

University of Wales Trinity Saint David

**An investigation into the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on
attendance of pupils in a secondary school in Carmarthenshire,
Wales.**

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DECLARATION FORM

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DECLARATION

I certify that the whole of this work is the result of my individual effort, and that all sources have been acknowledged.

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DECLARATION

I am satisfied that this work is the result of the Student's effort.

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Abstract

This paper investigates the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on pupil attendance at a secondary school in a rural town in Carmarthenshire, Wales. Employing an interpretivist case study approach, the research draws on empirical data and researcher observations, informed by the author's position as a staff member at the school. Using purposive sampling, the study compares attendance rates before and after the pandemic, revealing a notable decline following the return to in-person schooling. The

findings highlight reduced attendance across various groups, particularly among pupils eligible for Free School Meals and those with Additional Learning Needs. The study concludes that the pandemic has significantly disrupted attendance patterns, exacerbated existing educational inequalities, and raised concerns about students' mental health and long-term academic outcomes. Addressing these challenges requires coordinated action from educators, policymakers, and communities.

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Glossary

SAPS	School Attendance Problems
eFSM	Free School Meals
ALN	Additional Learning Needs

ITE	Initial Teacher Education
HEI	Higher Education Institutions
SES	Socioeconomic Status
LSE	London School of Economics

Chapter 1: Introduction

1.1 Background to the Problem

The goal of this study was to understand the impact Covid-19 has had on the attendance of secondary school pupils within School A in Carmarthenshire, Wales. Although improving school attendance has been a national priority for a number of years (Welsh Government, 2022), data collected by Welsh Government and local authorities has shown that the recent Covid-19 pandemic has significantly impacted school attendance on many levels. This study discusses the impact the pandemic had on school attendance further, focusing on attendance data within School A before, during and after the pandemic. The study also focuses on attendance of pupils who are eligible for Free School Meals (eFSM), those who have Additional Learning Needs (ALN) and any attitudinal changes from staff, parents and pupils towards attendance following the Covid-19 pandemic.

The data within this study was collected from School A. There are 1,436 pupils on roll, 267 of whom are in the sixth form. Around half of pupils come from the town in which it is situated, and the other half from the surrounding rural area and nearby villages. The proportion of pupils who are eFSM is 18.9%, which is a little higher than the average across Wales of 16.4%. Almost a third of pupils come from Welsh-speaking homes. Around 47% of pupils speak Welsh fluently and a little over half study Welsh as their first language. Nearly 6% of pupils have a statement of special educational needs, compared with 2.2% across Wales. Nearly 30% of pupils have special educational needs. This figure is higher than the national average of 22.9%. The school has a specialist teaching facility for 29 pupils with profound and complex learning needs (Estyn, 2019).

I am currently a teacher employed at School A and have seen a decline in the school attendance of pupils since schools returned to 'normal' after the Covid-19 pandemic and associated periods of lockdown. As I continue to develop professionally and to improve my practice, I was eager to explore the reasons for this decline in more detail. I aimed to do this by analysing School A's attendance data for a selected sample of pupils and by seeking the opinions and attitudes of staff, parents and pupils around school attendance via the completion and analysis of questionnaires.

It is essential to highlight that school attendance data in Wales from 14th December 2020 to 26th March 2021 is not available as the pandemic was at its peak and schools were closed. Due to this most pupils apart from vulnerable children and children of critical workers were not expected to attend school (Welsh Government, 2022). The way in which attendance data was collected changed during the pandemic. This has made it extremely difficult to identify, with certainty, differences in attendance before,

during and after the pandemic. However, it is still important to learn about and identify any changes in school attendance to ensure there is no detrimental impact to pupils' education because of poor attendance following the pandemic in both school A and across the nation. Traditionally, schools use a coding system to record pupil absences along with reasons for their absence. The Covid-19 pandemic introduced a new code, 'Y' which accounted for school directed absences due to Covid-19. An 'I' code was also introduced to record remote learning due to Covid-19, this also included where a learner was shielding or self-isolating but still accessing online learning during this time. From 22nd November 2021 illness due to Covid-19 related reasons was further recorded by schools using a ';' (Welsh Government, 2022:6). Due to the change in the way absence was recorded and analysed during the pandemic, it makes it difficult to make solid comparisons to the rate of school attendance before and after. It does allow for comparisons of common trends to be made (Senedd, 2022).

1.2 Research question, aims and objectives

This research is guided by the following research question:

What are the factors impacting on a decline in attendance figures in a large secondary school in rural Wales from the perspective of staff, parents and pupils?

Within the context of School A, the specific aims of this research are to:

- ❖ Evaluate the impact of Covid-19 lockdowns and school closures has had on pupil attendance in School A
- ❖ Evaluate the main factors that are affecting school attendance in School A
- ❖ Explore the different perspectives of staff, parents and pupils along with any attitudinal change to school attendance post pandemic in School A
- ❖ Explore any differences in attendance rates between eFSM pupils, non-eFSM pupils, ALN pupils, and non-ALN pupils.

Within the context of School A, the specific objectives of this research are to:

- ❖ Explore the data the school holds on attendance patterns pre Covid-19, during Covid-19 and post Covid-19
- ❖ Conduct a series of questionnaires with staff, pupils and parents to explore potential factors affecting school attendance

1.3 Outline of the project

This study focused on a sample of 17 Year 11 pupils from School A. Year 11 was selected as these pupils had experienced secondary education before, during, and after the Covid-19 pandemic, allowing for a longitudinal comparison of attendance patterns across these key periods. Pupils were pragmatically selected to ensure a balanced representation across categories: gender, eFSM and non-eFSM, ALN and non-ALN, Welsh and non-Welsh speakers, as well as historic good and poor attenders. In line with Welsh Government targets (Welsh Government, 2023), good attenders were defined as those with attendance rates of 95% or above, while poor attenders had rates below this threshold. For the purposes of this study, poor attenders were those with attendance below 50%.

Attendance data for each pupil was analysed from Year 7 to Year 11. Both pupils and their parents were invited to complete questionnaires. Additionally, all senior and middle leaders at School A were surveyed, as they play a central role in monitoring and managing attendance across the school and within their respective departments.

1.4 Contribution of this research

School A is a bilingual secondary school maintained by Carmarthenshire local authority. Given the significant impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on school attendance, this study aims to address a gap in the school's internal understanding of attendance trends before, during, and after the pandemic. The school is committed to improving attendance as part of its whole-school development plan, and these findings will support the identification of targeted strategies and interventions to raise attendance across all pupil groups.

While this research may contribute to the wider academic field of school attendance in Welsh secondary schools—an ongoing and historically significant issue—it is important to note that the study is limited to a single school context. As such, the findings are not generalisable but could complement existing post-Covid research in Carmarthenshire and inform future studies or initiatives in neighbouring schools and local authorities. Most directly, this research will enhance School A's understanding of its own attendance profile and may support stakeholders in implementing meaningful

interventions. It will also deepen my professional insight into attendance challenges and inform my practice moving forward.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

2.1 School attendance

One thing that is clear within literature is that School Attendance Problems (SAPs) were a challenge long before the Covid-19 pandemic (Hallam, 1996; Collins, 1998; Hoyle,

1998 in Sheppard, 2005). Shepherd (2005) states that the proportion of children absent from school has seen little variation since the introduction of compulsory education around 1870. SAPs are complex and multifaceted, presenting challenges for pupils, professionals, families, and communities as a whole (Sandhaug et al. 2022). Indeed, school attendance was an issue prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, which intensified the situation. Before the pandemic, the overall absenteeism rate stood at 4.7% in the UK (The Education Hub, 2025). Nevertheless, school attendance has consistently been a priority for policymakers, as emphasised by the Welsh Government (2025) blogs that stress the significance of attending school every day. Missing even a few days can adversely affect a child's education and future opportunities. ITV News (2023) and the BBC News (2024) have amplified this concern, signalling growing public anxiety around the issue.

McDonald et al. (2022) discuss school attendance and highlights how SAPs typically start in primary school. McDonald also discusses the factors that contribute to SAPs which include child factors (e.g., mental health, special educational need [SEN], physical health and sleep problems); parental factors (e.g. parent mental health, school and home relationship, community support, socio-economic resources); and environmental factors (e.g. school climate, school and home relationship, community support, socio-economic resources). From these factors, an investigation into types of absence was carried out by Totsika et al. (2023) which showed that the most commonly reported reasons for absence were school refusal and illness, which accounted for 39% and 22% of the total days missed, respectively. These findings align with the data from School A, where a post-pandemic decline in attendance has coincided with increased reports of ill health—suggesting a potential shift in both medical vulnerability and perceptions of illness risk. Research from the London School of Economics and Political Science (LSE, 2024) indicates that the pandemic and the resulting public health policies have significantly altered family perspectives on school attendance. While the prohibition of in-person schooling did not appear to have a long-term effect, it is likely that the pandemic has fostered a lasting change in attitudes that continues to be felt in the post-pandemic period.

These pre-existing SAPs were important to consider whilst carrying out this study to be able to identify any potential changes in school attendance due to the pandemic and school related closures. Bronfenbrenner created an ecological systems theory that asserts that a person's growth is influenced by their interactions with the different systems present in their surroundings, which are interrelated and affect one another (Tong et al. 2024). This theory provides a useful framework for understanding how environmental disruptions during the pandemic might have contributed to SAPs. Bronfenbrenner suggests that the microsystem represents the most significant level of

this theory, encompassing the immediate environmental context in which the developing child is situated, such as the school (Tong et al. 2024). With schools being unavailable to pupils during the pandemic related lockdowns (explored further in 2.2), this theory would have been particularly influential to all school pupils as their sole environmental contexts would have been at home with their family and possibly contribute to the either the start of school attendance problems post Covid-19 or exacerbate an already existing school attendance problem. This home context would have differed from pupil to pupil with some learners being classed as vulnerable and living in potentially deprived and unhappy home environments.

The Department for Education (2020) provided guidelines aimed at identifying and supporting vulnerable students during lockdowns, which included those with child protection plans or Education, Health and Care (EHC) plans. School A, similar to other institutions, was responsible for ensuring that these students continued to receive an education. Notably, these students experienced schooling in a manner distinct from their peers, as they physically attended school during lockdown while others participated in remote learning. This division in experience must be thoughtfully considered when analysing post-pandemic attendance trends, as it may have resulted in differing educational paths and exacerbated existing inequalities. This is appropriate to this study as School A would have had to use these measures to identify their vulnerable pupils and ensure they had access to school during periods of lockdown. These pupils could have had a very different experience of education being in school during lockdowns instead of working from home and learning online. This is important to consider when collecting data.

2.2 The Covid-19 pandemic

Estyn (2024) confirms that SAPs have been exacerbated since the Covid-19 pandemic which has led to a notable decrease in school absence and persistent absenteeism. The Covid-19 pandemic led to school closures during two periods in Wales, one between March and September 2022 and the other between Christmas 2020 and Easter 2021. During these times, the only pupils that could physically access school physically were children of key workers and children who were seen as vulnerable by staff members. Empirical evidence supports this statement, with the attendance statistics from School A corresponding with a significant decrease in pupil attendance since the resumption of in-person classes after the lockdowns and periods of remote learning due to the Covid-19 pandemic. The Welsh Government states that overall absenteeism in secondary schools has increased from 5.7% in the academic year 2018/2019 to 10.5% in 2022/2023 (Welsh Government, 2023). Secondary schools have

encountered considerable obstacles in enhancing attendance after the pandemic. These statistics reveal more than just an administrative concern; they underscore a fundamental shift in educational participation. Schools now face a complex mix of challenges in re-engaging pupils, including diminished parental involvement, heightened mental health issues, and shifting social norms around the necessity of school attendance (Welsh Government, 2022; Baldwin et al. 2024; Nesta, 2023). Importantly, these are not transient problems but symptoms of deeper societal disruption.

