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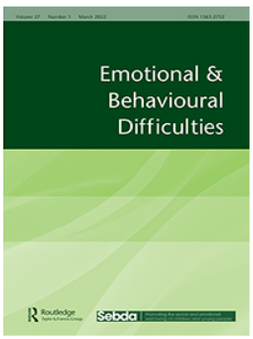

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School staffs' experiences of supporting children with school attendance difficulties in primary school: a qualitative study

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ABSTRACT

Children's absence from primary school is associated with lower attainment and social difficulties, and persistent absence at this age often continues or worsens as children progress into secondary education. It is therefore important to intervene early to interrupt this negative trajectory. This study used individual semi-structured interviews to explore the perspectives of eight members of primary school staff, who had experience supporting children with difficulty regularly attending school, from both mainstream and special primary schools in England. Data were analysed using thematic analysis. Participants perceive school non-attendance to be a complex and challenging issue that can have a significant negative impact, and can be caused and maintained by multiple factors related to the child, family and school/education. Participants believe prevention is key and identify several different social/emotional and learning-focused interventions they have used to support children to attend school regularly, with varying degrees of success. Participants emphasise that success of any intervention relies strongly on collaboration between parents, school staff and other agencies involved. Findings from this study suggest that sufficient resource, early intervention, development of a school community, collaboration with families, liaison with other professionals and targeted evidence-based strategies are all important in improving attendance in this age range.

KEYWORDS

school attendance; mental health; primary school; teachers; qualitative

Introduction

Recent Department for Education statistics reveal that, within the UK in the 2017–18 school year, 8.7% of primary school pupils (typically aged between 4 and 11 years) were classed as 'persistent absentees', defined as having missed 10% or more of possible sessions within the school year (Department for Education 2019). This is problematic as children's absence from primary (or elementary) school is associated with having lower attainment (Carroll 2010) and fewer friends than their peers (Carroll 2011), and research has identified that persistent absence starting before the age of 11 years often continues or worsens as children progress into later years of education (Schoeneberger 2012). Persistent absence in secondary school-aged children is, in turn, associated with eventual school dropout

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(Alexander, Entwisle, and Horsey 1997; Schoeneberger 2012), and problems in adulthood including employment difficulties and criminal activity (Rocque et al. 2017). It is therefore important to intervene early in order to interrupt this negative trajectory.

Recognised risk factors for school attendance difficulties in children of primary school age include individual factors such as emotional difficulties (Thornton, Darmody, and McCoy 2013; Egger, Costello, and Angold 2003) and autism (Munkhaugen et al. 2017); environmental factors such as family poverty and low socioeconomic status (Zhang 2003; Ready 2010; Thornton, Darmody, and McCoy 2013); and school factors such as bullying (Kumpulainen et al. 1998). Despite this knowledge, it is currently not clear how best to intervene and support children in primary school settings who are struggling to attend school.

Significant improvements in attendance have been demonstrated in children and young people across the age range when utilising strategies drawn from Cognitive Behaviour Therapy (CBT), particularly exposure to school and cognitive restructuring. Pina et al.'s (2009) review found that the intervention effects for the four studies that reported school attendance data post-treatment (Heyne et al. 2002; Kearney and Silverman 1999; King et al. 1998; Last, Hansen, and Franco 1998) ranged from 47% to 100% attendance, with young people attending school about 75% of time (compared to 30% at baseline). Each of these four studies included participants across both primary/elementary and secondary school age. In Australian children aged 7–14 years, Heyne et al. (2002) looked at the efficacy of offering child therapy, parent-teacher training or combined interventions, finding that all three approaches showed similar levels of significant improvement in attendance at follow-up. Heyne and colleagues attributed the relative success of all three treatment approaches to the common element of exposure across all treatments. This finding is supported in an empirical study by King et al. (1998), which concluded that their 4-week intervention based on CBT, involving coping skills development and graduated exposure to school, significantly improved attendance in persistent absentees aged 5–15 years, compared to waitlist controls. One study examined age as a moderator of treatment outcome; in Last et al.'s (1998) study involving children aged 6–17 years, they found that younger children were more likely than older children to achieve 95% attendance by post-treatment (although the age bands for these groups were not specified). Nevertheless, the large age ranges covered in these studies make it difficult to know to what extent findings can be generalised to pre-adolescent children. The focus in these studies, on clinical populations with interventions delivered by clinical professionals rather than school staff, also makes it difficult to know whether these strategies might be effectively implemented in the school environment by school staff.

School-based interventions for attendance difficulties at primary school typically involve targeting the functions of school avoidance (Kearney and Silverman 1999), through a partnership between the school and families/communities (Epstein and Sheldon 2002). This involvement of parents/carers may be particularly important within this age range where parents are likely to have great influence over their child's day-to-day attendance. Accordingly, recent CBT interventions for treating anxiety (rather than school attendance difficulties) in primary school-aged children have been demonstrated to be effective when delivered *solely* through parents (Thirlwall et al. 2013), rather than the more typical approach involving the therapist working directly with the child or young person.

