Working with young people to understand bullying and self-exclusion from school

Final Report

October 2019

Dr Niamh O'Brien and Anna Dadswell

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Dr Niamh O'Brien

Senior Research Fellow, Anglia Ruskin University, Chelmsford, Essex UK

Honorary Fellow of the UNESCO Chair on Tackling Bullying in Schools and Cyberspace Through a Global Partnership for Equality and Wellbeing (National Anti-Bullying Centre, Dublin City University)

niamh.obrien@anglia.ac.uk   +44 (0) 1245 68 4197   @NiamhOB2

Anna Dadswell

Research Fellow, Anglia Ruskin University, Chelmsford, Essex UK

anna.dadswell@anglia.ac.uk   +44 (0) 1245 68 3531

I. Executive summary

1.1 Background

In England, over 93,000 11-15 year olds are without school provision citing bullying as either a primary or secondary reason (Brown et al., 2011). However, the experiences and support needs of these young people are unknown. This study sought to find out from young people themselves, the reasons behind their own self-exclusion and the possible supports that need to be in place for other young people at mainstream school who might be suffering from bullying.

1.2 Participants

All study participants were attending a Red Balloon Learner Centre: a charity providing educational/therapeutic support to young people who self-exclude from mainstream education because of severe bullying or other trauma. Founded in 1996, Red Balloon has four Centres, based in houses in Cambridge, Norwich, Harrow and Reading. It also has an online provision called Red Balloon of the Air which is supported by three satellite Centres in Cambridge, Norfolk and Chelmsford Essex. These are places where the children receiving education and therapy online can go for community based face-to-face activities weekly.

Using participatory methodology, we conducted two phases of research. In phase one, we worked with young people in Chelmsford (previously in Braintree), to develop the research questions and in phase two we took these questions to the wider Red Balloon community and spoke to young people about their experiences using the focus group method. All young people provided their own consent to participate and parents/carers were made aware of the study through participant information sheets.

1.3 Findings

Anxiety underpinned self-exclusion due to bullying but a number of factors led to this anxiety including:

- Young people's perceptions of their friends:

  "…I thought they were my friends, but they were just fake people that just wanted to hurt me…" (Female, FG1)

- Overall support structures:

  "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)

  "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)

  "….and then I had, like, I think the biggest meltdown ever, I think, I've ever had in my life, and, yes, that's when everything came out…" (Female, FG1)

- Institutional and contextual factors:

The physical size of their schools, including the building being 'too big' as well as the numbers of students caused feelings of intimidation for some:

  "…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)

Young people told us it was the build-up of the above factors that led to their gradual withdrawal from school life and consequently their self-exclusion from school:

  "...one day you're at school, fine and then the next you're at home, too scared to move or go in. It's such a gradual slow thing that you don't see it coming." (Female FG4)

We asked the young people about anything that would have made their life easier while they were at mainstream school and three themes emerged as recommendations:

- Awareness of changes in behaviour:

In acknowledging that teachers have large demands on their time and given school size and student numbers, the young people suggested that school staff should try to notice changes in behaviour, which might indicate a student is struggling:

> *"Losing concentration in lessons… just forgetting or constantly making mistakes…"* (Female, FG4)

- Promoting a feeling of security:

The young people reflected that the use of 'timeout' rooms or 'isolation' was not effective in promoting a feeling of safety for bullied students. Instead, they suggested *"a supervised quiet space"* (Female, FG4) where anxious students could go to and feel safe.

- Promotion of empathy among and between students.

Young people suggested raising feelings of safety through practical approaches including assemblies and marketing to raise bullying awareness and promote empathy and compassion.

> *"….they could find a scenario, like find a YouTube clip or something, put it on the screen. Then people will think even more, "That could happen to my friend." Then speak up."* (Female, FG3)

1.4 Conclusion

There is growing interest in understanding bullying and self-exclusion and how to tackle it. Indeed, the findings from this research demonstrate the wealth of knowledge that young people 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 involving young people in further research into the matter in order to develop support that better fits the needs of bullied young people and reduce the incidence of self-exclusion.

2. Background and context

More than 93,000 11-15 year olds are without school provision in England, citing bullying as the primary or secondary reason for their self-exclusion (Brown, Clery and Ferguson, 2011). This clearly has detrimental impacts on their mental wellbeing, educational opportunities and inclusion in society, but the experiences and support needs of these young people are largely unknown. Research into self-exclusion is limited (Shivlock, 2010; Havik, Bru and Ertesvåg, 2015), with more attention paid to exclusion from school as a disciplinary measure. Meanwhile, research into bullying tends to be large scale and quantitative examining bullying prevalence, risk and protective factors, as well as negative outcomes (Patton et al., 2017) and focuses on young people who are still attending school. Less qualitative research has been conducted exploring the lived experiences young people have of bullying and in particular when this leads to self-exclusion. The current research addressed this gap by providing young people with the opportunity to share their lived experience of bullying and self-exclusion in order to generate new knowledge on the matter.

Self-exclusion from school is understood in this research as when a child or young person decides themselves to permanently stop going to school. This term therefore is in line with current discourse from practitioners working in the area and a recent report on bullying and self-exclusion (Centre for Social Justice, 2016; Red Balloon, 2019). However it appears to have evolved from previous conceptions of the phenomenon as 'school refusal'. School refusal is defined by Thambirajah, Grandison and De-Hayes (2008:16) as:

> "reluctance to attend school or school absenteeism due to severe emotional distress, especially anxiety, about attending school irrespective of the cause."

Other terms such as 'school phobia', 'school absenteeism' and 'extended school non-attendance' are used interchangeably in the literature. Pellegrini (2007) provides an overview of the terminology, raising issues around connotations of 'within-child' explanations for the behaviour that diverts attention away from the influence of the school environment, and highlights the lack of agreement around a definition. The literature also emphasises the

importance of distinguishing school refusal and self-exclusion from other types of unauthorised school non-attendance such as truancy (Thambirajah, Grandison and De-Hayes, 2008; Havick, Bru and Ertesvåg, 2015; Maynard et al., 2015). Students who truant generally do not have a particular emotional reason for non-attendance, tend to conceal non-attendance from parents so their whereabouts are unknown, they lack interest in schoolwork, and often express antisocial behaviours (Thambirajah, Grandison and De-Hayes, 2008). In contrast, school refusers often show significant emotional distress at the prospect of school, parents are usually aware of non-attendance so students stay at home, but they comply with school work, do not express antisocial behaviours, and do not show emotional distress outside of school times (Thambirajah, Grandison and De-Hayes, 2008). School refusal and self-exclusion may be for a temporary period, but for some can be permanent.

This form of non-attendance has been referred to as a psychosocial problem with adverse long- and short-term consequences for young people (Maynard et al., 2015). A systematic review of the literature by Finning et al. (2019) found an association between school refusal and separation, generalised and social anxiety disorders and phobias; though they emphasise a lack of high quality evidence into the issue. The implications of school refusal include poor academic attainment or performance resulting in limited future opportunities; the loss of peer relationships and age appropriate socialisation; and an increased risk of psychosocial difficulties in later life (Thambirajah, Grandison and De-Hayes, 2008). In addition to these impacts on the young person, consequences for parents are possible as they may be prosecuted for their child's non-attendance, as well as for the school who have a duty to provide education for students on their school roll (Red Balloon Learner Centres, 2015). Despite this, self-exclusion has remained a hidden phenomenon, with the UK Government placing far greater emphasis on truancy and exclusion by schools as disciplinary action.

Indeed, self-exclusion is not recognised in attendance statistics so even prevalence rates are difficult to estimate (Shilvock, 2010), let alone the experience and support needs of those who have self-excluded. Much of the research that does exist has focussed on clinical or family studies with samples

drawn from child mental health services, with little investigation into the role of school factors including bullying (Havik, Bru and Ertesvåg, 2015).

