

Secondary School Educational Practitioners' Experiences of School Attendance Problems and Interventions to Address them: A Qualitative Study

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BACKGROUND

- School attendance problems are associated with a range of adverse consequences in childhood and later life.
- Educational practitioners play a key role in identifying and responding to school attendance problems, yet their perspective has been overlooked.

METHODS

- Three focus groups conducted with sixteen educational practitioners from three secondary schools in South West UK. All had experience of school attendance problems.
- Semi-structured topic guide asked about practitioners' experience of, and their role in responding to school refusal, current support available and further support they would like to see.

THEMATIC RESULTS

Q1: Experiences of working with students with school attendance problems

LIMITED RESOURCES

- Attendance problems are resource intensive
- Practitioners going over and above
- Difficulties accessing support services
- Time delays are problematic
- Practitioners' influence is limited

"The teacher's going 'I'm doing this voluntarily, we're trying to help the kid, he's not buying into it'...you're wasting their time, it could be used elsewhere helping other students, doing other things."

RESILIENCE REQUIRED

- Emotionally challenging for practitioners
- Requires resilience from all stakeholders
- Attendance problems are a cycle
- Challenges of working with parents

"The levels of resilience from all the stakeholders involved in trying to get that young person back into school need to be very high, because often these plans break down and don't succeed...you have to keep going back and starting again."

ONE SIZE DOESN'T FIT ALL

- Attendance problems are diverse
- No one solution for all
- Understanding causes is important but difficult
- Concern about getting it wrong

"The frustration is that we still even, whatever you do for people, I still don't understand quite why she won't come because when she's here, she's happy and that is the problem isn't it?"

Q2: Experiences of interventions for students with school attendance problems

- Interventions must be tailored to individual needs
- Early intervention is key

ADAPTING THE SCHOOL CONTEXT

- Reduced timetabling, virtual classrooms
- Reintegration packages, home visits
- Designated point of contact at school
- Alternative educational provision
- Mixed opinions on punitive approaches

"I think that helps, if they know that they can come in and they've got a friendly greeting and not an angry miserable person who's fed up with them not being in the lesson."

PROVIDING EMOTIONAL SUPPORT

- Building child's resilience
- Mental health support where needed
- Especially at high-risk times, e.g. transition
- Some practitioners strongly emphasised pastoral support

"Explaining that they will feel those fight, flight symptoms and kind of really go into depth about that... and giving them strategies for when they are feeling that how to kind of bring that down and kind of help them to calm."

SHARED RESPONSIBILITY

- Parental support crucial
- Practitioners support parents too
- School support staff highly valued
- Teamwork essential

"There's a team thing though isn't it, so I can get them to you, and you can do your thing."

CONCLUSIONS

Findings highlight challenges for educational practitioners such as limited resources, emotional impact of attendance problems, and difficulty understanding causes. When schools implement individualised interventions at first sign of attendance problems and take a team approach, this can lead to positive outcomes.