The nature of attendance difficulty puts schools and their staff in an important position for early identification of children struggling to attend school, particularly in the earliest years of education, and subsequent intervention. Despite this, however, little is known about school staff's perceptions and experiences of supporting children with attendance difficulties within this age group. Finning et al. (2017) explored UK secondary school teachers' perceptions and experiences qualitatively through use of focus groups, finding that school staff often struggle to understand the causes of attendance difficulties, which they feel limits the extent to which they can intervene. Finning and colleagues concluded that education practitioners may not be fully aware of the potentially important role of school factors in non-attendance. This is in line with previous findings where teachers of children aged 12–15 years in Sweden rated school factors as one of the least

important contributors to absenteeism, behind both family and child factors (Gren-Landell et al. 2015). Findings from research investigating parent perspectives offers an interesting comparison, as parents of 10–18 year-olds in Norway emphasised the role of several school factors in attendance difficulty and felt school staff lacked the understanding required to support children struggling to attend school (Havik, Bru, and Ertesvåg 2014). This existing research into parent and teacher perspectives has focused primarily on the secondary school age group and it is unclear whether these patterns would be found when specifically considering primary school-aged children.

Understanding the perceptions and experiences of primary school staff is crucial moving forward in order to determine how best to support children struggling to attend school at this earlier stage of their education. The way that primary school staff understand and approach this issue may differ from secondary school staff. For example, children in UK primary schools typically have the same class teacher for most lessons every day across the academic year and so, compared with secondary school pupils, have a much stronger chance to develop familiarity and rapport. Consequently, it would be interesting to consider whether staff within primary schools are able to offer specific observations from their work with children who struggle to attend, that may not have been previously considered during research with secondary school staff.

The current study aims to explore primary school staffs' views and experiences of supporting children with attendance difficulties and of interventions aimed at reducing non-attendance. This research takes a qualitative approach to address its aims to investigate a complex topic that has yet to be considered in existing literature (Smith 2003).

Method

Data were collected using individual qualitative interviews in order to explore participants' views and experiences in depth (Ritchie 2003).

Participants

Eight participants from seven different schools across five English counties were recruited. Participant and school demographic characteristics can be seen in Table 1. All participants were school staff with experience of working with primary school-aged children who had some form of attendance difficulty or non-attendance. We used convenience sampling methods whilst aiming to recruit diversely across a number of participant and school characteristics to allow a large range of perspectives to be represented within the data (Mays and Pope 1995). Participants' current schools were located in a range of urban, suburban and rural locations, with size of school ranging between 42 and 652 pupils enrolled. The mean attendance figure was 94.8%; three of the schools (represented by four participants) exceeded the national average attendance figures (96%; Department for Education 2018), with the remaining four schools' attendance figures being below the national average. Participants included both junior and senior members of school staff with between 0.75 and 28 years' experience working in school settings (mean = 10.84 years).

Recruitment

Participants were identified using convenience and snowball sampling. The researcher was introduced to two participants via mutual contacts. One participant was introduced via an existing participant. Three participants responded to adverts on social media. Two participants responded to an email advert sent out to schools with existing connections to the University of Reading. Participants were not known to the researcher prior to recruitment. Participants were sent information sheets and gave written consent prior to the interview.

Table 1. Participant and associated school demographic information.

Participant pseudonym (Gender)	Current job role	Years' schooling experience	Age group (years)	Number of pupils enrolled	Type of school	Location	School attendance figure at time of participation
Mark* (M)	Yr 3 & 4 class teacher (NQT)	1	20–29	227	CofE primary, mainstream	Rural town and fringe	97.3%
Gemma* (F)	Yr 5 class teacher (NQT)	0.75	20–29	227	CofE primary, mainstream	Rural town and fringe	97.3%
Becky (F)	Yr 4 class teacher	2	20–29	42	Primary Academy, mainstream	Rural village	97.5%
Helen (F)	Assistant Headteacher/ SENCO	11	40–49	215	Community, mainstream	Urban city and town	95.4%
Jo (F)	Primary Lead (oversees education for children aged 7–11)	28	50–59	78	Non-maintained day & residential special school (ages 7–18)	Urban city and town	86.5%
Zoe (F)	Specialist Teaching Assistant	8	40–49	652	Community, mainstream	Urban city and town	94.4%
Caroline (F)	Deputy Headteacher	12	30–39	580	Academy-Converter, Mainstream	Urban major conurbation	95.8%
Paula (F)	KS1 coordinator; Foundation Stage/Year 1 class teacher	24	40–49	138	CofE, mainstream	Rural village	96.5%

M = male. *F* = female. *NQT* = Newly Qualified Teacher (qualified within the last year). *SENCO* = Special Educational Needs Co-ordinator. *Note*. Participants marked with an asterisk* are from the same school.