Bullying can be defined as aggressive, intentional acts carried out by a group or an individual repeatedly and over time against a victim who cannot easily defend him or herself (Vaillancourt et al., 2008). There are various other definitions across the literature and although there is some contention around the key features of bullying, most consider intentionality, repetition, and an imbalance of power. Research suggests discrepancies in how bullying is understood from the perspectives of young people and adults (O'Brien, 2009). Furthermore, disagreements are apparent in how 'serious' or 'severe' bullying is recognised, not only between teachers and students but also between students themselves. O'Brien, Munn-Giddings and Moules (2018) found that physical attacks were always regarded as 'serious' by participants but discrepancies were apparent around verbal bullying and social exclusion for example, and context played a large part in determining whether or not bullying was serious. Indeed debates continue as to how bullying is understood from a first order perspectives that see bullying as part of individual personality traits compared with second order perspectives that see bullying as a social construct (Schott and Sondergaard, 2014; Kousholt and Fisker, 2015). This study recognises the view of bullying from a second order perspective, but in supporting this position, acknowledges that moving the focus of bullying to further understanding group dynamics and processes does not diminish the bullying experience for individuals, rather the focus shifts to the process of being accepted, or not, by the group (Schott, 2014). Subsequently bullying might be more usefully understood as Horton (2011:269) puts it:

> "…a social phenomenon involving ordinary children in particular situations."

This stance focusses on the changing positions within a bullying encounter, and argues that individuals can sometimes be the bully, sometimes be the victim and sometimes the bystander/witness, so relations within groups and the dynamics of the group become the focus (Schott and Sondergaard, 2014).

These disagreements and debates have implications for how bullying is reported and addressed in schools. A recent survey from DitchTheLabel (2018) of 9,150 young people across the UK found that 22 per cent had experienced bullying within the preceding 12 months, but of those 35 per cent did not report it for fear of making it worse, being called a snitch, or that it would not be taken seriously. Indeed, O'Brien, Munn-Giddings and Moules (2018) found that when seeking support for bullying, young people engaged in a complex process of firstly deciding whether the behaviour constituted serious bullying, secondly whether reporting was the right thing to do, and thirdly who they can trust to report the bullying to.

Much research has shown the negative consequences of bullying for young people, including the impact on confidence, self-esteem and mental health (O'Brien and Moules, 2010) as well as their studies, social life, home life, and positivity (DitchTheLabel, 2018). Responses to the DitchTheLabel (2018) survey showed that for 47 per cent of young people there was a moderate to extreme impact on mental health: 50 per cent felt depressed, 45 per cent felt anxious, 34 per cent had suicidal thoughts, 28 per cent self-harmed. In addition, 45 per cent of young people reported a moderate to extreme impact on their studies and 59 per cent reported a moderate to extreme impact on their social life: 21 per cent had missed school or college because of bullying.

In severe cases, bullying can lead to a young person self-excluding from school (Kearney, 2008; Thamborajah, Grandison and De-Hayes, 2008; Havick, Bru and Ertesvåg, 2015; Maynard et al., 2015). Indeed, Thamborajah, Grandison and De-Hayes (2008) set out various factors within the domain of the child or young person, the family, and the school that may contribute to school refusal. Bullying is recognised as the most common school factor, and the authors draw attention to relational bullying in the form of damage and manipulation of peer relationships – including ignoring, isolating and shunning – leading to social exclusion. Thamborajah, Grandison and De-Hayes (2008:35) state that

> "…the most destructive aspect of bullying is that it damages the child's sense of developing self."

Despite this, bullying is not discussed at any great length in their book on understanding school refusal. Similarly, Maynard et al. (2015) conducted a systematic review and meta-analysis on the treatment for school refusal and identified bullying within a mix of school factors that can interact with individual, family and community factors resulting in school refusal. On the other hand, research from Norway by Havik, Bru and Ertesvåg (2015) suggests that being bullied, where other control variables are accounted for, has a strong link with school refusal for children at primary school but that this reduces at secondary school. In America, Cornell et al. (2013) found that peer victimisation in the form of prevalence of teasing and bullying perceived by ninth grade students and teachers predicted school dropout rates over the subsequent four years. Similarly, Vidourek, King and Merianos (2016) found that American bullied students were six times more likely to report fear at school and school avoidance compared to their peers. The latter three studies are all based on large scale survey data that demonstrate the connection between bullying and subsequent school avoidance, dropout, refusal or self-exclusion; however they give little insight into the experiences of bullying and self-exclusion from the perspectives of young people.

Academic understanding of a research topic is largely underpinned by theoretical knowledge of the issue (Bradbury-Jones, Isham and Taylor, 2018) as well as the general interest and possible life experiences of the researcher. However, young people have experiential knowledge of this issue as experienced in real time. Kellett (2010) argues that although adults are more knowledgeable than young people with regard to many life events and circumstances, young people are experts in their own unique childhood and what it is like to be a young person now. The lack of representation of young people in research about bullying and self-exclusion has been identified by scholars (Shilvock, 2010; Baker and Bishop, 2015, Billington, 2018), yet their first-hand experience and knowledge is crucial in enhancing our understanding of self-exclusion and how young people can be better supported when experiencing bullying. Furthermore, Billington (2018:349) states:

> "Empowering children and young people to build rapport with adults, communicate and jointly problem-solve is likely to

> promote inclusion in processes, rather than reinforcing a view that decisions regarding children missing education are made by others with preconceived ideas about how best to support."

Though a number of studies have begun to explore self-exclusion from the perspectives of young people (see Billington, 2018), none have looked specifically at the experience of bullying and self-exclusion.

Given this gap in the literature, the first author of this report conducted a small-scale study, which explored stories of young people who self-excluded from school due to severe bullying (O'Brien, 2017). In this research, young people did not feel listened to when reporting bullying in school and felt their outcome might have been different if somebody at school supported them. They reported feelings of loneliness and isolation as a result of bullying, which increased after their self-exclusion. Further effects were felt by the wider family who experienced helplessness and frustration at not being able to resolve the bullying. These findings were presented to the All Party Parliamentary Group on Bullying (APPG) in October 2016 and afterwards sent to all Parliamentarians who have raised questions about bullying in the two Houses of Parliament or are members of that APPG (O'Brien, 2017). While this research focused on the impacts of bullying and self-exclusion on the young person and their wider family, the current research builds on this to explore the process of how bullying led to self-exclusion and the support needs of young people based on their lived experience.

3. Design and methods

In order to understand more about bullying as a social construct, there is a need to listen to young people and consider the context in which the bullying has occurred. Consequently, this study focuses on the views and opinions of young people from the outset by actively involving them in the research process (Kellett, 2010). The study recognises that young people are experts in their own lives with valid views and opinions (James, 2007). Young people and adults were therefore able to work alongside each other and generate new knowledge together to enable adults to theorise and understand the social world of young people. In due course, it will enable adults to understand better the experiences of young people and make positive changes to their social and learning environments. This research uses a participatory research methodology focussing on the lived experiences of young people who have self-excluded from school as a result of severe bullying.

Two phases of research were conducted to give young people the opportunity to share their lived experience of bullying and self-exclusion. Participatory methodology involves young people in the research process and recognises that participation can be occurring even when young people are not the main decision makers (Moules and O'Brien, 2012). Such an approach adds to the rigour of the research process by identifying, from the outset, the requirement to understand the context of the area of enquiry because young people, as experts by experience, are central to that.

