indicate that SAPs are constructed differently by the different social agents involved (e.g., Malcolm *et al*., 2003; Torrens Salemi, 2006; Baker and Bishop, 2015). Section 2.6 discussed the longstanding academic debate regarding the varied conceptualisation of absenteeism and SAPs. Heyne *et al*. (2019, p.3) argue that this lack of a shared understanding of SAPs is problematic 'because inconsistencies and ambiguity are obstacles to the advancement of assessment, intervention, and scientific knowledge surrounding SAPs'. This study evidenced how these differing constructions and perceptions of the problem of school absence also creates obstacles in the 'field'. When different social agents around the child construct different understandings of the problem, and then respond based upon their own perceptions. This leads to situations where conflicting perceptions of the problem create a 'stalemate', such as Parent 10's observation:

> 'They wouldn't accept he wasn't fine, and I wouldn't accept he was'.
>
> (Parent 10)

This study found that parents who seek to resolve school attendance problems find themselves in a catch 22 position whereby they are required to take active responsibility for their child's education, but when they seek to do this, they find their agency frustrated. The ability of parents to fulfil this duty requires a fit between the child and the environment within which the child is educated (Lerner *et al*. 2006). This works adequately enough for many children, but not all. For instance, DfE (2021a) data indicates a current persistent absence figure of 916,131 (or 13% of all pupils) suggesting for a significant number of children this fit with the learning environment doesn't work. While traditionally the SAPs discourse has sited the 'problem' and therefore the solution within the child or family unit, there is growing recognition that the wider environment, including the school setting and, beyond that, the wider welfare context are equally significant in shaping this 'fit', and this wider environment around the family can be deficient.

To support these arguments, Section 8.2 demonstrates how an adapted version of Bronfenbrenner's bioecological systems framework (1979; 1998; 2005) allows us to apply the wider systems approach to the experiences of parents who seek to resolve school attendance problems. This adaptation of Bronfenbrenner's bioecological systems framework conceptualises the experiences of this study's participants in a way that allows us to gain a new holistic understanding of the parental perspective of school attendance problems. Where the dominant belief has been that absence from school is indicative of parenting failure and/or children's disaffection from education, this adapted model illustrates how when parents take a proactive approach to fulfil their legal duty to ensure children access an education, there are a wide range of factors and influences that act as barriers to hinder a successful outcome. In a wider context, this is problematic because these factors and influences preventing a successful outcome are unrecognised or unacknowledged in legal, clinical, and academic discourses. Any policies, legislation, treatment plans, or theories that do not account for these factors as barriers to successful outcomes are likely to be less effective as a result.

8.2 Incorporating parents' journeys within a bioecological systems framework

As discussed in Section 2.7.1, researchers have applied systemic models within studies of SAPs, to help them view individuals holistically within their cultural and social context (Nuttall and Woods, 2013; Myhill, 2017; Browne, 2018; Mortimer, 2019; Melvin *et al.,* 2019). This has directed attention towards the influence of the school environment, and other factors (e.g., socio-economic influences). This study aimed to contribute to this growing body of thought in recognition of the potential it offers to extend understanding of SAPs, as suggested by Place *et al*. (2000):

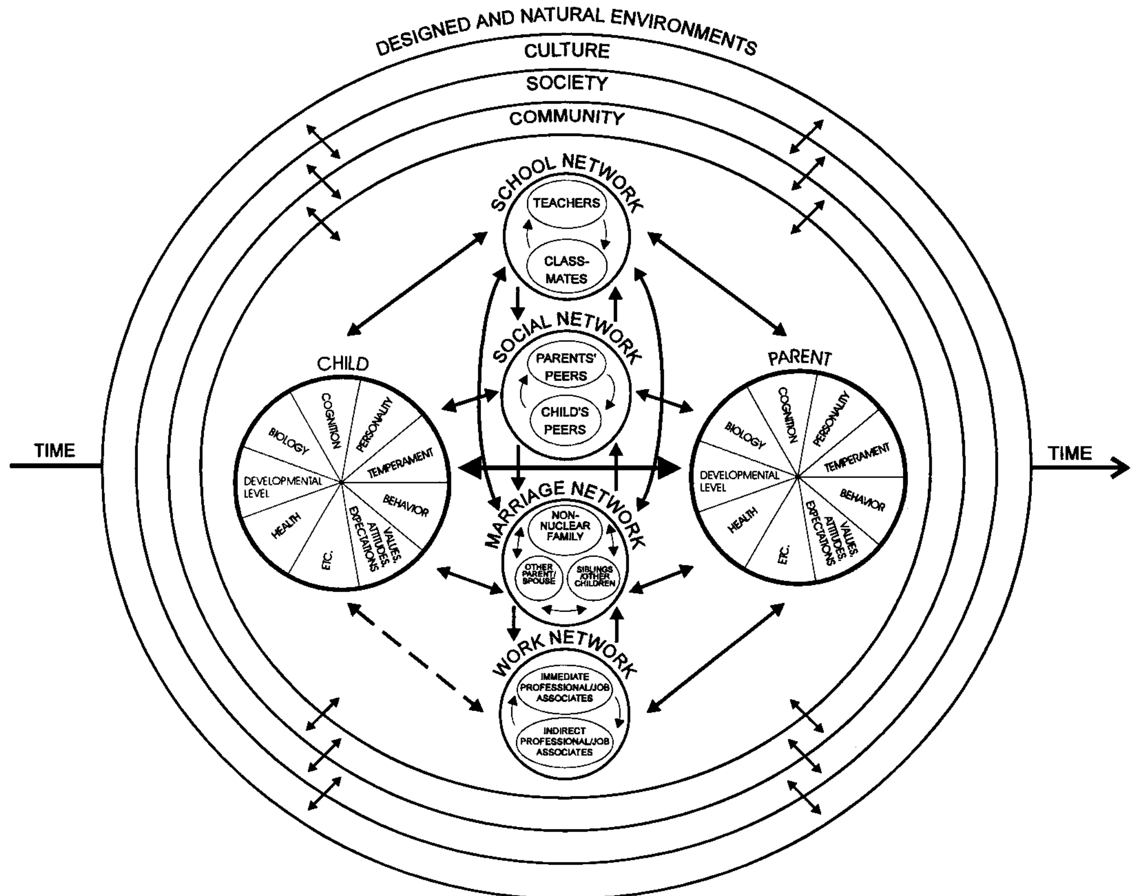
> An understanding of the interaction between environmental factors and school non-attenders is necessary to promote effective and lasting change and generate alternative discourses around this issue.
>
> (Place *et al*. 2000, p. 67)

8.2.1 Selecting Bronfenbrenner's bioecological model (1979; 1998; 2005)

The contextual perspective on human development focuses upon cultural and social influences upon development, and the interplay between an individual and the cultural context of their world (Lerner *et al*., 2006). As a tool to support the holistic understanding of the contextual perspective, Bronfenbrenner's widely utilised bioecological model (1979; 1998; 2005) was selected over other contextual or ecological models because it offers an inclusive structure and incorporates proximal processes which acknowledge the significance of interactions between people. In making this decision, the researcher drew upon the work of Lerner *et al.* (2002; 2006), who discuss the relevance of parenting (which involves multiple interdependent relationships), to developmental systems theory (which 'focuses on the dynamic, or fused, and changing relations between developing people and their contexts' (Lerner *et al.,* 2002, p.316)). Lerner *et al*. (2002) consider two models within the developmental systems theory family - Lerner's developmental contextual theory, and Bronfenbrenner's bioecological systems theory, in terms of how they support understanding of parenting processes and pay close attention to the parent-child relationship. These models

were of interest as they each offer a visual theoretic model which can be adapted to illustrate the context in a graphic form.

Figure 8.1 Lerner's Developmental Contextual view of human development (Lerner et al. 2002)



Lerner's developmental contextual model (Figure 8.1) considers how 'the actions of people in and on their world and the actions of the world on people shapes the quality of human behavioural and psychological functioning' (Lerner et al., 2002, p. 318). The model has a focus upon studying the actions of the child, and the actions of the parent, over time and in their broader context. Application of this model involves the study of how the behaviour and development of an individual are influenced by dynamic interactions between nature and nurture.

Although there are many similarities with Bronfenbrenner's bioecological systems model, Lerner's model has a closer focus upon the child – parent relationship and the influences upon this relationship. The researcher therefore decided that this

made it less appropriate for presenting and supporting understanding of the wider systemic context of parents' experience of SAPs.

Bronfenbrenner's bioecological systems model (1979; 1998; 2005) is especially useful in relation to this study because rather than focus simply on the child, parents, and family as the crux of the problem, it supports consideration of all social, systemic, and cultural factors which influence their experiences (Melvin *et al,* 2019). The environmental contexts around the individual are viewed as systems nested at different levels, with interactions taking place within and between them. These contexts comprise the microsystem where the components are the direct influences on the person at the centre of the model, then the mesosystem represents interactions between these components (Bronfenbrenner, 1977). The exosystem contains sites with an indirect influence upon the person at the centre (Bronfenbrenner, 1977), the macrosystem represents laws, and social and cultural norms and beliefs (Bronfenbrenner, 1978), and time-based events are represented in the chronosystem (Bronfenbrenner, 1986). Therefore, Bronfenbrenner's model can represent the complex context of an individual person. As discussed in Section 2.6, this holistic approach has been highlighted as a missing factor in many existing SAPs related studies.

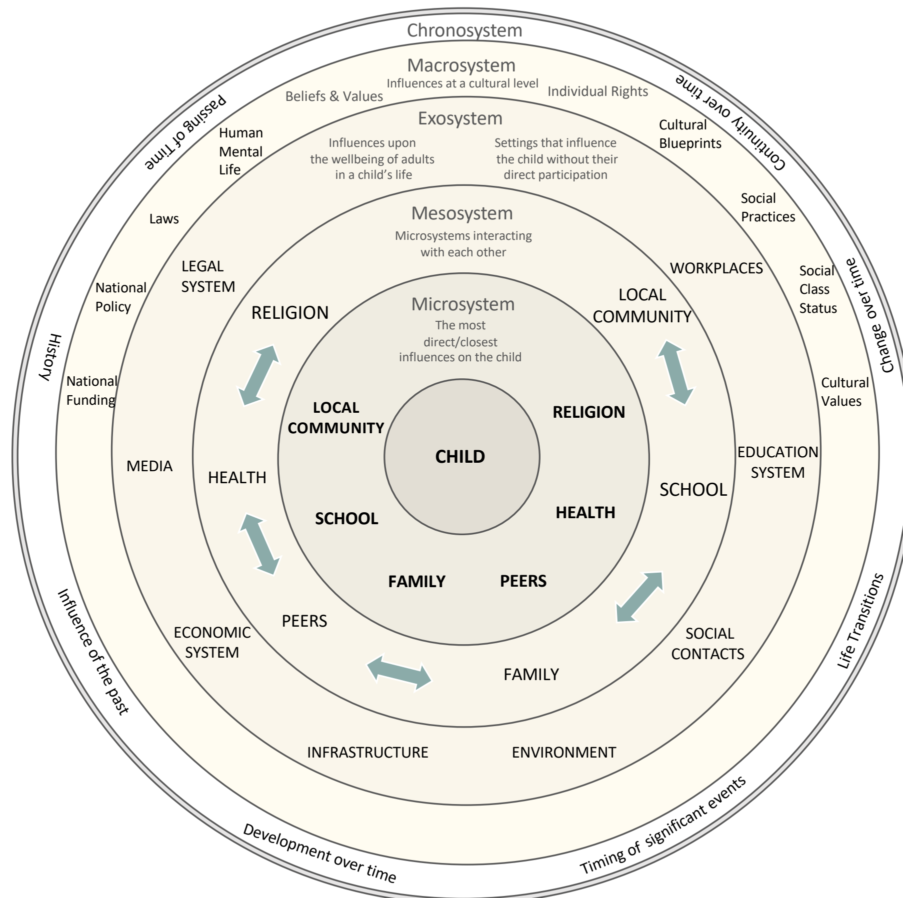
A further significant feature this framework supports is a focus upon proximal processes which Bronfenbrenner identified as the drivers of interactions between the parent, child, family, peers, school, and health services (Bronfenbrenner and Ceci, 1994; Bronfenbrenner, 1995). Proximal processes are integral to the context of SAPs as it involves a range of actors with differing perspectives and priorities, who need to communicate and negotiate to achieve a resolution to each child's difficulties. As Chapters 4, 5, 6 and 7 evidenced, these interactions were central to parental experiences in terms of social responses and professional working relationships, as they often determined the complexity and trajectory of each parent's journey through school attendance problems. Application of a comprehensive model such as this supports the following observation made by Sugrue, Zuel, and LaLiberte (2016) which acknowledges the complexity of the school absence context:

> Practitioners and policymakers attempting to address chronic absenteeism would benefit from applying an ecological approach (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) and developing intervention models that attempt to address issues in multiple ecological levels by combining direct services to individual families with macro practice activities, such as community organizing, capacity building, and policy advocacy.
>
> (Sugrue, Zuel, and LaLiberte, 2016, p.144)