Procedure

Ethical approval for this project was granted by the School of Psychology and Clinical Language Sciences (PCLS) Ethics Committee at the University of Reading (including procedures for participant informed consent, audio recording and transcription of interviews, use of data for research purposes, and data confidentiality).

Initially, the project aimed to conduct focus groups, however prospective participants advised that this would be impractical to organise due to the nature of primary school work. Therefore, individual, semi-structured interviews were used to obtain in-depth understanding of participant insights. This approach was employed primarily because it was convenient for participants, but it also enabled all participants the opportunity to speak freely without being influenced by the presence of colleagues (particularly those within a more senior or junior role) (Howitt 2010). This also allowed some interviews to be conducted over the phone, extending the geographical diversity of the participants.

A topic guide (Appendix A) was developed for the study and used to guide the discussion. It comprised of open-ended questions but was used flexibly and participants were encouraged to discuss any issue they considered relevant. An initial broad question 'what does attendance difficulty look like to you?' was asked at the start of each interview to ensure that the researcher and participant had a shared understanding of 'attendance difficulty' as a concept. The topic guide was devised based on the project's research questions and findings from existing research (Arthur and Nazroo 2003), and comprised four topics: (1) presentation and impact of school attendance difficulties, (2) challenges of dealing with school attendance difficulties, (3) the support available, (4) future improvements and developments. For each topic, questions were initially broad and then narrowed down to more specific questions as the discussion progressed. At the end of each interview, the researcher checked her understanding with participants, and offered the opportunity to add any further insights they felt were relevant and had not yet been covered.

Interviews were conducted by the researcher AC, who at the time of the study was a student undertaking a MSc in Psychology. Six interviews were conducted face-to-face with participants in locations determined by participant preference, travel distance and availability of interview space; three took place in private rooms at participants' schools and three in private areas of libraries local to participants. Two interviews took place over the phone. Interviews lasted between 29.5 and 85.8 minutes (mean = 48.7 minutes), were audio recorded and later transcribed verbatim.

Data analysis

Thematic Analysis was used to create themes that accurately summarise the content of data collected (Howitt 2010). This form of analysis was chosen due to its inductive nature, meaning that themes identified were participant-driven. This was appropriate given that, based on limited existing research, there were no pre-existing conceptualisations of primary school staff's experiences (Braun and Clarke 2006).

All transcription was completed by the researcher AC, as it formed the initial stage of analyses, enabling strong familiarisation with the data (Barbour 2008), which was an important aid to later coding and themes development (Howitt 2010; Bailey 2008). The researcher then became immersed in the data through reading and re-reading interview transcripts and field notes and listening back to audio recordings. Initial observations were recorded at this stage.

Transcripts were then read line by line and utterances were assigned codes; typically a word or short phrase that the researcher felt best captured the participant's meaning. As more data were coded, initial codes were revisited and refined in ways that were felt to best interpret and represent the data. This also enabled comparison between, and consistency across, similar codes and utterances. To improve credibility of analyses, participants were re-contacted after transcription and initial coding of their data with a brief summary of the researcher's main interpretations of their contributions. This gave participants the opportunity to clarify any points and to ensure that shared understanding was achieved. This also allowed the researcher the opportunity to ask for clarification of any ambiguous data or undefined specialist language used by participants.

Semantically similar codes were then grouped together, forming themes to represent important patterns in the data. For example, 'parent communication' was grouped with 'parental engagement' at this stage to form a broader theme 'collaboration with parents'. Themes that followed similar concepts whilst remaining distinctly separate from one another were grouped together to form broader, superordinate themes with constituent subthemes. Themes were reviewed and refined through comparison with each other and comparison to the interview transcripts, original codes and field notes. Themes and codes were also discussed between researchers AC, PW (Clinical Psychologist and researcher in the field of mental health) and KH (researcher with expertise in qualitative methods) at varying points during analysis. This allowed a clearer, more credible set of themes to emerge through utilising group discussion and consolidating alternative perspectives.

The final stage of analysis involved confirmation and naming of themes and development of summaries to describe each theme. Theme names were developed with the intention of adequately capturing the specific nature of the theme whilst remaining broad enough as to encompass the full diversity of participant contributions within it. Themes were then ordered in such a way that made most narrative sense to explain the dataset.

Results

Analysis identified two themes with nine subthemes. A visual representation of the final themes can be seen in Figure 1.

