

Working with Adolescents to Understand Bullying and Self-Exclusion from School

Anna Dadswell*, and Niamh O'Brien, Anglia Ruskin University, Chelmsford UK

* Address for Correspondence: Anna Dadswell, Faculty of Health, Education, Medicine and Social Care, Michael Salmon Building, Anglia Ruskin University, Bishop Hall Lane, Chelmsford CM1 1SQ. E-mail:

anna.dadswell@aru.ac.uk

Author note

Anna Dadswell <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1568-202X>

Niamh O'Brien <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2738-8514>

Abstract

Self-exclusion from school is a significant issue in the UK and increasingly associated with bullying. However, there is little research into this relationship and the experiences and support needs of adolescents who experience bullying leading to self-exclusion are unknown. Using participatory methodology, we worked with adolescents who had self-excluded from school and the staff supporting them, to identify key issues on experiences and support needs and design the research approach which was carried into a second phase of research involving four focus group discussions with other self-excluded young people. Fifteen adolescents were involved in total (eleven female, four male, aged 13-16). Data was analysed thematically and findings suggest anxiety underpins self-exclusion due to bullying, which was shaped by friendship dynamics, issues around seeking support, and institutional factors in schools. This led to gradual withdrawal from school, and eventually self-exclusion. These shared experiences, knowledge, and insight go beyond the current literature, thus providing a strong rationale for adolescents' involvement in future research.

Keywords: Bullying, self-exclusion, anxiety, lived experience, participatory research

Introduction

Self-exclusion is when a child or adolescent stops attending school due to the anxiety and distress that they experience in relation to their attendance. Across the literature, this complex phenomenon is also referred to as school phobia, school avoidance, school withdrawal, school absenteeism, extended school non-attendance, or school refusal (Heyne, Gren-Landell, Melvin & Gentle-Genitty, 2019; Pellegrini, 2007; Thambirajah, Grandison, & De-Hayes, 2008). Though school refusal is a more established term, it is sometimes conflated with truancy (Heyne et al., 2019) and holds connotations about the student's relationship with school. For example, students who self-exclude experience emotional distress at the prospect of attending school, but they often comply with schoolwork (Havik, Bru, & Ertesvåg, 2015; Thambirajah et al., 2008) and may ultimately want to attend (Elliott & Place, 2012), suggesting that they are not refusing everything about school. This also separates self-exclusion from truanting, 'dropping out' and other forms of unauthorised non-attendance, whereby students are usually disinterested in school and are also likely to engage in anti-social behaviour (Havik et al., 2015; Heyne et al., 2019; Thambirajah et al., 2008). Moreover, some point to how school refusal is used as a diagnostic term (Elliott & Place, 2012) suggesting that the problem lies within the individual, which potentially diverts attention away from the influence of the school environment (Pellegrini, 2007). We use the term 'self-exclusion' in line with our partner in this research, Red Balloon (2020). Furthermore, we contend that it draws attention to the exclusionary nature of the phenomenon, with regards to the social and environmental factors that push these students away from school, as well as the experience of exclusion as a consequence.

In this article, we explore self-exclusion as a consequence of school bullying through the lived experiences of adolescents themselves who had self-excluded from secondary school in the UK. We begin with a brief exploration of the literature before describing our methods and

findings. We conclude the article with a critical discussion and recommendations for practice and further research.

Self-Exclusion, Anxiety, and Bullying

Self-exclusion not only has detrimental impacts on young people's educational experiences, but also their mental health. This has implications for their engagement with society, including poor academic outcomes limiting future prospects, loss of peer relationships and missing out on age appropriate socialisation, and a greater risk of psychosocial difficulties in later life (Thambirajah et al., 2008). As mentioned, anxiety relating to school plays an important role in self-exclusion. Much research has demonstrated associations between school refusal and generalised anxiety, separation anxiety, social anxiety, and phobias (Egger, Costello, & Angold, 2003; Finning et al., 2019; Walter et al., 2013), though Finning et al. (2019) note that studies use different conceptualisations of school refusal and different ways of measuring absenteeism. Many of the interventions for school refusal use either psychodynamic therapy or behavioural therapy approaches (Elliott & Place, 2012) which are also typically used to treat anxiety. However, there are many factors that may contribute to both anxiety and school refusal that are overlooked in approaches aiming to treat individuals.

Ingul et al. (2019) reviewed the literature on school refusal and identified early signs and risk factors, including the characteristics of the students themselves, their home/family environment, and the school setting. Within the school setting, bullying and victimisation has been strongly associated with school refusal (Egger et al., 2003; Havik et al., 2015; Ingul et al., 2019; Thambirajah et al., 2008). Furthermore, bullying has been associated with mental health issues including anxiety (Besag, 2006), which suggests a further connection to self-exclusion.