Furthermore, some parents are exploring alternative educational methods, including homeschooling and online learning, while there are inconsistencies in the approach to attendance problems across different areas. Despite the implementation of various support measures for student well-being and strict attendance monitoring, progress has been limited (Rainer et al., 2021). Rainer et al state that educational institutions may find it challenging to effectively address the mental health and well-being needs of pupils, especially when confronted with limited resources and a growing demand for assistance. There is a necessity for more explicit guidance on the effective implementation of well-being practices and on how to assist pupils with mental health issues that impact their attendance (Welsh Government, 2021). Further complicating the situation is the tension between data-driven intervention and ethical concerns. Wilson et al (2024) found that utilising data to pinpoint pupils who may be at risk can be beneficial; however, there are apprehensions regarding the possibility of excessive monitoring and the necessity for a more comprehensive approach to student well-being. These issues underscore a policy contradiction: the effort to enhance accountability may, ironically, distance the very students it aims to assist.

These findings support the current trends of a decline of attendance in School A. Schools that have fostered a strong culture of attendance, utilised data effectively, and set high expectations have observed more positive results (Estyn, 2024). The Welsh Government has acknowledged the importance of a concerted nationwide effort to enhance school attendance following the Covid-19 pandemic (Welsh Government, 2024). They have unveiled a fresh set of preliminary instructions titled "Belonging, engaging and participating," designed to assist schools and local authorities in enhancing attendance. This involves seeking input on reducing the threshold for persistent absence in order to prompt earlier interventions (Welsh Government, 2024). This is interesting as although this documentation has been released at a national level, how schools have used it to tackle challenges around attendance concerns could have significantly differed between local authorities and schools. This distinction may be advantageous for schools by providing them with the autonomy to implement strategies tailored to their unique attendance challenges and the adjustment of pupil populations. Nevertheless, it could also lead to inconsistencies between local authorities and schools

regarding the extent of time, funding, and resources allocated to address these attendance issues.

Since the reopening of schools in Wales after the pandemic, the Welsh Government publishes termly reports on the attendance of pupils in maintained schools across Wales. The average attendance rate in secondary schools for the current year stands at 86.4%, a decrease from 86.7% during the corresponding period of the 2022/23 academic year (Welsh Government, 2024). In total, 29.0% of pupils have reached the persistent absence threshold of 10% of sessions missed for the current academic year, a decrease from 30.2% during the corresponding period of the 2022/23 academic year (Welsh Government, 2024). These reports and statistics clearly show the significant decline in school attendance across the country post pandemic which again, supports the current declining attendance trends in school A. Sibieta and Robinson (2020) support this and discuss how attendance levels of secondary pupils in Wales have significantly reduced post pandemic.

2.3 Online Learning

The COVID-19 pandemic has necessitated a transformation in the methods of learning and teaching within our educational institutions. Although there was some previous familiarity with blended learning strategies and digital resources, the enforced remote learning context introduced both obstacles and prospects for pupils, schools, parents/carers, and organisations such as the Regional Education Consortia. For the vast majority of children, the way in which they accessed education and curriculum provisions significantly changed with remote learning becoming the educational norm across the country (Welsh Government, 2022). The Welsh Government worked closely with local authorities and schools to ensure pupils who were eFSM were given IT equipment to ensure they could access the online learning platform that was being offered by schools (Welsh Government, 2020). While there was some prior exposure to blended learning methods and digital tools, the sudden shift to distance learning brought about both challenges and possibilities for pupils, schools, parents, and organisations like the Welsh Education Consortia. The Welsh Education Consortia collaborate to enhance standards in every facet of education throughout Wales. This collaboration was essential during periods of online learning when schools were delivering an education they had never done so before. Despite challenges such as limited access to technology, internet connectivity issues, and insufficient support for educators, there was a notable surge in innovation within online learning, enhanced resource accessibility, and broadened educational opportunities, as reported by the Royal Chartered College of Teaching (2021).

The objective of a research project carried out by Chapman et al (2022) was for three Higher Education Institutions (HEIs)—Aberystwyth University, the University of South Wales, and Wrexham Glyndwr University—to gather the shared experiences of partner schools, pupils, parents/carers, regional consortia, and Initial Teacher Education (ITE) pupils. The research sample was determined by the stipulations of the Welsh Government's call and investigated responses, captured practical experiences, and offered recommendations for the sector, including insights for ITE professional development and education. The study found that 16 out of 24 respondents believed the pupils had participated in remote learning, but they all recognised the difficulty of maintaining their engagement. Fifteen pupils reported that they felt they had the appropriate technology to support distance learning, four felt unsure and four felt they did not have sufficient access (Chapman et al, 2022). These findings hold significant importance in evaluating attendance patterns following the pandemic. The interruption of the learning experience during the lockdown may have contributed to a sense of disengagement that persists as absenteeism. For certain pupils, online education might have unintentionally altered the perception of mandatory schooling, rendering conventional face-to-face classes as optional or less essential.

Although several research studies have investigated the engagement of higher education pupils in online learning (Jeffrey et al. 2014; Vezne et al. 2022; Bergdahl et al. 2024), limited research has been conducted on online learning at the school level (Al-Salman, 2011). This oversight weakens policymakers' ability to craft targeted interventions post-pandemic. In sum, although online learning introduced new possibilities for curriculum access and pedagogical flexibility, it also contributed to uneven educational experiences. For some pupils, these challenges have persisted into the post-pandemic era, manifesting in ongoing difficulties with attendance, motivation, and re-integration into traditional learning environments.

2.4 The International context of school attendance and Covid-19

Analysing school attendance from an international perspective shows that the challenges encountered in Wales are indicative of a wider global trend. However, making comparisons between countries is difficult due to varying systems for recording attendance, differing definitions, and distinct educational policies. The intricacies involved in comparing national data highlight the necessity for careful consideration

when making direct comparisons. According to Reid (Sheppard, 2005), the exact number of children missing school daily remains unknown due to issues related to absence recording. While schools in Wales have strict regulations for attendance recording, the Swedish Government lacks specific guidelines or regulations for this purpose. However, they are required to record unexplained absences daily, with 84% of schools using electronic registration systems similar to those in Welsh schools (Sandhaug et al., 2022). Sandhaug et al. (2022) also point out that the classification of excused and unexcused absences is not defined in the Swedish Education Act (2010). The Finnish National Agency for Education (2014) emphasises the need for education providers to have an action plan to address student absenteeism and to be responsible for recording and reporting absences to pupils' guardians. In Denmark, schooling is mandatory, and the history of absence recording is extensive (Sandhaug et al., 2022). Balfanz and Byrnes (2012) note the absence of similar regulations in America, where attendance is assumed unless there is illness or an extraordinary event, without even being measured. These examples highlight that while school absenteeism is a global issue (Havik et al., 2021), its visibility and responsiveness vary considerably based on national priorities and policies.

Friedman (2022) carried out a study which examined the online learning difficulties encountered by high school pupils in South Korea, aged 15 to 19, during the pandemic, employing a quantitative survey methodology to identify the distractions faced by pupils while studying online. The study indicated that their primary challenge was maintaining alertness and concentration during virtual classes. Friedman also noted distractions such as viewing online videos, which detracted from their participation in online lessons. Additionally, pupils expressed concerns regarding unclear instructions and insufficient feedback. These findings illustrate that disengagement during online learning was not limited to infrastructure challenges, but also stemmed from pedagogical and psychological factors.

There is a clear and ongoing international issue with school attendance which has now become more apparent since the Covid-19 pandemic (Welsh Government, 2025). Concerns are being raised about how the pandemic has 'broken the old habit of going to school' (Schools Week, 2024) and has increased school absence (Senedd, 2023). A study by Zubrick (2014) shows an overall decline in school attendance globally. Zubrick (2014) states that attendance rates typically decrease as pupils advance in their education, with primary school pupils exhibiting higher attendance rates compared to secondary school pupils. One reason for this is the transition from primary to secondary school can represent a major change for pupils, which may result in heightened anxiety or challenges in adapting to the new surroundings, workload, and expectations (Spernes, 2020). Another is that the environment of primary schools is typically more

nurturing and familiar, featuring educators and staff who are well-acquainted with the pupils. This familiarity can contribute to children feeling more at ease and secure, which may have a beneficial effect on their attendance (Hodgkin et al. 2013). Hanewald (2013) also discusses how secondary schools typically impose more rigorous academic standards and place a stronger focus on self-directed learning. This can pose difficulties for certain pupils, possibly resulting in heightened stress levels or diminished motivation, which may adversely affect their attendance. McDonald et al (2022) carried out a study that focused on understanding how SAPs have manifested for primary school aged children in the context of Covid-19. Participants eligible for the study comprised parents of a child who was (i) enrolled in a publicly funded mainstream primary school located within the local authorities of East Sussex, West Sussex, and Brighton and Hove; and (ii) had encountered Special Educational Needs (SEN) during the academic year 2020–2021. He found that children with special educational needs and pre-existing anxiety faced significant challenges in attending school. The Covid-19 related anxiety struggles with adapting to new school routines, lack of effective home-school communication, and worries about academic progress all contributed to the difficulties. Effective support was evident when schools and families collaborated closely. Suggestions for enhancing practice focused on early intervention, rebuilding parent-school relationships, providing peer support for parents, and enhancing special educational services.

Focusing on school pupils in general, Anakpo et al. (2024) studied the attendance of school pupils before the school closures due to Covid-19 and then again after their reopening. The study analysed the effects of COVID-19 on student attendance in South Africa and how this situation was intensified by pre-existing socioeconomic conditions, utilising data from the National Income Dynamics Study-Coronavirus Rapid Mobile Survey (NIDS-CRAM). The results of their research found that the overall number of pupils attending before Covid-19 decreased significantly. There was a noticeable decrease in both male and female attendance. They found that this varied according to the socioeconomic factors ‘such as gender, race, geographical area, family size, economic status of learners’ parents and geographical location’ (Anakpo et al. 2024:8). Overall, the attendance rate of pupils significantly decreased across all the listed socioeconomic variables. Another study that supports these findings is one carried out by Tomaszewski et al. (2022). Tomaszewski’s research investigated whether the gaps in attendance rates between pupils of different SES backgrounds increased due to Covid-19. The research revealed that although the attendance rates of pupils from high socioeconomic backgrounds remained consistent before and during the Covid-19 pandemic, there was a notable decrease in attendance rates for pupils from low socioeconomic backgrounds and households without employment. This highlights the heightened impact of Covid-19 on this particular type of pupils and further reinforces and justifies the focus of this research. There is clear disparity in these findings between the attendance of pupils who have a high or low socioeconomic status (SES). It is

unclear within these studies what indicators are used as measures for high or low SES; however, in Wales, the most common measure of deprivation (SES) is eligibility for eFSM. This is used to allocate additional funding to schools through the Pupil Deprivation Grant (Department for Education, 2010).