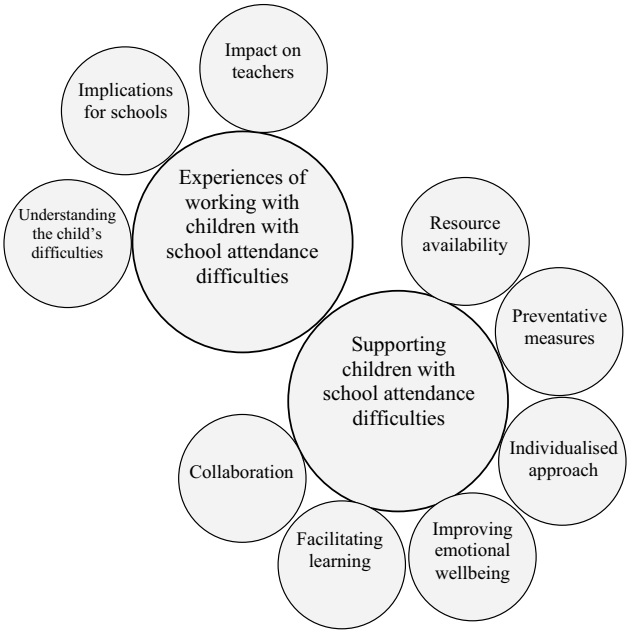

Figure 1. Thematic map showing superordinate themes and subthemes identified from analysis. Subthemes (small circles) are arranged to adjoin with their respective superordinate theme (large circles).

Experiences of working with children with school attendance difficulties

Participants spoke about how they make sense of children who struggle to attend school, as well as the negative impact this has on individual teaching staff and the school more broadly.

Understanding the child's difficulties

School staff perceive school non-attendance to be a complex issue that can be caused and maintained by multiple factors, related to the child (e.g., mental health or neurodevelopmental issues), the family (e.g., negative attitudes towards education and parental overprotection), and the school or learning environment (e.g., peer relationships or difficulties with schoolwork).

They describe how children who have difficulty attending school often struggle to get through the front door of the school building in the mornings. Zoe, a specialist Teaching Assistant, notices that these children become 'tearful' at the start of school and will complain of feeling unwell and wanting to go home. Jo, Primary Lead in a Special School, also recognises these kinds of behaviours as an indicator of anxiety around some aspect of school.

> it manifests itself differently so it can be anxiety about separation from the parent, anxiety about children in school, or having to go to the toilet at school, or eating the food in school, or not being able to do the work, or lots of stuff but it is all anxiety. (Jo, Primary Lead)

Once at school, children who have high rates of absence often seem 'unwilling' (Paula, teacher KS1) to engage with their work, could be 'dodging certain things' (Mark, newly-qualified teacher KS2) and are 'not necessarily enjoying it' (Paula, teacher KS1). In addition to this lack of interest/enjoyment and avoidance of academic work, non-attenders can be seen as 'lonely' (Zoe) or 'isolated' (Jo, Paula) in the school environment and having 'really small friendship groups' (Zoe). These factors may be both a cause and a consequence of not attending regularly, creating a vicious cycle that may be difficult to break.

Implications for schools

Non-Attendance is described as a 'resource drainer' (Jo, Primary Lead), with additional staff required to support the child.

> We have to be able to provide staff to look after those children if they're not able to come into the class or if they are finding it difficult to actually get **in** to the school building. (Zoe, Teaching Assistant)

It can reduce the number of children reaching 'age-related expectations' (Mark, Gemma) and negatively impact the school's overall progress figures (Mark, Zoe, Jo). Participants make reference to the 'the pressure of data' (Zoe, Teaching Assistant) and the strict targets schools must meet; if attendance figures are poor, this can then have negative consequences for the school, in terms of funding cuts and/or poor OFSTED ratings.

> at the end of the day schools live by their results and without good results you're gonna get OFSTED, you're gonna get governors involved, you're gonna lose funding. (Mark, newly qualified teacher KS2)

Caroline, a Deputy Head, had previously worked in a school that was since put in 'Special Measures' (OFSTED rating) 'because they just obviously couldn't deal with, you know, the attendance.'

Impact on teachers

The degree to which children's non-attendance has an emotional impact on participants is variable and notably, it does not appear to relate to factors such as years of teaching experience, age, current job role or the school's overall attendance figures. At one end of the continuum, there are participants, such as Mark, Becky, Jo and Paula, who feel it has no impact on their wellbeing or even that of other staff.

> it's not caused me any emotional or, kind of like, mental health difficulties [. . .] it's definitely not been one of my stressors this year. (Becky, teacher KS2)

In contrast, others describe the experience as an 'emotional drain' (Zoe, Teaching Assistant). In particular, teaching staff can experience frustration when children missed carefully planned teaching sessions.

> primary schools are– their timetables are just jam packed [. . .] it also means that [. . .] somebody else might have to go and do some keep ups with them. (Helen, SENCO/Assistant Head)

> I had a child who missed an assessed piece of writing the other day and you think I now can't see the progress or I'll have to get them to catch up on it but it won't be until after the weekend [. . .] it's a bit of a, yeah it's a bit annoying. (Gemma, newly qualified teacher KS2)

In addition, having to have difficult conversations with parents about their child's absence and 'dealing with irate parents' can be 'challenging' and 'the hardest part of it' (Helen, SENCO/Assistant Head).