In Norwegian-Irish research, interviews were conducted with eight girls and one boy aged 12-18 who had experienced long term traditional bullying and/or cyber-bullying (Sjursø, Fandrem,

& Roland, 2019; Sjursø, Fandrem, O'Higgins-Norman, & Roland, 2019). Sjursø, Fandrem, and Roland, (2019) explored symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and found that those who experienced traditional bullying only, reported fewer symptoms of PTSD than those who experienced both traditional and cyber-bullying. Meanwhile, Nielsen, Tangen, Idsoe, Matthiesen, and Magerøy (2015) conducted a literature review and meta-analysis to explore if there is a correlation between bullying and PTSD. They found that across the studies, the majority of victims reported symptoms of PTSD and that two out of three clinical diagnosis studies suggest a correlation. However, they conclude that due to a lack of longitudinal studies on this issue, causal associations between bullying and PTSD are not possible.

Besag (2006) suggests that for girls in particular, friendship breakdown was the most anxiety provoking aspect of school life. The dynamics of friendship and bullying are complex; for example, some research identifies friends as supportive in circumstances of bullying (Moore & Maclean, 2012), but it has also been found that friends or peers of those being bullied may find it difficult to seek support for them, as they risk undermining their own position within the friendship network (O'Brien, Munn-Giddings, & Moules, 2018).

Anti-Bullying Policies and Reporting

In order to prevent self-exclusion, early intervention is essential, but most of the research about school absenteeism interventions have focused on truancy (Ingul, Havik, & Heyne, 2019) and neglect the issue of bullying. Despite all schools in England and Wales being legally required to have an anti-bullying policy (Smith & Samara, 2003). Effective anti-bullying policies make it clear what the school is doing about bullying and why, shows that bullying will not be tolerated, can be used to monitor progress (Glover, Gough, Johnson, & Cartwright, 2000), and can be successful in reducing bullying in schools (Olweus, 2003). However, it is still difficult to intervene as students do not always report bullying. O'Brien et al. (2018) suggest that due to insecurities about the implications of reporting bullying, students have to navigate a

‘complex web’ in their decision about reporting it in school. The Ditch the Label (2019) annual survey of 2,347 UK school and college students reported that of those who had been bullied, 28% did not tell anybody because they were fearful, embarrassed or did not have any trust in the offered support systems.

Sjursø, Fandrem, O’Higgins-Norman, and Roland (2019) explored student perceptions of class-teachers’ authoritative leadership when intervening in long-term cases of bullying. They found that most of the nine participants believed their teachers had little or no control over protecting bullied students. Participants cited teachers not knowing what to do or not following up with the complaint. In Finland, Saarento, Kärnä, Hodges, and Salmivalli (2013) found that teacher’s attitudes towards bullying contributed to predictions of victimisation in schools, while in New Zealand, Denny et al. (2014) found that teacher action against bullying did not reduce victimisation or bullying.

Research into Bullying and Self-Exclusion

School bullying research is traditionally conducted from the perspective of adults, on children and adolescents who are still attending school. Some large cohort studies report on the link between bullying and self-exclusion (Havik et al., 2015; Vidourek, King, & Merianos, 2016), yet this hidden issue is not recognised in government statistics on attendance (Shilvock, 2010). Brown, Clery, and Ferguson (2011) reported that in England, 93,000+ 11-15 year olds were out of school citing bullying as the primary or secondary reason for their self-exclusion. No figures have been recorded since on the extent of self-exclusion related specifically to bullying. Moreover, though survey data on bullying, and bullying related to self-exclusion, provide a broad picture of what is happening, they offer little insight into the lived experiences of the children and adolescents behind the numbers.

Research is beginning to explore lived experiences of self-exclusion, however perspectives on the connection between bullying and self-exclusion are lacking (Shilvock, 2010). Children and adolescents are experts in their own experiences and what it is like to be young now (Kellet, 2010); therefore to better understand the relationship between bullying and self-exclusion, children and adolescents with lived experiences need to be involved in the research process.

Methods

Participatory research involves children and adolescents in the research process and gives them the opportunity to share their lived experiences (Bennett & Roberts, 2004). In this research, we used a participatory approach across two phases, to work with adolescents from Red Balloon (RB), a unique charity providing educational/therapeutic support to adolescents who have self-excluded from school because of anxiety related to bullying or other trauma. In phase one we worked with staff and students at one RB Learner Centre to design the research, which was then carried out in phase two with students at the four other RB Centres. Ethical approval was received from Anglia Ruskin University's School of Education and Social Care Research Ethics Panel. A more detailed account of the methods can be found in the final report (O'Brien & Dadswell, 2019) and a critical reflection on the participatory research process is published elsewhere (O'Brien & Dadswell, 2020).

Phase one

In phase one, we formed a research group comprising two self-selecting adolescents (one female, one male, aged 15) with lived experiences of bullying and self-exclusion, two staff members who brought expertise in supporting these adolescents, and the authors who have academic knowledge on the subject. This multi-perspective team added to the credibility and trustworthiness of the research and the findings.

