

into consideration. The presence of adults who were open-minded and inclusive, for example, by not stigmatising mental health, was also cited as a helpful factor, perhaps suggesting that participants were enabled to feel secure at school because they were accepted and understood by the adults around them.

Previous research has found that avoidance of stressful situations such as academic demands and perceived inability to cope are factors that can push students away from attending school (Kearney & Silberman, 1990; Thambirajah et al., 2008). Anxiety around academic performance has also been cited as a contributing factor for EBSA (Wimmer, 2010). In the present study, participants cited support with exams as important factors in supporting them to attend school. Specifically, they seemed to value the carefully planned, personalised, and calm approach to examinations perhaps because it supported them to manage anxiety in situations that they have previously found stressful. In support of previous research into specialist settings (Raywid, 1994), the present study also found that small class sizes and adapting lessons to ensure that they are engaging and interesting was a valued part of students' educational experience, perhaps because these factors made them feel more secure and capable in lessons.

Interpersonal, relational benefits and supports to create a sense of psychological safety are valued by students, and these factors are connected and dependent upon each other. Relationships have been highlighted as crucial factors in creating capacity for learning, the suggestion being that students with a secure base in the form of a supportive, trusted adult at school feel safe and contained and can, therefore, engage in the challenge of learning and assessments. It has been argued that, in order to promote learning, schools must focus first on creating safe relationships within school (Greenhalgh, 1994; Youell, 2006), something that students at School X appear to value highly. It is likely that the calm approach to examinations or personalised learning available to students at School X would not be possible without strong, relational foundations and that these relationships would not be formed if academic supports were not as individualised or readily available. Thus, the model used by School X seemed to communicate to students that they were important to the adults supporting them, who gave them responsibility, recognised what they needed to feel calm, listened to them, and adapted instruction to meet their needs. The current study argues that, although learning supports should be put in place for students experiencing EBSA, without sufficient, supportive adult-student and student-student relationships, these structures are unlikely to create full engagement within school as the latter were so highly valued by participants.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE

The current study has implications for strategies and approaches employed within specialist settings for students who present with EBSA. Our findings suggest that it is the school structures and systems that can bring about change in terms of school attendance as opposed to factors within the students themselves (Southwell, 2006). In line with Thambirajah et al.'s (2008) suggestion that intervention can be planned based on the factors that push young people away from school and pull them towards home, the present study identified a range of protective factors that can overcome some of these difficulties and promote school attendance.

Although conducted within a specialist setting, the study also has implications for approaches employed within mainstream schools. Although some strategies may not be possible in all settings (such as smaller class sizes), the access to trusted adults, use of safe spaces, emphasis on creating supportive peer relationships, and a calm approach to examinations could be considered as part of reintegration plans for students who have experienced EBSA in mainstream schools. The underlying principles of a programme that creates a sense of psychological safety and interconnectivity could underpin approaches used by all settings when students present with EBSA.

LIMITS OF THE STUDY

The current study was implemented by an educational psychologist (EP) linked to the setting at the request of the head teacher, who had noticed positive associations with the model being used (e.g., on GCSE results and attendance). Consequently, there are several significant limitations. Of note is the likelihood of researcher bias, in that the EP was aware of the positive associations related to the approach used in the school and might unwittingly have created bias within the data gathering through, for example, tone of voice or body language. Unconscious

researcher bias could also have occurred within the analysis phase when the researcher might have been drawn to data that proved the hypothesis.

There is also a high probability of issues relating to internal validity. The EP had working relationships with the adults in the setting and had also worked previously with some of the students. This may have created a bias, particularly for the adult participants, as they may have wanted to speak positively about the programme to please the EP or the head teacher. The Q-sorting technique was delivered in a strict format individually for each participant, and care was taken to ensure the experience was the same for each participant; however, slight differences might have occurred that could have had an impact on reliability between participants. The two group elements of the research could be subject to biases, in particular group bias, in which the participants might have been swayed by what others were writing.

Finally, it is important to acknowledge that the findings of this study are based on a small sample size and as such are potentially transferable but not generalizable; they provide an insight into practices that could be explored further in future research. The analysis was also based on brief and succinct qualitative data and, although thematic and content analysis were used, more in-depth information could have been gathered from individual interviews with students.

IMPLICATIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

The study explored factors valued by students attending a specialist setting for students who have struggled to engage with school due to mental health difficulties. Future research could incorporate the views of parents and school staff to provide a richer picture of the factors that promote school attendance. It might also be helpful to explore the approaches of other alternative programmes in order to compare strategies employed and look for consistency across them.

In addition, participants in the current study were all in Year 11 (aged 15 or 16), which may have accounted for some of the findings discussed here. Students seemed to value the guidance and support offered by trusted adults in a safe environment where they felt respected and treated like adults. Younger children, who are less autonomous learners and at a different educational and psychological stage of development, may make different suggestions about how school could support them, and it would therefore be helpful to explore their views.

Future research could also consider how students who have experienced EBSA can be encouraged to integrate into a mainstream setting as, due to the difference in structure and resources, it is likely that some of the approaches may be operationalised differently within this context. Finally, the present study did not explore the correlation between approaches used at School X and academic progress as these data were not gathered as part of the study to respond to the research question. Future research could explore academic progress for students experiencing EBSA who attend specialist settings of a similar nature.

CONCLUSION

The present study explored the protective factors valued by participants attending a specialist setting where students had previously made progress in terms of attendance and academic outcomes. The importance of interconnectivity and psychological safety were found to be most important to students, factors that, it is argued, are linked and dependent upon each other. Through the factors identified, School X's model seemed to communicate to students that they were valued, understood, and important to the staff working with them; Characteristics that then create the safe base needed by students who have previously struggled with school attendance to feel confident to engage in school and learning.

Previous studies have found that the outcomes for students experiencing EBSA are generally poor, including negative impact on academic attainment, employment, mental health difficulties, and social engagement (Garry, 1996; Pellegrini, 2007; Taylor, 2012; Walter et al., 2010). Findings from the current study present a model for supporting students who avoid school to enable them to not only attend an educational programme but engage in learning and academic qualifications. Participants reported valuing supportive adults who understood them as individuals and responded to their needs. Prioritising interconnectivity and psychological safety in any educational programme could, therefore, contribute to the prevention of further negative life outcomes for students experiencing EBSA.

This study was initially part of educational practice. All participants and their caregivers provided signed consent as part of the school contract stating that evaluations would be carried out to improve practice. Formal consent to be included in the study was gained via individual telephone discussions with each participant by an objective trainee clinical psychologist and a follow-up email that outlined the consent given in written form. All participants were over the age of 16 at the time.

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COMPETING INTERESTS

The authors have no competing interests to declare.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

The first author is an educational psychologist and leads on EBSA practice within a London borough. The second author is a senior educational psychologist and conducted the research as the educational psychologist linked to the setting at the time the evaluation took place.

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