Although these studies employ various metrics and contexts, the fundamental issue remains unchanged: the pandemic had a disproportionate impact on vulnerable students. In Wales, the primary indicator of socioeconomic disadvantage is eligibility for eFSM, which serves as a crucial criterion for the distribution of the Pupil Deprivation Grant (DfE, 2010). This offers a valuable national perspective for interpreting global findings. Nevertheless, the international literature frequently lacks precision regarding the definition or operationalisation of disadvantage, which restricts the comparability and relevance of international evidence to the Welsh context. While national and international contexts differ significantly, the trend is remarkably consistent: the COVID-19 pandemic intensified existing attendance issues, especially among disadvantaged and vulnerable populations. Rather than being a problem confined to Wales, ongoing absenteeism represents a global challenge that necessitates coordinated policy responses addressing both structural inequality and behavioral changes following the pandemic.

2.5 Attendance and eFSM

As noted above, one common factor that contributes to school attendance problems is eFSM eligibility. Empirical evidence suggests the correlation between eFSM and school attendance is intricate and may differ based on several factors such as SES, school regulations, and available support systems. The Welsh Department for Education (2010) argues that pupils qualifying for eFSM typically belong to families with lower incomes, which could be linked to a multitude of obstacles impacting their attendance at school. A study carried out by Balfanz et al. (2012) showed that additional investment in school resources has been found to positively impact the academic performance of all pupils, with a greater effect on the achievement of disadvantaged pupils. This is further supported by Mooney et al. (2022), who suggest that individuals with a low SES, non-English speakers, those residing in remote areas, and those with special learning needs are more likely to experience negative outcomes due to poor school attendance. This finding is also echoed by Balfanz et al. (2012), who assert that chronic absenteeism is particularly common among pupils from low-income backgrounds.

A report prepared by the Welsh Government (2023) emphasises the importance of early identification of poor attendance, as it enables timely interventions to support the child.

This addresses the need to understand the causes behind declining attendance, which is central to the research question. Within a Welsh Government review (Rowlands, 2022) discusses a study that was conducted at a High School in Pontypridd. The study revealed that pupils there who were eFSM had lower attendance rates compared to their peers. This finding points to poverty and social disadvantage as key elements worth exploring in the context of this study. Furthermore, it was observed that pupils who did not actively participate in online learning during the lockdowns also exhibited poorer attendance. To address this issue, the school provided additional support to these pupils, including access to school counsellors, youth workers, and increased communication with parents. This is relevant to the study as it indicates that pupils who did not engage in online learning during lockdowns later had poorer attendance highlighting the lasting impact of COVID-19 on pupil engagement and school routines.

The Senedd (2023) however, has brought to light that as of October 2022, eFSM pupils have a higher attendance rate compared to those who do not. This indicates that the previous concern regarding poorer attendance among eFSM pupils may have been alleviated due to the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic. The possible reason behind this shift could be attributed to a more lenient approach towards lower school attendance as a result of the pandemic (Senedd, 2023). Families experiencing financial difficulties during the pandemic may have found it challenging to supply sufficient resources for their children's education, which includes access to technology necessary for remote learning (Parnham, 2020). Limited access to technology during the pandemic not only affected students' ability to participate in remote learning but could also contribute to decreased attendance. Without reliable internet or devices, many students were unable to join virtual classrooms consistently, leading to disengagement and academic setbacks. In Wales in the academic year 2018/19, the overall absenteeism rate was recorded at 5.7%. There was however a significant increase in the academic year 2022/23 with absenteeism recorded at 10.5% (Welsh Government, 2020). Notably, the rate of persistent absence among eFSM pupils has more than doubled from 8.4% in 2018/19 to 18.8% in 2022/23 (Welsh Government, 2023). Supporting this and contradicting the findings of the Senedd (2023) the Children, Young people and Education Committee in Wales(2022:17) state that 'the attendance rate for the academic year 2022-2023 has been higher for eFSM pupils (93.1%) than eFSM pupils (86.9%).' The evidence demonstrates that eFSM status continues to be a vital, albeit flawed, measure of vulnerability concerning school attendance. It reflects general trends but should be evaluated in conjunction with other intersecting factors such as ALN status, household structure, and responses at the school level. Merely acknowledging disadvantage is inadequate; effective interventions need to be customised, proactive, and sustainably funded.

2.6 Attendance and ALN

It is clear that there is also a difference in the attendance of school pupils who have an Additional Learning Need compared to those who do not (Welsh Government, 2025; Welsh Government, 2023; NIHR, 2022). The Senedd (2022) published a report which shows school attendance rates across Wales prior to the pandemic. Data shows that pupils who have a Special Educational Need (SEN), an Educational Statement or School Action + also have poorer absence rates than those who do not. Davidson (2004) confirms that School Action + is an increased level of support put in place by the school for pupils who have complex needs or who need more focused and specific support in lessons. The Senedd (2022) states that in 2018-2019 7.8% of Secondary pupils with a Special Educational Needs Statement and 10.3% of pupils who had a School Action + plan were absent. These figures are particularly concerning when considered in light of the statutory purpose of such interventions, which are intended to provide targeted support and promote inclusion. The Welsh Government (2024) supports this and states that there was a rise in persistent absence from 2018/19 to 2022/23 among pupils with various levels of SEN/ALN support. The statistics appear unchanged since the resumption of 'normal' schooling after the pandemic. Research indicates a persistent gap in school attendance between pupils with ALN and those without. In the academic year 2022/23, 51.6% of secondary school-aged pupils receiving SEN/ALN support were persistently absent, in contrast to 38.2% of those without such support. Statutory frameworks like the SEN Statement and School Action+, are designed to support inclusion and engagement. The fact that pupils receiving these supports are still disproportionately absent suggests a gap between what is intended by policy and what is experienced in practice. This is a critical insight for understanding systemic or implementation issues affecting attendance.

Supporting these findings, Totsika et al. (2023) conducted a research project focusing on the issue of school absenteeism in children with neurodevelopmental disorders such as intellectual disability and/or autism. The study was conducted around one year following the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic in the United Kingdom. The findings revealed that 32% of the 486 children with neurodevelopmental issues experienced chronic absenteeism, which involved missing over 10% of school days. The most common reasons for absence were school refusal and illness, which together made up 37% and 22% of the total days missed, respectively. Additionally, child anxiety was identified as a contributing factor to school absenteeism. They concluded that within that period, Covid-19 had a limited impact on school attendance problems. It is clear within these findings that pupils who have an ALN are less likely to attend school.

Another study that supports these findings is one by Kouroupa et al. (2023) who carried out a study to investigate whether school closures because of the Covid-19 pandemic had a subsequent impact on school absenteeism in children with neurodevelopmental conditions in the UK. They found that the rates of school absence were exacerbated after periods of home learning in this group of vulnerable children. Kouroupa et al. (2023:850) found that 'children learning from home during school closures were 145% more likely to present with persistent absence in May 2021 compared with children who went to school every day during school closures.' These findings reinforce this study's final aim, clearly evidencing a disparity in attendance of pupils with an ALN compared to those who do not.

These findings reveal significant shortcomings in the ability of the current education system to adequately support pupils with ALN. Despite commitments to inclusivity and the introduction of the new ALN Code in Wales, the ongoing attendance gap indicates a disparity between policy goals and actual results. Schools may be lacking essential resources, training, or specialised support staff necessary to address the complex and diverse needs of ALN pupils, especially in a post-pandemic environment where the pressures on school pastoral systems have intensified. Furthermore, attendance policies may unintentionally put ALN pupils at a disadvantage. Uniform methods of tracking and penalising absences often overlook the intricate and frequently changing nature of ALN-related requirements. A more adaptable, trauma-informed approach that prioritises individual wellbeing and family involvement is likely to yield better results. Pupils with ALN encounter persistent and substantial obstacles to consistent school attendance. Although the pandemic has exacerbated these difficulties, the underlying issues are systemic and demand a coordinated, well-funded, and compassionate response. Without fundamental reforms to both policy and practice, the education system risks neglecting some of its most vulnerable learners.

Chapter 3: Research Methods

3.1 Research Paradigm

To meet the research objectives, a qualitative social research study was conducted. This chapter outlines the main research methods used to address the aims of the study. As an empirical investigation into attendance patterns at School A, the research reflects

both the data gathered and my interpretation as a current member of staff. Data collection involved two stages. The first used secondary data—school attendance records extracted from the school’s management system (SIMS). These records confirmed a shift in pupil attendance patterns following the return to in-person schooling after periods of lockdown and remote learning (Schools Week, 2024). This will be further explored in Chapter 4.

The study was guided by an interpretivist paradigm, which focuses on understanding the subjective experiences and social realities of individuals (Myers, 2008). This approach is appropriate for exploring how stakeholders in School A perceive and interpret attendance post-pandemic. Interpretivism views reality as socially constructed, shaped by individual experiences and interactions (Alharahsheh et al., 2020). As Turin et al. (2024) note, research within this paradigm often relies on qualitative techniques such as interviews, case studies, and ethnography to explore complex meanings. Aspers et al. (2019) describe qualitative research as interpretative and naturalistic, conducted within real-world settings and concerned with the meanings individuals attach to phenomena. This informed the second stage of data collection: primary data via questionnaires. These were distributed to staff, parents, and pupils to gather insights into attendance perceptions and experiences. Attendance data for the 17 purposively sampled pupils was analysed from Year 7 to Year 11 (2019–2024), including individual year-by-year attendance percentages. The aim was not to test a hypothesis, but to develop a deeper understanding of the factors influencing attendance, grounded in both quantitative trends and qualitative perspectives (Alharahsheh et al., 2020).

3.2 Research Design

The research method selected for this study was a case study. As Blaxter et al. (2010) explain, case studies are used to examine the characteristics of a single unit—in this instance, a specific group of pupils within a school. Denscombe (2021) notes that case studies are particularly appropriate when unique research opportunities arise, such as the global disruption to education caused by the Covid-19 pandemic. This method was also well-suited to a small-scale researcher, allowing for in-depth analysis of a specific issue—school attendance (Denscombe, 2021). Conducting the research within my own school aligns with Blaxter et al.’s (2010) observation that case studies often address problems situated in the researcher’s place of work. The aim was to investigate attendance-related challenges and generate findings that could inform future practice. To enhance validity and credibility, triangulation was used (Daines, 2023). By drawing on multiple data sources—quantitative attendance records and qualitative questionnaire responses from staff, parents, and pupils—the study built a richer understanding of the factors affecting attendance. This approach also helped to address the limitations of relying on a single data source, which is especially important in small-scale case study

research. While the case study approach provided valuable real-world insights using both statistical and experiential data, it does not allow for broad generalisations. Nonetheless, the findings offer School A meaningful context-specific evidence, which can inform internal strategies and potentially influence future practice and policy development.