We held discursive research sessions to establish a shared understanding of bullying, decide what issues were considered important, and design the research approach for phase two. After discussing vignettes of different bullying situations as well as the participants' own experiences, the research group agreed on five key issues to explore: the decision to leave school; reactions from the wider peer group; support structures in schools; potential early interventions; and policies, process and legislation surrounding bullying and self-exclusion. We decided together that semi-structured focus groups would be the most appropriate data collection method as the students at RB are generally comfortable sharing their experiences together and a rich discussion would give a fuller picture of the issue rather than individual examples.

Phase two

In phase two, we conducted a focus group discussion at each of the four RB Learner Centres. We used purposive sampling with two criteria; firstly that bullying was a factor in the participants' self-exclusion and secondly that they were unlikely to feel distressed as a result of participating. RB staff members at each Centre invited all students meeting the criteria to take part. Thirteen adolescents formed our sample, comprising three or four participants at each Centre; ten females and three males aged approximately 13 to 16 years. Given this small sample size and selection criteria, we did not intend for the sample to be representative of the wider RB population, or the population of children and adolescents who have self-excluded from school due to bullying. Rather, this is an exploratory study aiming to gain an initial insight into these experiences.

The focus group approach took into account specific methodological and practical concerns outlined by Gibson (2007) for conducting focus groups with children and adolescents. They were audio-recorded and took place in an empty classroom or the dining room of the Centres with both authors present, one acting as the facilitator and the other taking notes. Participants

were asked if they would like a RB staff member present and at all Centres this was declined. Focus groups began with an ice breaker and collective agreement on ground rules. The facilitator used a semi-structured topic guide based on the five key issues identified in phase one. All participants were encouraged to contribute, and focus groups lasted between 30 and 60 minutes. Afterwards, participants were thanked for their time and signposted to RB staff if they wanted to discuss anything further.

Data Analysis

Our intention was to analyse the data from phase two with the participants from phase one, however this was not possible due to competing priorities. Instead, we conducted a semantic thematic analysis using our five key issues as a starting point (Aronson, 1995). The focus groups were transcribed verbatim using a trusted professional transcriber. Once returned, they were examined by the two researchers to ensure accuracy. Analysis was subsequently carried out using Aronson's four stage model, the purpose of which was to use the a-priori themes identified in phase one to guide the analysis as follows:

1. Focus group transcripts were individually examined under the a-priori themes. Participant's direct quotes and paraphrasing of common ideas were used to illustrate links between these themes.
2. The transcripts were examined for a second time to generate sub-themes under each a-priori theme.
3. Relevant data from each transcript were merged to form a broader view of combined experiences which helped to identify emerging patterns.
4. Links between themes and the related literature were identified to develop a valid argument, thereby strengthening the research overall.

Results

The results show that anxiety underpinned self-exclusion due to bullying. This was shaped by the dynamics of friendships, experiences of seeking or not seeking support, and institutional factors relating to the school. For the participants in the focus groups, this led to their gradual withdrawal from their friends and school, and eventually their self-exclusion.

Anxiety

The participants shared their experiences of anxiety, which they felt about going to school and whilst at school before their self-exclusion:

Then it was the dread of thinking about having to go to school... whenever I got home I was like, "Oh thank God, I'm home." It was like a relief to get home and be in your own space. (Female FG4)

No, [I] didn't want to be there. That was like my first self-exclusion. Nothing specifically happened. But it was just something about school that made me really anxious. (Female FG3)

They talked about how their anxiety could sometimes lead to outbursts and behaviour that was regarded by the school as 'acting out' and intentional disruption:

I would fight the teachers, I would scream at them, I would swear at them and then I'd run because I was so scared. Whatever happens, I don't get upset, I get angry. (Female FG4)

At the other end of the spectrum, anxiety made some of the participants turn in on themselves and some engaged in forms of self-harm:

So, I just kept it to myself, and almost every night, I cried myself to sleep. (Male FG1)

Yes, I would bite my hands to the point I bled. It was really unusual for me to come home from school not bleeding. (Female FG4)

As our focus group discussions developed, participants shared further insights into what fuelled their anxiety, these are explored in the next three themes.

Friendship dynamics

Friendship dynamics was a prominent theme, with most participants feeling unsupported by friends during their bullying. The term ‘fake friends’ was frequently used, along with complex dynamics of apathy and conflict regarding bullying and relationships with peers.

‘Fake friends’

Participants shared examples of peers who were once their friends, or seemed to be their friends, but played an active role in the bullying they experienced:

...it went on for a few years, like, on and off... these people were supposed friends, or I thought they were my friends, but they were just fake people that just wanted to hurt me... (Female FG1)

I had my best friend but looking back I realise she was the bully. She would say, “Oh yes, I completely get it, you should feel like that, you are fat, you should feel like that, you should starve yourself. I can’t believe you went to lunch today.” I’d be sitting there, I’d be like, “Yes, you’re completely right”. (Female FG4)

Even when one participant reached out to her friend for help, the friend broke her trust and perpetuated the bullying:

I confided in one of my friends and said, “I was scared to tell my parents.” I said, “I don’t know what to do, what should I do?” She then went around spreading it around the school which made it even worse... This was my friend... We’d grown up together.