The research took place with young people from Red Balloon, the only charity in the UK that provides educational and therapeutic support for young people after self-exclusion from school because of bullying or other trauma. The staff at Red Balloon work with young people to build their self-confidence, get them back on an academic track and reconnect with society. All young people have access to a broad and balanced curriculum of academic subjects, creative arts, counselling or therapy, and personal and social education. Founded in 1996, Red Balloon has four centres in the South East of England and in London, as well as providing support online through Red Balloon of the Air. Despite the need for and value of their work, Red Balloon are currently supporting less than

1 per cent of those in need, around 80 young people in their Centres (Red Balloon, 2015), and about 100 online in 2018/2019 through Red Balloon of the Air.

In phase one, we worked with young people from Red Balloon of the Air to develop the research questions that would be used in focus groups across the four other Centres in phase two.

3.1 Phase one: Developing research focus and approach

Young people from Red Balloon of the Air, who meet once a week in Chelmsford (previously in Braintree), were invited to take part in phase one of the research over three sessions. Although a number of young people were interested, the nature of their experiences and competing priorities of preparing for exams made their involvement difficult. Two young people took part, joined by two of the Red Balloon teaching staff who encouraged and supported the young people throughout the sessions but also provided some input based on their extensive experience. Each session followed an indicative outline (appendix 1) starting with an icebreaker and then took the form of informal discussions where everyone was encouraged to contribute their perspective. Given the size and nature of the group, this discursive approach was deemed most appropriate over other creative methods that could have been used.

In session one, we explained the purpose and aims of the research and explored the difference between qualitative and quantitative research with the young people. We also discussed what bullying is from their perspective in order to create a shared understanding and definition. In session two, we used vignettes of young people who were being bullied as a starting point for young people to reflect on and share their own experiences of what was happening in the lead up to their self-exclusion. Based on this, we thought about the sorts of questions that would be useful to investigate and how best to do so. The young people and the Red Balloon teaching staff agreed that focus groups would be appropriate as most young people attending the Centres learn together and feel comfortable speaking in a group; they are able to relate to each other through their shared experiences of bullying and self-exclusion, which is likely to

encounter a rich discussion that is more useful than individual accounts from one-to-one interviews. They suggested that the focus group questions (appendix 2) should be sent ahead of time so that young people could decide with Red Balloon staff whether they wanted to be involved and then think about what they might want to share, as their experiences might still be quite raw and emotional. It was also important for the young people that those who feel less comfortable speaking in a group also had the opportunity to take part in the research so the focus group questions were adapted into an online questionnaire.

Unfortunately, due to illnesses and the Red Balloon of the Air Centre relocating, the third session where questions and data collection methods were to be further developed could not take place. However due to the smaller group size, we were able to cover most of this in session two. The focus group questions, questionnaire and research plan were sent to the young people via Red Balloon staff who agreed that it represented what we had discussed.

3.2 Phase two: Focus groups and data analysis

Contact was made by the researchers with the four remaining Red Balloon Centres inviting them to participate in the research. When favourable access was provided, participant information sheets developed specifically for young people were sent to the Centres, along with the focus group questions. Staff at the Centres were asked to explain the research to the young people and obtain their individual consent to participate. Parents were made aware of the project through information sheets containing the contact details of the researchers should they wish to make contact or clarify any issues prior to the focus groups commencing. Focus groups with those young people who wanted to be involved took place in the four other Red Balloon Centres: Norwich (4 participants), Cambridge (3 participants), Harrow (3 participants), and Reading (3 participants). In some Centres, a member of Red Balloon staff sat in on the focus group while in others they did not, depending on what the young people preferred.

Focus groups began with an icebreaker and agreeing ground rules for the discussion, such as listening to each other, not being judgmental, and

respecting different points of view. One of the researchers then facilitated the focus group while the other took notes. The sessions were audio recorded with the permission of the young people. After the focus group, the young people were thanked for their time and for sharing their experiences. They were reminded that they could talk to the Red Balloon staff or get in touch with the researchers if they had any questions or concerns after the research.

The timing of the research was beyond the control of the researchers and coincided with exams and the end of term. As such, it was decided that it would be inappropriate to send out the questionnaire and add to the workload of Red Balloon students. For the same reasons, it was not possible to return to the original group of young people from Red Balloon of the Air to analyse the data from the focus groups. The use of participatory methodology intended to give young people the opportunity to be involved in the research process and collaborate in data analysis, but in reality these approaches have to be flexible and take into account the needs and lives of those involved. Instead, analysis employed the themes initially identified by the young people in the phase one discussions and development of the focus group questions: decision to leave school, reaction from wider peer group, support structures, early interventions, policies, process and legislation. Sub-themes were then derived from the focus group data.

3.3 Ethical considerations

The research started from the premise that all participants were competent to consent. However, everybody was treated as individuals and the decision on their ability to consent was made on an individual basis. Coyne (2010) argues that parental/carer consent is not always necessary in social research. Coyne (2010:228) speaks about the difference in the terms 'consent' and 'assent' which are normally used to distinguish:

> "[the] legal competency of children over and under 16 years in relation to research."

She further draws our attention to the fact that children in England do not give assent as this does not apply, rather children have the legal right to consent once deemed Gillick competent. All participants in this research were aged 13

years and over and were given the opportunity to participate without the consent of their parents/carers unless deemed incompetent to consent. In this case the onus was on the adult (parent or carer for example) to prove incompetency (Alderson, 2007).

Information about the project was made available to young people through the relevant Participant Information Sheets (PIS): one PIS for phase one (appendix 3) and individual PISs for each Centre in phase two (appendix 4). Consent to participate was subsequently sought via the Participant Consent Forms (PCF) prior to data collection commencing. Parents/carers were made aware of the project through relevant PISs in both phases (appendices 5 and 6) and encouraged to contact the research team with any queries.

Given the sensitive nature of this enquiry and to ameliorate against any distress, professionals from Red Balloon were involved in deciding the criteria for who should be invited to participate in both phases of the study. The topic of bullying is very sensitive and as these young people had experienced trauma as a result of bullying, we were mindful of how we approached the questions we asked. Young people in phase two had the option to have a support worker present when discussing their story and in some cases a member of Red Balloon staff sat in on the focus group discussion.

4. Findings and discussion

This section reports on the findings of the study alongside the relevant research literature. Our thematic analysis focused on important issues identified with the young people during phase one of the project while this write up represents the prominent themes discussed by young people in the focus groups.

The findings showed that anxiety underpinned self-exclusion due to bullying but a number of factors led to this anxiety including:

- Young people's perceptions of their friends and the (lack of) provided support;
- Overall support structures including the young people not wanting support;
- Institutional and contextual factors including school atmosphere and anti-bullying policies.

For the young people in the focus groups, the above factors led to their gradual withdrawal from school life and consequently their self-exclusion from school.

4.1 Anxiety

Underpinning self-exclusion was the anxiety that young people felt about going to school. In our discussions, they spoke about 'not wanting to be there', a theme reiterated in the literature on the relationship between being bullied and experiencing high levels of anxiety (Swearer et al., 2001; Thambirajah, Grandison and De-Hayes, 2008). In the current study, young people spoke about their anxiety in a number of ways. Some described physical outbursts due to the discomfort and unease at school:

> *"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)

while others spoke about physical illness and in some cases self-harm:

"I started getting pseudo seizures. So, I started having epileptic type symptoms and I was getting really nervous and I just couldn't- I started not being able to go out anymore, and stuff. So, I'd black out at least three to twice a week, and that would be at school. So, I would have to go to the hospital a lot and I just had no one to talk to, really." (Female, FG2)

"Yes, I would bite my hands to the point I bled. It was really unusual for me to come home from school not bleeding. It wasn't just the teachers but students were as bad, if not worse." (Female, FG4)

As the focus group discussions developed, the young people spoke to us about the reasons they felt this anxiety. They gave a number of reasons, which we discuss below, starting with the reactions from their wider friendship groups.