8.2.2 Representing parents' experience within Bronfenbrenner's model

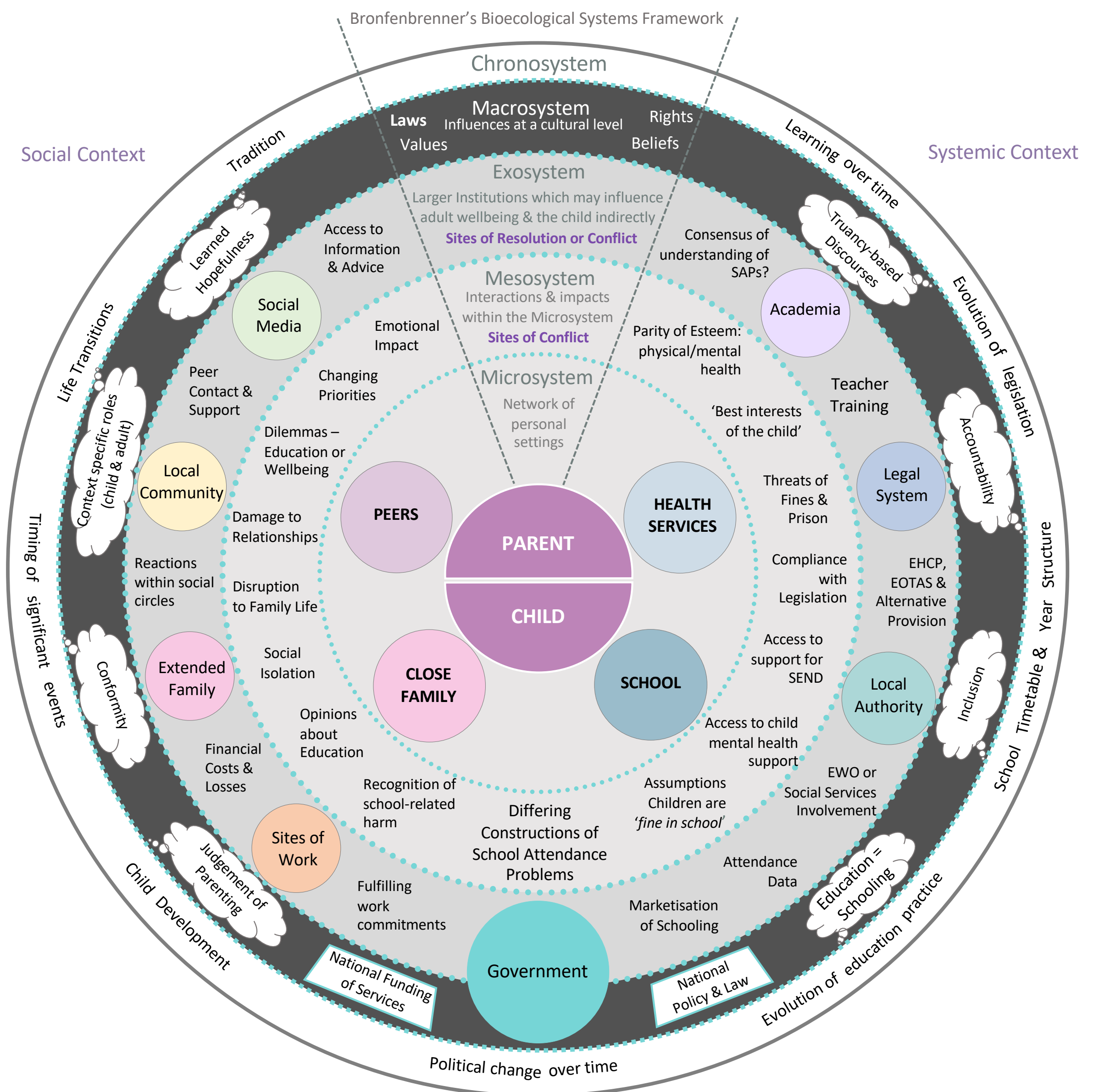
Bronfenbrenner's bioecological systems model was introduced within this thesis in Section 2.7.1 and is reproduced again here in Figure 8.2, to allow a comparison to be more easily made with the researcher's adapted model (Figure 8.3) to allow the novel adaptations to be more easily seen.

Figure 8.2 Bronfenbrenner's (1979; 1998; 2005) Bioecological Systems Framework



The researcher's aim was to adapt Bronfenbrenner's bioecological systems model to represent dimensions of the participants experiences. To achieve this aim, the researcher considered the features of participant's experiences which were revealed through thematic data analysis and then located them within the appropriate systemic levels of Bronfenbrenner's model. The adapted model also features elements that were discussed in Chapter 2, to incorporate social, historical, and political factors of relevance to the study findings.

Figure 8.3 A Bioecological Systems Model of Parents' Journeys through School Attendance Problems



This adapted version of Bronfenbrenner's model represents the viewpoint of the parent who is sited centrally as the principal advocate for, and agent on behalf of the child. The key features and aspects of the parental experience are shown at relevant systemic levels. In viewing the findings of this study through this bioecological systems lens, the stages and contexts of the Parents' Journey described in Chapters 4, 5, 6, and 7 have a reciprocity with the features and systemic levels of Bronfenbrenner's model that will be explained throughout this chapter. Although it is not possible to discuss every contextual aspect and factor here, the aim is to draw attention to significant elements of the perspective of parents who participated in this study. A further aim is to extend understanding of the difficult aspects of seeking a resolution and highlight existing barriers that hinder parents' agency in fulfilling their duties relating to children's education.

The role of the parent as represented in the adapted model will now be discussed, and this is followed by a discussion of how each level of the model represents aspects of the parental experience that combine to build a holistic picture of the complexity of their position. This has not been possible before because the experiences of parents who seek to resolve SAPs have not been considered before.

8.3 The role of the parent

During the development of this adapted model, early versions followed Bronfenbrenner's lead and incorporated the parent as one component of the microsystem alongside the school, health service, peers, and close family, with the child in a central position (see Figure 8.2). However, upon reflection it was decided to site the parent centrally with the child in this adapted model. This decision reflects the importance of what is often a role undertaken by one specific parent within the family unit, where they take responsibility for arranging support for the child's educational and health needs in the SAPs context. Here, as described in Section 5.2 the parent becomes the agent acting on behalf of the child, forming a bridge between the child and the components of the system. In this position, the parent advocates for the child in negotiations within the education, health, and political systems, and can also become the focus of any accusations of being responsible for the SAPs and/or punitive action.

The parents who took part in this study also took on the role of advocate or mediator for the child within the home environment, as described in Section 6.2.2., where members of the immediate family struggled to understand their child or siblings' reaction to attending school and may have been critical and resented the disruption brought about by the SAPs. Although the welfare of the child remains central to the SAPs, the context both at home and in navigating systems creates an essential but stressful role for the parent, who is significantly impacted emotionally and practically through their involvement. Therefore, this is represented through the placement of the parent in a shared central position in the adapted model. The adapted model then highlights through the mesosystem how the parental experience is dominated by dilemma and conflict with others.

It seems appropriate here to draw upon the writing of Arendell (1997) to consider a social constructionist perspective of parenting. This perspective considers that human parenting activities are not simply biological or instinctive responses; instead, they are dynamic and complex social processes that are learned and influenced through participation within a social community. These cultural meanings regarding parenting are grounded in tradition and ideology. The influence of the social community upon parenting practices is situated in time and place, meaning practices are shaped by historical events and transformed by developments in the structure and context of society at any given point in time. Consideration of school attendance and absence from this perspective suggests that any parental involvement is influenced by knowledge of cultural norms and values, especially in terms of what are considered good or bad parenting practices. A parent condoning or supporting a child's absence from school is therefore considered a 'bad parent', however this reflects the Parental SAPs Predicament, as examples of good parenting include parents protecting a child from harm and prioritising their health and wellbeing. This paradox creates a significant dilemma for parents when a child experiences SAPs.

The parental perspectives reported in this study were shaped by competing and conflicting social constructions of roles, processes and rules that relate to school attendance. If parents opt to educate their child by enrolling them at a mainstream school, they take on the role of 'parent of a schoolchild' (as

discussed in Section 2.6). In doing so, they are expected to conform to a site-specific range of socially constructed scripts, rituals, and behaviours (David, *et al*., 1993; 1995). Section 2.2 described how the introduction of mass compulsory education led English society to develop a belief that children must access a school-based education to become functioning adult members of society.

The responses of others in the family, school community and social circles, reported in Chapters 5 and 6, suggest these beliefs and attitudes remain widespread. Furthermore, most experiences described by parents (Section 6.2.4) confirm how uncomfortable many people feel if they hear that a child is not attending school. Parents observed how school staff also demonstrated little empathy for children with attendance problems. School staff were reported to dismiss the distress children display about attending school and claim they were 'fine in school'. Parent 7 believed this response reflected an acceptance that not all children like going to school but they have no other choice but to get used to it, and therefore any distress is viewed as an inconvenient part of this process. Parent 7 described this as a 'rite-of-passage' for the child, (which correlates with the suggestion in Section 2.4) that children need to make the transition from child-of-the-family, to become a schoolchild (Dockett and Perry, 2012, p.59). Bronfenbrenner (1979) described starting school as an ecological transition which requires a person to navigate a change in role. This change in role includes learning to conform with expectations for behaviour which are associated with the new role.

The impact of role changes may also correlate with the conflict between parents and professionals within this study. The roles of both parents and teachers are challenged when a child ceases to attend school, with each person needing to either accept responsibility or direct blame at the other person in their corresponding role. Bronfenbrenner (1979, p.85) notes how both parents and teachers are expected to provide guidance to children, with parents in Western society having authority over a broader segment of a child's life than teachers do. Within a school-related context, parents have less authority because the potential negative legal consequences are one-sided. Essentially as the findings of this study evidence, while parents have a legal duty to ensure attendance if a child is

enrolled at a school, they have little power to influence how schools respond to their child. There was a perceived loss of agency for parents in this study when they recognised that despite their attempts to advocate, their child's difficulties would not be acknowledged or supported by the school as they had hoped or expected.

8.3.1 A focus upon mothers

Regarding this study, and school attendance problems in general, it is relevant to discuss how responsibility for managing a child's daily care, school attendance and education falls mostly to mothers. Mothers often accommodate these roles due to a combination of cultural expectations, gendered stereotypes, and sometimes practical family decisions regarding salary levels and availability (Walkerdine, et al. 2001; Cooper and Rodgers, 2015; Goodall, 2021). This prevalence of maternal responsibility is reflected in the participant demographics, where all participants are female, and in the site of recruitment, as 96% of the 22,200 (January 2022) 'Not Fine in School' group members are female.

In legal terms, more mothers than fathers are prosecuted for their child's school absence. For instance, in 2017, 16,400 parents were prosecuted for failing to send their children to school, and 74% of those convicted were mothers. 80% of the 110 people given a suspended sentence of imprisonment were women. 83% of the 500 people given a community order were women. Nine out of the ten people sent to prison were women (Epstein, Brown and O'Flynn, 2019). This is not a new development, for instance, in 2003 Kendall *et al*. reported on 86 Local Education Authorities who provided data on the gender of parents prosecuted for a child's school absence between September 2001 and July 2002. The breakdown was 75% female and 25 % male. Responding to data such as this, Donoghue argued that:

> The consequences of Government policy on truancy have impacted disproportionately upon women and that the use of the law regulating the prosecution of parents under section 444 of the Education Act 1996 in effect imposes an unfair burden upon mothers.
>
> (Donoghue, 2011, p.219)

In relation to the significant levels of SEND within the children in this study, it is also noted that mothers are in the majority as primary carers for children with SEND. In disability research studies mothers make up the majority of participants and report similar experiences of negative working relationship with schools to those found in this study (Todd and Jones, 2003; Browne, 2018; Runswick-Cole and Ryan, 2019; Epstein, Brown and O'Flynn, 2019; Goodall, 2021). This involvement of mothers means they are often implicated in and considered responsible for their child's difficulties and disabilities. This suggests mothers are destined to share the stigma of their child's absence from school, and face judgements of good or bad parenting through responses from the practitioners they encounter (McKeever and Miller, 2004; Reay, 2004).

This study's participants demonstrated how some parents do react against the disempowerment they perceive if they encounter systemic barriers preventing children with needs accessing the help they need. This 'push back' has led to the application of labels such as 'warrior parents', 'difficult parents', 'toxic mothers' and 'bad mothers'(Blum, 2007; Lamb, 2009; Douglas, *et al*., 2021). Some parents embraced these identities which arose directly from the interaction they as parents had with different components of the system. In Section 7.2.8, Parent 20 was quoted as saying she had become 'a warrior' because of her experiences. Fourteen other parents also wrote about similar impacts their experienced had had on them personally in terms of becoming an activist, an advocate, and feeling more courageous; more assertive; more willing to fight, question, disagree, complain, defend children's rights, object to ableism, and stand their ground.

Parent 22 exemplified the severe consequences some parents face if they fight the power imbalance by questioning professional actions or decisions. Professionals refused to believe Parent 22's daughter's illnesses and learning needs were genuine and valid reasons for her attendance problems. As a result, both were subjected to intimidation and harassment by school and local authority staff; bullying, gaslighting, and threats of imprisonment, being placed in social care, and accusations of Fabricating and Inducing Illness (FII). Both mother and daughter's mental and physical health and wellbeing were permanently damaged

because of their treatment by school and local authority staff. Retrospectively, the Local Government Ombudsman investigated the case and found in favour of the family, awarding them compensation for their unjust treatment (LGO, 2018). Although most parents did not report this extreme intimidation, this case indicates it does exist within the current systems.