You'd think "I can tell you anything and I trust you" but then it's – I don't want to say 'fake friends' but it's who do you actually trust then? (Female FG4)

Another participant described being known around the school as the student who is bullied, as well as having 'fake friends' which eventually led to her self-exclusion:

Everyone started getting to know me from other years when my bullying started, so I was known in the school as the girl who got bullied, and then everyone would start bullying me. And then I thought I had a group of friends, but they ended up just being fake because they felt bad for me, and then they, kind of, left... that's when I started distancing myself from them and then got to a point where I just didn't go to school anymore. (Female FG1)

Apathetic and conflicted friends

The participants expressed their frustration at friends and other peers who were aware of the bullying, but were apathetic and remained uninvolved:

I mean, like, it was like they knew I was being bullied, but they just didn't bother to do anything about it. So, like, if someone else in my class was getting bullied, I would ask them to stop bullying that person, but if it was the other way around, then they wouldn't exactly do it for me. (Male FG1)

In contrast, they were more understanding of friends who were genuine and wanted to help, but felt unable due to fear of retaliation from the bully:

I had a few friends that wanted to be friends with me, but wanted to be on the good side of the bullies to protect themselves. It just ended up with me having no one really... The really hard thing is when they say, "I am not going to take sides." But really they are. (Female FG3)

There was this one time. I used to get a load of grief from people. I had one of my best friends at that school. She stuck up for me. But then, as it got on, she didn't want to be the one to get picked on. (Female FG3)

Seeking support

Participants talked about seeking support – or not seeking support – for the anxiety and bullying they experienced at school. Many did not want support for various reasons, so it was not until crisis point that ‘everything came out’ and support was offered. Even when support was offered, it was seen as piecemeal and inadequate.

Not wanting support

Experiences of anxiety and bullying meant that some participants did not want to draw attention to themselves. Some adopted a ‘persona’ suggesting to others that everything was fine, while others just wanted to be left alone, so did not seek support:

I don't know. Like, with me, I didn't really want any support. I just wanted to be completely alone. I didn't want anyone. (Female FG1)

Sometimes, not seeking support was linked to not being able to trust others, particularly around such sensitive issues, and linking to the idea of ‘fake friends’:

That was a tricky time for me because I didn't really trust anybody else enough to tell them how I felt about certain things, and that was when I was self-harming. (Male FG1)

In other cases, participants did confide in a friend but asked them not to disclose the bullying to anyone else; however they were relieved support was sought on their behalf, and sometimes hoped for this outcome:

I think sometimes you tell someone with the mind-set don't tell anyone that but then if they do tell someone you're secretly relieved and you're like, "I'm actually glad they

did,” so then you don’t have to tell them. Then it’s not just a thing that’s almost weighing you down. You get cross at first but then you realise, “Oh actually yes.” Sometimes you just tell them stuff in the hope that they tell someone else and then when they don’t, you think, “I wish they did”. (Female FG4)

Support only at crisis point

Many participants talked about dealing with bullying on their own until they reached crisis point, referred to by one participant as a ‘meltdown’:

...because I didn’t want to feel like that. I didn’t want to have to say I have a problem. I just wanted people to think I was happy and the old me. So, it was difficult to tell anyone any of it, until I broke down and that’s when it came out. (Female FG 2)

I just had a massive breakdown in the corridor... and a teacher saw me, like, full-on crying, and then they took me into the classroom and I explained what had happened. That was, like, the first time I’d ever really said anything to anyone about it. (Female FG1)

It was only when bullying became too much that ‘everything came out’ and the severity of their problems were recognised. This was often the first time they were offered support despite, for some, trying to seek it earlier.

Inadequate support

When participants did seek support for bullying, or finally received it at crisis point, it was often inadequate, unhelpful, or piecemeal:

Well, they gave me support but then they just, kind of, didn’t know what to do. They were just, kind of, like, “Oh, instead of going to form in the morning, you can come into the hub, and then if you don’t want to go to a lesson, you can come to the hub,” but

then they'd say I have to go to the lesson, so they didn't really give me support. (Female FG1)

It does really frustrate me, because especially the teacher I used to go to. She was head of SENCO. She would say, "I know how you feel. I've been in similar situations." I would think to myself, "If you know how I feel, do something to help me." But you're not. (Female FG3)

This was a prominent theme across all the focus groups, with participants feeling completely unsupported by their teachers and schools, contributing to a perception that nothing will change despite authorities' awareness of the bullying and the desperation they felt:

They don't really do anything. They just left me... I was crying as well, quite a lot. They just left me crying. I just said to my mum, "I'm not going there anymore. I can't. I can't really do this". (Female FG3)

The teachers don't do anything. It even got to a point where we were complaining so much, where they would just put me in isolation as well. (Female FG2)

In my previous school, I just think that they weren't going to do anything about it, and, at home, my parents would just say they were going to do something about it, but they really weren't. (Male FG1)

Institutional factors

Participants shared their perspectives on the institutional factors within schools, which shaped their experiences of anxiety and bullying that led to their self-exclusion. These included the school environment and security, as well as anti-bullying policies.