3.3 Selection of Participants

This research involved the participation of three groups of people: pupils, parents and staff. In order to gain a wider perspective, pupils and parents were invited to participate in this study to provide a strategic perspective as a pupil on school attendance pre, during and post pandemic. The teaching Staff were invited to provide a school based, empirical perspective on school attendance pre, during and post pandemic. The research utilised a purposive sampling strategy, chosen for its compatibility with the study's objectives. As noted by Cohen et al. (2018), purposive sampling is commonly employed in various research types, especially when the aim is to achieve representativeness, facilitate meaningful comparisons, concentrate on specific issues or cases, or construct theory through the systematic gathering of data from a range of sources (Yu, 2007, in Cohen et al., 2018). This sampling method was particularly beneficial as I was able to seek participants with specific characteristics or experiences pertinent to the research question. In this study's context, purposive sampling was fitting as it enabled the intentional selection of a representative and relevant group of students from School A. By choosing participants based on criteria that align with the research objectives, the study guaranteed that the data collected would be rich, pertinent, and conducive to thorough analysis and interpretation. The sample was handpicked by myself, the researcher, to meet specific needs of this study (Cohen et al. 2018). First, participants were chosen to ensure representativeness across the pupil cohort at School A, reflecting a range of backgrounds, abilities, and educational experiences relevant to the research focus. Second, the sample was structured to facilitate meaningful comparisons between distinct groups of pupils, allowing for a deeper understanding of patterns and differences within the school context. Third, the selection process aimed to focus on unique issues related to each pupil's individual status, including those with ALN, pupils with English as an additional language (EAL), and those identified as high-achieving or underperforming. These categories were central to exploring the research question. Permission was sought from the head teacher of the school before any contact was made with the pupils, parents and staff. I will now explore each participant in more detail.

Parents

The parents who were invited to take part in this research were the legal parent or guardian recorded in the school's system for the 20 selected pupils. From the 20 parents who were invited to participate through email, 17 provided a response. All parents received an identical email to each other that included an invitation to participate along with a consent form and a participant information sheet attached. It was explicitly stated that by replying to the invitation to fill out the questionnaire, they were giving their consent to engage in the research. The parents' questionnaire was made up of 11 questions (see appendix A).

Pupils

A total of 20 year 11 students were chosen to take part in this study. As 17 parents provided their consent, only the students whose parents agreed were included in the research. To clarify, 17 students participated. This particular year group of pupils were chosen because they had been in Secondary school before, during and post Covid-19 (2019-2023), meaning data was readily available on their school attendance throughout the pandemic. To gain representativeness, a typical case approach to purposive sampling was used (Teddlie et al, 2007) ensuring the sample included the most typical cases of groups of pupils to ensure representativeness. I used the following measures to identify a selection of pupils within this year group:

- gender (male and female)
- eFSM and non-eFSM
- ALN and no ALN
- Welsh speaker and non-Welsh speaker
- good attenders and poor attenders

The cohort of year 11 pupils was 245 so to ensure that the sample of participants chosen was manageable for this research I chose 4 pupils from each of the listed categories above. These pupils were chosen randomly using the school's data collection system SIMS. I emailed each of these pupils using their school email addresses after consent was gained from each of their parents. This consent was also gained via email. Seventeen of the 20 pupils responded and participated by completing the questionnaire. I was happy to continue with the 17 that had responded due to time constraints. The pupils' questionnaire was made up of 11 questions (see appendix A).

Staff

All middle and senior members of the teaching staff were invited to take part in the research. This decision was made because classroom teachers who do not possess any Teaching or Learning responsibilities, and thus do not belong to middle or senior leadership, typically have limited engagement in the analysis or monitoring of attendance. I felt that using middle and senior leaders would suffice and give the findings needed. Middle and senior leaders, including pastoral staff, are significantly involved in the recording and monitoring of school attendance and play a crucial role in communicating with pupils and their parents when trying to identify attendance issues and implementing measures to address these challenges. 19 members of staff were invited to participate. 8 members of staff participated. The other 11 members of staff did not respond to the invitation sent via email. All staff were given an identical email. The staff questionnaire was made up of 8 questions (see appendix A).

3.4 Data Collection Methods

As outlined earlier, the first phase of data collection involved analysing attendance data from School A. Examining patterns before, during, and after the Covid-19 pandemic confirmed a noticeable decline in attendance, supporting the research hypothesis. This quantitative insight helped identify pupils most affected by fluctuating attendance and informed the selection of participants for the next phase of the study. The second phase involved collecting qualitative data through questionnaires. As Cohen et al. (2018) note, questionnaires offer standardised yet flexible responses, allowing researchers to gather views from a broad group efficiently and cost-effectively. Designed with open-ended questions, the questionnaires allowed participants to express their own experiences, placing ownership of the data in their hands (Cohen et al., 2018:475). Bailey (1994) supports this approach, particularly in exploratory research where responses are not predetermined. The structure followed Denscombe's (2010) guidance that questionnaires should generate analysable data relevant to the research aims.

Questionnaires for both pupils and parents followed a consistent format, divided into four sections. The first gathered background information, including eFSM eligibility and ALN status. The second explored attendance before the pandemic, the third focused on experiences of online learning, and the fourth examined attendance following the return to regular schooling. These sections were carefully designed to capture perceptions across the three key phases of the pandemic. The initial background section also supported data analysis by enabling connections between pupil characteristics and broader attendance trends, helping to address the study's research objectives.

3.5 Data Analysis

As stated previously, the data was collected from parents, pupils and staff. Although the questions were differentiated to ensure relevance to the specific participant in which it was intended, the themes of each question remained the same for all questionnaires. This was also done to ensure the questions were understood appropriately by the participant. The process of analysing qualitative data does not follow a straight path. Instead, it involves an iterative method for identifying and comprehending themes and patterns (Creswell, 2007). The qualitative data was analysed using open coding. As per Schoh (2020) the initial stage of this type of data analysis involved ‘describing’ the data after numerous readings and reviews of what has been collected. The coding process was structured into six distinct steps as per Braun and Clarke’s six-phase framework for doing a thematic analysis (Braun et al., 2006). First, I focused on becoming familiar with the data by breaking down the data. I separated qualitative data from each response in the questionnaires into smaller segments. Second, initial codes were created for each response to encapsulate the meaning or aspects of the data pertinent to the research question (Siegle, 2023). This process involves generating initial codes that reflect the primary ideas or concepts present in the data. Third, patterns and themes were identified and noted for each question at this stage as part of open coding from each of the questions in each of the questionnaires (Miles and Huberman, 1994). These codes encapsulated and assigned labels to the patterns, themes, or categories identified in the data (Schoh, 2020) and allowed for the fourth step, reviewing the themes identified. Open coding was employed to facilitate exploration and discovery, as I remained receptive to emerging patterns and concepts without any predetermined categories. I meticulously read and re-read the data, either line by line or segment by segment, to pinpoint significant concepts, actions, and meanings (Siegle, 2023). Open coding contributed to the development of a thorough understanding of the data by identifying a broad spectrum of ideas and perspectives. The fifth step of this qualitative analysis included making comparisons between and defining the themes that were identified within the answers to each question. The final step of this process involved a write-up of the codes. An example of the coding process can be seen below:

Codes	Theme	Example
Learning difficulties	Difficulties with learning associated with ALN were mentioned	‘Being autistic he needed the routine of attending school’
Focus	Difficulties with focusing during online learning were mentioned	‘Unable to focus’
Motivation	Pupils were clearly unable to motivate themselves whilst	‘No motivation’

	working in their home environments	
Illness	Pupils were experiencing illness which was stopping them from participating/engaging with online learning	'Illness'
Lack of equipment	Pupils were having difficulties accessing online learning due to lack of equipment	'Not enough laptops in the house'
Lack of engagement	Pupils were not engaging with online learning and the work that was being set online by staff members	'Work set online with no live instructions from staff'

Table 1: Example of coding process

The table above shows the coding process concerning the question that revealed the reasons provided by parents who indicated that their child had not participated effectively in online learning. The code 'learning difficulties' emerged, as several parents noted that this was one of the factors contributing to their child's lack of engagement with online learning.

3.6 Ethical Considerations

According to the British Educational Research Association (2024), informed consent/assent was acquired from all participants at the outset of the research by having them complete a consent form. This process ensured that the participants chosen for the case study understood the purpose of the research, their involvement in it, and their voluntary choice regarding participation. It was clearly communicated that there would be no adverse consequences for any participant who opted out of participation.

An email was dispatched to the parents of the pupils selected for attendance analysis. To meet the expectations set forth by the British Educational Research Association (2014:14), the email clarified that their child's attendance data would be utilized as part of this research. It was explicitly stated that their child's data would remain anonymous throughout the study. I made certain that both the parents and pupils had a

comprehensive understanding of the research objectives, that their data would be thoroughly analysed, that there was no obligation for them to engage in any activities as part of this research (other than having their attendance data examined), the associated risks and benefits of participating in this research, and the voluntary nature of participation, emphasising that they were not required to take part if they did not wish to do so. Assent from all pupils who were under the age of 18 was obtained from one parent as well as the student themselves to ensure that all participants were actively engaged in the consent process (University of Wales Trinity Saint David, 2022).

Consent was obtained from the staff who were invited to take part in this research. The staff received a consent and participant information sheet and were informed that by responding to the invitation to fill out the questionnaire, they were giving their consent to participate. Data de-identification was performed to eliminate any direct identifiers such as names, etc. (UK Data Service, 2023). Pseudonymisation was also carried out to ensure that none of the collected data could be traced back to the individual staff member. Additionally, the data was aggregated and presented in a manner that ensured participants could not be identified (UK Statistics Authority, 2022).

The University of Wales Trinity Saint David's (2022:23) Research Ethics and Integrity code of practice states that 'enabling children to engage in a meaningful way requires careful attention to practical considerations, including the use of information sheets and consent forms written in a child-friendly way.' I ensured age-appropriate information was provided within the consent form whilst ensuring all safeguarding measures were kept. I gave three slightly different questionnaires to each type of participant (pupil/parent/staff) to ensure accessibility to the questionnaire for all. This was essential to ensure a sound understanding and to keep it relevant to each type of participant. A summary of the purpose of the research was written at the start of each questionnaire. It was also clear that the questionnaires were to be completed on a voluntary basis. To ensure 'appropriate treatment of participants' data' with the standards of the British Education Research Association (2014:22) the questionnaires were completed anonymously to ensure confidentiality was maintained and the conduct of this ethical research. I did not ask for the name of the pupil, parent or staff member.

As stated in the University of Wales Trinity Saint David's (2022) Research Ethics and Integrity Code of Practice, all personal data has been processed in accordance with the Data Protection Act 2018 and the General Data Protection Regulation (2018). This involved ensuring that personal data was managed lawfully, fairly, and transparently, with restrictions on its usage and storage. Moreover, the data was preserved in a manner that permits the identification of individuals only for the duration necessary for

the intended purposes, alongside a commitment to integrity and confidentiality. The research also adhered to legal obligations concerning interactions with children, including the directives outlined in the school's safeguarding policy. Participants were allowed to withdraw at any moment without the need to provide justification. It was clearly communicated that this would not affect the learning of pupils.

Additionally, parents were reassured that their involvement in this research would not influence their roles as parents or their child's education at school A. There would be no negative consequences related to any poor attendance statistics noted or responses provided in the questionnaire. Staff members were also informed that their involvement would not affect their professional relationships with colleagues, and all responses would remain confidential and anonymous. The pupils involved in the research were not pupils that were directly taught by myself. This was purposely done to avoid pupils/parents feeling pressure to participate and avoid favorable responses. The staff were reassured that their responses would be anonymous to dismiss any fear they may have about our working relationship being affected in any way. For this reason, I avoided directly approaching any pupils, parents or staff and used email to communicate with all participants. Upon the conclusion of this dissertation, I offered to provide feedback to the research participants by extending support to enhance their individual attendance. I will not disclose raw data to participants during feedback; instead, I will present a summary.