Supporting children with school attendance difficulties

Resource availability

The availability of resources, particularly staff availability and the funding for this, can affect how easy or hard it is to adapt to a child's needs and support them. Having dedicated staff time to be able to support a child around attendance is perceived to be crucial.

Jo: *in a special school we're better at being a bit more flexible [. . .] whereas it's not always possible in mainstream*

Researcher: what do you think makes it easier to be more flexible in special schools compared to mainstream?

Jo: *Higher staff resourcing. That's simple, high staff ratio, simple as that*. (Jo, Primary Lead in a Special School)

The support of external agencies (particularly the Local Authority), as a resource that schools can go to when there are difficulties, is also seen as important. Participants recognise that reductions in funding have had a negative impact on support from the Local Authority but, without Local Authority support, 'there's nowhere to go' (Caroline, Deputy Head) when a school is struggling to uphold attendance. Staff training is also identified as a way to help school staff to manage attendance difficulties. However, while some participants feel that 'it'd be good for all staff to have more training' (Zoe, Teaching Assistant), others are concerned that this would be too general in nature, and that 'individual situations may end up not being resolved through the training that's been given' (Becky, teacher KS2).

Preventative measures

Participants try to prevent attendance difficulties occurring in the first place among their pupils. Participants from varying roles and backgrounds describe trying to make lessons interactive and enjoyable so that children are more likely to want to go to school each day.

> we're trying to schedule in more outdoor learning so it's not always in the classroom [. . .] trips and like hooks for projects, so, getting them to come in and do something like absolutely crazy and really get them in to the topic that we're doing [. . .] the teacher's gotta do [taps table] gotta make sure school is fun. (Mark, newly qualified teacher KS2)

Similarly, school-wide events outside the classroom are aimed at encouraging children to want to come to school.

> it's just little things like that, events throughout the year, you know we put on so many events so many exciting things. (Caroline, Deputy Head)

Building strong relationships with pupils and a sense of community/belonging at school is also seen as important. Becky and Paula both feel that being in a smaller school environment can be conducive to this.

> I think they're big fish in a small pond 'cause we're a small school so they are, they're known, and they're known **well** by everybody so they can't get lost they can't feel like they're swimming underneath. (Paula, teacher KS1)

Positive incentives are widely used as a school-wide method of preventing non-attendance. Children or classes with good attendance are offered rewards in various forms, such as certificates, class prizes or 'a special award assembly' (Caroline). Nevertheless, there is some uncertainty about their effectiveness.

> we give out certificates for a hundred percent attendance and well that's fairly negligible as well, I don't think that has a massive impact. (Paula, teacher KS1)

Individualised approach

Participants feel that an individualised approach should ideally be taken to address the range of issues causing a child's non-attendance, such as anxiety about a particular lesson (Mark, newly qualified teacher KS2), friendship difficulties (Paula, teacher KS1) or sensory issues ('for example there was a child who doesn't want to wear socks'; Helen, SENCO/Assistant Head).

> if there's a particular reason they're not attending and you just keep throwing interventions at them then they might not be in the right mind-set to be learning because you don't know what's going on behind it. (Gemma, newly qualified teacher KS2)

Trying to tease apart the causes of a child's attendance difficulty is not perceived to be easy.

> I think it's more complex than that. I think there'll be lots of reasons deep down, lots, so it'll take quite a bit of work to try and work out [the causes]. (Jo, Primary Lead in a Special School)

Therefore 'knowledge about your families is a key factor' and 'you've got to be really quite sensitive' (Helen, SENCO/Assistant Head) to what might be going on for the child and their family. Choosing suitable strategies to support a child can be 'trial and error' (Zoe, Teaching Assistant) and what works for one child may not work for another.

> when we've had children [struggling to come in to school], some of our other children go and meet them at the school entrance and that's been met with quite a strong reaction at times by both the family [. . .] and the child themselves because, I don't know how they see it, I don't know if it's embarrassment, I'm not sure. (Zoe, Teaching Assistant)

Improving emotional wellbeing

Facilitating feelings of safety and comfort at school are seen as crucial for children whose attendance difficulty stems from issues such as anxiety and low self-confidence. Participants describe using designated 'safe areas' children can go to during the day (Zoe) or a 'nurturey type room' to start the day in (Jo). In other situations, parents may accompany a child to the classroom in the morning '*for their own peace of mind as well as the child*' (Zoe), recognising the systemic nature of some attendance difficulties. There appears to be a recognition that while these strategies may be helpful in the short term, they may not always be beneficial in the longer term. Although staff might try to encourage the child back into the classroom, this is 'not always successful' (Zoe).