Security at school

Participants reflected on the sheer size of their schools, with the physical buildings ‘too big’ and large numbers of students. In some cases, it was suggested that teachers were unable to manage these numbers of students, which made some participants feel unsafe and contributed to their anxiety:

...when I was in mainstream, it was just too much, because obviously you get big classes, and you get kids doing stuff with kids, and teachers just not listening, or just making you feel like you don't want to go to a big school. (Female FG3)

Whatever happened to safeguarding at school? Aren't teachers supposed to be trained in areas like that? Because the stuff that goes on at schools, like, stuff that goes on at prison. It just really baffles me. (Female FG2)

At the other extreme, participants continued with the idea of school being ‘prison-like’ referring to the enforcement of security which made them feel trapped:

...some schools they're nurturing, but mine, they had 10 foot fences with police on site all the time. (Female FG4)

I just felt I wasn't allowed to go out of school. You feel like you're stuck, there's no exit. (Male FG4)

Similarly, many participants talked about how after reporting bullying, they were made to feel like they were in the wrong. For example, some were put in isolation as a measure to protect them from the bullying, but this made them feel like they were being punished as victims:

So, it was hard but it's just treating you like you've done something wrong. Like, even though you're getting bullied, you're still doing something wrong. One thing they'd always say to me, "Well, you picked to be these girls' friends". (Female FG2)

Anti-bullying policies

Overall, participants were aware that their schools had anti-bullying policies, but reported that in their experiences, the policies were not implemented or enforced:

Well, I knew there was one, but it was never brought up or talked about. (Male FG2)

For the most part, anti-bullying policies were regarded as bureaucratic exercises, involving paperwork that recorded the incident but did not instigate any form of response to the bullying:

...the amount of statement forms I had to fill out explaining what happened... then they'd just read it and file it away, and then that would be that. They didn't do anything.

(Female FG1)

In focus group four, participants discussed experiences of anti-bullying policies in their respective schools:

Female: You had to figure out on your own what it was. No one would tell you.

Female: I still don't know what it was. I know they had one but I got no clue what it was.

Female: Just don't bully, do your work was kind of mine.

They also shared that although schools often advertised anti-bullying posters and helplines, these were not always helpful:

You might even be too anxious to write down the number or to ring it or you might not want to ring it at home and you don't get out enough to do it somewhere else. (Female FG4).

Gradually withdrawing

The experiences discussed under the themes of friendships, seeking support, and institutional factors related to anxiety and bullying caused these adolescents to withdraw from others and from their schools. When we asked about experiences leading up to their decision to leave school, the participants told us it was not a clear decision in reaction to an event or set of events, but a gradual process of withdrawal that happened over time:

I don't think it is a decision. I don't think someone decides on self-excluding from school. I think you get so overwhelmed and then suddenly you look around and realise you haven't been to school in months. Suddenly you realise that this is your life now and it's too scary to go back. You don't decide, it just happens... It's not a conscious decision, it's almost like a subconscious one. You do it without even realising you are.
(Female FG4)

They spoke about their school attendance gradually declining, for example going to school but not attending classes or faking illness to avoid school:

I was refusing to go into lessons, I used to spend all of my time hiding in the quiet room or in the bathroom and just not wanting to – feeling like what's the point of being here when all that's happening is me getting bullied and teased. (Female FG4)

I started not going to classes, and then I just stopped going to school altogether.
(Female FG1)

I was pretending to be ill to have days off. I would ask to go home quite a lot. (Female FG3)

As a consequence of feeling unsupported by their friends and losing trust and respect for 'fake friends', the participants also described withdrawing from their friendship groups and distancing themselves from friends:

I don't think anyone would help me, because I stopped giving them respect. Like, the people who I thought were my friends, I didn't care anymore, because when I realised they were fake, if they had a problem, I wouldn't listen, I wouldn't help them... If they'd actually been loyal and supported me and, like, stood up for me, or didn't go behind my back and make me feel constantly awful, then, yes, they probably would've had my respect and, you know, like, we would've supported each other with our issues, but because they didn't do that, I didn't see the point. (Female FG1)

Some participants also recognised that their friends were in a difficult position and they withdrew themselves from their friendship groups because they did not want anyone else to go through the bullying they had experienced.

Discussion

The participants in this research shared their personal lived experiences of self-exclusion as a result of bullying and explored how schools could better support those with similar experiences. The findings show that self-exclusion is underpinned by the anxiety that accompanies bullying. In addition to an association between anxiety and self-exclusion (e.g. Finning et al., 2019), the literature also shows a relationship between being bullied and high levels of anxiety (Thambirajah et al., 2008). From our findings it is difficult to discern the ways in which anxiety and bullying impact and are impacted by each other, but it is clear that these experiences had severe negative consequences for these adolescents. Furthermore, participants expressed how these experiences were influenced by friendship dynamics, issues around seeking support, and institutional factors within schools which led to their gradual withdrawal from others and from school, and eventual self-exclusion.

