



University of Wales Trinity Saint David Birmingham

Module: Digital Skills and Research Methods

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Assessment Component 2: Research Literacy- Learning How to Read a Research Paper

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Section 1

The research paper selected for this report is "'She didn't know how to go back': School attendance problems in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic—A multiple stakeholder qualitative study" by Brontë McDonald, Kathryn J. Lester and Daniel Michelson, published in 2023 in the British Journal of Educational Psychology. The study explores the challenges children and young people experienced when returning to school following the COVID-19 pandemic, with more intense research as to what the reasons were behind this and it was tackled.

The main topic of the research is school attendance problems after the COVID-19 pandemic and how this hard time affected the children, other members of the family and people working within education and health services. During the pandemic, many students became used to being homeschooled and were affected by higher levels of anxiety, social isolation and emotional distress. When schools started to open children were very reluctant to return into the normal school day. The researchers aimed to understand these experiences by gathering the views of parents and professionals who supported children with attendance difficulties.

The research focuses on parents of school-aged children who experienced attendance problems, alongside professionals such as educational psychologists, mental health practitioners and school staff. These participants were chosen because they had direct experience of supporting children whose school attendance had been negatively affected by the pandemic. By collecting perspectives from multiple stakeholders, the researchers were able to gain a broader understanding of the issue and identify common themes across different experiences.

This topic is very important to UK health and social care because poor school attendance is closely linked to children's mental health, emotional wellbeing and long-term development.

Children who are unable to attend school regularly may experience reduced educational achievement, increased social isolation and a greater risk of mental health difficulties.

Effective collaboration between schools, Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS), educational psychologists and families is essential to provide appropriate support and improve outcomes. The findings of this study can help professionals develop more effective strategies for supporting children with school attendance difficulties following major disruptions such as the COVID-19 pandemic. Furthermore, the research highlights the importance of early intervention, partnership working and person-centred approaches, which are key principles within UK health and social care practice.

Section 2

The purpose of this study was to understand why some children struggled to return to school after the COVID-19 pandemic and how this affected their attendance. The researchers wanted to hear what the problems and issues had raised while being at home directly from parents and professionals who had supported children with these difficulties. Instead of trying to prove a theory, the study aimed to build a clearer picture of the reasons behind school attendance problems after lockdown. By understanding these experiences, the researchers hoped to identify ways that schools, mental health services and families could work together more effectively to support children and improve their attendance.

Section 3

Research methods are the different ways researchers collect and analyse information in order to answer a question. In health and social care research, the three main approaches are quantitative, qualitative and mixed-methods research. Each method has a different.

Quantitative research focuses on collecting numerical data. This type of research is useful when researchers want to measure something, compare groups or identify patterns using statistics. For example, a quantitative study might use surveys or questionnaires to find out how many children experienced school attendance difficulties after the pandemic. The results are usually presented in numbers, percentages or graphs, which can make it easier to compare large groups of people.

Qualitative research, on the other hand, focuses on people's experiences, feelings and opinions. It is used when researchers want to gain a deeper understanding of a situation rather than simply measure it. Qualitative studies often use interviews, focus groups or observations so that participants can explain their experiences in their own words. This method provides rich and detailed information that cannot always be captured through numbers alone.

Mixed-methods research combines both quantitative and qualitative approaches. Researchers may collect numerical data first and then use interviews to explore the reasons behind the results in more detail. This approach can provide a more complete understanding of a research topic because it includes both measurable data and personal experiences.

The research paper by McDonald, Lester and Michelson (2023) used a qualitative research design. This was the most suitable approach because the researchers wanted to understand the experiences of children returning to school after the COVID-19 pandemic through the views of parents and professionals. School attendance problems are often connected to emotions such as anxiety, fear and low confidence, which cannot be fully understood through statistics alone. A qualitative method allowed the participants to describe these experiences in detail and explain how the pandemic affected children's ability to return to school.