8.4 The Microsystem and Mesosystem

The mesosystem comprises the interactions within the microsystem which Bronfenbrenner referred to as proximal processes (Bronfenbrenner and Ceci, 1994; Bronfenbrenner, 1995). Proximal processes were significant as they reflected the impact and influence of various interactions that featured within parent accounts. Through these interactions with peers, family, and professionals, access to further sources of support and help could be assisted, blocked, or delayed. Through the representation of the study findings in the adapted model it is apparent that for parents, the mesosystem primarily became a site of conflict and managing practical difficulties as they mediated on their child’s behalf, both with family members and professionals.

As Burr (2015) explains, the theory of social constructionism argues that a person’s identity is formed through and within the social interactions and discourses experienced by individuals daily. The discourses surrounding SAPs reflected a range of perspectives which often conflicted (including teacher, psychologist, psychiatrist, sociologist, and parent). Discourses are sited within social interactions and vary over time as beliefs and opinions evolve. The discussion of relevant literature in Section 2.6 included studies of SAPs which have explored the differing perspectives and discourses of children, parents, and professionals (e.g., Nuttall and Woods, 2013; Aucott, 2014; Clissold, 2018; Orme-Stapleton, 2018; Mortimer, 2019). Although English society has constructed a collective understanding of the concepts of school attendance and why it is significant, the findings here suggest that children, parents, and professionals apply differing characteristics and definitions, and construct differing truths or beliefs about absence from school.

One common finding has been that parents and professionals make sense of SAPs by directing the focus of blame upon each other (Malcolm *et al*., 2003). These differing discourses are significant as they compete, and the strongest voices become established as the truth. The relevance of this is reflected in the dominant discourse which has sited the blame for SAPs in the child and family. The differing constructions of SAPs meant that professionals appeared to view them as a parenting failure and/or sign of problems in the home setting. This was indicated by practices such as responding to parents' reports of concerns with recommendations for parenting courses, or referrals to social services. In contrast, parents viewed SAPs as a sign that their child was encountering school related problems, and they looked for evidence of academic or learning difficulties, bullying or friendship difficulties, or signs of physical or mental health problems. This parental approach reflects the recommended practices expressed in DfE guidance documents included in Figure 1.4 (page 12). Parents attributed the lack of professional interest in these possible triggers to deficiencies in teacher training and awareness, or to the influence of senior leadership discussed in Section 5.2.1.

8.4.1 Working relationships

The study findings indicated how parents are effectively 'silenced by words' through threats and unsupportive systemic responses. When parental concerns were shared with professionals they were often dismissed with "they are fine in school" or "we don't see that in school" type responses, which contradicted each parent's definition of the situation and, with it, their self-confidence and identity as a perceived equal in the home/school working relationship. Parents opinions were often overruled or diminished by professionals during conversations or meetings, especially where they were referred to as 'mum' or their comments recorded as 'mum says ….'. Nimmo (2019) argues that these types of response trigger a power-based relationship which creates additional barriers because parents feel disrespected and invisible as people with valuable knowledge to contribute.

This reflects the concept of 'othering' as 'a way of distinguishing 'us' from 'them' (Goodall, 2019, p.3). This happens when people construct a group they identify

with, which consequently also creates a group who they do not identify with. Goodall (2019) explains how this creates a deficit discourse which is reflected in language related to education, where there are staff viewed as ‘professionals’ and there are ‘parents’. Similarly, a literature review by Hughes and Mac Naughton (2000) identified ‘constant ‘othering’ of parental knowledge by staff’ (2000, p.242). The othering was viewed within instances where teachers considered parental knowledge of their own child was inadequate, supplementary, or unimportant in comparison to their own. Where ‘othering’ is taking place, it contributes to power imbalances where one group has a voice that is considered more valid and carries more weight than the other. This was a visible problem within parents’ accounts of their interactions with professionals.

Section 2.4.1 drew attention to the notion of parents and professionals working in partnership or co-production to support children and this is promoted as best practice (Warnock, 1977; Sheldon, 2007). However, the findings of this study suggest the likelihood of it becoming a genuine working practice in the SAPs context seems remote. The participants’ experiences suggest that an underlying reason for this is the difficult power dynamics between professionals and parents, which echoes the findings of Clissold (2018), Browne (2018), and Mortimer (2019). Within the SAPs context there are various relationships where power is experienced differently by individuals, and this then influences how they can respond. Progress throughout the Parents’ Journeys was determined by human interaction, where individual responses determined outcomes. This was significant as it was only education and health professionals, or employees of local government who had the power to make decisions and judgements, which then impacted upon both parental agency and children’s access to support and educational provision.

One example relates to how prior to 2006, parents were able to decide whether children were well enough to attend school or not. However, The Pupil Registration Regulations (2006) gave headteachers the discretion to decide if a child’s absence due to illness was valid (and authorised) or invalid (and unauthorised). This significantly disempowered parents because it removed a decision making right related to their children and passed it to schools instead.

The significance of this for parents was clarified within analysis of the process mothers undertake in deciding if their child's claims of illness are genuine or not (Prout, 1988). Prout (1988) observed that mothers make such decisions based upon their intuition and knowledge of their child, which they weigh-up against testing for feigning and recognising the need to encourage stoicism. This reflects the process of making sense of observations and difficulties described in Section 4.4.4, where parents decided how to respond to their child's emerging SAPs. Prout (1988) claimed the decision to send a seemingly unwell child to school or not is one that is complicated by a range of emotions and concerns that formed 'certain implicit and virtually insoluble difficulties' (1988, p.780). This was explained further in terms of maternal competence and judgements made by school staff, suggesting that negotiating over a child's attendance problems is also a site where mothers attempt to manage others' impressions of their parenting competence and moral character, but where they eventually lose and must accept others will possibly define them unfairly.

Furthermore, a power imbalance exists in various ways throughout the systems of relevance, which further impacts upon parents' sense of agency. As a further example, in 2020 a high court ruling featured an observation which evidences the imbalance of power between families and local authorities:

> Local authorities have huge powers over the lives of families with children who have special needs, making decisions with potentially lifelong consequences. Where parents are unhappy with those decisions, there is a fundamental and frightening inequality of power.
>
> (Mrs Justice Collins Rice in L Kumar v LB of Hillingdon (2020) EWHC 3326)

Although this study is focused on a specific problem and not on all aspects of the professional-parent relationship, it does reveal the existence of an underpinning power imbalance which is likely to underpin wider professional-parent relationships even if it not always visible. Some professionals also lack power in terms of the budget and resources they are provided. This can be linked to the power of government, at the macrosystem level, to shape all component parts of

the system and to help establish the parameters for the interactions and conflict which then ensue when resourcing is inadequate (Section 8.6 discusses how the adapted model reflects the influence of government at all systemic levels).

Parents reported how some professionals supported the use of threats and emotional/physical force over children to enforce their attendance, demonstrating the importance assigned to attendance. However, it also seems morally questionable, especially if consideration is given to the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNICEF UK,1989) which sets out the rights that all children are entitled to enjoy in countries where it is ratified, (including the UK). These rights include:

> **Article 3 (best interests of the child)**
>
> The best interests of the child must be a top priority in all decisions and actions that affect children.
>
> (UN, 1989, Article 3)

The concept of the best interests of the child is especially difficult to reconcile in this situation. Parents were aware that both wellbeing and educational progress are important for their child. However, if children struggled to attend school one of these aspects needed to take precedence over the other. This created a conflict between a child's educational-best-interests versus their health-best-interests. This conflict between wellbeing and education is reflected within the mesosystem as an aspect of the interactions between parents and education staff (or more widely between a family and the education, health, and political systems), regarding who has the power to decide which actions are in the 'best interests' of the child?

According to Porter (2006, p.290) ‘relationships between teachers and parents are often ones of concealed power’. While parents argue that they are ‘experts in their children’s and family’s needs and have experience at resolving their issues’ (2006, p.292). Porter asserts that a teacher’s power is created ‘by virtue of their expertise’ and ‘being part of the system’ (2006, p.290). In this context they each manoeuvre to maintain a sense of individual agency and control of the situation,

whilst still requiring the input and support of the other. In a practical sense, teachers generally have more power than parents because they have a range of available options to take punitive action against a parent if they disagree with their choices and actions (Epstein, Brown and O'Flynn, 2019).

Moreover, it seems important to recognise that there is a limit to what parents can do to enforce school attendance, especially if they are dealing with a teenager who cannot be physically carried or forced into school. Mortimer (2018) noted how the parents of a teenager resorted to calling the police to intervene, in desperation. This action did result in his return to school; however, it was noted that although the strategy appeared successful, he was attending unhappily through fear, suggesting his voice and rights were not being respected and attendance was prioritised over wellbeing.

These examples reflect the complexity within the mesosystem which is created by the variations in constructions of SAPs and the differing perspectives and responses of those involved. Regarding the parental experiences that are the focus of this study, the mesosystem in the adapted model represents multiple sites of conflict and dilemma which the parent at the center needs to navigate. This navigation will often be undertaken without advice or guidance, especially in the early stages of SAPs or before each parent has located sources of support.

8.5 The Exosystem

During each parent's journey to seek a resolution for SAPs, the mainly negative experiences at the mesosystem level of the model meant parents resorted to exploring components in the exosystem. The exosystem while framing some of the difficulties – through legislation and through resourcing – also held the means for resolution through peer support, charities, and for some parents, successful negotiation with local authorities. Therefore, the exosystem in the adapted model becomes a mix of sites of systemic barriers, sites of potential support, and sites of resolution.

The interactions represented within the mesosystem were influenced by the institutions within the exosystem, and by government within the macrosystem as they determine and enforce laws, policies, and practices such as those related to attendance discussed in Section 2.4, and school-based data monitoring. As such the exosystem in the adapted model represents increased relevance for parents in their role acting as the bridge between a child's difficulties and sites of wider relevance. Consequently, an adaptation made to Bronfenbrenner's model is that 'government' is represented at a bigger size than the other institutions, and each systemic level of the model is bordered with circles of the same colour to represent the widespread influence of government in this context.

The self-help aspect of their pro-active approach is a step towards resolution for some parents, but peer support becomes important for many parents in achieving a resolution because of the sharing of knowledge and information, and because of the effects of validation or shared understanding. The adapted bioecological systems model includes social media in the exosystem as this was a significant site of support for the parents in this study. Through social media parents could access new social encounters where their situation became defined differently, as they learned from the lived experience of other parents and shared a social identity. The impact of this peer contact could be related to the idea of 'learned hopefulness' (Zimmerman, 1990, p.72) (discussed in Section 7.1.) as 'the process of learning and utilising problem-solving skills and the achievement of perceived or actual control'. The peer contact provided opportunities for parents which helped them to feel more in control of a situation they had experienced little control over previously through their systemic experiences. Zimmerman explains how 'perceived control will help individuals cope with stress and solve problems in their personal lives' (1990, p.72). Elements of self-help, peer support, and learned hopefulness were of particular importance due to the lack of guidance or a systemic pathway parents could access to help them resolve children's SAPs.

Section 8.5.1 will now discuss some of the key systemic barriers that parents encountered, and Section 8.5.2 will discuss peer support as a means of achieving a resolution.

8.5.1 Systemic barriers

In considering the current response to SAPs in England the background context relates to the larger institutions sited within the exosystem, the widespread influence of government in the macrosystem, and the cultural and historical influences sited within the macrosystem and chronosystem, some of which were considered in Chapter 2. Components in the macrosystem frame the nature and parameters of some of the components of the mesosystem, including the significant impact of systemic crises regarding funding for schools (NAHT, 2021) (and other services), SEND provision (House of Commons, Education Committee, 2019), and CAMHS provision (House of Commons, Education and Health and Social Care Committees, 2018).

According to a letter from the Government Legal Department (2020) on behalf of the Department for Education, existing attendance related legislation (section 19, Education Act 1996) provides what they describe as a 'safety net' to ensure children who are unable to attend school can access a suitable education via local authority intervention. However as mentioned in Section 8.5.1 the findings of this study demonstrate how ineffective this intended 'safety net' is in practice. Instead, parents' success in locating relevant support for children was often hindered by a range of systemic barriers including inadequate funding for schools and services; long waiting lists for access to services; a lack of accountability if schools and local authorities fail to adhere to legislation; a lack of parity of esteem between mental and physical health; and inadequate professional knowledge and training.

The combination of truancy-related discourses and systemic barriers appears to further direct the professional focus towards locating blame within the family and home to avoid responsibility for funding support or alternative provision for children who need the DfE supposed 'safety net'. The impact of existing systemic problems on working partnerships between schools and parents, and outcomes for children was highlighted by Browne (2018) in reference to the parental experiences she studied:

> Schools need to be supported to ensure that they follow the legislative guidance from the SEND Code of Practice (2015) and ensure that the child and the family remain at the centre of any collaborative, multi professional work. The lack of the term 'we' in my research highlights the lack of positive, collaborative involvement that parents had with professionals and suggests that professionals should consider ways in building more positive and balanced relationships with parents. However, the current pressures on schools and support services also needs to be considered, especially in the current political climate of 'austerity'. Public services are under increasing strain, particularly in the NHS, which includes CAMHS, which affects the accessibility of support from the service. Schools too are under increasing pressure to ensure high whole school attendance figures which are monitored by Ofsted, which may result in pressure on attendance being passed through to students and families. The priority becomes the attendance figure which possibly means the needs of the child can be lost.
>
> (Browne: 2018, p.124)

These are significant observations from Browne (2018) which will now be discussed further in relation to their relevance within the exosystem of the adapted model.