Therapeutic interventions provided by their schools are described as offering children the chance to talk about any difficulties with professionals or their peers. This includes play therapy (Zoe), counselling and drama therapy (Becky), 'nurture groups' (Helen) and programmes such as 'Ready to Learn' (Caroline). Paula, teacher KS1, spoke about social interventions (e.g., 'Circle of Friends' and 'Social Stories') that she has used with children who have difficulty attending school as a result of friendship issues or social-communication difficulties. She explained that 'if they've got friends, it's much easier [to encourage a child into school].' Jo, Primary Lead, who works in a SEN school, described how providing therapy dogs to go out to families' houses in the mornings has been 'the most successful [intervention] at getting children to school'. In general, however, it is not clear from participants' responses how effective these interventions were overall in addressing the young people's difficulties and improving school attendance. Paula, teacher KS1, described how the 'Social Stories' intervention is 'usually quite good', but for the young person in this instance it 'didn't make any difference.' Another participant described how her school 'analysed the data' for the Ready to Learn programme and it 'didn't have the required impact' to justify continuing to use it (Caroline, Deputy Head).

Facilitating learning

Offering additional academic support by 'slowing [work] down as they need it' (Gemma), offering additional tuition sessions (e.g. maths club) and personalising work assignments were perceived as helpful in improving a child's attendance where the problem relates to anxiety around difficulties with learning. Mark supported a pupil who had been missing school on days where he knew the class would be doing written work.

> I'll make sure that he's feeling comfortable with it, I'll give him scaffolds to help him, whether that be like a word or phrase bank so that if he gets stuck he can just quickly look at this thing and be like "oh there's the answer" [taps table]. I can simplify it for him [. . .] so that he isn't seeing it in a negative way. (Mark, newly qualified teacher KS2)

This approach had a positive impact on the child's willingness to attend school. Tailoring the content of assignments to fit with a child's particular interests is also perceived to help children to engage in work.

> Particular child who was really interested in motor cross and motorbikes so we made sure that a lot of the work was based around his interests [. . .] because we know that was something that he'd get excited about writing about. (Zoe, Teaching Assistant)

Collaboration

Participants strongly believe that a collaborative approach, particularly between school staff and parents/caregivers, is imperative to success.

> sometimes the school doesn't know what's best, sometimes the parents know what's best so it's about both the school and the parents working together for what's best for the child. (Mark, newly qualified teacher KS2)

This kind of joint working is seen to give parents the opportunity to identify any barriers in getting the child into school, which the school could then help to address.

> you need to get them to understand **why** we're doing things, you know, and to know what the difficulties are **for them**, you know, in particular because if there's difficulties with them then we say we say well we can help you with our Family Worker. (Zoe, Teaching Assistant)

Where parents are not able to contribute or adhere to agreed support strategies for their child, for a range of reasons, such as language barriers or parental mental health difficulties, this can mean that attempts to get the child into school regularly may be unsuccessful.

> a plan has been agreed and it's very clear "this, this, this and this and this will happen" and then the child will be in school. Mum'll do this and this, and then instead of, say for example going straight away, would come back, give the child a kiss, the child'll grab her coat, and then we'd have an incident [. . .] that's one example I can think of that's a parent who seems to be sabotaging but so subtly. (Jo, Primary Lead in a Special School)

Building good relationships with parents can facilitate positive collaboration and improve outcomes of interventions. For Mark, 'the best support for tackling a child with attendance issues is that conversation, that relationship with the parents'. Ensuring that any issues are fully discussed as they arise 'so you don't get this build-up of problems that are festering' (Paula) and making sure that staff, including the head teacher, are physically present in the playground in the mornings with an 'open door policy' (Paula) are perceived as helpful in building good relationships between families and school. However, this is seen as a two-way process that needs parents to engage and communicate with school staff. 'Something as simple as a phone call' from parents can have a positive impact on a school's ability to support a child who is struggling to attend (Helen, SENCO/Assistant Head). Although schools try to encourage parents to physically come into school through organised events, this is seen as having mixed success.

> we have events by the 'friends of' group [. . .] that are quite nice in encouraging parents to come but they won't all attend. (Gemma, newly qualified teacher KS2)

Finally, participants also mention the importance of collaboration between different professionals both within and outside of school. Sharing information between services and consulting other multidisciplinary colleagues is seen as helpful to discuss and plan how best to support a child.

> we have a multidisciplinary meeting [. . .] the Educational Psychologist might sit by and say "that sounds like it's something I need to see, let's book in an assessment", Learning Support Services might say "that's something to do with learning I'll come in", EBD people might say "that's a behaviour thing." (Paula, teacher KS1)

Discussion

School staff perceived school non-attendance to be a complex issue that can be caused and maintained by multiple factors related to the child, the family and the school or learning environment. Although the emotional impact for school staff is variable, it is clear that it is a challenge for schools to manage and can have significant negative impact. Between them, participants identified several different specific social, emotional and learning-focused interventions that they have used with children who have struggled to attend school, aimed at targeting the causes of a child's attendance difficulty whilst also accounting for the context of the child and family. However, participants were not always convinced that strategies were successful. Participants highlighted

that the success of any intervention relies strongly on collaboration between parents, school staff and other agencies involved. They also pointed out that preventative strategies are key in more broadly reducing the number of children who struggle to attend school in the first place.

