



University of Wales Trinity Saint David Birmingham

Module: Digital Skills and Research Methods

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

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1. Introducing the Research Paper and Topic (≈350 words)

This report examines the study by McDonald, Lester and Michelson (2022), titled '*She didn't know how to go back*': School attendance problems in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic – A multiple stakeholder qualitative study with parents and professionals. It was published in the *British Journal of Educational Psychology*, Volume 93, Issue 1, pages 386–401.

This research grew from major shared concerns across education, health and social care once schools fully reopened after COVID-19 restrictions. Before the pandemic, roughly 10% of primary pupils and 15% of secondary pupils in England were recorded as persistently absent (Department for Education, 2022). By the 2021–2022 academic year, official government data showed this figure had risen to nearly 25% of all pupils – and over 40% for children with special educational needs or disabilities (SEND).

Earlier research on attendance focused only on the views of schools or only spoke to families. Very little work brought together parents, teachers, health staff and social care workers to compare their perspectives. This project was designed to fill that gap. It explores what made it hard for children to return to school, how different professional groups understood these struggles, and what forms of support worked best. The study was carried out across Brighton & Hove, East Sussex and West Sussex.

This topic is highly important for UK health and social care. Regular school attendance is a key marker of children's wellbeing, and supports physical health, social development and long-term life chances (Gray, 2020). Long gaps from education can worsen anxiety, increase social isolation, and prevent vulnerable children and families from accessing targeted support. It also links directly to duties under the *Children Act 2004* and *Care Act 2014*, which require health, social care and education services to work together to safeguard children and promote their welfare (HM Government, 2014). Understanding these challenges helps professionals design better joined-up support for children and their careers.

2. Purpose and Research Questions (≈100 words)

The main aims of this research were:

- To explore how changes during the pandemic affected children's ability to return to regular school attendance
- To identify the underlying reasons attendance problems became more severe
- To find out what support approaches worked well, and where services needed improvement

The three key research questions were:

6. What challenges do children and their families face when trying to re-establish regular school attendance?
7. How do parents, school staff, health workers and social care professionals perceive and respond to these challenges?
8. What changes to practice, policy or support would most help children and families settle back into education?

3. Understanding the Research Methods (≈780 words)

3.1 Types of Research Methods

There are three core approaches to research used across health and social care (Creswell, 2021):

- **Quantitative research:** Focuses on numerical data, statistics and measurement to identify patterns, trends or relationships between variables. It answers questions such as “how many?” or “what is the scale of the issue?” (Sargeant, 2020).
- **Qualitative research:** Explores people’s experiences, feelings, perspectives and meanings, using non-numerical data. It answers questions such as “why?” and “how do people experience this?” (Gray, 2020).
- **Mixed-methods research:** Combines both quantitative and qualitative approaches to build a more complete understanding of a topic, using numbers to show scale and personal accounts to explain context (Morse and Niehaus, 2016).

This study uses **qualitative research**, because the researchers wanted to understand the complex human and practical reasons behind attendance struggles, rather than measure national trends.

3.2 Primary and Secondary Data

- **Primary data:** New, original information collected directly by researchers specifically for their study (Sargeant, 2020).
- **Secondary data:** Existing information gathered by other people or organisations, such as official statistics, past research papers or government reports (Creswell, 2021).

This research uses **primary data only** – all information was collected directly from participants for this specific study.

3.3 Research Design and Sampling

The study used a **multiple stakeholder qualitative design**, with two stages of data collection:

9. First, 29 parents/carers and 19 professionals completed an online survey with open-ended questions.
10. Then, 10 parents and 12 professionals took part in longer, one-to-one semi-structured interviews.

In total 70 people participated, including parents, class teachers, Special Educational Needs Coordinators (SENCOs), attendance officers, educational psychologists and Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS) staff. Participants were chosen because they had direct experience supporting children struggling with school attendance after the pandemic.

3.4 Data Collection

The researchers used **semi-structured methods**: they had a clear list of topics to cover but let participants speak freely about what mattered most to them, rather than following a rigid script. All sessions were held online or over the phone to keep people safe and comfortable during ongoing public health restrictions.

Full ethical approval was granted by the university research ethics committee. All participants gave informed consent, all personal details and locations were anonymised, and people could withdraw from the study at any time without giving a reason – important rules to protect vulnerable participants (British Psychological Society, 2021).

3.5 Data Analysis

The researchers used **thematic analysis**, a standard method for making sense of qualitative data (Braun and Clarke, 2022):

11. Every response was read multiple times to become familiar with the content
12. Important ideas and comments were labelled with short, clear codes
13. Related codes were grouped together to form five key themes:
 - Fears about illness, separation from family and adjusting to new routines
 - Lost confidence and reduced social skills after long periods away from school
 - Misaligned priorities: schools focused on attendance rules while health and social care teams focused on wellbeing
 - Long waiting times for specialist support and poor communication between services
 - What helped children settle back: gradual returns, home visits and shared decision-making
14. Two researchers analysed the data separately and compared findings, to reduce personal bias and improve reliability.

3.6 Strengths and Limitations

- **Strengths:** Brings together perspectives from many different roles; captures real lived experience; offers practical recommendations for service improvement.
- **Limitations:** Only recruited participants from southern England; most focused on primary-age children; findings cannot be generalised to the whole UK or all age groups.

4. Conclusion and Reflection (≈250 words)

Summary

This study shows that post-pandemic attendance problems were caused by a mix of children's personal worries, practical barriers, and gaps in how different services worked together. The

most effective support was flexible, put children's wellbeing first, and involved listening to families rather than enforcing strict rules immediately.

Reflection

Completing this report has helped me clearly distinguish between different research methods and understand why choosing the right approach changes what you can learn. I now see that statistics alone cannot explain the human impact of challenges like school absence – and that good research needs to centre the voices of the people most affected. I have also learned how important ethical rules are for keeping people safe and building trust.

For my future career in health and social care, these skills will help me read research and official reports critically, so I can make sure my practice is based on reliable evidence. I will also remember the value of listening to service users and their families, and work to build better communication between health, social care and education teams.

Reference List (UWTSD Harvard Style)

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