Parental experiences evidenced the ongoing failure to effectively implement the SEND reforms of 2014 (Ofsted, 2021a), and fund suitable educational provision for children with SEND (Hutchinson, 2021). These examples of systemic failure continue to be significant barriers to attendance as noted in the Education Committee First Report of Session (2019–20). The following observations and feedback from the Committee echo the complaints made by this study's participants:

> There is too much of a tension between the child's needs and the provision available. The significant funding shortfall is a serious contributory factor to the failure on the part of all involved to deliver on the SEND reforms and meet children's needs.

> We have found a general lack of accountability within the system.
>
> We recommend that parents should be able to report directly to central Government when local authorities fail to follow processes set out in statute and guidance. The Department should create a mechanism specifically for parents and carers of children with SEND, beyond what currently exists. The distance between young people's lived experience, their families' struggles and Ministers' desks is just too far.
>
> Parents and carers have to wade through a treacle of bureaucracy, full of conflict, missed appointments and despair.
>
> We want to see greater joint working between the health and education sectors, beginning firmly with the development of a joint outcomes framework to measure how the health aspects of support for children and young people with SEND are being delivered locally.
>
> (House of Commons, Education Select Committee, 2019, pp.3-4)

These observations of funding shortfalls, a lack of accountability, communication failures, poor joint working practices, and unclear pathways to support all feature in the accounts of this study's participants as systemic failures which create barriers to resolving attendance problems (see Chapters 5 and 7).

There are various systemic problems which act as barriers to achieving a resolution for SAPs, including the following observations:

School attendance related legislation has afforded local authorities with freedom to implement their own attendance policies and practices. The accounts of parents in this study suggest that in practice this means local attendance policies often do not correctly comply with legislation. This creates a variety of difficulties for parents, as evidenced by 939 Local Government Ombudsman investigations between May 2010 and January 2022, where in 672 cases the Ombudsman

upheld complaints against local authorities who failed to comply with their duties under section 19 of the Education Act 1996.

Furthermore, the lack of standardised policies for attendance coding and authorisation, combine with the crisis in CAMHS provision (Office of the Children's Commissioner, 2020; 2020/21). This often means parents are unable to obtain medical evidence demanded by schools and local authorities through their local policies, without long delays. Consequently, many absences become increasingly entrenched, the family difficulties escalate, and this leads to increased risks of fines and prosecution for parents. At the same time, children are left in limbo without education or support (Myhill, 2017; Clissold, 2018; Epstein *et al*., 2019). These systemic problems mean that the 'safety net' the Department for Education argue will 'catch' children who are unable to attend school, through local authority organised provision under section 19 of the Education Act, 1996, fails to materialise (Parish *et al*., 2018). Local authorities seemingly do all they can to avoid having to fund provision for children (Mortimer, 2018). These barriers to attendance were reflected in the parents' expressions of anger and frustration at local authority staff reported in Section 5.5.

Moreover, the lack of an effective complaints procedures (Clements & Aiello, 2019), and few mechanisms of accountability when relevant policies and legislation are not followed, mean parents have few ways of seeking redress, unless they can obtain funding to initiate Judicial Review proceedings. The impact of this situation is compounded by common societal, academic, legal, and professional assumptions and beliefs that if a child or family experiences difficulties such as these, existing systems will provide support. Realising that the support you expect to find does not exist and instead as a parent you will be blamed and threatened with fines and legal action can be devastating, as reflected in Parent 12's description of how her experiences left her feeling: 'disempowered, victimised, persecuted and punished'.

Cullen and Lindsay (2019, p.170) investigated parents experiences of disagreement resolution arrangements relating to SEND, following the SEND legal reforms introduced through the Children and Families Act (2014). One

aspect was an increased focus on partnership working which aimed to prevent disagreements between local authorities and families. However, it was found there remained a minority of disagreements which were difficult to resolve and 'were experienced by parents as intensely emotional and stressful'. Cullen and Lindsay (2019, p.180) referred to Bronfenbrenner's theoretical framework to interpret data gathered through interviews with seventy mothers and eight fathers. Their findings showed that disagreements mostly reflect a belief that a child's SEND are going unmet, and one main reason for complaints was 'delays and role dissonances experienced while seeking to ensure the child's needs are met'. Two role dissonances were identified:

> One was realising that not all staff were competent in the roles they held; the other was that staff could behave in ways perceived by these parents as unexpectedly unpleasant and unprofessional.
>
> (Cullen & Lyndsay, 2019, p.176)

The competency of school staff in relation to SEND was perceived by parents in this study to reflect a lack of training in SEND. Teacher training is therefore included in the exosystem of the adapted model, as it reflects a lack of adequate professional training and understanding of SAPs in addition to SEND. The parents in the study who worked in professional roles reported that they had not received any training in relation to understanding and managing attendance problems.

Section 4.2.3 described the triggers for SAPs reported by the study participants, and being autistic held significance for thirty of the forty-seven children involved, both in terms of recognition and acknowledgment of autism, and the provision of appropriate support for autistic children within school environments. School staff often failed to recognise or accept children were autistic, especially in terms of recognising when children were masking their difficulties (Beardon, 2019; Pearson and Rose, 2020). This could be linked to many instances where children were said to be 'fine in school' but at home it was clear the children had problems attending school. The need for workforce development via improved autism

knowledge for teachers is discussed by Guldberg (2020), who recommends a variety of improvements in training and practice. This includes an emphasis on engagement and partnership with parents, creating an inclusive culture, and making reasonable adjustments to remove barriers to participation.

The following section discusses how parents attempted to navigate these systemic barriers, with the assistance and support of other parents. This aspect of the parent experience indicates that the exosystem contained sites of resolution, sites of conflict, and systemic barriers.

8.5.3 Peer support

The most significant support that parents in this study were able to locate was self-sourced through internet-based peer-support groups, local peers with lived experience, and SEND charities or parent-targeted services. As the participants in the study were recruited through an internet-based peer support group it is not unexpected to find they benefitted from online peer support. However, some parents stated that online peers were their only support source. In addition, parents reported that they found someone within their social circle who had similar lived experience, which was disclosed when they began to discuss it with people they met face-to-face. Myhill (2017) found parents in her study expressed the view that they would have appreciated contact with other parents going through the same difficulties they were, as they thought it would reduce their fear of professional judgement.

Some parents appeared to mourn the effective loss of their membership of a school community because they felt isolated and no longer had a sense of belonging once their child stopped attending. Membership of a peer support group online offers membership of a new community or ‘new tribe’ where similar lived experiences mean that you do ‘belong’ somewhere again. In terms of the adapted model, parents lost a source of belonging and support within the microsystem, but they found a new source in the exosystem, which shows how the model can helps us to view things differently and identify contextual changes.

Opportunities to share peer support and lived experience empowered parents in a range of ways. The exchange of information helped to encourage parents to keep fighting for systemic help, as they learned whether information provided by professionals was accurate or not. Section 7.2.2 also indicated the significance of peer contact in that it offered evidence to parents that their family was one of many in the same situation, rather than being an isolated or unusual case. Some parents had been led to believe they were unusual in experiencing SAPs, suggesting it reflected something they had done as parents that was the cause. If parents later learned they were one of many experiencing similar difficulties and barriers to finding support, they questioned whether the problem was more systemic, rather than within-family. This empowerment encouraged some parents to resist the pressure to comply with professional expectations and act against the interests of the child as they saw them.

Runswick-Cole and Ryan (2019) considered how mothers who become engaged in these battles with professionals become increasingly compelled to share their story with others:

> Crucially, in England, as in many other Global North contexts, parenting roles are socially constructed in ways that demand that it is mothers of disabled children who take primary responsibility for the fight for their children. They are simultaneously valorised and vilified as 'tiger mums', 'warrior mums' or 'angels', with fathers or other family members erased.
>
> (Runswick-Cole & Ryan, 2019, p.16)

The battle mothers encountered involved persuading professionals and others in 'authority' to alter their definition of absence-as-truancy and alter their approach towards ongoing school absence in recognition of the impact of current systemic barriers. If mothers succeeded in doing that, or if they were able form their own definition of SAPs, whereby they felt less compelled to aim for a re-entry to school, they regained some sense of power and ability to 'move forward'. Parents found resources at the exosystem level such as greater knowledge and self-confidence, which they then took into their interactions in the mesosystem level; with the irony that the exosystem is the level at which many components are framed but also the level at which aids to resolution are found.

8.6 The Macrosystem

The macrosystem is influential throughout the parents' journey, as it represents subjective psychological states such as the beliefs and opinions of members of society, and its broader cultural and institutional norms, structures, and constructs. This therefore relates to Chapter 2 and the widespread acceptance of a mass education system and its impact upon social practices, with expectations that all children attend school. The macrosystem in the adapted model represents all the social practices, beliefs and values, and the human mental processes that feature in chapters 4, 5, 6, and 7.

Cultural influences are of relevance throughout the different levels or systems, just as they were throughout the Parents' Journeys. Bronfenbrenner represented these subjective states in the macrosystem and recognised how they influenced the inner systems of the model. This is because they determine how a culture functions, and consequently how people in similar circumstances experience similar things (Rosa and Tudge, 2013). Regarding experiences of SAPs described in this study, this helps to explain why forty parents described similar difficulties and outcomes. This recognition of common cultural beliefs also helps to support any statements of generalisation that might be made in relation to the study findings.

The macrosystem acknowledges the significance of government, legislation, and politics. For Bronfenbrenner, government is one of the institutions within the macrosystem. In relation to the SAPs context the model recognises the significance of governmental influence upon all aspects by showing government as part of the macrosystem and exosystem, with additional reach into all levels. Political narratives have promoted the belief that school attendance is vital to maintain democracy and ensure economic success. This has then influenced the discomfort people feel about children's absence from school (Lees, 2013; 2014). It has been argued that policies implemented by successive governments since compulsory education was introduced have reflected efforts to control working class families (Ball, 2017). Some argue that governments have achieved this by encouraging blame cultures and moral panics about the impact of school

absence, and truancy as deviance, damaging both society and the economy (McIntyre-Bhatty, 2008; Furedi, 2008).

As suggested in Chapter 1, it seems relevant and significant to acknowledge that there are negative aspects to school environments that offer understandable reasons why children may feel unable to attend school. The argument that school environments can be toxic and cause children injury and harm has been shared by various writers including Holt, 1964; Knox, 1990; Harber, 2004; Fortune-Wood, 2007; Robinson and Aronica, 2018; Gray, 2020; and Fisher, 2021. It is noted by Lees (2014) that school-based harm is created in several forms, including social humiliation, sexual abuse, various types of bullying, human rights abuses, neglect of basic needs and 'more tacit abuses of an individual sense of self'. Lees (2014) argues that as school attendance has been promoted as beneficial to children, their safety and wellbeing should be better protected and guaranteed. Given that these forms of harm caused by, and within, our systems of schooling are recognised, this knowledge should support suggestions that children sometimes have valid reasons to avoid school, and equally, that school environments can become barriers to attendance.

In recent years this has become increasingly apparent through various reports expressing concern about the impact of systemic failures, and school-based factors which are detrimental to children's wellbeing in relation to mental health (Mind, 2021); bullying (Ditch the Label, 2020); sexual assault in schools (Lloyd *et al*., 2021; Ofsted, 2021b); provision and support for long-term physical illnesses (No Isolation, 2021); provision and support for pupils with SEND (House of Commons, Education Committee, 2019); and provision and support for autistic pupils (Totsika *et al*., 2020; Truman *et al*., 2021).

It is clear from these reports and others like them, that there are many reasons why children and young people find attending school is a difficult and traumatic experience. In relation to school-belonging and safety, Stroobant and Jones (2006) interviewed university students who had previously experienced SAPs at school. Within their analysis they suggest that 'school refusal behaviour' may be a perfectly rational response to a disturbing school environment. They argued

that rather than the usual response of exploring why a child or young person is 'school refusing', a more relevant question should be 'why assume that the child should want to attend school?' (Stroobant and Jones, 2006, p.213).

Moreover, Lees (2014) argues that although the concept of education should relate to a variety of possible approaches and practices, as a society we struggle to accept education as a valid practice unless it involves attendance at a mainstream school. Lees refers to this as a kind of 'educationism' or 'prejudice against forms of education that are outside of the standard model' (2014, p.14). This prejudice has contributed to circumstances where children who find mainstream school an adverse and injurious environment are considered flawed or maladjusted. This prejudice continues to contribute to the dominating belief that children simply must go to school even if the circumstances or impacts are detrimental to them, and possibly their family too.

8.7 The Chronosystem

Finally, the outer layer represents the Chronosystem which acknowledges the influence of time across a variety of domains, incorporating aspects such as life transitions, changes in attitudes, policies, systems or environments over time, or the influence of family or cultural traditions. Bronfenbrenner and Morris (2006) defined human development as:

> The phenomenon of continuity and change in the biopsychological characteristics of human beings, both as individuals and as groups . . . over the life course, across successive generations, and through historical time, both past and future.
>
> (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006, p.793)

In this context, the Chronosystem recognises the development of family experiences and outcomes over time and acknowledges the historical aspects of school attendance. This is echoed in Chapter 7 through recognition of parents' reflection upon their experiences and observations. This reflection often led to a deeper recognition of the cultural and historical influences upon current

understanding and management of school attendance/absence. Considering the Chronosystem in reference to this study's findings it suggests the response to SAPs should no longer simply follow the historical model of absence as truancy, phobia, and refusal. Instead, recognition that our truancy-related legislation is outdated is needed, as our understanding of absence from school has surpassed the assumption of truancy. It is also necessary to acknowledge that fines and prosecution of parents do not lead to a resolution of SAPs, especially when they have a systemic basis (Sheppard, 2012).