The recognition by staff that children's attendance difficulties at primary school were likely to be complex and related to child, family and school factors is consistent with the broader literature (e.g., Thornton, Darmody, and McCoy 2013; Egger, Costello, and Angold 2003; Kumpulainen et al. 1998). In particular, participants in the current study appeared to recognise that some difficulties may relate to factors within the academic or school environment, such as learning difficulties, social issues or anxiety about particular aspects of school, and as such, had put in place targeted interventions to try to address school-based factors. This is in contrast to a recent study involving focus groups with staff from secondary schools, which found that they largely overlooked school-based factors when considering what caused and maintained school attendance problems, instead putting greater emphasis on the role of parents (Finning et al. 2017).

Intervening early and using strategies aimed at addressing the reasons for an individual child's attendance difficulties are seen as important, but staff are not always convinced of the effectiveness of the various strategies in improving attendance. Staff appear to be employing a range of interventions focused on addressing anxiety, social issues and academic difficulties, all of which have been evidenced as risk factors for school attendance difficulty (Kearney 2008). Descriptions of some of the strategies indicate the use of problem-solving, breaking tasks down into manageable steps and encouraging children to engage and face their difficulties, all of which could be seen to be using cognitive-behavioural principles, and as such broadly following similar principles to existing research recommendations (Pina et al. 2009). However, there are times when staff describe using strategies that may be ineffective, or worse, potentially damaging. If strategies are selected that are not based on a good understanding of the child's difficulties or without the child or family on board with the approach being taken, then interventions may have the unwanted effect of actually worsening attendance (Kearney and Silverman 1999).

Participants stress how the outcomes of their interventions are largely dependent on engagement from parents and this is not always possible, despite their best efforts. This mirrors Epstein and Sheldon's (2002) suggestion that partnership between schools and families is a prerequisite to successfully supporting children who struggle to attend school. There is a wealth of existing research that points to a broader benefit of collaborative relationships between schools and families for supporting children's academic, social and emotional development (Davis-Kean and Eccles 2005; Cox 2005; Marcon 1999). Some of the recommendations made within the literature for how school staff can facilitate this collaboration can be found in strategies discussed by participants, such as using school events to promote general parental engagement with the school community. Participants in this study emphasised the importance of the school community to build good relationships with families and school and potentially prevent problems developing. This was not identified by secondary school staff in the study by Finning et al. (2017), perhaps reflecting greater amounts of contact and involvement that parents of primary school-aged children have with the school (and possibly other parents/carers), which leads to closer relationships and a sense of community, compared to those with children at secondary school.

Although there was occasional reference to the use of school-based outcome data to evaluate the effectiveness of interventions, the selection of strategies was largely described as using 'trial and error' and anecdotal evidence to inform decision-making. Dagenais et al. (2012) highlights that in general, education practitioners do not often make use of school-based outcome data or research evidence to inform and shape their practice. This may also reflect the lack of evidence for interventions such as CBT being empirically evaluated within a school setting by school staff.

Finally, participants highlight the lack of resources needed to be able to adequately address school non-attendance. Consistent with Finning et al.'s participants, participants here voice frustration at the limited resources available within schools and feel that adequate resources are crucial in being able to

help children regularly attend school. When overall targets are not reached by the school, this is often met with punitive intervention from authorities, including reduced funding for the school, creating a vicious cycle, further limiting schools' abilities to adequately support their pupils' attendance.

Strengths and limitations

This study recruited participants across a variety of staff roles, from both mainstream and special educational settings. Participants also had varying years of experience working within the primary school setting, and worked in schools of varying sizes, settings and locations, allowing for representation of the views of school staff across a variety of contexts within the UK. This diversity in participant characteristics allowed us to capture a range of perspectives, as recommended by Mays and Pope (1995). However, the sampling methods employed are likely to have reached some groups more so than others, including those geographically closer to the researcher, those who use social media for professional interests and those with a greater interest in the topic of school attendance. It is also important to note that although four of the seven schools had attendance figures below the national average of 96% (Department for Education 2018), only one school's attendance figure was significantly below this, which was a special school. This means that perspectives of school staff working in mainstream primary schools with significantly high levels of non-attendance were not captured. To understand experiences of this population, further research is needed to focus on areas of very low school attendance. The use of individual interviews to collect data allowed for convenience of participants and may mean that they found it easier to be more honest and open than if required to share their opinion amongst other participants. However, this also limited the possibility for participants to reflect on each other's viewpoints.