Firstly, the participants in this research talked about 'fake friends' and apathetic or conflicted friends, who were for the most part unsupportive throughout their experiences of bullying.

Though small-scale, our sample was predominantly female, and their focus on friendships is in line with the idea that girls find friendship breakdown particularly anxiety-provoking (Besag, 2006). Research suggests that secondary school students are more likely to seek support for bullying from friends over adults (Moore & Maclean, 2012), so the lack of support from friends in cases of self-exclusion is concerning. It may be that adolescents are at a greater risk of self-exclusion when bullying is accompanied by unsupportive friends. Furthermore, unsupportive friends, along with the link between bullying and anxiety, suggests that these adolescents are likely to feel extremely isolated and are therefore unlikely to have the confidence to come forward and seek support.

Secondly, the participants described issues around seeking support for the bullying and anxiety that they experienced in school. Some did not want support, so it was not until they reached crisis point that their problems were recognised and support was offered. This is in line with research suggesting that some secondary school students prefer to ‘do nothing’ about bullying, or deal with it themselves (Moore & Maclean, 2012). This may also be influenced by the perceived seriousness of the bullying and the impact this has on deciding to report, identified as the ‘complex web’ (O’Brien et al., 2018). However, others were reluctant to come forward and seek support due to a lack of trust in the offered support systems (Ditch the Label, 2019). Indeed, research has found that there may even be an expectation by schools that students should resolve issues of bullying themselves (deLara, 2012; Moore & Maclean, 2012). On the other hand, Sjørsø, Fandrem and Roland (2019) suggest the need for teachers to be sensitive to the possibility that some students may be experiencing symptoms of PTSD as a result of bullying and may subsequently avoid going to school out of fear. This has important implications for how support is provided in schools, and the need for this to be proactive – identifying students who are struggling and going to them – rather than reactive.

Thirdly, institutional factors such as mixed perceptions of security at school, and poor implementation of anti-bullying policies influenced participants' experiences of bullying and anxiety leading to self-exclusion. The school environment has been implicated in relation to self-exclusion, including issues around school size and unmonitored areas (Lauchlan, 2003), however there is little research focussing specifically on the issue of security in the UK. In America, one study suggested that strengthening students' relationships with adults and increasing the fairness and consistency of rules may help students feel safer at school (Fisher, Viano, Curran, Pearman, & Gardella, 2018). Another found school safety measures (such as security guards and/or police) were associated with a lower likelihood of bullying, yet security equipment (such as locked doors) did not address bullying and instead may create a "heavily scrutinized prisonlike feeling" (Gerlinger & Wo, 2013, p.9). This comparison of school with prison was evident in our findings and suggests the need to enhance the school environment. Further institutional factors, such as support structures that respond appropriately to bullying concerns have been identified as creating an enabling or disabling climate for bullying (O'Brien, 2019). Despite some participants in our research being aware of the anti-bullying policy and the rhetoric of zero tolerance at their schools (Smith & Samara, 2003), in their experiences this was not translated into action.

These inter-related factors influencing bullying and anxiety led participants to gradually withdraw from their friends, classes, and schools until they eventually reached a point where they could not return. Though faking illness was sometimes mentioned as a strategy for avoiding school, this was due to the anxiety they felt as a result of bullying. This critical understanding of the reason behind their behaviour, supports the idea that self-exclusion is distinctly different from other types of unauthorised school non-attendance such as truancy (Havik et al., 2015; Thambirajah et al., 2008). Ditch the Label (2019) found moderate to extreme impacts of bullying on students' mental health (55%), academic studies (50%) and

social life (64%). Crucially relevant for our findings, 20% had missed school or college because of bullying; though young people no longer attending school or college were not captured by the survey.

The participants emphasised that in their experience, self-exclusion is a gradual process – rather than a clear decision – which is not prominent in the existing literature. Critically, this points towards opportunities for early intervention in schools to identify students who may be struggling with bullying and anxiety, and support them to stay in school, as identified by Sjursø, Fandrem and Roland (2019).

Limitations

Focussing on the lived experiences of a small number of adolescents, who were predominantly female, could be considered a limitation of this study. The sample is not claimed to be representative of the wider population of those who have self-excluded, and generalisations cannot be made. However, the collected stories depicted diversity in experiences and highlighted the value in hearing these unique experiences through qualitative methods. Indeed, the results from the current research demonstrate the wealth of knowledge that adolescents with experience of bullying and self-exclusion have to share. Their knowledge and insight goes beyond that in the current literature and provides a strong rationale for their involvement in further research to develop support that better fits the needs of bullied children and adolescents and reduce the incidence of self-exclusion.

Conclusions

The participants in this research supported the recommendations of Sjursø, Fandrem, and Roland (2019), around the need for teachers to notice changes in behaviour that might be a consequence of bullying. They suggested schools could create a safer environment by promoting empathy across students and staff. In addition, our research calls for a greater

awareness of the link between bullying and self-exclusion, and the need for more concrete action in cases of severe and persistent bullying. This should not only directly address the bullying but also wider concerns around how students perceive the school environment and support them to overcome any issues to enable them to remain in school. Accordingly, further research could seek to work with adolescents to explore the specific support needs of those at risk of self-exclusion due to severe bullying, in order to develop resources to support schools in tackling this issue.

