

RESEARCH ARTICLE

‘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’

Research Report



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1. Introduction and Topic Development

The research paper chosen for this report is “She Didn't Know How to Go Back: School Attendance Issues During the COVID-19 Pandemic, A Multiple Stakeholder Qualitative Study with Parents and Professionals.” Brontë McDonald, Kathryn J. Lester, and Daniel Michelson authored the study, which was published in the British Journal of Educational Psychology in 2023. The article was accepted in 2022, but published in the 2023 volume of the journal.

The study examines the issues of school attendance problems (SAPs) among primary school children after the disruption of the COVID-19 pandemic. Many schools were closed for extended periods during the pandemic, and when they reopened, many children had difficulty attending regularly (Ashikkali, et al., 2020). The researchers investigated why these attendance challenges arise and what kinds of supports might be helpful to children and families in addressing these challenges.

The research was conducted with primary school-aged children who were having difficulties with attendance, their parents, and professionals working in educational settings, including teachers, headteachers, educational psychologists, and mental health practitioners. The researchers sought to obtain a wider perspective on the factors affecting school attendance following the pandemic by gathering feedback from various stakeholder groups (Braun, et al., 2020).

This topic is significant in the UK as good attendance is strongly associated with children's educational outcomes, emotional health, social development, and future opportunities. Long-term absenteeism can lead to lower academic achievement, mental health issues, and social isolation. The COVID-19 pandemic added to the difficulties faced by children, particularly those with anxiety disorders and special educational needs (SEN). It is important to recognize these challenges to be able to create effective support systems in education, health, and social care services. The results can inform schools, families, and policymakers to enhance attendance support and mitigate the long-term impact of school disruption due to the pandemic.

2. Understanding the Purpose and Research Question

The primary objective of the study was to gain insight into the emergence of school attendance issues among primary school children during and following the COVID-19 pandemic and to identify effective community-based interventions that can help families affected by these

issues. The researchers wanted to investigate the factors that contribute to school attendance problems, the formal and informal support already in place, the effectiveness of this support, and what further interventions might enhance school attendance. The study also asked parents and educational professionals for suggestions on future services and supports for children who have attendance issues (Crawley, et al., 2020).

3. Research Methods

Research methods are the way in which researchers gather and analyze information. The three types of research are quantitative research, qualitative research, and mixed methods research.

Quantitative research is based on numbers and statistics. Quantitative researchers gather data from instruments like questionnaires with predetermined answers, experiments, and surveys that yield quantitative data. This is helpful when researchers are looking for patterns, relationships, or trends with numbers (Gale, et al., 2013).

Qualitative research is about people's experiences, opinions, perceptions, and behaviours. Interviews, open-ended surveys, observations, and discussions are common methods of data collection. Qualitative research does not yield numerical outcomes, but rather detailed descriptions and an understanding of social phenomena (Fletcher, 2016).

Mixed-methods research is a combination of quantitative and qualitative research. Numerical data and descriptive data are gathered by the researchers to have a better understanding of the research problem.

McDonald et al. employed a qualitative research method in the main. The researchers wanted to learn about parents' and professionals' experiences and views on school attendance issues after the COVID-19 pandemic. The study was designed to investigate feelings, experiences, explanations, and recommendations, not numerical relationships, so a qualitative approach was deemed most appropriate.

The study was conducted in two phases, a sequential design:

In Phase 1, the researchers sent out qualitative surveys to parents and professionals. These surveys included open-ended questions where the respondents could write in their answers. The data gathered in this stage enabled researchers to identify issues of importance in school attendance.

The researchers used semi-structured interviews in Phase 2 with selected participants. The questions for the interviews were designed on the basis of the results of the first phase. The semi-structured interviews enabled participants to provide more detailed accounts of their experiences, while also ensuring that important topics were addressed. The interviews addressed topics of child anxiety, parental reactions, school support, family-school communication, and potential intervention strategies.

The study included parents of primary school children with attendance issues and professionals in educational settings. Twenty-nine parents and 19 professionals took part in Phase 1. In Phase 2, 10 parents and 12 professionals took part in interviews. Southern England was used as the recruitment area, and participants were recruited via social media, schools, local authorities, and professional networks.

One of the key points of research methodology is to know the difference between primary and secondary data collection. Primary data are data that are gathered firsthand by the researchers for the study at hand. These include surveys, interviews, focus groups, and observations. Secondary data is data that has already been collected by others and is available for researchers to analyze, for example, government reports, published articles, databases, or organizational records.

The researchers used primary data collection in this research since they collected data directly from parents and professionals. The primary sources of data were qualitative surveys and semi-structured interviews, as they were based on the first-hand experiences and opinions of the participants. There were no secondary data sources used as primary sources of evidence (Cook, et al., 2017).

The first way of data collection was qualitative surveys. Parents were asked questions regarding their child's attendance challenges prior to and during the pandemic, their attitudes towards school attendance, why their child was having attendance issues, and the support they received. Professionals were asked about high-risk groups, factors that lead to attendance issues, examples of good practice, and areas for improvement. These were open-ended questions and yielded rich descriptive information.

Semi-structured interviews were the second data collection technique. The interviews were conducted by phone or Zoom, were about 45 to 60 minutes in length, and were recorded and transcribed. This approach allowed participants to share their experiences in detail and for researchers to delve into issues that arose during the survey phase.

Thematic framework analysis was used to analyze the data. This is a qualitative analysis technique that seeks to uncover patterns, themes, and meanings in textual data. The researchers read the survey and interview responses repeatedly to become familiar with the responses. They then created a preliminary coding structure that was derived from the research questions and ideas that arose from the data. Responses were clustered into categories, and general themes were developed. The coding framework was continually reviewed and refined throughout the process.

Three main themes emerged from the analysis: factors that contribute to school attendance issues, actions taken in response to school attendance issues, and areas for further support. The researchers identified factors within these themes, including anxiety, special educational needs, challenges to new school routines, worries about academic progress, the need for home-school partnership, and the need for early intervention and better support services (Kalvin, et al., 2021).

The overall qualitative methodology allowed the researchers to obtain a detailed understanding of the experiences of families and professionals. Both surveys and interviews yielded rich data that helped to explain the complex factors that affect school attendance issues in the post-pandemic period and to inform recommendations for future support services.

4. Conclusion

This report reviews the research article by McDonald, Lester, and Michelson on school attendance issues for primary school children during and after the COVID-19 pandemic. The study identified a number of factors that affected attendance, such as anxiety, special educational needs, disruption to school routines, concerns about school performance, and communication issues between schools and families. The researchers also highlighted the value of good working relationships between parents and schools, early intervention, peer support, and better support for children with special educational needs.

The research method adopted was qualitative, with primary data gathered using an open-ended survey and semi-structured interviews. Thematic framework analysis was used to identify key themes and patterns within participants' experiences. The approach enabled the researchers to understand in detail the difficulties experienced by children, parents, and professionals throughout the pandemic.

Through this research, I have learned the significance of choosing the right research method to effectively answer a research question. I also gained a better understanding of qualitative research, primary data collection, and thematic analysis. The study illustrated the process of researchers investigating real-life experiences and making practical recommendations based on the experiences of the participants. The research skills I have acquired will be useful in my future studies as they will enable me to critically analyze academic literature, to understand research designs, and to apply evidence-based knowledge in my professional practice. In addition, knowledge of the various research methods will enhance my capacity to undertake independent research and make informed choices in education, health, and social care contexts.

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