4.2 Friendships

The value of friendship groups as a source of support for bullied young people and as a preventer of bullying is highlighted in the research literature (Oliver and Candappa, 2007; Moore and Maclean, 2012; Allen, 2014). Indeed friendships have been identified as a form of resiliency following experiences of repeated bullying (Rothon et al., 2011). Within our data however, young people reported feelings of being unsupported by their friends, particularly at times when they needed them. Indeed the term 'fake friends' was used within the focus group discussions.

4.2.1 'Fake friends'

The term 'fake friends' was used by a number of young people when referring to those who they perceived as their friends but who were in fact playing an active role in the bullying:

"…it went on for a few years, like, on and off. So, there was, like, a year where there was nothing, and then it full-blown started again and it was, like, I don't know, because 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)

Salmivalli (2014) suggests that in a bullying episode, bystanders are usually present who support the bully through laughing and cheering. When the wider peer group, including the class and friendship groups, support this behaviour

the bullying thrives. This was further evidenced in the current study when young people spoke about being known around the school as the student who is bullied:

> *"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)

> *"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)

Positioning within the friendship group was further reiterated by young people who felt they did not have any support from their peers. This concept has been discussed by O'Brien, Munn-Giddings and Moules (2018), who suggest that a young person's ability or desire to support a bullied student is influenced by the loyalty they feel towards the bully or the bullied student, as well as their need to protect themselves from bullies:

> *"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)

> *"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)

Although the literature shows that young people are more likely to turn to their friends for support with bullying concerns than to adults (Oliver and Candappa, 2007; Moore and Maclean, 2012; Allen, 2014), our findings show that some

young people who confided in their friends found little support and protection and the behaviour of their 'friends' subsequently broke their trust:

> *"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)

> *"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)

Besides perceptions of support from friends, the young people spoke to us about the overall support provided at school.

4.3 Support structures

During this discussion, we asked the focus group participants about the support structures in place to help them while they were at school. For the most part, they regarded these structures as unhelpful and unsupportive. However, they also acknowledged that they themselves did not always want to seek support. Many divulged that they did not seek support until crisis point, referring to this as a 'meltdown'.

4.3.1 Not wanting support

Young people felt a reluctance to seek support for bullying in school because they did not want to be a burden on others, nor did they trust others to help them:

> *"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)

Due to feeling isolated, young people in the focus groups told us that for the most part they wanted to be left alone and did not want any attention drawn to them by means of support or otherwise:

> *"They just want to be left alone and, well, they just feel like they want to be by themselves and just constantly be negative towards themselves."* (Male, FG1)

> *"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)

These findings are supported by Moore and Maclean (2012) who show that several young people in their study reported their preference to deal with bullying incidents themselves with some revealing that they would 'do nothing' about the situation.

Young people also relayed that in some cases they did confide in a friend and asked them not to disclose their bullying. However, they also told us that in some cases the intention of the discloser was the hope that their friend would seek support on their behalf:

> *"I think sometimes you tell someone with the mindset 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)

This is an important finding for intervention work and promoting the value of friendships and a caring ethos in schools. O'Brien, Munn-Giddings and Moules (2018) found that it can be difficult for young people to seek support for a friend or classmate who is being bullied, as they risk undermining their own position within the friendship group. Promoting a culture that encourages seeking help when a student witnesses or is made aware of bullying or unfair behaviour, underpinned by a robust support structure could encourage students to disclose the bullying and ask for support (O'Brien, 2016).

4.3.2 Perception that nothing will change

Underpinning the views about not seeking support was the notion that nothing would change even if they did report bullying:

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

> "*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)

Indeed the research literature suggests that young people often feel reluctant to seek support from adults in school because they fear the bullying will be made worse as a result or that teachers will not do enough to protect them (Oliver and Candappa, 2007; deLara, 2012). The literature further suggests that students are often expected to resolve bullying issues themselves (deLara, 2012; Moore and Maclean, 2012). Consequently, the point at which young people in our study sought support was usually reactionary and provided at crisis point; some referred to this as a 'meltdown'.

4.3.3 Reactionary support: 'Meltdown'

The young people themselves used this term when they talked about the crisis point they reached, which for many, was the point at which they sought support:

> *"That was, like, the first time I'd ever really said anything to anyone about it. And then I don't- I'm not sure if my parents knew at this point, but my parents didn't know for, like, months. And then I think I was getting told off for something, and it was because I'd been feeling so bad, why I'd done it, and then I had, like, I think the biggest meltdown ever, I think, I've ever had in my life, and, yes, that's when everything came out"* (Female, FG1)

> *"……you end up falling out with everyone over the tiniest little thing. Like, me and this one teacher, we were fine. I really liked her. And then….we started arguing over the littlest things… They would cause such a big argument and end up either one of us storming out or shouting and stuff or me getting sent home."* (Female, FG4)

Some young people reported that it was not until crisis point that their problems were recognised and they were offered or sought support:

> *"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)

> *"…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)

4.4 Institutional and contextual factors

The institutional and contextual factors within schools were considered as part of the overall school atmosphere and bureaucracy that young people felt they had to navigate on a daily basis. Certainly, Pellegrini (2007) debates the 'within-child' explanations surrounding school refusal and suggests other factors need to be considered in explaining the phenomenon. Participants in the current study spoke about the institutional and contextual factors contributing to their self-exclusion. Some reflected on the physical size of their schools, including the building being 'too big' as well as large numbers of students which caused feelings of intimidation and a feeling of dread about going to school:

> *"…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)

> *"Then it was the dread of thinking about having to go to school or Sunday night, the dread of going to bed from the fear of waking up, having to go…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)

The wider school atmosphere was explored in relation to how it supports or hinders bullying at school.

4.4.1 School atmosphere

Young people spoke about the physical buildings and the impact this had on their sense of security at school. In two of the focus groups, the young people viewed their previous schools as 'prison like':

"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, you know. It really does, because so many kids go through so much at school and they just do nothing. It's just really, like- we had girls self-harming in the bathrooms that they would know about but not do anything about it." (Female, FG2)

"…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)

The perception of teachers not being supportive during anxious periods or experiences of bullying added to their feeling of insecurity at school:

"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." The girls I was friends with, they were known as the popular ones and they were mean to everyone." (Female, FG2)

Against this backdrop of large school buildings and student numbers, since November 1999 all schools in England and Wales are required by law to have an anti-bullying strategy in place (Smith and Samara, 2003), implemented through the School Standards and Framework Act (1998). We asked young people about their experiences of their schools' anti-bullying strategies and whether or not they used them.

4.4.2 Anti-bullying policies

Overall, the young people were aware that their schools had anti-bullying policies but reported that in their experiences they were not implemented:

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

For the most part the anti-bullying policy was regarded as bureaucratic, more concerned with paperwork than reducing or responding to bullying in the school.

> *"…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 spoke about the anti-bullying policies in their respective schools and all had a similar experience:

> 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."*

A comparable experience was reiterated with regard to anti-bullying posters and helplines advertised throughout the school:

> *"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).

However, research shows that implementation of an effective anti-bullying policy can be successful in reducing bullying at school (Olweus, 2003). Glover et al. (2000) propose that the implementation of a school anti-bullying policy is important for three reasons: firstly, it is clear amongst the school community what the school is doing about bullying and why; secondly, it shows that bullying will not be tolerated; and thirdly an effective policy can be used to monitor progress. However, Sullivan, Cleary and Mark (2004) suggest that it is easy to write a whole-school philosophy about bullying into vision statements, school policies and charters, but it also requires action.

4.4.3 Inadequate institutional support

Young people spoke about the institutional and contextual factors related to them feeling unsupported at school. Some felt that this support was ambiguous 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 are not."* (Female, FG3)

These wider contextual issues, including the support structures in schools, have been identified by O'Brien (2019) as factors that enable or disable a bullying climate. This includes a school's ability to respond appropriately to bullying concerns. This finding was further supported in the current study when the participants spoke about the reality of zero tolerance to bullying versus the rhetoric:

> *"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)

> *"I don't feel that teachers push enough to get down to the bottom of things. I think, if they just take it as, if you tell them you're okay, then you're okay. They don't investigate or anything. They just don't really care to be honest."* (Female, FG2)

The final section of the findings explores how the themes explored so far led to the gradual journey towards self-exclusion as a result of bullying.