Implications

There are a number of implications for schools on the basis of these findings, although some of which may not be within their control. Firstly, participants in schools that have higher staff ratios, dedicated staff and/or the ability to be flexible, described finding it easier to support children (and families) who are struggling with attendance. Where schools are identified as 'failing' in terms of attendance, this can have the effect of putting more pressure on the school in a way that is perceived as unhelpful rather than helpful. Secondly, a systemic approach which involves creating a community, making the school and staff accessible and builds relationships with families can help prevent problems developing and can also make it easier to intervene early when problems start to arise. Thirdly, there are a wealth of strategies and interventions being used and, in many instances, these are helpful. However, staff describe using idiosyncratic strategies to make decisions about what to use. Unless staff take the time to understand the nature of the child's attendance difficulties and bring the child and parents on board with the strategies, this runs the risk of having a negative impact for some families and potentially leading to greater problems in attendance (and potentially other difficulties, such as anxiety). Specialist training was suggested as being helpful and this may enable staff to have a clear understanding as to the most effective evidence-based strategies for different reasons for non-attendance. Finally, staff would also benefit from being able to evaluate the evidence base around what might work for who; this might involve examining outcomes within the school as well as tools to enable them to appraise the latest research findings.

These implications are based on experiences of staff within schools whose attendance figures generally reflect the national average, and therefore further research would be needed to explore whether similar themes arise in schools with significantly low attendance. Further research is also needed to explore the effectiveness of intervention approaches delivered by school staff, taking into

account what school staff can realistically achieve in supporting non-attenders, within the constraints of their skills, knowledge and resources. It is also important that researchers find effective ways to disseminate research findings to education practitioners in a format that is accessible to them.

Conclusion

School staff perceive school non-attendance to be a complex issue that can have a significant, negative impact for staff and the school. The findings from this study suggest that sufficient resource, early intervention, the development of a school community, collaboration with families, the involvement of other professionals and targeted strategies are all important in improving attendance in this age range. Going forward, we would recommend specialist training to help staff identify intervention strategies in a more systematic way and an increased emphasis on the evaluation of specific interventions on school attendance.

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Ethical statement

Ethical approval for this project was granted by the School of Psychology and Clinical Language Sciences (PCLS) Ethics Committee at the University of Reading. Written informed consent was obtained from all participants. A pseudonym was generated for each participant, which have been used throughout this paper. No participant identifiable information has been included.

Data access statement

The data that supports the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author, PW, upon reasonable request.

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Appendix A: Topic guide for participant interviews

Objectives:

- Explore perceptions of school attendance difficulty and its impact
- Discuss challenges faced by participants in relation to school attendance difficulties
- Determine support that is currently available to pupils who have difficulty attending school, and the extent to which this is helpful/unhelpful
- Consider whether/what further support is required

Introduction:

- Introduce researcher and study; confidentiality; timing; audio-recording and transcription; data storage and deletion; informed consent

Warm up
- Participant introduction. What does school attendance difficulty look like to you?

Discussion topic 1 – Presentation and impact of school attendance difficulties

- How frequent would you say school attendance difficulties are among primary school children?
- How does the issue of school attendance difficulty affect you as teachers/school staff and affect the school overall?

Discussion topic 2 – Challenges of dealing with school attendance difficulties
Now consider your experiences of supporting students who display signs of school/lesson attendance difficulty.

- What challenges have you encountered when dealing with cases where children have difficulty attending school? (possible prompts: time, financial, resources, personal/emotional)
- Have you noticed any recurring challenges or patterns among children who have school attendance difficulties?
- What factors make it easier or harder to deal with school attendance difficulties? (possible prompts: child/school/external factors)

Discussion topic 3 – The support available
Think about the support and intervention that is available in this school.

- In what ways do staff or the school in general try to get children attending school regularly and into lessons?
- Is a punitive approach useful? (For example, fining parents or taking them to court.) What about pastoral support? (Such as learning mentors or parent support advisors.)
- What training do teachers and school staff receive regarding children with school and lesson attendance difficulty?
- From your experience, what has worked well? What has not worked well?
- Who has responsibility for dealing with children who have difficulty attending school? What are the implications of this for you/them?
- How important is it to involve parents in what the school is doing to try to get the child into lessons or attending school regularly?
- How important is it to understand the causes of school attendance difficulty when intervening? Are there any interventions that work for all children?

Discussion topic 4 – Future improvements and developments
Consider any gaps in the support for pupils with school attendance difficulty, their families and school staff.

- Do current interventions adequately address school attendance difficulty? In cases where they have shown improvement, did it last?
- Imagine you had unlimited time and resources; in an ideal world, what support and interventions would you like to be available?
- What are the key factors that would need to be considered and included in future interventions?
- What additional support, that is currently unavailable, could benefit school staff, pupils, and/or parents/caregivers?

Closure

- Summary of key points. Anything further to add or any clarifications? Any questions?
- Thank you for your participation