References

- Aronson, J. (1995). A pragmatic view of thematic analysis. *The Qualitative Report*, 2, 1-3.
- Bennett, F., & Roberts, M. (2004). *Participatory approaches to research on poverty*. Joseph Rowntree Foundation. <https://www.jrf.org.uk/report/participatory-approaches-research-poverty>
- Besag, V. E. (2006). Bullying among girls: Friends or foes? *School Psychology International*, 27, 535-551. doi: 10.1177/0143034306073401
- Brown, V., Clery, E., & Ferguson, C. (2011). *Estimating the prevalence of young people absent from school due to bullying*. Red Balloon Learner Centre. <https://www.anti-bullyingalliance.org.uk/sites/default/files/field/attachment/estimating-prevalence-young-people.pdf>
- DeLara, E. W. (2012). Why adolescents don't disclose incidents of bullying and harassment. *Journal of School Violence*, 11, 288-305. doi: 10.1080/15388220.2012.705931

Denny, S., Peterson, E. R., Stuart, J., Utter, J., Bullen, P., Fleming, T., Ameratunga, S., Clark, T., & Milfont, T. (2014). Bystander intervention, bullying, and victimization: A multilevel analysis of New Zealand high schools. *Journal of School Violence, 14*, 245-272. doi: 10.1080/15388220.2014.910470

Ditch the Label. (2019). *The Annual Bullying Survey 2019*. Ditch the Label. <https://www.ditchthelabel.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/11/The-Annual-Bullying-Survey-2019-1.pdf>

Egger, H. L., Costello, J. E., & Angold, A. (2003). School refusal and psychiatric disorders: A community study. *Journal of the American Academy of Child & Adolescent Psychiatry, 42*(7), 797-807. doi: [10.1097/01.CHI.0000046865.56865.79](https://doi.org/10.1097/01.CHI.0000046865.56865.79)

Elliott, J., & Place, M. (2012). *Children in difficulty: A guide to understanding and helping*. Oxon: Routledge.

Finning, K., Ukoumunne, O. C., Ford, T., Danielson - Waters, E., Shaw, L., Romero De Jager, I., ... & Moore, D. A. (2019). The association between anxiety and poor attendance at school—a systematic review. *Child and Adolescent Mental Health, 24*, 205-216. doi: [10.1111/camh.12322](https://doi.org/10.1111/camh.12322)

Fisher, B. W., Viano, S., Curran, F. C., Pearman, F. A., & Gardella, J. H. (2018). Students' feelings of safety, exposure to violence and victimization, and authoritative school climate. *American Journal of Criminal Justice, 43*, 6-25. doi: [10.1007/s12103-017-9406-6](https://doi.org/10.1007/s12103-017-9406-6)

Gerlinger, J., & Wo, J. C. (2016). Preventing school bullying: Should schools prioritize an authoritative school discipline approach over security measures?. *Journal of School Violence, 15*, 133-157. doi: [10.1080/15388220.2014.956321](https://doi.org/10.1080/15388220.2014.956321)

Gibson, F. (2007). Conducting focus groups with children and young people: strategies for success. *Journal of Research in Nursing, 12*, 473-483. doi: 10.1177/1744987107079791

- Glover, D., Gough, G., Johnson, M., & Cartwright, N. (2000). Bullying in 25 secondary schools: Incidence, impact and intervention. *Educational Research*, 42, 141-156. doi: [10.1080/001318800363782](https://doi.org/10.1080/001318800363782)
- Havik, T., Bru, E., & Ertesvåg, S. K. (2015). School factors associated with school refusal-and truancy-related reasons for school non-attendance. *Social Psychology of Education*, 18, 221-240. doi: [10.1007/s11218-015-9293-y](https://doi.org/10.1007/s11218-015-9293-y)
- Heyne, D., Gren-Landell, M., Melvin, G., & Gentle-Genitty, C. (2019). Differentiation between school attendance problems: Why and how?. *Cognitive and Behavioral Practice*, 26, 8-34. doi: 10.1016/j.cbpra.2018.03.006
- Ingul, J. M., Havik, T., & Heyne, D. (2019). Emerging school refusal: a school-based framework for identifying early signs and risk factors. *Cognitive and Behavioral Practice*, 26, 46-62. doi: 10.1016/j.cbpra.2018.03.005
- Kellett, M. (2010). *Rethinking children and research: Attitudes in contemporary society*. London: Continuum International Publishing Group.
- Lauchlan, F. (2003). Responding to chronic non-attendance: A review of intervention approaches. *Educational Psychology in Practice*, 19, 133-146. doi: [10.1080/02667360303236](https://doi.org/10.1080/02667360303236)
- Moore, S., & Maclean, R. (2012). Victimization, friendship and resilience: crossing the land in-between. *Pastoral Care in Education*, 30, 147-163. doi: [10.1080/02643944.2012.679956](https://doi.org/10.1080/02643944.2012.679956)
- Nielsen, M. B., Tangen, T., Idsoe, T., Matthiesen, S. B., & Magerøy, N. (2015). Post-traumatic stress disorder as a consequence of bullying at work and at school. A literature review and meta-analysis. *Aggression and Violent Behavior*, 21, 17-24. doi: 10.1016/j.avb.2015.01.001