4.5 Withdrawing

Throughout the focus group discussions, the young people shared with us their individual experiences of self-exclusion as a result of bullying. They identified that the anxiety they felt was underpinned by wider relational issues, including their friendships groups and institutional and contextual issues around support structures and policies. They also told us that their self-exclusion followed a gradual process. Some spoke about other forms of exclusion they experienced up until the point of self-exclusion including truanting and faking illness.

4.5.1 Gradual process

Young people spoke to us about their gradual withdrawal from mainstream school. They stressed that their self-exclusion was not reactive to a particular event or set of events, rather it happened over time:

> *"...one day you're at school, fine and then the next you're at home, too scared to move or go in. It's such a gradual slow thing that you don't see it coming."* (Female FG4)

In interrogating the data further the experiences described by the focus group participants in many ways resonates with the research literature in relation to 'school refusal' and the various terms used to describe this including 'school phobia', 'school absenteeism' and 'extended school non-attendance' (Pellegrini, 2007; Thambirajah, Grandison and De-Hayes, 2008). However, young people also described examples of faking illness or hiding absences from their parents in order to avoid school:

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

> *"I started not going to classes, and then I just stopped going to school altogether. Like, I'd leave in the morning to go to school, but then I wouldn't go into school, I'd just spend the day in the town."* (Female FG1)

These findings may appear to represent the concept of 'truanting', and indeed some research has suggested that the concepts of 'truancy' and 'self-exclusion' are not mutually exclusive (Egger, Costello and Angold, 2003). However, a

more critical understanding of the reason behind this avoidance of school highlights a distinct difference: the young people in this research talked about this behaviour in the context of avoiding school due to the anxiety they felt as a result of bullying. This supports the literature that emphasises the need to distinguish between self-exclusion and other types of unauthorised school non-attendance such as truancy (Thambirajah, Grandison and De-Hayes, 2008; Havick, Bru and Ertesvåg, 2015; Maynard et al., 2015). For the current study participants, withdrawal from education took many guises before they self-excluded and did not return to mainstream school. For example, the gradual decline in attending education was also seen in relation to their participation in lessons and in general school life:

> *"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)

It is important to acknowledge that some participants experienced many school moves before they started at Red Balloon. Their stories show that the issues they experienced in one school transferred to others, highlighting discrepancies in planning for newer students who had already experienced disruption in their education as a result of bullying. The findings also suggest that the 'damage' done to a young person is not healed by just moving schools, as Red Balloon (2019) advocate, they require a safe environment, time to recover, therapy, wellbeing and a place to belong.

> *"I moved, so I was bullied a lot. So, I've been to two schools before this school, and I was bullied in my first school, and then I moved house so I had to move school, but then I didn't get to move school straightaway, so I was there for a bit longer than I was supposed to. Then I moved and, like, the bullying got worse. I was threatened with death threats, like, pushed in front of buses, stuff thrown at me."* (Female FG1)

The young people's gradual withdrawal from school was also evidenced in their friendships. Not only were there times when they felt unsupported by their friends, but there were also times when they felt they needed to withdraw

themselves from their friendship groups because they did not want their friends experiencing what they had experienced.

4.5.2 Distancing oneself from friends

Although young people regarded some friends as 'fake' due to their lack of support, they also considered the bullying situation from the perspective of their friends or bystanders. There was a sense of understanding why their friends did not side with them, as they did not want them to go through what they had to experience:

> *"You have friends, and then if you get picked on and they are starting to get picked on as well, they are not going to want to be friends with you, because they don't want to be the ones to get picked on because they haven't done anything. They are more likely to just leave you."* (Female, FG3)

There was also the recognition that respect was lost within and between friendship groups once the bullying continued:

> *"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)

4.6 Recommendations

We asked the young people about anything that would have made their life easier while they were at mainstream school and three themes emerged:

- Awareness of changes in behaviour;
- Promoting a feeling of security for students;
- Promotion of empathy among and between students.

4.6.1 Changes in behaviour

The young people were aware of the demanding job that teachers have and that recognising changes in behaviour of all struggling students may not be possible, particularly given school size. However, they suggested that where possible school staff should try to pay attention and notice changes in behaviour or mood that might indicate bullying is taking place.

> *"Losing concentration in lessons… just forgetting or constantly making mistakes…"* (Female, FG4)

The young people described how struggling students can adapt a 'persona' to pretend that they are coping when in reality this is not the case. They suggested that if young people are engaging in behaviours that are not usual for them, then school staff need to be aware that it could be a cry for help:

> *"Especially in lessons, because if you are stressed and you have a moment with a teacher, you are acting out. They will just think it is acting out, and you are being silly. But really, you're not. You are actually saying, "Can I have some help?" But you actually can't say, "Can I have some help?" You are showing you need help."* (Female, FG3)

Indeed, some young people suggested that students themselves could be forthcoming about anxious traits they have that school staff could look out for:

> *"Maybe when you first join write down what things you do when you're anxious. For me, I can write down my leg jiggles. So they can see, so it's not always them having to notice themselves. You give them something to go on so they know when you're starting to get like that and then they can come up to you. If you join a school, you've got to do some paperwork anyway, so that could be a question on the paperwork. What kind of things do you do when you're anxious if you're feeling down, do you just go and isolate, do you go hide."* (Female, FG4).

As the focus group discussions continued the young people considered the possible reasons why young people bully and suggested that school staff also need to be aware of the changes in their behaviour:

"…we don't know what is going on for them outside school or whatever, you know, somebody who is bullying in school could be bullied at home or at a youth club." (Female, FG3)

4.6.2 Feeling safe

In recognising that bullying students also need support, the young people stressed that it does not give them the right to treat people negatively which makes them feel unsafe at school:

> *"I just think there should be more things in place to let the bullies take their anger out on, like a boxing bag or whatever. Why should they take their anger out on us?"* (Female, FG3)

The young people reflected that the use of 'timeout' rooms or 'isolation' was not effective in promoting a feeling of safety for bullied students. They also stated that for the most part, when bullying students were sent to isolation they regard this as free time rather than a punishment or reprimand. Instead, they suggested *"a supervised quiet space"* (Female, FG4) that anxious and bullied students could go to and feel safe away from the noise and other forms of anxiety in the wider school. Consequently, this shows a proposed shift in a punitive to a caring approach.

4.6.3 Promotion of empathy

Young people suggested raising feelings of safety through practical approaches including assemblies and marketing to raise bullying awareness and promote empathy and compassion.

> *"….they could find a scenario, like find a YouTube clip or something, put it on the screen. Then people will think even more, "That could happen to my friend." Then speak up."* (Female, FG3)

This echoes a recent recommendation by the Centre for Social Justice (2016) which suggests that schools forge themselves as communities rather than organisations in order to build common values of active citizenship, responsibility, transparency and open dialogue to tackle problems together. Involving students in deciding safe initiatives was also raised in the focus

groups. Through these initiatives the students can take ownership of the provision and feel secure in school. In a participatory research project involving young people in exploring cyber-bullying and its effects on mental health, O'Brien and Moules (2010) recommended the development of school policies which stress the importance of emphasising values of care and kindness amongst young people.