3.7 Positionality

Positionality in social research pertains to a researcher's understanding of their own social identity and location, as well as the impact this has on their research, including their viewpoints, assumptions, and interpretations (Yip, 2023). It encompasses the acknowledgment of how their background, experiences, and privileges affect their engagement with research participants, data gathering, and analysis (Massoud, 2022; Gurr, 2024). This awareness was essential for conducting this research ethically and with validity, guaranteeing that I, the researcher, was open about how my positionality may affect this work. It is crucial to acknowledge that, as a staff member at the school, I was an insider researcher involved in the execution of this research. The body of literature concerning insider research underscores both its advantages and its challenges. Being an insider can enhance access, cultivate trust, and deepen understanding due to shared cultural or institutional insights (Mercer, 2007; Dwyer & Buckle, 2009). Insider researchers frequently possess pre-existing relationships that enable participants to feel more at ease and forthcoming during the data collection process (Breen, 2007). This dynamic can result in data that is richer and more

authentic. Nevertheless, the insider role is not without its risks. These risks encompass the possibility of role confusion, assumptions of mutual understanding, and challenges in maintaining a critical distance from the data (Asselin, 2003; Hellawell, 2006). Researchers may unintentionally project their own viewpoints or fail to analyse data thoroughly due to a sense of familiarity. Consequently, insider researchers are required to practice reflexivity and uphold methodological rigor to prevent bias and ensure credibility (Trowler, 2011). In this investigation, being situated within the same institutional context as the participants necessitated increased self-awareness and a systematic approach to address these issues, which will be elaborated upon in the subsequent sections.

Conducting this research without an unconscious bias was unfeasible. To mitigate bias, I implemented various strategies. First, I utilised anonymous questionnaires to promote candid responses and lessen the impact of my position on participant feedback. Second, I adhered to a well-defined and systematic data analysis approach to guarantee consistency, transparency, and impartiality. Coded responses were generated inductively, allowing themes to arise from the data itself rather than being dictated by preconceived notions. This methodology was consistently applied across all responses, and categories were refined through iterative analysis to enhance internal validity. Moreover, ethical approval was secured before data collection to ensure that the research design and procedures complied with established ethical standards, particularly concerning issues of power, anonymity, consent, and potential bias stemming from my dual role as both researcher and staff member. In addition, I assured all participants that the research and its outcomes would not affect my interactions with pupils, parents, or staff members. I guaranteed anonymity for all participants, and in instances where the findings could potentially allow for the identification of a participant as an internal researcher, such identification was eliminated prior to the publication of this work. These measures were essential in upholding ethical standards and bolstering the credibility and trustworthiness of the research findings.

Chapter 4: Findings and Discussion

In this chapter, I will present my findings based on the 3 groups of participants involved in the study. I will be discussing themes for each participant and analysing each as I present them.

4.1 Parents' Findings

The results in Fig. 1 show that 5% of parents whose children are eFSM completed the questionnaire. Of the 17 parents who completed the questionnaire, 35% had children with an ALN (as shown in Fig. 2) and 22.2% had an IDP (as shown in Fig. 3).

Fig. 1. The % of pupils whose parents said they receive eFSM
(taken from results of questionnaire)

Fig. 2 The % of pupils whose parents said they have an ALN
(taken from results of questionnaire)

Fig. 3 The % of pupils whose parents said they have an IDP
(taken from results of questionnaire)

These statistics are significant as they provide important context regarding the representativeness and focus of the parental feedback collected in this study. The fact that only 5% of parents whose children are eFSM completed the questionnaire highlights a potential limitation in capturing the full breadth of experiences among one of the most vulnerable groups. This low response rate is particularly notable given that eFSM pupils were identified in the study as having disproportionately low attendance rates post-pandemic. Their underrepresentation in the parental data may reflect broader issues of disengagement or barriers to participation in school-related activities, which could themselves be factors contributing to poor attendance.

Furthermore, the data showing that 35% of responding parents had children with ALN, and that 22.2% of those children had an IDP, is particularly relevant. These groups were also found to have lower attendance rates and face more significant challenges during and after the pandemic. Their stronger representation in the parent responses adds weight to the findings related to ALN pupils and provides a more detailed insight into the barriers they face, including possible support gaps or the adequacy of current interventions.

Pupil attendance before the Covid-19 Pandemic

The open coding table below (Table. 2) shows that most parents stated that their child/children had 'positive' attendance before the Covid-19 pandemic.

Codes	% of parents per coded response
Positive	99%
Negative	1%

Table. 2 Coded answers to parents' questionnaire- question: 'How would you describe your child's school attendance before the Covid-19 pandemic?'
(taken from results of questionnaire)

The overwhelmingly favorable feedback concerning pre-pandemic attendance is particularly insightful. In spite of the socioeconomic disadvantages and ALN present within the sample, the data indicate that these obstacles did not substantially affect the perceived attendance prior to the pandemic. This observation may highlight the importance families attribute to routine and face-to-face education, especially for children with additional needs or those from lower-income families. Furthermore, it establishes a robust baseline for evaluating changes post-pandemic, implying that the disruptions instigated by Covid-19 were not simply continuations of pre-existing attendance challenges but signify a notable departure from previous trends.

Reasons given for school absence

Figure 4 illustrates that illness was the most commonly reported reason for school absence prior to the Covid-19 pandemic, with 94.7% of parents selecting this option. This aligns with the findings of Totsika et al. (2023), who identified school refusal and health-related issues as the primary causes of absence, thereby reinforcing the relevance of health as a key factor in school attendance both before and after the pandemic. These findings further align with data from the Welsh Government, which indicates that from September 2023 to May 2024, the most frequently reported reason for absence was 'illness', accounting for 45.9% of missed school days (Welsh Government, 2024). Additionally, 5.3% of parents opted for 'other' and provided reasons such as 'anxiety which was fairly severe' and 'sports injury'. These results are significant within the framework of this study as they offer a basis for comparison regarding attendance during and after the Covid-19 pandemic, as elaborated in section 4.1. Importantly, illness as a form of absence is predominantly unavoidable and deemed

legitimate, suggesting that school absenteeism prior to Covid-19 was primarily attributable to health issues rather than behavioral or motivational factors. The limited responses indicating 'anxiety' or injury provide preliminary evidence that emotional or psychological difficulties existed even before the pandemic, albeit possibly under-acknowledged, under-reported or very few cases at all.

Fig. 4 Reason given by parents for school absence
(taken from the questionnaire)

Engagement with online learning

Question 7 asked participants: "In what ways did your child interact with online learning during the school closures related to the pandemic?" An examination of the responses uncovered a distinct dichotomy in experiences, with answers categorically aligning into either positive or negative classifications. This indicates a polarised array of outcomes among students throughout this phase of remote education. Positive feedback often demonstrated adaptability and, in certain instances, a preference for the online learning format. Expressions such as "reasonably well," "loved it," and "worked hard" suggest that some children not only managed but excelled in the online setting. For a minority, the absence of conventional classroom dynamics—especially social pressures—proved advantageous, as reflected in comments like "suited her to learn without social issues school presents." These insights imply that online learning provided a more comfortable or safe environment for specific learners.

In contrast, a considerable number of responses underscored significant challenges. Phrases such as "nightmare," "struggled," and "great difficulty" indicate that for numerous students, the transition to remote education was disruptive and overwhelming. Frequent issues included lack of engagement and incomplete assignments, as illustrated in remarks like "did not engage" and "work not completed". Responses were nearly evenly divided between positive and negative experiences. This balanced distribution emphasises the highly individualised nature of students' engagement with online learning. It also accentuates the necessity of considering personal learning preferences, home environments, and levels of support when assessing the efficacy of remote education. These findings imply that while online learning may benefit some students, it also poses a risk of leaving others behind without targeted intervention or additional support.

Continuing on from this, the next question identified the reasons given by the parents who said their child had not engaged well with online learning. During the coding analysis, the following codes were identified:

Codes	Learning Difficulties	Unable to focus	Illness	Lack of equipment	No motivation	Lack of engagement
% of parent responses per code	16.7%	16.7%	8.3%	16.7%	8.3%	33.3%

Table. 3 Coded answers to parents' questionnaire question: 'What was the main reason for any non-engagement?'

(taken from results of questionnaire)

As illustrated in the table above, certain parents indicated that their children were 'unable to focus,' while others reported that their child exhibited 'no motivation.' Some parents attributed the lack of engagement to 'illness.' Additionally, others mentioned that 'not enough laptops in the house' and 'insufficient equipment at the beginning' were factors contributing to their child's disengagement. Furthermore, some suggested that 'lack of participation from the teachers, absence of live learning,' and 'assignments set online without live instructions from staff' were reasons for their child/children's lack of engagement. These findings corroborate those presented in the studies conducted by Chapman et al. (2022) and Friedman (2022). The proportion of pupils who felt they lacked adequate access to technology was comparable to the findings reported by Chapman. Moreover, motivation and focus were areas where parents perceived their children faced challenges, which aligns with Friedman's study, where she noted that the primary difficulty for participants was sustaining alertness and concentration.

As emphasised by Erickson, Trerise, VanLooy, Lee, Bruyere, 2009 (cited in Walters et al., 2022), there is a scarcity of research regarding the effects of online learning and engagement on children with ALN. These findings highlight the limited adaptability of generic online learning models to cater for neurodivergent or high-needs pupils, supporting existing literature (Walters et al., 2022). However, the findings of this study reveal that parents of children with ALN felt their children struggled to engage with online provisions due to their unique learning requirements. Some parents expressed that their children encountered learning difficulties, stating that 'being autistic, he

required the routine of attending school’ and ‘his learning issues meant he only responded to his one-to-one.’ These results are of considerable significance within the context of this study as these findings introduce additional factors contributing to poor attendance during the pandemic. It is evident that the school closures established new obstacles to participation and attendance in learning that were not present prior to the pandemic.

Impact of Covid-19 on current school attendance

The observation that 52.4% of parents noted a change in attendance following the complete reopening of schools (Fig. 5) is significant and corroborates both national and international trends indicating a ‘new normal’ characterised by diminished or irregular attendance (Anakpo et al., 2024). This represents a distinct departure from the previously robust attendance patterns documented prior to the pandemic.

The coded reasons illustrated in Table. 3 indicate that ‘mental health/wellbeing’ has emerged as a predominant factor influencing attendance challenges, comprising over one-third (35.3%) of the responses. This finding is consistent with an expanding body of literature that emphasises post-pandemic anxiety, trauma related to school, and difficulties in social reintegration among children and adolescents (Loades et al., 2020). Importantly, numerous parents have reported experiencing new or exacerbated anxiety, panic attacks, and challenges in navigating social settings such as classrooms. These findings are critical for schools to consider, particularly when developing strategies for re-engagement and mental health support.

Fig. 5 % of pupil's attendance that has changed pre and post pandemic
(taken from the questionnaire)

The main reason given for any changes in attendance were split into the following codes during analysis:

Codes	Mental Health/Wellbeing	Illness	Defiance	Motivation	No change in attendance
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% of parent responses per code	35.3%	11.8%	23.5%	5.9%	23.5%
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Table. 4 Coded answers to parents' questionnaire question: 'what was the main reason for this?'
(taken from results of questionnaire)

The emergence of 'defiance' (23.5%) as a notable post-pandemic theme is particularly significant. In this context, defiance refers to students deliberately resisting or rejecting school expectations, rules, or authority—such as refusing to attend, follow instructions, or engage with learning. Unlike illness or anxiety—which are often involuntary—defiance suggests a more active form of disengagement that may be attitudinal or behavioral. This shift could stem from the disruption of pre-pandemic school routines, the increased autonomy pupils experienced during lockdowns, or changing perceptions of the value and authority of formal education. It may also represent a silent form of protest or a coping mechanism in response to post-pandemic stressors. This underscores the need for a deeper psychological and socio-emotional understanding of student behavior in the current educational climate. Lastly, the 23.5% of families indicating 'no change' serves as a reminder that not all students experienced negative impacts. This resilience may be associated with stronger familial support, fewer pre-existing vulnerabilities, or more adaptable learning styles. Their experiences could provide valuable insights into protective factors that alleviate attendance challenges in the aftermath of Covid.