The inclusion of the Chronosystem as an influence within the SAPs context suggests that society should learn from experience, especially in terms of experience that occurs repeatedly over time. The evidence presented in this thesis suggests there has been a failure to learn from the failure of political action to reduce persistent absence, and a failure to learn from the experiences of children and families who struggle with school attendance. For over one hundred years the social constructions of related terminology, discourses, practices, research and legislation around school attendance and absence have focused upon punishing families for truancy, with very little success in resolving attendance problems. Instead, it seems these social constructions have built more and more barriers for families to overcome.

8.8 Chapter summary

This chapter has presented and discussed an adaptation of Bronfenbrenner's bioecological systems model which offered a framework that supported the researcher in presenting a visual representation of the social, cultural, political, and systemic context parents are situated within when they have a child experiencing SAPs. The adapted model offers an interpretation of the study findings shared in Chapters 4, 5, 6, and 7, by locating them within the systemic levels of Bronfenbrenner's framework to offer a new way of understanding the complexity of the parental position when both fulfilling their legal duty and complying with the social expectation that parents ensure children attendance at school. This highlights the varied barriers hindering parents' agency in achieving a resolution for children's SAPs.

The adapted model helps us to understand the phenomenon of SAPs anew in the following ways:

The significance of the parents' role

Siting the parent in a central position with the child, along with the inclusion of home based and systemic factors, and the impacts of each, demonstrates that the parent is the agent of the child. In this role, the parent acts as a bridge between the child and other components of the system and mediates the relationship between the child and these components. The parent also needs to mediate between the child and other members of the family in the home context.

Sites of Conflict and Sites of Resolution

The mesosystem is mostly the site of conflict for parents, while the exosystem is mostly the site of resolution in the context of parents seeking to resolve SAPs.

The Influence of Government

In the context of this study there is a greater acknowledgement of the significant influence of government, and political policies and actions throughout the systems of the adapted model.

Variations in Perceptions and Constructions of School Attendance Problems

There is recognition of the tensions created by differing social constructions of school attendance problems by the various social agents involved.

A greater understanding of the interaction between environmental factors and school absence.

The adaptation of Bronfenbrenner's model provides an overview of the most significant contextual components that parents need to navigate to achieve a resolution. It appears that the many systemic factors of the SAPs context may not always be taken into consideration when judgements have been made about the adequacy of parental efforts to ensure children's attendance at school.

In summary, the adapted model supports a greater understanding of the complexity of parents' position specifically in England, created by the combination of legislation; systemic barriers; the different constructions of SAPs by different agents; and the lack of specific guidance or a pathway to assist parents and professionals when they seek to resolve school attendance problems.

Chapter 9. Conclusions and Recommendations

This concluding chapter revisits the research questions listed in Section 3.1 to discuss how the findings of this study have addressed them. This is followed with a discussion of the practical and methodological considerations and limitations of this study. Next, conclusions that have been drawn because of this study's findings are explained. Several recommendations will then be discussed regarding changes that could be made to policy and practice to reflect these findings and conclusions and potential future work that could be developed from the findings of this study.

9.1 Answering the research questions

Within the research paradigm, the researcher and the study participants have together constructed data about the perspectives of parents who seek to resolve school attendance problems (SAPs). The answers to the study's four research questions, as determined through thematic analysis of data generated, are as follows.

9.1.1 What actions do parents take to resolve a child's difficulties with attending school?

When each parent recognised that attending school was becoming problematic for their child they began a process of observation, application of existing knowledge of the child, investigation, and reflection, to help them identify any underlying reasons and triggers as a first step towards achieving a resolution. Parents may or may not have had existing and possibly long-term concerns about aspects of their child's development, behaviour, or wellbeing when the SAPs began. Parents often discussed their concerns with other family members, and at some point, consulted their child's teacher and/or GP to request their initial advice. When the SAPs continued parents extended this investigative process of self-directed research to try to access more advice, practical support, and information that might help them understand and identify what they needed to do to resolve the situation.

Most parents took on this role solely, as although the study did not ask specifically about the reactions of partners and spouses, it was evident that some parents acted with the support of their partners, while others had conflicting opinions and approaches. In either case, one parent usually held responsibility for delivering their child to school each day or spending time with them at home if they were unable to go to school. In this position these parents developed an awareness of how powerful and significant their child's reaction to attending school was becoming. It was usually the same parent who took on the process of investigation, who needed to communicate with school staff and other professionals, and who attended meetings and appointments.

This parent with the most in-depth involvement is represented in the adapted version of Bronfenbrenner's bioecological systems model discussed in Chapter 8. The positioning of this parent in a central role within the adapted model acknowledges their role as agent acting on behalf of the child, forming a bridge between the child experiencing SAPs and the other components of the system. In this role, the parent advocates for the child in negotiations within the education, health, and political systems, and can also become the focus of any accusations of being responsible for the SAPs and/or punitive action.

This role of advocate or mediator for the child is also relevant within the home environment, as other members of the immediate family often struggled to understand the child or siblings' reaction to attending school and may have resented the disruption brought about by the SAPs.

9.1.2 What do parents experience when they engage with various professionals in the education, health, and local government systems?

The findings of this study indicated that a lack of appropriate systemic support for school absence, SEND, and mental or physical illness can have a significant impact upon children's ability to attend school, and impact upon parental efficacy in resolving SAPs. The accounts provided by the study participants evidenced how in England, parents who seek resolutions for SAPs are often hindered and disempowered by the systemic responses and barriers to support they encounter. These responses often related to school staff being dismissive of the

existence of any problems perceived within the school environment. This was combined with a tendency to suggest that any difficulties reported by parents reflected deficiencies in their parenting and/or problems in the home. This suggests that the differing perceptions and constructions of SAPs that have been identified through clinical and academic research involving children, parents, and professionals are influential in the field, as they act as barriers to a shared understanding, and therefore hinder attempts at working in partnership to resolve SAPs.

9.1.3 What barriers do parents encounter in trying to achieve a resolution for school attendance problems?

Participants described how a combination of systemic factors including: discourse directing blame at children and parents; truancy-related cultural narratives; professional lack of compliance with policy and legislation (with no accountability or repercussions); a lack of relevant professional understanding of SAPs, SEND, and child mental health; inflexible policies and practices; and the current underfunding of education, health, and local government services, diminished their power and agency to achieve a resolution. This made it difficult for parents to comply with their legal duty to ensure children access a full-time, suitable education. This lack of power and the reduction in agency forced some parents to engage in complex battles, some lasting for more than ten years, which sometimes ended with them removing children from school rolls altogether. These observations are significant and somewhat ironic, as the very system and legislation designed to ensure compliance with attendance requirements itself obstructs this compliance in the case of children who experience anxiety in relation to attending school.

9.1.4 What is it that assists parents in reaching a resolution for a child's school attendance problems?

Parents who took part in this study became empowered by their own proactive approaches and activities. In the case of these parents, recruited through an online self-help group, peer contact through social media was one source of parental empowerment that influenced outcomes, as parental awareness of systemic issues developed, and they reflected upon alternative solutions. The

resultant insights improved their ability to identify, understand, and respond to SAPs, along with the triggers that may have been a factor. One significant aspect of empowerment was learning about relevant legislation, and consequently, understanding what professionals should and shouldn't be doing in response to children's SAPs. Parents also became better able to recognise unhelpful or damaging approaches, thus leading to reflection and a re-evaluation of priorities and decision making about the best course of action for the child and their educational progress. In effect parent peers provided some of the information and support that was not offered within the systems concerned.

Parents began their journey with the aim of supporting their child's needs and seeking help to overcome any difficulties they had in relation to attending school. Parents then discovered that to do this they needed to satisfy the requirements and needs of the education system. However, they encountered a range of systemic barriers that hindered or prevented them from meeting these education system-based needs. Contact with peers in similar situations provided shared support and information. Hearing many other similar stories also prompted recognition that rather than individual families being isolated or unusual cases, as many had been led to believe, it was more the case that it was the education system and the wider systemic response to SAPs that was problematic, and they were all fighting similar battles. As a result of these experiences parents come to a realisation that their first duty had to be to their child, and not to the education system. For many families the resolution they achieved was not the one they had hoped for at the outset of their journey, but it was a resolution that reflected a change in their perception of the problem and their altered priorities as a result.

9.2 Conclusions

The conclusions reached by the researcher in response to the findings of this study are as follows:

1. Existing research and existing discourses which frame official responses to school absence have largely overlooked the experiences of parents who actively seek a resolution to their children's school attendance problems and have consequently overlooked the experiences of these children too.

2. The underlying construction of school attendance problems as 'truancy', understood as a failure of parents and children to conform to cultural norms and expectations in relation to children gaining education through school attendance, remains dominant in shaping official responses to situations of school absence despite research in the past two decades pointing to problems within the school environment.

3. Differing constructions of school attendance problems by the different social actors involved act as barriers to a shared understanding which hinders attempts at working in partnership to resolve SAPs.

4. Joint working and professional-parental collaboration is not occurring – it exists as a policy statement of good practice but is not being lived out or implemented in practice.

5. There is no recognised and effective 'pathway' for parents (or professionals) who are actively seeking to resolve their children's school attendance problems.

9.3 Recommendations

The Perspective of Parents who seek to resolve their children's school attendance problems

When evaluating parental involvement and efficacy, the findings of this study strongly suggest that professionals must keep in mind that some parents will be doing all they can to resolve their children's SAPs. However rather than preventing or hindering a resolution, these parents will be encountering systemic issues and factors outside their control or influence that act as barriers to achieving a resolution.

The Bioecological Systems Model

This study has found that school attendance problems can be better understood by viewing the individual child and her or his parents within their full context, using an ecological systems framework to identify barriers that might hinder a

resolution. The adapted model could be further developed as an analytical tool to support discussion and build understanding of individual contexts. An analytical tool such as this could help to develop new perceptions of SAPs and discourage the contrasting and conflicting perceptions that hinder the process of resolving SAPs.

Legislation: Attendance

When parents attempt to resolve attendance problems they may fail because existing policies, systems and attitudes are not supporting their efforts. Therefore, it is inappropriate and ineffective to continue to enforce legal expectations which appear to be largely unachievable in the current context. Instead, it would be more appropriate to establish a different response which acknowledges the complexity and heterogeneity of school attendance problems. This approach should recognise that many SAPs reflect instances where our current education system is failing to support the needs of individual children. Where this is the case the punitive response to 'truancy' is clearly inappropriate.

Research: The influence of school-based support upon SAPs

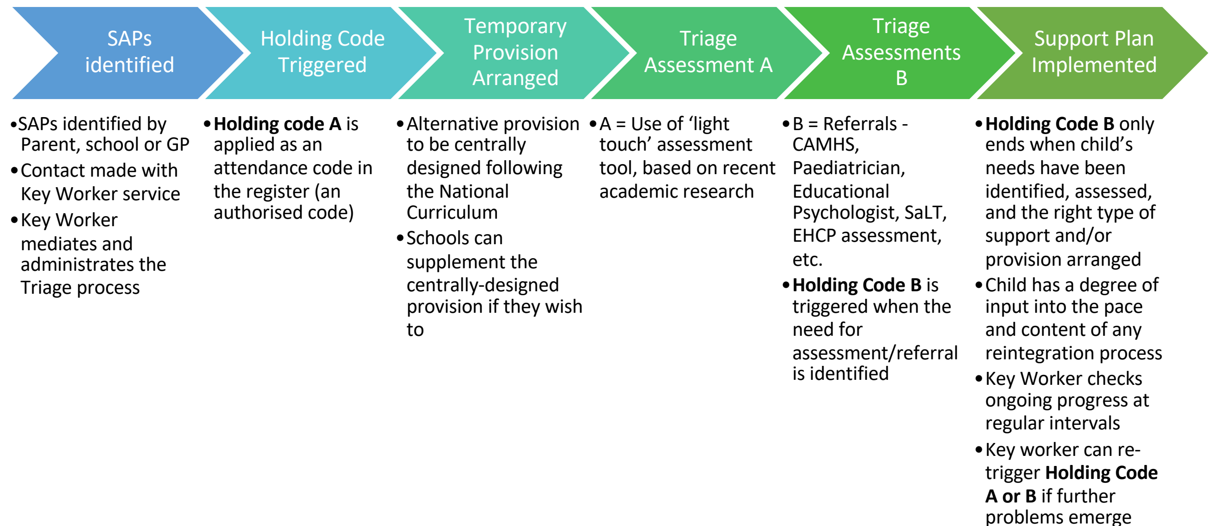
Existing studies investigating underlying cause of SAPs have tended to focus upon within-child and within-family factors. However, the adequacy and impact of systemic and school-based support for SEND, or long-term physical illness seems to be overlooked within existing studies of SAPs. This study also notes the lack of informed and appropriate school-based support for autistic children which impacts upon their attendance and wellbeing. The literature also recognises other school-based factors influencing SAPs, including bullying, and transitions between primary and secondary school. The adequacy of school provision and responses to this range of factors needs to be evaluated in terms of their impact upon the development of SAPs, and the resolution of SAPs.

A triage pathway for parents and professionals

To address the lack of a pathway for parents and professionals to follow if they seek support for SAPs, a suggested triage pathway administered by a specialist key worker is set out in Figure 9.1 below. Appendix 7 also illustrates how this

pathway relates to the different systemic levels of the adapted Bronfenbrenner model (Figure 8.3).