The study involved two groups of participants: parents of children who were experiencing school attendance problems and professionals who worked in education or mental health services. These professionals included educational psychologists, school staff and mental health practitioners. Including both groups was important because it allowed the researchers to compare different perspectives on the same issue. Parents could explain what they observed at home, while professionals could describe the challenges they faced when supporting children in schools and services.

The researchers collected primary data through semi-structured interviews. Primary data is information gathered directly from participants for a specific research study. This is different from secondary data, which is information that has already been collected by other researchers or organisations, such as books, journal articles, government reports or statistics. In this study, primary data was necessary because the researchers wanted current, first-hand accounts of experiences during and after the COVID-19 pandemic.

Semi-structured interviews involve using a set of prepared questions while also allowing the interviewer to ask follow-up questions. This method was appropriate because it gave participants the freedom to discuss issues that were personally important to them. At the same time, the prepared questions ensured that all participants were asked about similar topics, making it easier for the researchers to compare their responses.

The interviews were conducted online, which was a practical choice following the pandemic. Online interviews allowed participants from different locations to take part safely and conveniently. However, one limitation of online interviews is that researchers may find it harder to observe body language or build the same level of rapport as they might in face-to-face interviews.

After the interviews were completed, the researchers used thematic analysis to examine the data. Thematic analysis is a method used to identify, organise and interpret repeated patterns, or themes, within qualitative data. The researchers first read through the interview transcripts several times to become familiar with the information. They then highlighted important statements and grouped similar ideas together. These groups of ideas were developed into broader themes that represented common experiences shared by parents and professionals.

Several themes emerged from the analysis. Participants explained that many children experienced increased anxiety about returning to school after spending long periods learning from home. Some children had become comfortable with home routines and found it difficult to adjust back to the structure of school life. Others experienced social anxiety or worried about academic pressures after missing classroom learning. Parents often felt that they did not receive enough support, while professionals reported that services were under pressure because of the increased demand for mental health support.

One of the main strengths of this qualitative study is that it provided detailed and personal accounts of school attendance problems. The interviews allowed participants to explain their feelings and experiences in a way that would not have been possible through a simple questionnaire. Including both parents and professionals also strengthened the study because it provided a wider range of perspectives.

However, there are some limitations to consider. Qualitative studies usually involve smaller sample sizes, so the findings cannot always be generalised to all children or schools in the UK. The participants' responses may also have been influenced by their personal opinions or memories of events. In addition, the researchers' own interpretations could affect how the themes were identified, although careful analysis can help reduce this risk.

Overall, the qualitative method was appropriate for this study because the aim was to understand personal experiences rather than measure numerical outcomes. The research provides valuable evidence for schools, mental health services and health and social care professionals by showing the importance of early intervention, communication and collaboration when supporting children with school attendance difficulties after the COVID-19 pandemic.

Section 4

This report has explored the research paper by McDonald, Lester and Michelson (2023), which investigated school attendance problems following the COVID-19 pandemic. The study helped to explain why some children found it difficult to return to school and highlighted the impact that anxiety, disrupted routines and emotional wellbeing can have on attendance. It also showed how important it is for parents, schools and health professionals to work together when supporting children who are struggling.

By analysing this paper, I have developed a better understanding of the different types of research methods used in health and social care. I learned that quantitative research focuses on numerical data, qualitative research focuses on experiences and opinions, and mixed-methods research combines both approaches. I also learned why qualitative research was the most suitable method for this study, as it allowed the researchers to collect detailed information through interviews and identify common themes using thematic analysis.

One of the most useful things I learned from this assignment is how research can be used to improve professional practice. The findings of this study could help schools and mental health services develop better support for children experiencing attendance difficulties. As someone interested in working with children in mental health, this research has helped me understand the importance of listening to children and families, recognising early signs of anxiety, and providing person-centred support. Overall, completing this report has improved my confidence in reading and evaluating academic research, which will be valuable for my future studies and career in health and social care.

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