- O'Brien, N., Munn-Giddings, C., & Moules, T. (2018). The repercussions of reporting bullying: some experiences of students at an independent secondary school. *Pastoral Care in Education*, 36, 29-43. doi: [10.1080/02643944.2017.1422004](https://doi.org/10.1080/02643944.2017.1422004)
- O'Brien, N. (2019). Understanding alternative bullying perspectives through research engagement with young people. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 10, 1984. doi: [10.3389/fpsyg.2019.01984](https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2019.01984)
- O'Brien, N., & Dadswell, A. (2019). *Working with young people to understand bullying and self-exclusion from school: Final report*. Anglia Ruskin University. <http://arro.anglia.ac.uk/id/eprint/704884>
- O'Brien, N., & Dadswell, A. (2020). Reflections on a participatory research project exploring bullying and school self-exclusion: power dynamics, practicalities and partnership working. *Pastoral Care in Education*, 38, 208-229. doi: [10.1080/02643944.2020.1788126](https://doi.org/10.1080/02643944.2020.1788126)
- Olweus, D. (2003). A profile of bullying at school. *Educational Leadership*, 60, 12-17.
- Pellegrini, D. W. (2007). School Non - attendance: Definitions, meanings, responses, interventions. *Educational Psychology in Practice*, 23, 63-77. doi: [10.1080/02667360601154691](https://doi.org/10.1080/02667360601154691)
- Red Balloon. (2020). *Red Balloon Homepage*. Retrieved February 12, 2020, from <http://www.redballoonlearner.org>
- Saarento, S., Kärnä, A., Hodges, E. V., & Salmivalli, C. (2013). Student-, classroom-, and school-level risk factors for victimization. *Journal of School Psychology*, 51, 421-434. doi: 10.1016/j.jsp.2013.02.002

Shilvock, G. G. (2010). *Investigating the factors associated with emotionally-based non-attendance at school from young people's perspective* [Doctoral dissertation, University of Birmingham]. UBIRA ETheses. <https://etheses.bham.ac.uk/id/eprint/1142/>

Sjursø, I. R., Fandrem, H., O'Higgins Norman, J., & Roland, E. (2019). Teacher authority in long-lasting cases of bullying: A qualitative study from Norway and Ireland. *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, 16, 1163. doi: 10.3390/ijerph16071163

Sjursø, I., Fandrem, H., & Roland, E. (2019). "All the time, every day, 24/7": A qualitative perspective on symptoms of post-traumatic stress in long-term cases of traditional and cyber victimizations in Norway and Ireland. *International Journal of Bullying Prevention*, 2, 1-10. doi: 10.1007/s42380-019-00024-8

Smith, P., & Samara, M. (2003). *Evaluation of the DfES anti bullying pack* (Brief No: RBX06-03). Goldsmiths College, University of London. <https://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/20130402122645/https://www.education.gov.uk/publications/eOrderingDownload/RBX06-03.pdf>

Thambirajah, M. S., Grandison, K. J., & De-Hayes, L. (2008). *Understanding school refusal: A handbook for professionals in education, health and social care*. London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers.

Vidourek, R. A., King, K. A., & Merianos, A. L. (2016). School bullying and student trauma: Fear and avoidance associated with victimization. *Journal of Prevention & Intervention in the Community*, 44, 121-129. doi: [10.1080/10852352.2016.1132869](https://doi.org/10.1080/10852352.2016.1132869)

Walter, D., Hautmann, C., Minkus, J., Petermann, M., Lehmkuhl, G., Goertz - Dorten, A., & Doepfner, M. (2013). Predicting outcome of inpatient CBT for adolescents with anxious - depressed school absenteeism. *Clinical Psychology & Psychotherapy*, 20, 206-215. doi: [10.1002/cpp.797](https://doi.org/10.1002/cpp.797)

Bio Sketches

Anna Dadswell is a Research Fellow in the Faculty of Health, Education, Medicine and Social Care at Anglia Ruskin University. Her doctoral research explores young women's experiences and understandings of anxiety. Further research interests include the use of inclusive and creative methodologies to explore the mental health and wellbeing of marginalised groups, including women and young people.

Niamh O'Brien is a Senior Research Fellow in the Faculty of Health, Education, Medicine and Social Care at Anglia Ruskin University, with expertise in participatory research involving young people. Her doctoral work used PAR methodology to explore bullying alongside students. Niamh's interests are in bullying and enabling young people to have a voice in areas which interest and/or affect them.