Figure 9.1 SAPs Triage Key Worker Service



The SAPs Triage Key Worker Service would be implemented by a neutral, independent, trained key worker who mediates with the family and the school to begin, and then administrate a process of initial assessment, possibly leading to referrals to specialist assessments if appropriate.

The process could be triggered by requests from families or schools. The resulting assessment process may lead to a plan of support and provision to meet the child's education and healthcare needs. The plan would either be permanent, or temporary and reviewed at regular intervals to assess whether reintegration to mainstream school is appropriate.

During the triage assessment process 'holding codes' would be used to authorise absence and prevent the threats of fines and imprisonment for parents while the causes of the school absence are investigated and resolved. The holding codes would also protect the school from any detrimental impact upon their attendance data as it would be recognised that a process was underway to resolve the absences.

The Key Worker would remain in place to support the family, guide any referrals, act as a point of contact for agencies, and keep the school updated on progress. Their independence means they can ensure practices remain lawful (saving the legal costs of parental challenge).

Co-production and mutual respect would be crucial to the success of this initiative. This new approach acknowledges that there are parents, schools and local authorities who do everything possible to resolve a child's difficulties, but equally there are others (on all sides) who do not respond in the ways they should.

The Key Worker role could sit within the sphere of services supporting school attendance which includes educational welfare, educational psychology, CAMHS and SENDIASS. This study has evidenced how educational psychologists are already working to better understand the challenges around support for SAPs and therefore it would seem most appropriate to sit this Triage Key Worker service as an extension to educational psychology services.

A Triage Key Worker service would require targeted funding to address the cuts to Education Services Grants in 2017 (which local authorities had used to fund services including attendance officers). There would also need to be funding to increase the capacity of educational psychology services. As a balance to these costs, the Triage Key Worker service could help to reduce the costs involved in the ineffective practice of prosecuting parents for truancy and could help reduce the numbers of children needing funding through an EHCP to access the support they need in schools.

Resolving persistent absence is again a current area of concern for the DfE, who announced a scheme to introduce 'attendance advisors' to focus on the use of enforcement measures (DfE, 2021b). The DfE also formed an 'attendance alliance' of experts whose task was to improve school attendance (DfE, 2021c). In January 2022, the DfE also opened a consultation with the aim of investigating how to improve support for families experiencing attendance difficulties. Within

these initiatives the focus remains on schools holding the primary responsibility for acting to resolve pupil absence, yet the findings of this study suggest how problematic that can be. The implementation of a Triage Key Worker service could offer a new approach to resolving absence.

9.4 Methodological considerations

The researcher's role

The researcher was in the position of being a woman who had had experiences of SAPs herself as a parent, a woman who was active in fostering peer support for SAPs, and a woman in the position of conducting research in a professional capacity. Therefore, she was a researcher who was already part of the field in which she was conducting her research.

The researcher was emersed in the context before and throughout the study and so had a deep awareness of what parents were experiencing. This meant that the analysis wasn't simply based upon the researcher's interpretation of data gathered through a limited number of hours of interaction. This was a strength in terms of the in-depth knowledge the researcher has of the SAPs context as an acknowledged element of the co-construction of the study findings involving the participants and the researcher.

It may be argued that the position of the researcher meant she had less objectivity when interpreting data, however the researcher took steps to support the reliability of her analysis. As explained in Section 3.7, she aimed to balance the impact of her influence by staying as close as possible to the content of the participant's accounts in her data analysis (using process coding), analysis, and reporting, therefore establishing internal validity (Gray, 2018).

The researcher's connection with the participants of the study came through their membership of the peer support group that she runs, which was also the site of recruitment. The participants therefore had existing awareness of the researcher's knowledge and experience of SAPs, which gave them confidence that the researcher understood their experiences and positions as parents. This

helped both to facilitate recruitment and instil confidence in the participants to tell their stories in some detail, since they were likely to have perceived the researcher would be sympathetic of their perspectives and opinions.

The recruitment method

The use of the Facebook peer support group as a site of recruitment was intended to enable the researcher to find participants with the specific experience she wished to investigate. The use of the Facebook support group limited the recruitment to parents who were members of one specific group, who used Facebook, and who had access to the internet, and were literate and comfortable communicating online, using a keyboard. This suggests that further research could be carried out that facilitates the input of parents who seek to resolve SAPs but are not members of the Facebook support group, who don't have access to the internet, and who prefer to communicate verbally, or in other ways.

Recruitment of participants with relevant experience was achieved successfully, although there were aspects of the recruitment method that the researcher found created limitations to her analysis as she progressed through the study. Initially, the researcher decided she wanted to include everyone who volunteered to participate as she believed every volunteer would have a story that would contribute to the understanding of parents' experiences of resolving SAPs. As analysis progressed and the concept of the Parents' Journeys was established, the researcher noted how the participants were at different stages of their journey when they took part in the interview process some had reached a resolution, and others were at an earlier stage of the journey. This meant that she did not learn about the complete journey of all parents who participated. Therefore, the researcher concluded that it would have helped if she had focused on recruiting participants who had reached a resolution for their child's SAPs, so that a full account could be analysed in each case.

The researcher did not gather certain types of information from her participants which, with hindsight, could have been useful to extend her analysis of participants experiences. This relates to information about the profile of participants and their households, especially indicators of class such as

employment, income, or educational attainment. This may have limited the voices that have been heard as it is not possible to fully assess what types of experience have been included or missed out. Therefore, further studies of parents' experiences of resolving SAPs could be conducted whereby the influence of factors such as socio-economic status are considered and included in the data analysis.

The data collection method

The researcher intended to use semi-structured interview questions within the email exchanges with participants so that she could tailor the questions in response to the content of each participant's emails. However, in practice managing this process for forty participants meant that she relied upon the set of structured questions she had devised as a guide prior to the data collection process to a greater degree than first intended. This meant that the researcher did not tailor each 'conversation' to the individual parents' experiences, which was a limitation to the study.

The data collection method was structured around six sets of questions that asked about different aspects of parent's experiences. These questions did not ask specifically about parent's understandings of wider constraints around SAPs until the fifth set. However, by the fifth set, the number of participants who responded to the email was seventeen out of the forty who originally agreed to take part. This meant there was a smaller amount of data to analyse in relation to those questions, but some parents had provided accounts or opinions that had relevance in earlier email responses.

9.5 Potential future work

The findings of this study suggest some potential future work that would extend understanding of the concept of Parents Journeys through SAPs, the Parental SAPs Predicament, and the application of a systemic model to support a comprehensive understanding of the SAPs context and the barriers that might hinder a resolution for SAPs. Aspects that require further study include:

- A longitudinal study to understand complete Parents Journeys from the beginning of SAPs to the point when a child reaches the end of compulsory education.
- As the participants in this study were all mothers, it would be useful to study the experiences of fathers to better understand how they are similar and how they might differ.
- Further development of the adapted bioecological model to identify how it can be utilised as a tool to help understand the influences upon individual SAPs cases

To work towards scientific publication and dissemination of this research I plan to explore opportunities to share this research and the findings through the International Network for School Attendance (INSA) https://www.insa.network. INSA was formed and is supported by many of the leading researchers in the field, with connections to several journals with relevance. The INSA website lists research about school attendance and absence, and shares resources and details of practice and activities in a range of countries.

I will also explore opportunities to share these research findings and explore practical and policy impact work related to this research, through the activities and network of contacts built up by the organisations I am closely involved with. This activity is aimed at raising awareness of the issues families experience and encouraging policy change. These networks include a range of organisations and services supporting families and young people, academics, alternative education providers, clinicians, national charities, politicians, parliamentary bodies, and the Department for Education.

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Appendices

Appendix 1. The process codes used in stage 2 of the data analysis

CONCERN FOR CHILD	Short code (Used in TAMS)
Observing child's distress	Concern>child_distress
Making sense of observations	Concern>observations
Identifying child's difficulties	Concern>difficulties
Understanding child's needs	Concern>needs
Observing effects on attendance	Concern>attendance
Observing / Experiencing Child's Reactions - Recognising Anxiety	Concern>child_reaction
Taking Action	Concern>parent_action
Identifying Own Reactions	Concern>own reaction
Professional Actions	Concern>professional_action
Reactions of Others	Concern>others_reaction
SCHOOL MANAGEMENT	
Professional attitudes/practices	School>practices
Difficult Working Relationships	School>difficult_WR
Positive Working Relationships	School>positive_WR
School Priorities	School>priorities
Policy	School>policy
Lack of Relevant Training	School>training
Beliefs	School>beliefs
SYSTEM FAILURES	
Legal Action	System>legal_action
EHCP Difficulties	System>EHCP
Lack of Help	System>no_support
Professional Responses	System>professional_responses
Financial Implications	System>finance
CAMHS Failures	System>CAMHS
CAMHS Support	System>CAMHS_support
NHS Failures	System>NHS
NHS Support	System>NHS_support
System Failure	Systemic_failure
LA Difficulties	System>LA
Compliance with Legislation	System>compliance
SEND Awareness	System>SEND
Needing Legal Advice	System>advice
School System Issues	System>education
Impact on Children	System>impact_on_child
EMPOWERMENT	
Increased Knowledge	Empowered>knowledge
Being proactive	Empowered>proactive
Acknowledgement	Empowered>acknowledged
Support from professionals	Empowered>professional_support
Change in priorities	Empowered>priorities
Increased Self-confidence	Empowered>confidence
Listening to child	Empowered>child_voice
Peer support	Empowered>peer_support

Relevant Support	Empowered>support_service
Identifying progress	Empowered>progress
EMOTIONAL IMPACT	
Blame	Emotion>Blame
Feeling impact	Emotion>Impact
Overwhelm	Emotion>Overwhelmed
Isolation	Emotion>Isolation
Frustration	Emotion>Frustration
Guilt	Emotion>Guilt
Violence	Emotion>Physical_hurt
Distress	Emotion>Distress
Regret	Emotion>Regret
Anger	Emotion>Anger
Worry	Emotion>Worry
Desperation	Emotion>Desperation
Judgement	Emotion>Judgement
Conflicted	Emotion>Conflicted
Concerned	Emotion>Concern
Ashamed	Emotion>Shame
Intimidation	Emotion>Intimidation
Helplessness	Emotion>Helplessness
Afraid	Emotion>Fear
Paranoid	Emotion>Paranoia
Pressured	Emotion>Pressure
Stressed	Emotion>Stress
Sad	Emotion>Sad
Heartbroken	Emotion>Heartbreak
Unsure / Lost	Emotion>Unsure
Vulnerable	Emotion>Vulnerable
Grateful	Emotion>Grateful
Hope/ Optimism	Emotion>Hope
Pride	Emotion>Pride
Relief	Emotion>Relief
Lucky	Emotion>Lucky
IMPACT ON FAMILY LIFE	
Family disruption	Family>disruption
Family wellbeing	Family>wellbeing
Family relationships	Family>relationships
Family finances	Family>finances
Employment	Family>employment
Marriage	Family>marriage
Knowledge	Family>knowledge

Appendix 2. Overall themes generated from the data

HOW DO PARENTS RESPOND WHEN A CHILD EXPERIENCES SCHOOL ATTENDANCE PROBLEMS AND BARRIERS?

	Concern for Child	Negotiating Systems	Barriers to Support	Family Crisis	Emotional Turmoil	Empowerment
THEMES	*"Watching your child's spark go out"* Parents observe and support their child's development over time, and recognise their child's strengths and difficulties. When problems arise parents • look for clues • try to understand what is going on • try to identify the triggers • consult professionals • apply their in depth knowledge of their child, to identify strategies and solutions to help their child overcome their problems When significant difficulties emerge at school the situation is complicated by aspects such as professional judgement, legal issues and lost educational progress	*"There was a massive elephant in the room whenever we talked to schools about her anxiety, they couldn't at any point admit they couldn't meet her needs, but really as the system is they couldn't."* Reflecting that child's anxiety may not have become so bad if school/LA had not **delayed support** & **appropriate provision** Teachers do not know how to help a child who struggles in the school environment Teachers do not think it is their **responsibility** to help a child who is not attending **Difficult Working Relationships** (parents & schools/medical/LA staff) [55 codes] v. Positive Working Relationships [5 codes] **Professional reactions**	*We also asked school to send work home for her (to keep the connection to school and [child] enjoyed school work) but they refused, stating it would be "condoning her absence"* The '**schoolchild' as a traditional construct** – a set of expectations about children and education Reflecting that **children have to change** to fit the education system Reflecting some children struggle to fit in at school, **one size does not fit all.** Reflecting was wrong to believe the **law would be upheld.** Reflecting on acceptance that children's dislike of school is accepted as normal - **adapting to school is a rite of passage.** In battle between adults – **child's opinion** is ignored	*"Horrendous times are our 'normal'"* Recognising **emotional, mental & financial costs to family** Families are individual - each has their own idea of normality Feeling **different** to other families Guilt about effect on **marriage** Guilt about effect on **siblings** Needing to put **own life /career** on hold **Financial worries** **Awareness of 'school refusal/SAPB'** as a 'thing' – may not have been aware of it previously, or may have known of others who had experience of it Awareness of **way/s other people react** towards your family if your child isn't attending school	*"I'll never forget the look on her face when I told her we would no longer be making her go to school. More than three years on it still breaks my heart thinking about it. She was so relieved and grateful; she had suffered so much, not having control over her situation, feeling hopeless and desperate for so many months. I made it my priority to rebuild her trust in me, and promised her we'd never force her again."* Parental instinct v Professional advice = **conflict + dilemmas** Worry about **child's wellbeing** Worry about **child's education and future** Loss of 'school-based expectations' & lost membership of the school community	*"I was desperate to help her, my instinct was screaming at me to stop sending her to school, but the psychologist didn't advise it and I was afraid that if she stopped going it would be a slippery slope; that her anxiety would worsen. I had no idea what to do. And that's when I found the school refusal Facebook group, which I truly believe saved our lives"* Need to **develop confidence to advocate** for child Reflecting that I would act differently now (**changes in priorities**) **Peer support** **Researching** and learning **Being proactive** **Recognising progress** Concern for others in similar situations