5. Conclusions and next steps

The young people participating in this study shared their personal lived experience of self-exclusion as a result of bullying and what support is needed to tackle bullying in schools. The findings show that self-exclusion is underpinned by anxiety that accompanies bullying, and this is influenced by a variety of factors. Firstly, friendships are particularly important and though the literature suggests they can be protective in instances of bullying, the young people here reported 'fake friends' who were unsupportive. They also expressed their fear that if they stuck with their friends there was the chance that their friends could become targets for bullying too - a situation they wanted to avoid. Secondly, support structures were seen as ineffective: though some young people did not want support, there was also a perception that nothing would change as a result, and support was reactionary - sometimes only offered at the point of a 'meltdown'. Thirdly, institutional and contextual factors such as the school atmosphere and piecemeal anti-bullying policies and institutional support perpetuated issues of bullying. These factors led to the gradual disenchantment of adults being able to do anything constructive, withdrawal from school and distancing oneself from friends until the young people reached a point where they could not return. Various recommendations were made to improve the situation and support bullied young people in schools, including teachers noticing changes in behaviour, establishing a safe environment in schools, and promoting empathy and compassion.

There is growing interest in understanding bullying and self-exclusion and how to tackle it. The Centre for Social Justice recently published a report on the matter generated from a roundtable discussion held on 19th July 2016. The roundtable comprised expert practitioners in the area and provides an important exploration into how the education sector can best support young people who self-exclude due to bullying. Though this report made various recommendations, it overlooks the perspectives of young people with direct experience of the issue. Indeed, the findings from the current research demonstrate the wealth of knowledge that young people 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 involving young people in further research into the matter in order to develop support that better fits the needs of bullied young people and reduce the incidence of self-exclusion.

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7. Appendices

Appendix 1: Indicative outline of session phase one

Approximately three one hour consecutive sessions (weekly) will take place focusing on exploring the individual stories of bullying and self-exclusion of the young people. The below gives an indicative outline of these sessions:

Session one	
Activity	**Time**
Getting to know each other through short games (young people and researchers): • Two truths, one lie.	5 minutes
Explaining the project and expectations (ethics and the right to privacy including not answering uncomfortable questions): • Synopsis of O'Brien (2017) project and what happened with the findings. • Plan for this project – working with this group who will form the research team as well as being part of the participant group. • Nobody needs to discuss anything that they are uncomfortable with.	10 minutes
Ground rules (determined by adults and young people together).	5 minutes
Explaining qualitative and quantitative data to determine what type of data we want to collect in phase two. • Ask group if they know these terms. • Have they been involved in research before – at school or in any other place? • Agree/disagree/don't know game.	10 minutes
What is bullying from your perspective: creating a definition and shared understanding. • Looking at other definitions of bullying (government/Essex/ABA). • Creating our own bullying definition for the project.	25 minutes
Plan for next session.	5 minutes

Session two	
Activity	**Time**
Refresh on session one. • Who can remember the lies from last week? • Present working bullying definition.	5 minutes
Looking through the highlights of the report from the initial O'Brien (2017) study: • What are the common themes? Present briefly what the young people said about their own experiences of self-exclusion. Does this resonate with you? • Can you liken your situation to those of the young people in this study?	15 minutes
Naturally following on from this sharing we will discuss timelines of events leading to their self-exclusion: • Vignettes will be used to encourage the young people to reflect upon their own experiences. Focus here on how they can relate/not relate. Do you think young people are likely to stop going to school due to these incidents? What other reasons related to bullying, might impact upon students not wanting to return to school? • Data will be recorded on white boards, flip chart, and if necessary tape recorded with permission from the young people. Creative methods will be used such as timelines and graffiti walls which young people can add to throughout the session. • Based on these vignettes and your stories what sorts of questions should we be asking other young people at Red Balloon Centres? • What methods do you think we could use to capture this?	35 minutes
Plan for next session.	5 minutes

Session three	
Activity	**Time**
Refresh on session two and allow time for further exploration of individual stories: • Recap on bullying definition – has anything changed? Brief discussion.	10 minutes
Having explored the young people's stories, what questions do we want to ask young people in the other Red Balloon Centres? (This will be in development over the three sessions): • Present questions developed from discussion in session two. • What is the main 'topic/point' that we want to address in this research?	20 minutes
Building on session one, we will determine the methods for data collection possibly to include interviews, focus groups and/or questionnaires. • How can we hear individual and collective stories? • What about those students receiving support online? • In session 2, it was suggested, that we send the questions ahead of time – is this still agreed?	20 minutes
Plan for session after data collection. • Inform group of where we will be collecting data: • Agree data to return for first data analysis session taking into account exam times.	10 minutes

Appendix 2: Focus group questions phase two

Topic one: Decision to leave school

- What are the signs that a young person might be thinking about self-excluding from school?
- Thinking about your decision to self-exclude, what was happening in the lead up to this decision?

Topic two: Reactions from wider peer group

- How did your class/friendship/year group respond to the fact that you were being bullied?
- Did you feel supported by them?
- How can/should other students support a student who is being bullied?

Prompt: Element of the behaviour being 'normal'- either as acceptable behaviour in the school such as 'play fighting' or maybe 'normal reaction' to a particular student.

Topic three: Support structures

- Was there anyone inside/outside school who you could talk to about your experiences of bullying?
- What is it/was it about this person that made them approachable?
- If you did not speak to anyone inside/outside school, why was this?

Prompt: Teacher, other school staff, counsellor, online support, parents, siblings, friends?

Topic four: Early interventions

- How can school staff identify those students who might be struggling?

Prompt: Adopting a 'persona'.

- How can awareness of support systems be raised?

Prompt: Should awareness be refreshed?

Topic five: Policy, Process and Legislation

- Were you aware of your school's anti-bullying policy? If so, did you use it?

- Did you receive any support from your school either before or after you self-excluded?
- Did you receive any support from your wider local authority either before or after you self-excluded?
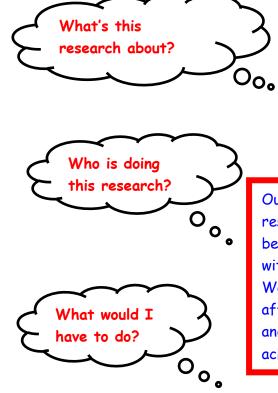
Prompt: Exploration of what happened between the decision to leave school and attendance at Red Balloon?

Anglia Ruskin University

Cambridge Chelmsford Peterborough

Working with young people to research bullying and self-exclusion from school

Information for young people about participating in a research project and sharing their experiences of bullying leading to self-exclusion.
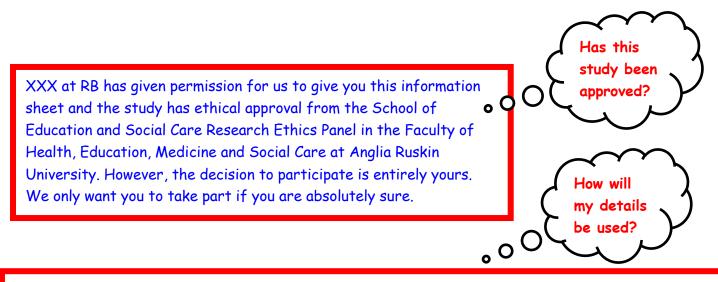
What's this research about?

This research project is about understanding from young people, like you, how bullying affected their life leading to a decision not to attend school (self-exclusion). Self-exclusion, for the purposes of this study, means that a young person has made a decision not to go to school. Bullying is defined as unwanted, unpleasant behaviour that has a negative impact and is not deserved.

Who is doing this research?

What would I have to do?

Our names are Niamh O'Brien and Anna Dadswell. We are researchers from Anglia Ruskin University in Chelmsford and we will be doing this research. We have worked on many projects like this with young people and we are particularly concerned about bullying. We think it's really important to find out from you how bullying affected you. It's important, therefore that your story is heard and understood and that your views are taken seriously and acknowledged. We may then be able to find a solution!