4.2 Pupils' Findings

Figures 6, 7, and 8 provide important insights into the demographic and support characteristics of the surveyed pupils. Specifically, 10.8% of the respondents were eFSM, indicating that a small portion of the sample originates from lower-income backgrounds, while the overwhelming majority (89.2%) did not qualify, which may illustrate socio-economic disparities within the group. Furthermore, 11.1% of the pupils had an IDP, underscoring a segment of students who require specialised educational support. Nevertheless, only 8.1% of these pupils received assistance from a teaching assistant during lessons, indicating possible deficiencies in the provision of direct in-class support for students with additional needs. This inconsistency prompts inquiries

regarding the sufficiency and execution of support systems designed to aid pupils with IDPs.

Fig. 6 The % of pupils who receive FSM
(taken from the questionnaire)

Fig. 7 The % of pupils who have an IDP
(taken from the questionnaire)

Fig. 8 The % of pupils who have a teaching assistant
(taken from the questionnaire)

Pupils' attendance before the Covid-19 Pandemic

The examination of the responses to the question, 'How would you describe your attendance prior to the Covid-19 pandemic?' uncovers a complex range of self-assessments, classified into positive and negative categories. Positive replies such as 'good', '100%', 'fine', 'very good', 'brilliant', 'pretty good', and 'I was in everyday' indicate that a significant number of students viewed their attendance before the pandemic as reliable and satisfactory. These statements suggest a foundation of robust attendance habits for many learners, which is noteworthy when considering the disruptions instigated by the pandemic. On the other hand, the responses coded as negative—terms like 'average', 'alright', and 'boring'—illustrate a less enthusiastic or more unstable attendance pattern. Although not overtly negative, these expressions imply ambivalence or dissatisfaction with attendance levels, potentially highlighting underlying issues such as a lack of engagement or motivation, which could influence school participation.

This contrast in responses prompts further exploration into how the pandemic may have disrupted not only the physical act of attending school but also students' perceptions of attendance. Those who indicated positive attendance before the pandemic may have encountered new obstacles in sustaining their routine due to lockdowns and remote

learning, while students with previously mediocre attendance might have faced intensified disengagement. Comprehending these trends is essential for customising post-pandemic interventions—acknowledging that attendance encompasses more than mere physical presence; it also mirrors broader emotional and motivational dynamics. The self-reported attendance descriptions highlight the necessity of examining attendance through both quantitative measures and qualitative insights to obtain a comprehensive understanding of students' experiences and requirements.

Reasons given for school absence

As depicted in Fig. 9, the data indicates that illness was the primary reason for school absenteeism among students, reported by 70.3% of those surveyed. This observation is consistent with the findings of McDonald et al. (2022), who similarly identified illness as the most frequently cited cause of absence in their research. The significant percentage implies that, for numerous students, health-related issues—whether they are physical or psychological—continue to pose a substantial obstacle to regular school attendance. Interestingly, other reasons for absence were mentioned less often: holidays represented 13.5%, wellbeing issues and family emergencies each accounted for 5.4%, school refusal was noted at 2.7%, and another 2.7% fell into the 'other' category. This lower reporting rate may be due to a combination of factors. Firstly, issues like wellbeing and school refusal are often underreported by parents due to stigma, lack of formal diagnosis, or uncertainty around how to categorise such challenges. Families may be more comfortable citing concrete or socially acceptable reasons—such as illness—rather than emotional or psychological concerns, which may not always be fully recognised or acknowledged. In the case of holidays, the figure (13.5%) may reflect both a reluctance to admit to taking term-time vacations—often discouraged by schools—and the possibility that fewer families could afford or prioritise holidays post-pandemic. The low percentage of 'other' responses suggests that most parents opted for predefined categories, potentially limiting the visibility of more complex or less conventional causes of absence. These trends highlight the importance of creating safe, non-judgmental spaces for parents to disclose sensitive information, as well as the need for schools to improve how they identify and record non-attendance linked to emotional or socio-economic stressors.

In the open-text responses categorised as 'other', students identified reasons such as 'mental health', 'illness and family emergencies', and 'not wanting to go to school', highlighting a more intricate relationship between emotional wellbeing, motivation, and environmental stressors. These responses, although fewer in number, provide essential insights into the wider context of student absenteeism. While the prevailing narrative

focuses on physical illness, the references to mental health and school avoidance emphasise the increasing importance of emotional and psychological factors in school attendance. This is particularly relevant in the post-pandemic educational environment, where disruptions to routine and heightened anxiety have exacerbated existing challenges for many young individuals. The relatively small percentage of students explicitly indicating 'school refusal' (2.7%) may imply underreporting or a lack of comprehension of the term among students. However, the overlap between reported reasons—such as

Fig. 9 Reasons given by pupils for school absence
(taken from the questionnaire)

Engagement with online learning

The responses to questions concerning pupil engagement with online learning during the school closures caused by the pandemic were categorised thematically as either positive or negative. This coding method facilitated a more precise analysis of pupils' perceptions regarding their involvement in remote education. Positive feedback included expressions such as "good", "I attended most [lessons]", "I was highly engaged and completed all assigned work", "I participated in every lesson", and "I joined everything". These remarks represent a group of pupils who sustained a significant level of motivation and adaptability despite the transition in learning environments, indicating that some learners flourished in the autonomy and structure provided by online education.

In contrast, a considerable number of responses reflected disengagement, with remarks like "poor", "bad", "barely present!!!! I completed the work only if it was easy, never attended a Zoom meeting", "didn't do any of it", and "not so good". These negative comments highlight substantial difficulties in sustaining engagement, potentially associated with a lack of digital access, insufficient parental support, or diminished motivation and accountability in a home learning context. The near equivalence between positive and negative responses emphasises the inconsistent effects of remote learning. While some students adapted effectively, others were evidently left behind, bringing to light issues of digital inequality, variability in learning environments, and differences in individual learning requirements. The strong emotional language evident in some negative responses, such as the use of multiple exclamation marks and explicit acknowledgments of non-participation, indicates a level of frustration or disengagement that may have longer-term consequences for educational outcomes. This observation is

consistent with broader research suggesting that remote education intensified existing educational disparities (Friedman, 2020; Havik & Ingul, 2022). It also prompts essential inquiries regarding the readiness of educational systems to support diverse learning needs.

The next question asked ‘if you did not engage well, what was the main reason for this? The answers for this question were analysed and the following codes were identified:

Codes	Mental health/Wellbeing	Focus/Concentration	Internet/Technology issues	Choice
% of pupil responses per code	16.7%	44.4%	27.8%	11.1%

Table. 5 Coded answers to pupil’s questionnaire question: ‘If you did not engage well, what was the main reason for this?’

(taken from results of questionnaire)

A thematic analysis of responses concerning barriers to engagement in online learning revealed several significant patterns, with the most commonly mentioned theme being challenges related to focus and concentration. Responses categorised under this theme included remarks such as: “too bored”, “not interesting lessons. Sometimes not very challenging”, “couldn’t concentrate”, and “it wasn’t ideal and I couldn’t focus”. These remarks imply that numerous students perceived online learning environments as cognitively unstimulating or lacking the necessary structure to sustain attention. This disengagement may indicate a decrease in teacher-student interaction, limited lesson interactivity, or the absence of a supportive learning environment at home. A considerable number of students also emphasized mental health and wellbeing as a fundamental issue impacting their engagement. Statements such as “often disrupted due to mental health issues” and “because I was nervous” illustrate the psychological burden that the pandemic and remote learning imposed on learners. These observations corroborate existing research (e.g., Corcoran et al., 2022), which has demonstrated that pandemic-related stressors, social isolation, and heightened anxiety levels adversely affected student participation and motivation.

Another prevalent theme was technological constraints, where students reported being unable to engage in learning due to insufficient equipment or connectivity problems.

Instances include “didn’t have a laptop”, “my laptop was slow”, and “slow Wi-Fi”. This underscores persistent digital inequality, particularly for students from lower-income families, reflecting national concerns regarding unequal access to remote educational resources (Welsh Government, 2020). Finally, a smaller group of students expressed a voluntary withdrawal from online learning. For example, one student remarked: “didn’t really want to. Plus, I had like 100 missing assignments from like the first 2 weeks that caused me that much stress my brother caught me crying on the floor.” This statement reveals several critical insights into student disengagement during and after the pandemic. Firstly, the phrase “didn’t really want to” indicates a sense of withdrawal or lack of motivation, possibly stemming from emotional exhaustion or a perception that re-engaging with school was overwhelming or futile. The reference to “100 missing assignments” highlights how quickly academic pressure can accumulate, especially in remote learning environments where support structures are limited and self-management becomes essential. The student’s emotional response—“my brother caught me crying on the floor”—emphasises the severe impact this pressure can have on mental health, suggesting that academic disengagement may not stem from apathy, but rather from being overwhelmed and unsupported. This quote exemplifies how punitive or inflexible academic expectations, combined with a lack of timely intervention, can contribute to a downward spiral of anxiety, avoidance, and further disengagement. It underscores the need for early intervention, compassionate communication from staff, and realistic academic expectations during periods of disruption. It also calls for greater attention to students’ emotional well-being and the implementation of trauma-informed practices that prioritise support over sanctions when students fall behind.

Impact of Covid-19 on current school attendance

As shown in Table. 8, the answers to the concluding question — “Do you feel your attendance has changed since schools have fully reopened post-pandemic?” — demonstrated a split perception among students. Just over half (56.8%) reported that their attendance had changed, while 43.2% indicated it had not. This nearly equal division implies that the return to in-person education post-pandemic has had a varied effect on student attendance, underscoring the necessity to comprehend the underlying reasons for these self-reported changes. To delve deeper into this issue, students were prompted to elaborate on their responses based on whether they answered “yes” or “no”. These qualitative responses were thematically analysed, providing deeper insights into the factors influencing perceived changes in attendance.

Question: If yes, what is the reason for this?

Codes	Medical	Mental Health/Wellbeing	Choice
% of pupil responses per code	40%	50%	10%

Table. 6 Coded answers to pupil's questionnaire- question: 'Do you feel your attendance has changed since schools have fully reopened post pandemic?'

(taken from results of questionnaire)

Among those who believed their attendance had changed, significant themes included mental health issues, loss of routine, and diminished motivation. For some, the disruption caused by the pandemic seemed to have lasting effects on their capacity to reintegrate into the school setting. This pupil's account adds depth to the broader themes emerging from the study, particularly those related to mental health challenges, disrupted routines, and reduced motivation. The feeling of being overwhelmed by academic demands—expressed through the mention of “100 missing assignments”—illustrates how quickly pupils can fall behind in remote learning environments, and how this can escalate into significant emotional distress. It also highlights a perceived lack of adequate support structures to help students manage their workload and re-engage after periods of absence or disengagement. In the context of this study, the comment reinforces the idea that for some pupils, the impact of the pandemic extended beyond temporary disruption and resulted in lasting psychological and behavioral effects. The loss of routine, previously cited by participants as a key factor in declining attendance, is echoed here in the student's struggle to keep up with expectations, suggesting that post-lockdown reintegration was not simply an academic issue, but a deeply personal and emotional challenge.