CODES	Professional's Responses:	Systemic experiences:	Perceived barriers:	Difficulties experienced:	Emotional Influences:	Empowered by:
Professional Responses	◦ Lack of understanding / sympathy / compassion for child ◦ Refusal to provide work at home ◦ Ignore parent concerns ◦ Make own medical judgements ◦ Dispute medical diagnoses ◦ Priority on attendance ◦ Priority on attainment ◦ Inappropriate discipline ◦ Being 'Gaslighted'	◦ Dreading reporting absences ◦ Parent/child blame ◦ Battling with school ◦ Negotiating with school ◦ Arguing with school ◦ Conflict while arranging suitable provision ◦ SENCO refusal to offer support ◦ Reluctance to admit school cannot meet child's needs ◦ Inflexibility in expectations	◦ Belief children need to be in school to be educated & socialised. ◦ Belief that it is ok to ignore a child's distress ◦ Children cannot be allowed to 'choose' whether to attend school ◦ Inaccurate knowledge of legislation ◦ Lack of Mental health awareness ◦ Lack of SEND Awareness	◦ Family Disruption ◦ Family Wellbeing Issues	◦ Feeling Bullied ◦ Feeling Criticised ◦ Feeling Judged ◦ Experiencing Anger & Hostility ◦ Lack of professional honesty / integrity ◦ Being viewed as part of the problem when emotional ◦ Parenting/Home Life being viewed as the problem when siblings attend without problems ◦ Lack of compliance with legislation, SEND guidance etc	◦ Supportive GP ◦ Diagnosis by private practitioner ◦ CAMHS referral leads to support ◦ Feeling empowered by a supportive professional ◦ Recognising skills of helpful professionals ◦ Feeling empowered by knowledge and understanding gained ◦ Finding support from local charities or advocates
Reactions of Family & Friends (F&F)	◦ F&F Expressing Anger ◦ F&F Expressing Concern ◦ F&F Criticism ◦ Being disbelieved by F&F ◦ F&F Offering Support	◦ Culture ◦ Media ◦ History/Tradition ◦ Policy ◦ Politics	◦ Understanding of SAPB (+ OR -) ◦ Conformity – expectation 'Children go to school = normality' ◦ Different Reactions of mother & father	◦ Family Relationships ◦ Family Wellbeing Issues	Experiencing: ◦ Isolation ◦ Judgement ◦ Support ◦ Criticism of parenting ◦ Avoiding telling wider family & friends	◦ Applying parental knowledge to reactions of others ◦ Gaining knowledge by talking to other parents of children with similar difficulties
Systemic Failures	◦ Having no options to offer when a child is severely anxious ◦ No informed advice/guidance ◦ Forced attendance	◦ No Relevant Guidance / Policy ◦ No Relevant Sources of Support ◦ Lack of SEND awareness ◦ CAMHS access/failure	◦ Low Understanding of school refusal ◦ Low awareness of school refusal ◦ SAPB = inconvenience = Blame on Family	◦ Disruption to Home Life ◦ Changes to structure of family life ◦ Financial Issues ◦ Marriage /Relationship Issues	Experiencing: ◦ Prosecution referral when professionals know child's problems are real/genuine ◦ Accusations of fabricating illness	◦ Empowered by Peer Support ◦ Empowered by Knowledge Gained ◦ Empowered by Being Proactive
	◦ Staff attempting to collect child from home ◦ Off rolling attempts ◦ School disinterest in helping	◦ NHS failure to support ◦ LA issues ◦ Education System ◦ Low priority = Lack of action	◦ Parity of esteem – physical & mental health Influences: ◦ Tradition ◦ Funding - Austerity ◦ Politics	◦ Employment Issues ◦ Letting people down – multiple responsibilities (work & family)	◦ Referrals to social services ◦ Inaccurate coding of absence	
Child's Reactions	◦ Observing child's distress ◦ Observing child's words & actions ◦ Identifying child's reactions ◦ Understanding child's needs ◦ Identifying triggers ◦ Listening to child's comments and opinions	◦ Impact of Systemic Issues on child's health & wellbeing ◦ Breaking child's trust ◦ Loss of interest in education ◦ Loss of time in education ◦ Self-harming ◦ Loss of friendships	◦ Criticism of child's attitude	◦ Coping with traumatic memories ◦ Practical family difficulties ◦ Problematic behaviours ◦ Forced changes in family life ◦ Trying to support child to recover ◦ Accommodating specific needs	◦ Being hurt by child ◦ Child says they want to die ◦ Making wrong decisions ◦ Not taking action sooner to support child ◦ Forcing child to attend ◦ Leaving distressed child at school ◦ Prioritising school over wellbeing	◦ Asking child about their needs and solutions ◦ Asking child for opinions about school options ◦ Listening to child
Emotional Turmoil (created by all aspects of the situation)	◦ Guilt ◦ Worry ◦ Regret ◦ Fear ◦ Conflict ◦ Blame ◦ Frustration ◦ Judgement	◦ Intimidation ◦ Anger ◦ Despair ◦ Frustration ◦ Judgement ◦ Blame ◦ Stress ◦ Fear	◦ Frustration ◦ Anger ◦ Blame ◦ Pressure ◦ Helplessness ◦ Heartbreak	◦ Guilt ◦ Isolation ◦ Pressure ◦ Worry ◦ Distress ◦ Judgement	◦ Emotional Impact ◦ Needing to find the strength to carry on ◦ Feeling unsure identifying the problem ◦ Feeling unsure about actions to take ◦ Mothers shouldering the responsibility	◦ Gratitude ◦ Pride ◦ Relief ◦ Luck ◦ Hopeful

Appendix 3. Recruitment Flyer (p. 82)

The Social Construction of School Refusal: Parental Perspectives

Researchers know very little about the experiences of parents with children who struggle to regularly attend school (commonly referred to as 'school refusal').

As the main care providers for children, it is important we understand what parents are experiencing and how support for families in this situation could be strengthened.

This research attempts to understand parents' experiences and parents' points of view.

'Not Fine in School' members are invited to take part

*** Any participation will be voluntary and anonymous ***

Why take part?

- This research study will enable and validate the voice of parents in school refusal situations in recognition that they have a key role in influencing any successful outcomes.
- The findings of this study will make recommendations for policy and practice.
- The findings will contribute an alternative viewpoint to that in the majority of existing studies which have a medical or educational basis.

What will you be asked to do?

- You will be asked to participate in an **EMAIL BASED INTERVIEW** with me.
- During the interview process I would like to ask you some questions about your own experiences and your thoughts about the school refusal situation in general.

This research is being undertaken by

Beth Bodycote

I have been the parent of a school refusing child and a school-anxious child.
I have been involved in running school refusal related parent support groups on Facebook for over seven years. Because of these experiences I am undertaking this research project for my PhD.

To request a Participant Information Sheet please email me using my university email address
p12225413@my365.dmu.ac.uk

- Where the term 'parent' is used this refers to those in a parental role such as biological parents, step parents, grandparents, foster parents or adoptive parents.
- The study refers to 'school refusal' in acknowledgement that it is currently the most recognised term used for children who are unable to attend school, (or whose attendance is at a rate considered below an acceptable level), often for reasons related to anxiety.

Appendix 4. Participant Information Sheet

PARTICIPANT INFORMATION SHEET

Title of Study: **The Social Construction of School Refusal: Parental Perspectives**

Name of Investigator: **Beth Bodycote**

Thank you for your interest in participating in research for my PhD. I have been the parent of a school refusing child and I have been involved in running school refusal parent support groups on Facebook for over seven years. Because of these experiences I am undertaking this research project for my PhD. I would like to find out about parents' experiences of school refusal and their experiences of trying to obtain help and support.

Before you decide whether to take part it is important for you to understand why the research is being done and what it will involve.

Please take time to read the following information carefully and discuss it with friends and relatives if you wish to.

Please ask me if there is anything that is not clear or if you would like more information.

My email address for further information

Beth Bodycote - p12225413@my365.dmu.ac.uk

I will email you seven days after I send you this information sheet to ask whether you have any further questions, and whether you would like to take part.

* Where the term 'parent' is used this refers to those in a parental role such as biological parents, step parents, grandparents, foster parents or adoptive parents.
* The study refers to 'school refusal' in acknowledgement that it is currently the recognised term used for children who are unable to attend school, (or whose attendance is at a rate considered below an acceptable level), often for reasons related to anxiety.

What is the study about?

Researchers know very little about the experiences of parents who have children who 'refuse' to regularly attend school, often for reasons related to anxiety.
As parents are the main carers for their children, it is important we understand what parents are experiencing, and how support for both them and their children could be strengthened.
This research therefore attempts to understand parents' experiences and parents' points of view.

Research Participant Information Sheet
Version 4. March 2019

PARTICIPATION

What does participation in the study involve?

If you agree to volunteer, firstly I will send you a short questionnaire which allows me to gather some contact information and understand a little about your school refusal related circumstances.

The Email Interview

We will arrange to exchange emails over a period of time. I will ask you two or three questions per Email in an ongoing sequence. I will create a file of our email exchanges to form the overall interview.

During the interview I will ask you to answer a range of open questions about your experiences of school refusal. An example of the type of question which I will ask is:

> "Can you tell me what you think influences or causes school refusal?"

I will analyse the data that I collect and I will send all participants a summary of the final research report, if they wish to see it.

Why have I been asked to participate?

You have been asked to participate in this research because you are a parent of a child or young person who is experiencing school refusal. I have been able to make contact with you as a member of a school refusal related parent support group on Facebook.

Does it matter what sort of school refusal experience I have had, or which sort of solution I have chosen for my child?

I am keen to involve all types of experience. As a parent, and as a researcher, I recognise that we each have our own opinions and circumstances. I am interested in hearing and including all points of view and types of experience within the study.

Are there any disadvantages in taking part?

You will be giving up your time to complete the interview.
The interview questions have the potential to raise emotive issues. As we are conducting the interview by email exchanges you always have the option of pausing so you can gather your thoughts, and returning to complete your answers when you feel ready.
You always have the option of withdrawing from the study at any time, if you feel it is necessary.
I will provide all participants with a list of sources of support that may be helpful.

Are there any benefits in taking part?

The research is not designed to benefit you individually, but you may find it useful to share your experiences and voice your opinions.

You will be providing information which will inform debate, and hopefully contribute towards an improvement in awareness of family perspectives when school attendance difficulties are experienced.

Do I have to take part?

Your participation in the study is entirely your choice, and you can choose not to take part without giving a reason and without prejudice.
If you should decide not to take part, or to leave the study, your decision will not affect our relationship in any way now or in the future.

What if I agree to take part and then change my mind?

If you decide to take part you are still free to withdraw at any time without giving a reason. Please note however that I will not be able to remove the data you have provided once the interview has taken place and I have begun the analysis process. Any data used within the study will always be anonymised.

If I have a complaint, who can I complain to?

You can initially approach me, as the lead researcher – Beth Bodycote:
p12225413@my365.dmu.ac.uk
You may also contact my supervisor, Professor Sarah Younie:
syounie@dmu.ac.uk

If this achieves no satisfactory outcome, you should then contact the Administrator for the Faculty Research Ethics Committee, Research & Commercial Office, Faculty of Health & Life Sciences, 1.25 Edith Murphy House, De Montfort University, The Gateway, Leicester, LE1 9BH or hlsfro@dmu.ac.uk

CONFIDENTIALITY

Will my taking part in this study be kept confidential?

- Yes, it will. Only I (as the researcher) will have access to your full name and contact details.
- Only I, and my three supervisors will have access to the email transcripts.
- I will give you a pseudonym within the research. Any information you give me or direct quotations I use in written articles or presentations will be anonymised – in other words, it will be impossible for anyone else to know the information has come from you.

Where will my information be stored?

- All information and files will be stored on secure, password protected storage devices or in a locked cupboard.

- De Montfort University policy is that any raw data is kept securely for 5 years after a study has been completed and it is then destroyed.

What will happen to the results of the research study?

The results of the research will be used in a report that will be submitted for a PhD award. I may also write some articles and present my findings at conferences or workshops. I will write a summary of my findings and you are welcome to a copy of this.

Who is organising and funding the research?

The research is funded by De Montfort University and I am organising the research under the guidance of my supervisors.

Who has reviewed the study?

This study has been approved by De Montfort University, Faculty of Health and Life Sciences Research Ethics Committee.

I have another question, who do I contact?

Please email Beth Bodycote using her university email: p12225413@my365.dmu.ac.uk

Thank you very much for your interest in this study

Appendix 5. Initial questionnaire

Participant Initial Questionnaire

The Social Construction of School Refusal: Parental Perspectives

Thank you for volunteering to take part in my research study.
I need to collect some details so that I can contact you.
I also need to ask some questions about your experience of school refusal so far.
I am the only person who will see your answers and they will be stored securely to protect your privacy.