Your participation in this research will involve sharing your experience of bullying and self-exclusion from school with us and up to five other young people attending Red Balloon in Braintree. Based on these combined experiences we would like the group to come up with some questions that we can ask other young people, who have had a similar experience to you, and attend another Red Balloon Centre. We will then work together to make sense of this information and report our findings to those who make decisions about schooling in England.

We will have a total of five sessions together and you only need to share what you are comfortable sharing. At our final session, when we look at all of the information we have collected we will bring along some treats as a thank you for your time.

Has this study been approved?

XXX at RB has given permission for us to give you this information sheet and the study has ethical approval from the School of Education and Social Care Research Ethics Panel in the Faculty of Health, Education, Medicine and Social Care at Anglia Ruskin University. However, the decision to participate is entirely yours. We only want you to take part if you are absolutely sure.

How will my details be used?

Your name will not be passed on to anyone or used in anything written about the research such as the research report or journal articles (unless you want us to use your name). No one will know what you've said, unless you say something that makes us believe you or another young person might be in danger. If this happens, we may need to discuss what you have told us with someone else, and we would, wherever possible, talk to you about this first.

At the end of the study we will write a report based on all the findings but you will not be identified in the report (unless you want to be). We will also be presenting the findings at conferences about bullying and writing about the project in academic journals. This is because we want others to hear about the lived experiences of young people like you. We will use (possibly anonymous) quotes from the data in the presentations and journal articles. We will also be using the findings to support writing a bid for additional research money so we can explore bullying and self-exclusion on a wider scale and if you are interested in helping with this that would be great!

I'm interested in getting involved so what do I do?

If you are interested in taking part please let XXXX know by [date]. You will be given a consent form to sign. This means that you understand what the research is about and that you are happy to take part. If you have any questions at all about the research please feel free to contact Niamh using the details below.

Contact details:
Email: niamh.obrien@anglia.ac.uk
Phone: 01245 684197
Address: Anglia Ruskin University, Faculty of Health, Education, Medicine and Social Care, 210 Salmon Building, Bishop Hall Lane, Chelmsford, CM1 1SQ

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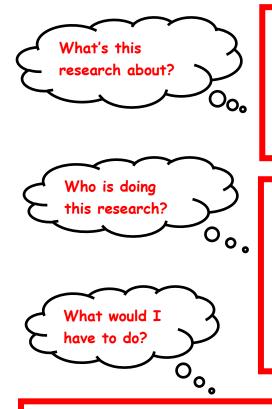
Appendix 4: Young people's participant information sheet phase two

Anglia Ruskin University

Cambridge Chelmsford Peterborough

Working with young people to research bullying and self-exclusion from school

Information for young people about sharing their experiences of bullying leading to self-exclusion.

What's this research about?

This research project is about understanding from young people, like you, how bullying affected their life leading to a decision not to attend school (self-exclusion). Self-exclusion, for the purposes of this study, means that a young person has made a decision not to go to school. Bullying is defined as unwanted, unpleasant behaviour that has a negative impact and is not deserved.

Who is doing this research?

Our names are Niamh O'Brien and Anna Dadswell. We are researchers from Anglia Ruskin University in Chelmsford and we will be doing this research. We have worked on many projects like this with young people and we are particularly concerned about bullying. We think it's really important to find out from you how bullying affected you. It's important, therefore that your story is heard and understood and that your views are taken seriously and acknowledged. We may then be able to find a solution!

What would I have to do?

Your participation in this research will involve sharing your experience of bullying and self-exclusion from school with us through a focus group. This will take place at RB (XXX) and will last between 40 minutes and 1 hour. If you wish, you will be able to have a support person from RB with you while we talk. You will not need to tell us anything that you do not wish to share and you can end the discussion if you want to. We will tape record the session so we can remember everything you have told us but we will delete it as soon as it is typed up. The only people hearing the recording will be us and the person who transcribes it.

If you decide after speaking to us that you no longer want us to use what you have said for the research then you can withdraw what you have said. If you decide to withdraw please either tell XXX who will let us know, or email/phone Niamh. However you will not be able to withdraw your interview after [date] because the information will all be made anonymous at this point ready for data analysis.

XXX at RB has given permission for us to give you this information sheet and the study has ethical approval from the School of Education and Social Care Research Ethics Panel in the Faculty of Health, Education, Medicine and Social Care at Anglia Ruskin University. However, the decision to participate is entirely yours. We only want you to take part if you are absolutely sure.

Your name will not be passed on to anyone or used in anything written about the research such as the research report or journal. No one will know what you've said, unless you say something that makes us believe you or another young person might be in danger. If this happens, we may need to discuss what you have told us with someone else, and we would, wherever possible, talk to you about this first.

Once we have collected all of the information we need from young people, we will return to the young people at RB Braintree who helped us develop the questions we ask you. They will be involved in helping us analyse the information but they will not have access to any of your information such as your name. At the end of the study we will write a report based on all the findings and you will not be identified in the report. We will also be presenting the findings at conferences about bullying and writing about the project in academic journals. This is because we want others to hear about the lived experiences of young people like you. We will use anonymous quotes from the data in the presentations and journal articles. We will also be using the findings to support writing a bid for additional research money so we can explore bullying and self-exclusion on a wider scale and if you are interested in helping with this that would be great!

I'm interested in getting involved so what do I do?

If you are interested in taking part please let XXXX know by [date]. You will be given a consent form to sign. This means that you understand what the research is about and that you are happy to take part. If you have any questions at all about the research please feel free to contact Niamh using the details below.

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Postal address: Office of the Secretary and Clerk, Anglia Ruskin University, Bishop Hall Lane, Chelmsford, Essex, CM1 1SQ

Appendix 5: Parent's information sheet phase one

Anglia Ruskin University

Cambridge Chelmsford Peterborough

Working with young people to research bullying and self-exclusion from school

Dear Parents/Carers,

Our names are Niamh O'Brien and Anna Dadswell and we are researchers from Anglia Ruskin University based in Chelmsford. We are conducting the above study at Red Balloon Braintree (RB) and your child has been invited to take part. This information sheet provides details about the study: why the study is being done, how your child will be involved, ethical considerations, and who to contact with any questions.

We want to hear about your child's experience of the bullying he/she experienced at school which led to his/her self-exclusion. Niamh has already conducted some work at RB in 2016 where she spoke to young people and their parents about their experiences and this was presented to the All Party Parliamentary Group on Bullying (APPG) at Westminster. We now want to extend this study so we can include more views from young people.

Niamh & Anna

Who is organising the research?

The research is being carried out by Dr Niamh O'Brien (Senior Research Fellow) and Anna Dadswell (Research Assistant) at Anglia Ruskin University.

What is the purpose of the research?

The purpose of this research is to hear directly from young people about their experiences of self-exclusion from school as a result of bullying. Self-exclusion, for the purposes of this study, means that a young person has made a decision not to go to school. Bullying for the purposes of this research means behaviour which is unwanted and unpleasant, has a negative impact on the recipient, and is unwarranted.

Why has my child been asked to participate?

Your child has been asked to participate in the study because he/she has been identified, by the staff at Red Balloon, as somebody who might be willing to share their story about their individual experience of bullying and self-exclusion. He/she can provide us with an insight into what self-exclusion meant for him/her. He/she will have the opportunity to offer his/her views and opinions about what can be done to support young people who are experiencing bullying and self-exclusion and what could have been done to support him/her in their own experiences.

What will he/she have to do?

Your child's participation in this research will involve sharing his/her experience of bullying and self-exclusion from school with us and up to five other young people attending Red Balloon in Braintree. Based on these combined experiences we would like the group to come up with some questions that we can ask other young people, who have had a similar experience to them, and attend other Red Balloon Centres. We will then work together to make sense of this information and generate a report of our findings.

We will have a total of five sessions (lasting one hour) and your child only needs to share what he/she is comfortable sharing. At our final session, when we look at all of the information we have collected we will bring along some treats as a thank you to the group for their time.