Moreover, this quote exemplifies how mental health and motivation are interconnected. The stress and emotional breakdown described here are not only responses to academic pressure but also potential contributors to ongoing absenteeism. When students feel overwhelmed and unsupported, motivation to attend and participate in school can deteriorate rapidly. This aligns with wider research and responses in your study indicating that some pupils no longer feel emotionally equipped to cope with the demands of full-time education. Ultimately, this insight underlines the importance of compassionate, flexible reintegration strategies that account for emotional readiness, not just academic performance. It also highlights the need for schools to build systems of early intervention that identify students at risk of disengagement due to emotional overwhelm, and to create a culture where asking for help is normalised and supported.

Others mentioned heightened anxiety, fatigue, or feelings of disconnection, which they linked to the extended period of remote learning. These responses echo the findings of Havik and Ingul (2022), who contend that re-engaging students in full-time education after prolonged absences necessitates targeted support that addresses emotional and psychological barriers, not solely academic ones. In contrast, among students who reported no change in attendance, prevalent themes included a strong sense of routine, family support, and personal motivation. These students frequently cited external structures or personal habits that facilitated a smoother transition back to regular school attendance. This is consistent with research by Cook et al. (2017), which indicates that protective factors such as consistent parental involvement and school connectedness are crucial predictors of attendance stability. The diversity in student responses highlights the necessity for more tailored attendance strategies in the post-pandemic context. A uniform approach may fail to consider the specific and individualised factors contributing to the inconsistent attendance of some students, while others manage to attend regularly. These insights emphasise the need to persist in tracking attendance patterns in conjunction with student feedback, especially for those still facing the lingering impacts of the pandemic on their educational involvement.

When students were asked to elaborate on whether their attendance had changed since schools fully reopened after the pandemic, their responses revealed a variety of complex and interconnected factors. These responses were thematically categorised into groups such as medical, mental health/wellbeing, no change, and external enforcement (e.g., parental influence), offering a more profound understanding of the diverse experiences that affect post-pandemic attendance. Students citing medical reasons frequently mentioned an increased incidence of illness, indicating a heightened physical vulnerability or possibly a greater awareness and caution regarding health following COVID. Statements like “I kept getting ill” and “more illnesses” demonstrate how recurring sickness continues to hinder attendance. This trend corresponds with national statistics reported by the Department for Education (2023), which identified illness as the primary cause of absenteeism in the post-pandemic period. A considerable number of students linked their change in attendance to concerns regarding mental health or wellbeing. They noted heightened anxiety, reduced tolerance, and a worsening emotional state intensified by lockdown, with remarks such as “mental issues and tolerance got worse” and “more anxious and really don’t like school.” These comments corroborate the expanding body of research suggesting that the pandemic has had a lasting effect on the mental health of young individuals (Cunningham, Harvey & Waite, 2022), which, in turn, is affecting school attendance.

Interestingly, a subset of students reported no change in their attendance. Their explanations — such as “I have always loved school” or “Covid didn’t really affect my

school absences” — imply a sense of resilience or stability, either in their attitudes towards education or in the support systems around them. These students may represent a demographic for whom school remained a source of routine and security, rather than disruption. Collectively, these results demonstrate that post-pandemic school attendance is influenced by a complex interaction of health, emotional wellbeing, personal attitudes, and family dynamics. This intricacy emphasises the necessity for comprehensive, student-focused attendance strategies that extend beyond mere monitoring to encompass personalised support and proactive intervention.

4.3 Staff Findings

The staff questionnaire was distributed exclusively to senior and middle leaders within the school, which may have influenced the nature of the responses gathered. As illustrated in Figure 19, there is a noticeable variation in response rates between these two management levels, suggesting possible differences in engagement, availability, or perceived relevance of the questionnaire among the leadership tiers.

Fig. 10 The role of staff members who completed the questionnaire
(taken from the questionnaire)

Pupils' attendance before the Covid-19 Pandemic

The first question explored whether staff perceived variations in pupil attendance across different year groups within the school. Responses were coded into two distinct categories, as shown in the table below. Notably, one assistant headteacher based their response on observations from Post-16 provision (Key Stage 5), specifically Year 12 and Year 13 students. As the scope of this research is limited to pupils in Years 7 to 11, this response falls outside the defined parameters and has therefore been excluded from the coding process. This decision ensures consistency in the data analysis and maintains the focus on the target cohort. The findings align with Zubrick's (2014) assertion that school attendance tends to decline from primary to secondary education. Staff responses indicated a clear downward trend in attendance from Year 7 through to Year 11, reinforcing existing literature on this issue. The subsequent question examined whether staff perceived differences in attendance between pupils eligible for eFSM and those who are not. Responses were again coded, resulting in two distinct categories, as

presented in the table below. This approach facilitates a comparative analysis of staff perceptions regarding socio-economic disparities in school attendance.

The feedback from staff members showcased a variety of viewpoints concerning the relationship between eFSM eligibility and student attendance. Numerous staff echoed the conclusions of existing research, including that of the Welsh Department for Education (2010), which emphasises the correlation between lower household income and obstacles to consistent school attendance. These staff members endorsed the perspective that pupils eligible for eFSM frequently encounter structural and socio-economic difficulties that can adversely impact their attendance. Nevertheless, not all feedback conformed to this narrative. Some staff articulated a more nuanced perspective, proposing that attendance is influenced more by personal circumstances than by eFSM status alone. One staff member remarked, 'I believe pupils who receive free school meals tend to have better attendance.' School can serve as a secure environment for these individuals and provide a hot meal, underscoring the potentially stabilising influence of school for certain eFSM pupils. In contrast, other responses were more definitive, with assertions such as 'eFSM attendance is lower' and mentions of measurable disparities, including a 9-percentage point attendance gap between eFSM and non-eFSM pupils. These observations corroborate the findings of the Wales Children, Young People and Education Committee (2022), which indicated that attendance for the academic year was greater among pupils not eligible for eFSM (93.1%) compared to those who were eligible (86.9%). The variety of staff responses illustrates both the intricacy of the issue and the necessity of considering both systemic trends and individual differences when analysing attendance patterns.

The next question asked staff whether there was a difference in the attendance of pupils who have ALN and those who do not. Again, the answers were coded into two categories as shown in the table below.

Codes	Yes	No	Unsure
% of staff responses per code	10%	80%	10%

Table. 7 Coded answers to staff questionnaire- question: ‘Is there a difference in the attendance of pupils who have ALN compared to those who are not? Please explain your answer. ’
(taken from the questionnaire)

The findings in this section were similarly varied, reflecting a lack of consensus among staff regarding the relationship between ALN (Additional Learning Needs) and pupil attendance. One respondent was uncertain about whether a meaningful difference exists, while another perceived a noticeable difference. The majority, however, suggested that there is no significant disparity, with comments such as ‘no—in my experience ALN has very good attendance’ and ‘I feel these pupils have better attendance if they are in the correct class and not overwhelmed.’ Another staff member noted that ‘currently, there is not a significant trend here,’ suggesting that while some pupils with ALN may struggle with attendance, these issues do not appear to follow a consistent or identifiable pattern at School A. This could indicate that the attendance of pupils with ALN is highly individualised and influenced more by the specific nature of their needs and the quality of support provided, rather than their ALN status alone. It may also reflect the school’s efforts to implement inclusive practices or tailored interventions that mitigate potential attendance barriers for this group. However, this observation warrants further investigation, as the absence of a clear trend does not necessarily mean an absence of need—it may instead highlight the complex and variable nature of how additional learning needs intersect with school engagement and attendance.

However, IDP needs vary widely from pupil to pupil,’ highlighting the heterogeneity within the ALN population. These staff perspectives align with the findings of Totsika et al. (2023), whose research concluded that in the year following the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic, there was limited evidence of widespread attendance issues among pupils with neurodevelopmental disorders and/or intellectual disabilities. The responses underscore the importance of considering individual circumstances and support structures in place for ALN pupils, rather than assuming uniform trends in attendance across this group.

The next question asked staff to describe the attendance of pupils before the Covid-19 pandemic. The answers were coded as shown in the table below.

Codes	Positive	Negative
% of staff responses per code	90%	10%

Table. 8 Coded answers to staff questionnaire- question: ‘How would you describe the attendance of pupils before the Covid-19 pandemic?’

(taken from the questionnaire)

The first response—‘comparable with county average’—suggests that attendance levels at the school were viewed positively, particularly in relation to similar schools within the local authority. This comparative framing indicates a perceived alignment with broader regional standards. Other responses categorised as positive further reinforced this view, with descriptors such as ‘good’, and references to pre-Covid conditions where ‘attendance was significantly better’ and ‘percentage attendance was significantly higher in general, with an average across the school of approximately 94%.’ These responses highlight a general perception among staff that historical attendance rates were strong, particularly prior to the disruptions caused by the Covid-19 pandemic. The emphasis on pre-pandemic data also suggests that staff may view current attendance challenges as part of a broader national trend rather than issues specific to their school context.

Engagement with online learning

The following question asked staff to reflect on pupil engagement with online learning during the Covid-19-related lockdowns. Their responses were coded into key themes, which are presented in the table below. This data provides insight into how effectively students adapted to remote education, as perceived by school leadership, and offers a lens through which to assess the broader impact of school closures on pupil learning and participation.

Codes	Positive Engagement	Negative Engagement	Mixed Engagement
% of staff responses per code	0%	40%	60%

Table. 9 Coded answers to staff questionnaire- question: ‘How would you describe pupil engagement with online learning during the pandemic related lockdowns?’

(taken from the questionnaire)

Staff feedback concerning student involvement in online education throughout the Covid-19 lockdowns exhibited significant diversity, showcasing a broad range of experiences within the school community. Some staff characterised engagement as ‘poor’ and conveyed their disappointment, pointing out that while attendance rates may have approached pre-pandemic figures, the quality of student participation during remote learning did not meet expectations. This perception of largely negative engagement is a shocking finding, especially given the considerable effort invested in delivering high-quality remote education. Conversely, others presented a more nuanced

perspective, recognising that although the school’s offerings were labeled as ‘excellent,’ student engagement remained erratic—‘good at best’—with those who engaged benefiting from high-quality instruction, yet a considerable number did not participate.

Numerous staff members pointed out structural obstacles that contributed to this inconsistency. One respondent mentioned challenges such as lack of access to digital devices, absence of home routines, and limited parental support as significant factors impeding engagement. Another highlighted the existence of a 'notable socio-economic divide,' indicating that students from underprivileged backgrounds were disproportionately impacted. In many cases, the lack of appropriate technology, the absence of strict routines or guidelines at home, and parental perceptions that online learning was not as important as in-person schooling all appeared to contribute to disengagement. These factors suggest that despite staff perceptions, the school’s remote learning provision may not have been as effective or accessible as intended, potentially contributing to the low levels of engagement observed. Throughout the responses, common themes included low motivation, inadequate parental assistance, digital exclusion, and a lack of structure during lockdown—all of which mirror broader issues identified in national studies on remote learning during the pandemic. These findings raise a number of difficult questions, particularly due to my position as a researcher within this context. My dual role as both an insider and an investigator brings with it a degree of subjectivity that must be acknowledged. While this positionality grants deeper insight into the school’s dynamics, it also necessitates careful reflection on how my perspectives, relationships, and assumptions may have shaped the collection and interpretation of staff feedback.

