

Primary school staff experiences of managing pupil attendance difficulties



Amethyst Cunningham | Dr Polly Waite | Dr Kate Harvey

Introduction

- Persistent absence from school has been shown to be a risk factor for a multitude of problems, including substance misuse and psychiatric disorders.¹
- The majority of existing research in this area investigates the entire child age span, despite findings that some specific age groups (5-6yrs & 10-11yrs) are more prone to persistent non-attendance than others.²
- School staff play an important role in bridging the “information gap” between researchers and schools in terms of intervention delivery.³

Research Questions

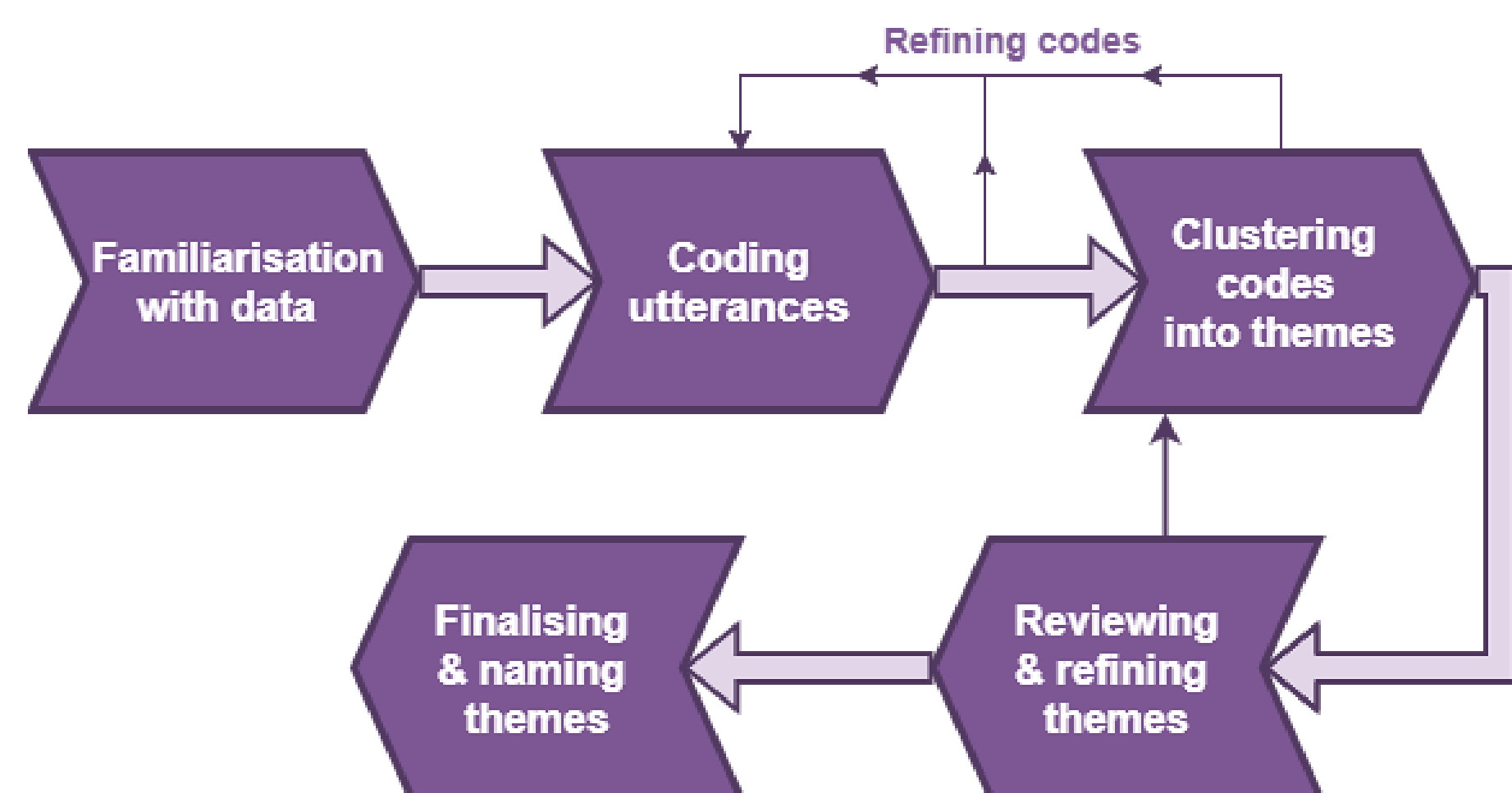
- 1) What is the impact of primary school attendance difficulty?
- 2) What are the experiences of primary school staff in relation to child attendance difficulty?
- 3) What support and interventions relating to attendance difficulty are currently available in primary schools, and are there any improvements that staff would like to see?

Method

- Participants were 8 members of primary school staff from 7 schools across England. A diverse range of current job roles and overall schooling experience were held by participants.
- Participants were interviewed either face to face or via telephone, using a semi-structured prepared topic guide.
- Interviews lasted 30-86 minutes and were audio recorded.
- Audio recordings were transcribed verbatim and anonymised prior to data analysis.

Data Analysis

Interview data was analysed qualitatively using a Thematic Analysis approach.⁴ Phases of analysis are shown below.



Contact information

- AnDY Research Clinic, School of Psychology and Clinical Language Sciences, University of Reading, Whiteknights, RG6 6AL
- Email: a.cunningham@reading.ac.uk | www.reading.ac.uk | andyresearchclinic.com

Results

Four super-ordinate themes were identified from the data, each with their own subthemes. A selection of these subthemes are represented here, along with illustrative quotes from the data.

1. Responsibility i. Parent/carer responsibility	<p>“It is parent responsibility. But if you’re working with parents who are not necessarily able to help themselves then we can help, maybe, but the main responsibility is the parents.” - Special School Primary Lead</p>
2. Vulnerabilities to Nonattendance i. Family circumstances ii. Attitude to education iii. Child socio-emotional wellbeing	<p>“I think what the big issue is ... is just this how much do we value education? I think sometimes when you’re trying to compete against families with low aspirations that’s really difficult.” - Assistant Headteacher/SENCO</p>
3. Nature & Impact of Attendance Difficulty i. Implications for schools ii. Impact on teachers	<p>“When progress is being impaired and so [non] attendance becomes a bigger issue. And not just progress academically but also in terms of pastoral relationships with their peers.” - Class Teacher</p>
4. Improving Attendance i. Preventative practice ii. Individualised approach iii. Collaboration iv. Maximising socio-emotional Wellbeing	<p>“You’ve got so much more kind of that emphasis on fun because they are still so young and they need that otherwise they wouldn’t come in. If they came in and it was dull for six hours and it was boring then they’d just completely lose the will to come in to school at all.” - Class Teacher (NQT)</p> <p>“Obviously no one knows their own child like themselves [so] to be able to have that communication with [parents] is really useful. And also you need to get them to understand why we’re doing things, you know, and what the difficulties are for them in particular.” - Specialist Teaching Assistant</p>

Discussion

- Participants felt that although multiple parties should take steps to ensuring a child’s attendance, responsibility for this is ultimately with parents/carers. This is somewhat consistent with secondary school findings⁵, although parental responsibility seemed to be highlighted more explicitly by primary school staff.
- School staff discussed a number of potentially useful approaches to dealing with non-attendance. An individualised approach focusing on understanding and targeting the unique causal circumstances for the child was deemed essential. Similarly, collaboration between all parties involved with the child is important for facilitating successful intervention.

Implications

Challenges faced around pupil attendance difficulty and solutions employed by primary school staff were identified. This may contribute to future intervention development and implementation.

References

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