Please could you tell me:

Your name	
Your email address	
Which county do you live in?	
Your child's age when they began to experience school attendance difficulties?	
Your child's age now?	
What do you think are the main reasons for your child's difficulties with school attendance?	
Please list any solutions you have tried to resolve your child's difficulties with school attendance?	
Is your child currently receiving any form of educational provision? (if 'yes' please describe)	
Your occupation or job when school refusal started?	
Your occupation or job now?	

Appendix 6. Overview of Parents' Journeys

THE JOURNEY EXPERIENCED BY PARENTS RESPONDING TO SCHOOL ATTENDANCE PROBLEMS

1. RESPONDING TO EMERGING SCHOOL ATTENDANCE PROBLEMS

[a] IF CONCERNS BEGIN WHEN ATTENDANCE DIFFICULTIES START	[b] IF LONG-TERM CONCERNS ALREADY EXIST
▪ Observing child's distress/reluctance about attending school ▪ Applying knowledge of child's developmental history ▪ Attempting to make sense of any current observations ▪ Investigating possible triggers ▪ Discussion with others and reflection ▪ Difficulties may continue or escalate ▪ Threshold for further action reached	▪ Concerns were first noted when child was younger ▪ Parent may have discussed concerns with professionals ▪ May have received a diagnosis that could be relevant ▪ Observing child's distress / reluctance about attending school ▪ Attempting to make sense of any current observations ▪ Difficulties continue or escalate ▪ Threshold for further action reached

SEEKING INITIAL SUPPORT FOR ATTENDANCE PROBLEMS

Professional Support	Personal Support
School staff and/or GP	Family members and/or friends/peers

EXPERIENCING INITIAL RESPONSES

Impeding Responses	Empowering Responses	Impeding Responses	Empowering Responses
Dismissal of concerns Blame of child / home / parent Threats of fines / prison	Recognition of concerns Support for concerns Home / school partnership	Disagreement / anger Criticism of child or parent Rejection & suspicion	Recognition of concerns Advice & Support Practical assistance
▪ Parent makes further observations & assessments ▪ May try other sources	▪ Interventions are tried ▪ Referrals made ▪ Assessments of needs carried out & responded to	▪ Parent reflects upon further observations & assessments of child ▪ May approach others	▪ Interventions tried at home ▪ Emotional support shared ▪ Experiences are shared ▪ Reduction in isolation

- Responses vary depending upon the suspected or known triggers / causes of the child's difficulties
- Responses vary depending upon the understanding / training / experience / seniority / opinions / priorities of those involved
- Responses vary depending upon whether the person believes what the parent/child is saying – if their own observations match the parents - whether they interpret the observations in the same way
- Responses vary depending upon policies within systems in local areas, levels of funding, waiting times for input and assessments within health services & advisory services

2. NAVIGATING THE SYSTEMIC CONTEXT

SCHOOL	GP/NHS	CAMHS	LOCAL AUTHORITY

Parent & child experiences relate to either:

Impeding Working Relationships	Empowering Working Relationships
▪ Ignoring family concerns ▪ Lack of empathy for child ▪ Making own medical judgements (unqualified) ▪ Disputing medical diagnoses (unqualified) ▪ Assuming child is 'fine in school' ▪ Assuming truancy or refusal	▪ Willingness to listen to family concerns ▪ Demonstrating empathy for child ▪ Recognising limits to own knowledge ▪ Respecting medical practitioner input ▪ Considering child is masking difficulties / distress ▪ Avoidance of making automatic assumptions
▪ Lack of knowledge about attendance difficulties ▪ No mental / physical health awareness / provision ▪ Lack of SEND knowledge / awareness ▪ Ignoring legislation related to SEND / attendance ▪ Prioritising attendance / attainment over wellbeing	▪ Knowledge of attendance difficulties ▪ Mental/physical health support offered ▪ Demonstrating knowledge of SEND ▪ Following legislation related to SEND / attendance ▪ Prioritising child wellbeing
▪ Refusal to support EHCP applications ▪ Refusal to provide schoolwork at home ▪ Ignoring or denying cases of bullying ▪ Referrals to Social Services to avoid funding support	▪ Arranging SEND support via EHCP if needed ▪ School work provided at home ▪ Resolving bullying issues effectively ▪ Referrals to Social Services to provide support
▪ CAMHS access delays ▪ Lack of NHS support options ▪ LA non-compliance with legislation related to EOTAS ▪ LA non-compliance with SEND Code of Practice ▪ Fines & prosecution threats (ineffective resolution)	▪ CAMHS referral leads to assessments ▪ CAMHS referral leads to appropriate support ▪ LA complying with legislation related to EOTAS ▪ LA complying with SEND Code of Practice ▪ Working in Partnership & Co-production

3. MANAGING THE HOME CONTEXT

PRACTICAL IMPACTS	EMOTIONAL IMPACTS
▪ Disruption to home life ▪ Difficulties meeting work & other commitments ▪ Financial cost (salary loss / private assessments / legal advice) ▪ Attending meetings and appointments ▪ Managing problematic reactions of others ▪ Complexity of accommodating specific needs of all children ▪ Forced changes to family and personal plans & activities	▪ Marriage /Relationship issues ▪ Letting people down – multiple responsibilities ▪ Worry about multiple concerns & practical issues ▪ Experiencing blame, judgement, guilt, & isolation ▪ Explaining child's situation to others (repeatedly) ▪ Observing impact on siblings ▪ Impact on relationships with wider family and friends

4. WORKING TOWARDS A RESOLUTION

Parent Peers	Self-Empowerment	Charities / Organisations	Professional
Empowering result: ▪ Gaining knowledge from other parents with lived experience of what works & what options there are ▪ Sharing information ▪ Gaining emotional support from others who understand what you are going through	**Empowering result:** ▪ Being proactive ▪ Self-conducted Research ▪ Listening to and respecting your child's opinions ▪ Observing improvements in child's wellbeing because of your actions ▪ Trusting parental instincts ▪ Gaining self-confidence	**Empowering result:** ▪ Finding support, advice, & information from SEND related charities, advocates or other advisors / services ▪ Accessing support in meetings with schools, local authorities, social services, and courts	**Empowering result:** ▪ Therapy by NHS or private practitioner ▪ Assessments by NHS or private practitioner ▪ Diagnosis by state or private practitioner ▪ Professional advice, support, and advocacy
Impeding result: ▪ Being unable to locate parents who have similar experiences to you	**Impeding result:** ▪ Being unable to source relevant information ▪ Professional intimidation ▪ Practical barriers	**Impeding result:** ▪ Finding SEND charities or advocates are too busy or unable to help effectively	**Impeding result:** ▪ Private fees/costs too high ▪ Unable to source suitable professionals ▪ Other professionals dismiss private reports

REFLECTING UPON EXPERIENCES & OUTCOMES

▪ Observing a continuation/worsening of distress /ill-health ▪ Observing further / additional concerns for wellbeing ▪ Reduction in child's engagement with people / activities ▪ May reflect changes in circumstances; within the school environment; in (physical or mental) health; within support systems, etc	▪ Observing a reduction in distress / ill-health ▪ Observing improvements in child's wellbeing ▪ Increase in child's engagement with people / activities ▪ May reflect changes in circumstances; within the school environment; in (physical or mental) health; within support systems, etc
= Parent makes further attempts to locate people who will listen to their concerns & help them access support & advice	= Parent continues to monitor child's wellbeing and communicate with sources of support as necessary

A FAMILY CRISIS POINT may relate to:	**FAMILY EMPOWERMENT** may relate to:
▪ Child's loss of progress in education ▪ Child's loss of friendships ▪ Child's loss of interest in education ▪ Child's loss of ambitions or interest in their future ▪ Self-harming and/or suicide attempts ▪ Decline in mental and / or physical health ▪ Damage to family relationships ▪ Threats of legal action / Social Services involvement	▪ Developing confidence to advocate for child ▪ Accessing suitable provision for child ▪ Obtaining a good quality EHCP for CYP ▪ Recognising a change in priorities ▪ Recognising progress made by child ▪ Developing a clearer understanding of options ▪ Developing a clearer understanding of limits to support ▪ Making choices in partnership with child

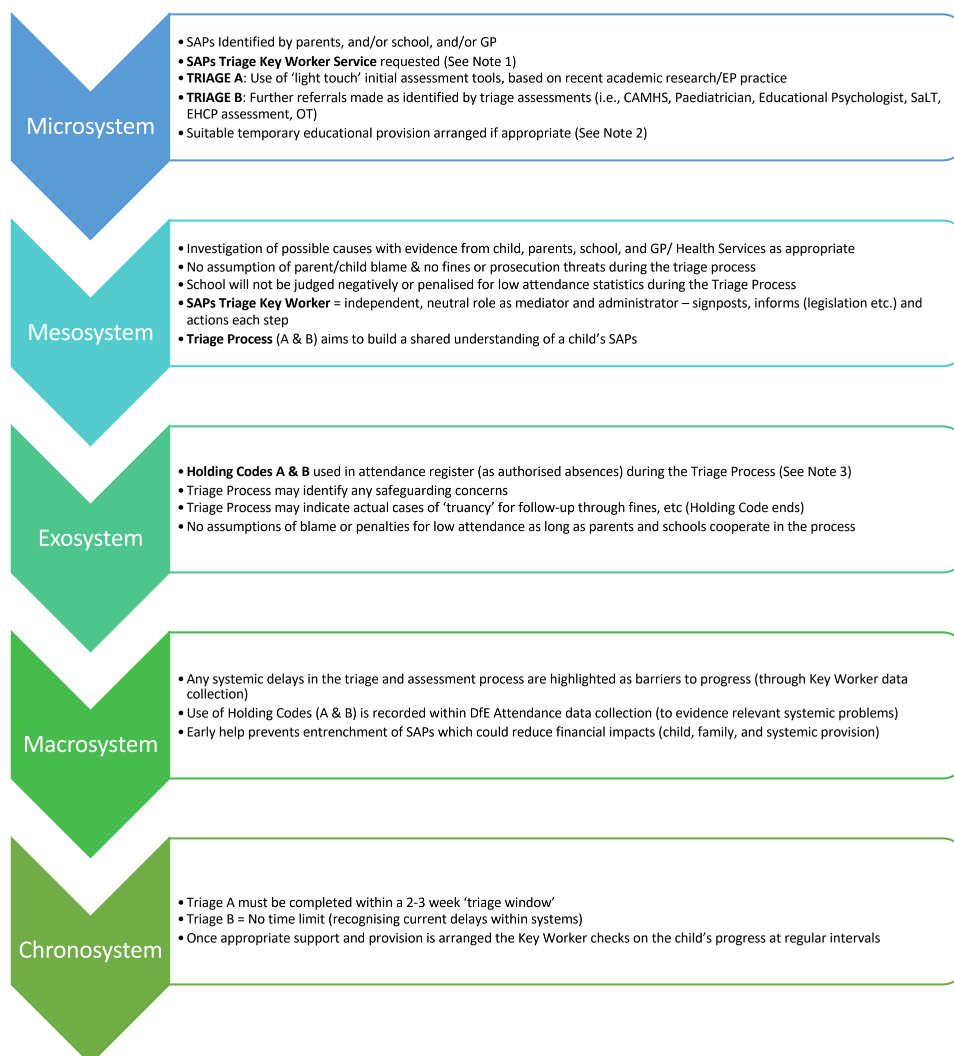
REACHING A DECISION POINT OR A RESOLUTION

The family continue their search for support & assistance indefinitely, until a resolution is found, or a decision is taken to stop searching. This could relate to a range of scenarios including:

- A school or local authority provide the child with access to an educational setting that suits & supports their needs
- The child is offered appropriate support (i.e., child-led, flexible, needs focused) to reintegrate with their original school setting
- The situation builds to a crisis point where a child is too unwell to access any type of education
- The family independently source alternative educational provision (including elective home education / self-directed learning / alternative schools / online schools/education)
- Negative systemic responses (legal action, social service intervention) force a child's return to school
- Systemic difficulties and pressures mean deregistration is the only viable option left (i.e forced rather than elective home education)

Overall Conclusion:
The agency of each parent to be able to fulfil their legal duty to resolve a child's school absence will be hindered or empowered by the systemic & societal responses they encounter

Appendix 7. Key Worker Service Triage Plan



Note 1: SAPs Triage Key Worker Service

- Key Workers must be independent & appropriately trained (SEND CoP, DfE Guidance, Legislation, relevant assessment frameworks)
- Key Worker monitors progress of referrals or EHCP application, ensuring legislation is adhered to
- Key Worker provides regular updates to family, school, and local authority

Note 2: Temporary Educational Provision

- Alternative provision to be centrally designed following the National Curriculum
- Schools can supplement the centrally-designed provision if they wish to
- Provision could be a combination of printed work, online provision, face-to-face tutors, and therapeutic sessions
- Level of provision to be guided by child's needs
- If reintegration to school is possible, this ensures that the child has kept up with peers, so reducing their anxiety about returning to school

Note 3: Holding Codes A & B

- Holding Code A is applied as an attendance code in the register as the Triage process starts (an authorised code)
- Holding Code B is triggered when the Triage Plan is in place and the need for assessments/referrals is identified (an authorised code)
- Holding Code B only ends when child's needs have been identified, assessed, and the right type of support and/or provision arranged
- Key worker can re-trigger Holding Code A or B if further problems emerge

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