The final question asked staff whether they felt there has been a change in attendance since schools have fully reopened following the Covid-19 related lockdowns.

Codes	Yes	No
% of staff responses per code	100%	0%

Table. 10 Coded answers to staff questionnaire question: ‘Would you say there has been a change in attendance since schools have fully reopened following the Covid-19 related lockdowns? Please explain. ’
(taken from the questionnaire)

All staff respondents agreed that school attendance patterns have shifted since the reopening of schools following the Covid-19 pandemic and associated lockdowns. While

there was consensus that a negative change had occurred, the explanations provided revealed a range of contributing factors, reflecting the complexity and multifaceted nature of the issue. Several staff pointed to broader societal shifts as influencing attendance trends. One highlighted factors such as 'hybrid working, high anxiety, and poor motivation,' suggesting that changes in family dynamics and work patterns may have altered perceptions of school attendance. Another staff member described the decline as part of a national issue, stating, 'Generally, attendance is poor. This is a national issue affecting all schools,' pointing to systemic rather than school-specific challenges. Others focused on evolving parental attitudes and pupil wellbeing. Parental perceptions towards school attendance appear to have shifted significantly in the aftermath of the Covid-19 pandemic. Several staff members noted a growing tendency among some parents to view school as a more flexible space, where attendance is no longer regarded as essential on a daily basis. This change in attitude has led to increasing numbers of parents requesting blended or remote learning options, particularly when their child is experiencing low-level illness, anxiety, or general disengagement. One staff member commented that certain parents now actively support keeping their children at home and expect the school to continue providing remote education as a standard alternative. This expectation has placed increasing pressure on schools to adapt their provision, despite government guidance reinforcing that learning should primarily take place in person. As a result, schools have found themselves needing to reassert the importance of physical attendance and re-establish clear boundaries around what constitutes legitimate absence.

Concurrently, staff observed a noticeable rise in school refusal and anxiety-related absences, suggesting that these are becoming more prominent and normalised post-pandemic. One participant remarked that "wellbeing or school phobia has increased as a reason for long-term absence," indicating that emotional and mental health concerns are now more frequently cited as barriers to attendance. This may be partly driven by increased awareness and openness around mental health, but also reflects the ongoing psychological impact of prolonged school closures, disrupted routines, and the loss of social connectedness experienced during lockdowns. Collectively, these trends highlight the complex and evolving landscape of school attendance, where schools must now navigate not only logistical and academic challenges, but also changing cultural and emotional dynamics within the wider school community. A member of the senior leadership team provided a more data-driven reflection, describing an approximate 8 percentage point drop in overall attendance since the pandemic and identifying significant rises in anxiety-related absences and elective home education. This aligns with national concerns, as the respondent noted that declining attendance has become both an Estyn recommendation and a strategic priority for secondary schools across Wales. These varied perspectives illustrate the breadth of factors influencing post-pandemic attendance and support wider research findings that highlight increased

anxiety, shifts in family expectations, and growing numbers of pupils transitioning to home education as key post-Covid trends.

4.4

Following the staff questionnaires, attendance records for the 17 selected pupils were analysed using data from the school's SIMS system, covering Year 7 (2019/20) to Year 11 (2023/24). This allowed for a longitudinal view of attendance patterns, shown in Figure 11. Notably, 16 of the 17 pupils showed a decline in attendance post-Covid compared to pre-pandemic levels. This supports Estyn's (2024) findings that School Attendance Problems (SAPs) have worsened since the pandemic and aligns with national concerns about rising absenteeism, reinforcing the view that Covid-19 has had a lasting impact on pupil attendance.

Fig. 11 Pupil attendance from Year 7 to Year 11
(results taken from the school's data system- SIMS)

The attendance data of the 17 pupils in this study reflects national trends of declining attendance from primary to secondary school. Pupils 4, 10, 14, and 16 showed sharp declines between Year 7 and Year 11, with Pupil 4's attendance falling from 63.93% to 24.76%. This supports Zubrick's (2014) findings of falling engagement over time. Notably, eFSM pupils (e.g., 6, 14, 16) experienced significant drops, echoing Welsh Government (2023) data showing persistent absence has more than doubled among this group since 2018/19. This aligns with research linking low SES and household unemployment to chronic absenteeism (Tomaszewski et al., 2022; Mooney et al., 2022; Balfanz et al., 2012), underlining the impact of socio-economic disadvantage. ALN pupils in the sample also showed consistent declines, supporting Estyn (2024) and Kouroupa et al. (2023), who highlight how Covid-19 disruptions particularly affected pupils with neurodevelopmental conditions. Gender differences were minimal, though only one female improved and one male remained stable, with all others declining—consistent with Welsh Government (2024) data on rising persistent absence across all levels of SEN/ALN provision.

The sample also highlighted patterns of both consistent and changing attendance. Pupils 3, 4, and 17 began secondary school with low attendance and remained persistently absent, despite pre-pandemic interventions. Others, like pupils 1, 13, and 15, entered with high attendance (>95%) but still experienced post-pandemic decline, though less severely. These findings reinforce the wide-reaching impact of Covid-19 on attendance. The shift to remote learning amplified existing inequalities—especially the digital divide—leaving pupils from low-income families disproportionately affected. Inconsistent access to devices, connectivity, and home support hindered their engagement. Mental health also emerged as a key barrier, with increased anxiety,

isolation, and emotional stress impacting participation both during and after lockdowns. The loss of routine, reduced motivation, and challenges of self-directed learning contributed to widespread disengagement. Overall, the pandemic exposed critical vulnerabilities in the education system, highlighting the urgent need for targeted strategies addressing digital access, mental health, and socio-economic inequality to improve long-term attendance.

Chapter 5: Conclusion

This study set out to explore the factors contributing to declining attendance in a large secondary school in rural Wales (School A), with a particular focus on the perspectives of staff, parents, and pupils. Through the analysis of school attendance data and the findings from questionnaires, the research also aimed to evaluate the impact of Covid-19, explore differences between key pupil groups (eFSM, non-eFSM, ALN, non-ALN), and identify attitudinal changes in the school community following the pandemic. The research reveals that the Covid-19 pandemic had a profound and lasting impact on pupil attendance at School A. Comparison of attendance data from before, during, and after the pandemic clearly shows that current attendance figures have not returned to pre-pandemic levels. This trend is particularly pronounced among pupils eligible for eFSM and those with ALN, indicating that existing educational inequalities have been exacerbated.

The perspectives of staff, parents, and pupils highlighted a range of interrelated factors contributing to this decline. These included mental health and well-being concerns, illness, term-time holidays, family emergencies, and school refusal. Importantly, structural and environmental barriers were consistently mentioned—such as lack of access to digital devices, absence of routines or guidance at home, and reduced

parental capacity to support learning. Additionally, many parents were perceived to undervalue online learning, which may have contributed to a shift in how school attendance is viewed. One of the most striking findings was the widespread view among staff that student engagement during remote learning was poor. Despite efforts to maintain high standards of provision, this perceived lack of engagement was described as disappointing and even shocking by some. These insights suggest that, although staff believed the remote learning offer was strong, it may not have met the needs of all learners—especially those facing socio-economic challenges. This raises critical questions about the actual effectiveness and inclusivity of the school's pandemic response.

Moreover, the study found evidence of an attitudinal shift post-pandemic, with staff observing that some pupils and families no longer see regular school attendance as essential. This shift appears to be influenced by the long period of disrupted routines, reduced accountability during lockdown, and a lingering perception that online learning was a temporary alternative rather than an integral part of education. In answering the research question, the study concludes that the decline in attendance figures at School A is influenced by a combination of personal, structural, and cultural factors. These are shaped by both pre-existing inequalities and the long-term consequences of the Covid-19 pandemic. To address these challenges, School A must continue to implement the Welsh Government's recommendations, including the appointment of an Educational Welfare Officer and Family Engagement Officer. Interventions should be tailored to the specific needs of pupils, with early identification of well-being and support needs. A collaborative approach between schools, families, and external agencies remains essential, alongside investment in pastoral care and reintegration programmes. Building stronger links with feeder primary schools and fostering trust with families may also help shift attitudes and improve long-term attendance. Ultimately, this research highlights that improving attendance in a post-pandemic context requires more than policy compliance—it demands a nuanced, empathetic understanding of the lived realities of pupils, staff, and parents in rural Welsh communities.

5.1 Research Limitations

There were several limitations to this research, beginning with potential participant refusal or non-participation. As one of the primary methods used was questionnaires, the success of this tool depended on completion rates, the quality of responses, and the honesty of participants (Denscombe, 2010). Participants could not be coerced into completing them (Cohen et al., 2018). Despite this, the questionnaires were vital in understanding perspectives on attendance and, alongside school data, informed final recommendations for improving pupil attendance at School A. Without sufficient responses, the findings would have been limited.

Purposive sampling—where participants are selected based on specific characteristics—was used to gather focused insights. While useful, this method risks bias, as it relies on the researcher’s judgment and may not reflect the wider population (Palinkas, 2015). As an educator at School A, my familiarity with its systems and staff-pupil relationships may have influenced participant selection. Additionally, purposive sampling often targets specific groups, which, although insightful, may not capture broader trends (Andrade, 2021). Therefore, while this approach provided valuable qualitative data, it is important to acknowledge its limitations, disclosed selection criteria, and avoided overgeneralising findings.

5.2 Implications for future research

This research provides significant insights into the intricate factors that contribute to the decline in attendance at a rural secondary school in Wales. Nonetheless, it also prompts several critical questions that require further exploration. Future studies could build upon this work by examining how these trends appear in various educational environments—such as urban institutions, Welsh-medium schools, or post-16 education providers—to determine if analogous patterns and obstacles are present across different contexts. Comparative analyses between rural and urban schools, or among various regions of Wales, could shed light on how geographical, socio-economic, and cultural elements affect attendance.

Moreover, longitudinal studies that monitor attendance and engagement over time would be particularly beneficial in comprehending the enduring impacts of the pandemic on school culture and student behavior. Additional qualitative research could also investigate the viewpoints of specific student demographics—especially those with ALN or from economically disadvantaged backgrounds (eFSM)—to gain a deeper understanding of their experiences and the challenges they encounter in maintaining consistent attendance. There is also potential to explore the implications of digital exclusion more comprehensively, particularly regarding how access to technology and digital literacy among families continues to influence educational engagement over the long term. Lastly, future research could assess the effectiveness of particular interventions—such as pastoral support programs, reintegration strategies, or the implementation of Family Engagement Officers—to establish a more robust evidence base for policy and practice. Collectively, these research directions could lead to a more focused and inclusive strategy for addressing attendance challenges, ensuring that approaches are attuned to the complex realities of schools and communities throughout Wales.

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Appendices

Appendix A Questionnaire for Pupils, Parents and Staff

Questionnaire for Pupils

Questionnaire for Parents

Questionnaire for Staff

Appendix B

Attendance of eFSM pupils

(results taken from the school's data system- SIMS)

Attendance of pupils with ALN

(results taken from the school's data system- SIMS)

Attendance of Female pupils

(results taken from the school's data system- SIMS)

Attendance of Male pupils

(results taken from the school's data system- SIMS)