Does he/she have to take part?

It is completely up to your child to decide whether or not he/she would like to take part. If he/she does agree to take part he/she will be asked to sign a consent form indicating that he/she understands what the research is about and that he/she would like to participate. If he/she agrees to take part but then changes his/her mind, he/she will still be free to withdraw from the research at any time and without giving a reason. However once the data is anonymised we will not be able to remove it. Therefore the cut-off date for removing data is [date].

Will my child's participation be confidential?

Your child's name will not be passed on to anyone or used in anything written about the research such as the research report or journal articles (unless he/she want us to use his/her name). As he/she will be helping us to steer the study he/she might want to be acknowledged in the report but if he/she does not want his/her name to appear then that will be respected and a pseudonym assigned. No one will know what he/she has said, unless he/she says something that makes us believe he/she, or another young person, might be in danger. If this happens, we may need to discuss what he/she has told us with someone else, and we would, wherever possible, talk to him/her about this first.

At the end of the study we will write a report based on all the findings but your child will not be identified in the report (unless he/she wants to be). We will also be presenting the findings at conferences about bullying and writing about the project in academic journals. We will use (possibly anonymous) quotes from the data in the presentations and journal articles. We will also be using the findings to support writing a bid for additional research money so we can explore bullying and self-exclusion on a wider scale and if your child is interested in helping with this he/she is very welcome to join us.

How will my child's details be stored?

Any identifiable details about your child such as his/her name will be kept confidential and not passed onto anybody else. Only those participating in the group will know who your child is. All data will be stored on Anglia Ruskin laptops which are password protected and only accessible by Niamh and Anna.

Has the study got ethical approval?

XXX at RB has given permission for the study to take place and the study has ethical approval from the School of Education and Social Care Research Ethics Panel in the Faculty of Health, Education, Medicine and Social Care at Anglia Ruskin University. However the decision to

participate is entirely up to your child. We only want him/her to take part if he/she is absolutely sure.

What are the possible disadvantages of taking part?

We do not envisage any disadvantages to your child taking part. However, if he/she finds any topic upsetting and he/she wishes to end his/her participation at any point he/she is of course free to do so.

Are there any benefits from taking part?

The benefits are seen as an opportunity for young people who have experienced first-hand self-exclusion due to bullying to have their voice heard. This evidence is vital in helping to generate understanding around this subject and to help deal with this problem effectively.

Who can I contact for more information?

If you have any questions please contact the Principal Investigator Dr Niamh O'Brien using the contact details below:

Dr Niamh O'Brien

Email: niamh.obrien@anglia.ac.uk

Postal address: Anglia Ruskin University, Bishop Hall Lane, Chelmsford, Essex CM1 1SQ

Tel: 01245 684197

Complaints

If you have any complaints or queries about the study you can contact Anglia Ruskin University's complaints procedure:

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Appendix 6: Parent's information sheet phase two

Anglia Ruskin University

Cambridge Chelmsford Peterborough

Working with young people to research bullying and self-exclusion from school

Dear Parents/Carers,

Our names are Niamh O'Brien and Anna Dadswell and we are researchers from Anglia Ruskin University based in Chelmsford. We are conducting the above study at Red Balloon Centre's (RB) and your child has been invited to take part. This information sheet provides details about the study: why the study is being done, how your child will be involved, ethical considerations, and who to contact with any questions. Feel free to discuss the information with others or ask for further clarification if required.

We want to hear about your child's experience of the bullying he/she experienced at school which led to his/her self-exclusion. Niamh has already conducted some work at RB in 2016 where she spoke to young people and their parents about their experiences and this was presented to the All Party Parliamentary Group on Bullying (APPG) at Westminster. We now want to extend this study so we can include more views from young people.

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The research is being carried out by Dr Niamh O'Brien (Senior Research Fellow) and Anna Dadswell (Research Assistant) at Anglia Ruskin University.

What is the purpose of the research?

The purpose of this research is to hear directly from young people about their experiences of self-exclusion from school as a result of bullying. Self-exclusion, for the purposes of this study, means that a young person has made a decision not to go to school. Bullying for the purposes of this research means behaviour which is unwanted and unpleasant, has a negative impact on the recipient, and is unwarranted.

Why has my child been asked to participate?

Your child has been asked to participate in the study because he/she has been identified, by the staff at Red Balloon, as somebody who might be willing to share his/her story about his/her individual experience of bullying and self-exclusion. He/she can provide us with an insight into what self-exclusion meant for him/her. He/she will have the opportunity to offer his/her views and opinions about what can be done to support young people who are experiencing bullying and self-exclusion and what could have been done to support him/her in his/her own experiences.

What will he/she have to do?

Participation in this research will involve your child sharing his/her experience of bullying and self-exclusion from school with us through a focus group. This will take place at RB (location) and will last between 40 minutes and 1 hour. The questions we will be asking have been determined by us and another group of young people at RB of the Air (Braintree) who helped us decide the important questions to ask. If your child wishes, he/she will be able to have a support person from RB with him/her while we talk. Your child will not need to tell us anything that he/she does not wish to share and he/she can end the discussion if he/she wants to.

We will tape record the session so we can remember everything he/she has told us but we will delete it as soon as it is typed up. The only people hearing the recording will be Niamh, Anna and the person who transcribes it.

If your child decides, after speaking to us, that he/she no longer wants us to use his/her story for the research then he/she can withdraw his/her data. If he/she decides to withdraw he/she will be asked to either tell XXX who will let us know, or to email/phone Niamh. However your child will not be able to withdraw his/her data after [date] because the information will all be made anonymous at this point ready for data analysis.

Does he/she have to take part?

It is completely up to your child to decide whether or not he/she would like to take part. If he/she does agree to take part he/she will be asked to sign a consent form indicating that he/she understands what the research is about and that he/she would like to participate.

Will my child's participation be confidential?

Your child's name will not be passed on to anyone or used in anything written about the research such as the research report or journal articles. No one will know what your child has said, unless he/she says something that makes us believe he/she or another young person might be in danger. If this happens, we may need to discuss what he/she has told us with someone else, and we would, wherever possible, talk to him/her about this first.

Once we have collected all of the information we need from young people, we will return to the young people at RB (Braintree) who helped us develop the questions we asked your child. They will be involved in helping us analyse the information but they will not have access to any of your child's information such as his/her name. At the end of the study we will write a report based on all the findings but your child will not be identified in the report. We will also be presenting the findings at conferences about bullying and writing about the project in academic journals. We will use anonymous quotes from the data in the presentations and journal articles. We will also be using the findings to support writing a bid for additional research money so we can explore bullying and self-exclusion on a wider scale and if your child is interested in helping with this he/she is very welcome to join us.

How will my child's details be stored?

Any identifiable details about your child such as his/her name will be kept confidential and not passed onto anybody else. All data will be stored on Anglia Ruskin laptops which are password protected and only accessible by Niamh and Anna.

Has the study got ethical approval?

XXX at RB has given permission for the study to take place and the study has ethical approval from the School of Education and Social Care Research Ethics Panel in the Faculty of Health, Education, Medicine and Social Care at Anglia Ruskin University. However the decision to

participate is entirely up to your child. We only want him/her to take part if he/she is absolutely sure

What are the possible disadvantages of taking part?

We do not envisage any disadvantages to your child taking part. However, if he/she finds any topic upsetting and he/she wishes to end his/her participation at any point he/she is of course free to do so. He/she will also be free to not answer any questions he/she is uncomfortable with.

Are there any benefits from taking part?

The benefits are seen as an opportunity for young people who have experienced first-hand self-exclusion due to bullying to have their voice heard. This evidence is vital in helping to generate understanding around this subject and to help deal with this problem effectively.

Who can I contact for more information?

If you have any questions please contact the Principal Investigator Dr Niamh O'Brien using the contact details below:

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