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

RESILIENCE REQUIRED

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

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

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

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

SHARED RESPONSIBILITY

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

Q2: Experiences of interventions for students with school attendance problems

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

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.