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A qualitative exploration of school attendance problems in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic in the UK

Parent and educational professionals' perspectives

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Introduction

School attendance problems in the UK

- School attendance problems (SAPs) refer to different types of absences from school that are considered to have problematic outcomes for children.

- The onset of SAPs is likely to occur in primary school [1] and, although the importance of early intervention has been evidence in mitigating the negative outcomes, there is yet to be a focus on support for primary school-aged children in the UK [1].

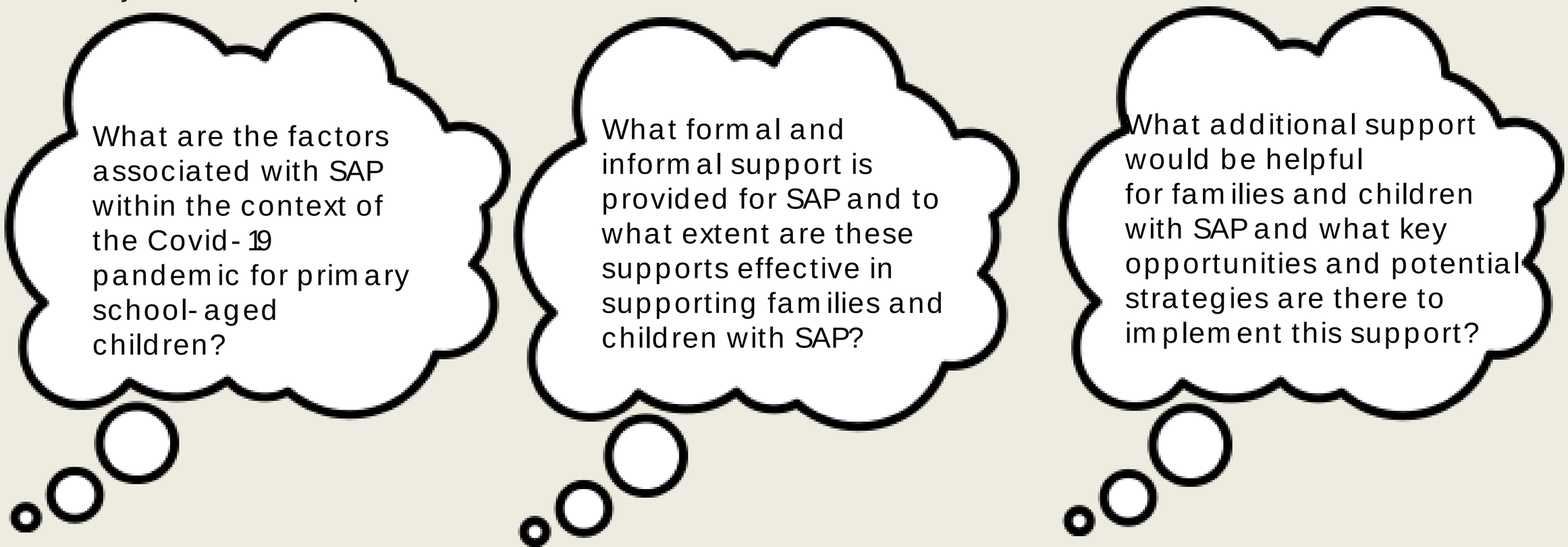
- Furthermore, Covid-19 pandemic significantly disrupted the educational lives of children across the world and attendance rates are considerably lower than previous years [2].

- In Autumn 2020, when the schools reopened after a period of lockdowns from March 31st, the overall absence rate was 11.7%. This is much higher than the previous absence rate of 4.9% in the previous Autumn [3]

Objective

This study aimed to provide a foundational understanding of the primary school-aged children's experience of SAP during the Covid-19 pandemic.

Specifically, our research questions were:



Methodology

Qualitative surveys shared on social media through professional contacts.

Participants

29 parents of primary school children experiencing SAP.

19 educational professionals (EPs) who work with primary school children experiencing SAP.

Participant Criteria

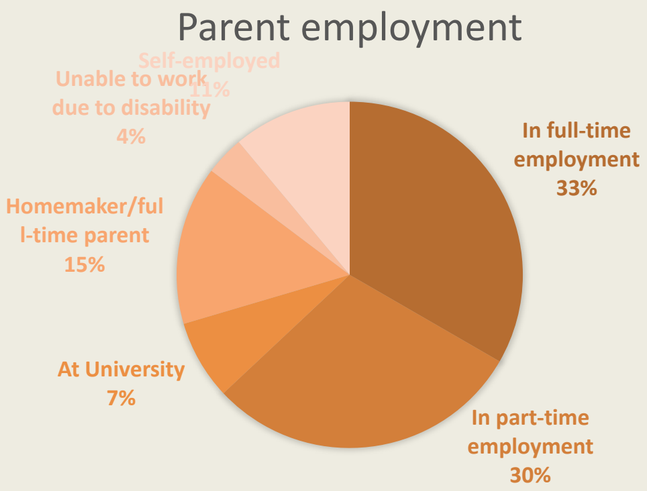
- Our sample was limited to the Sussex area.
- We focused recruitment to educational professionals who work with schools with the highest absence rates and highest free school meal percentage.
- We also focused on children who were struggling with school attendance in primary mainstream schools.

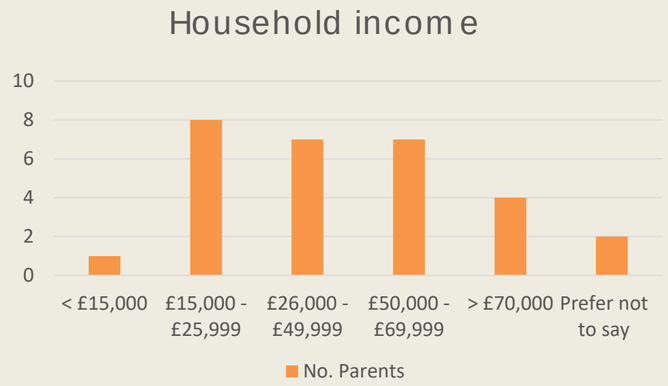
Analysis

Thematic analysis with a focus on answering the research questions

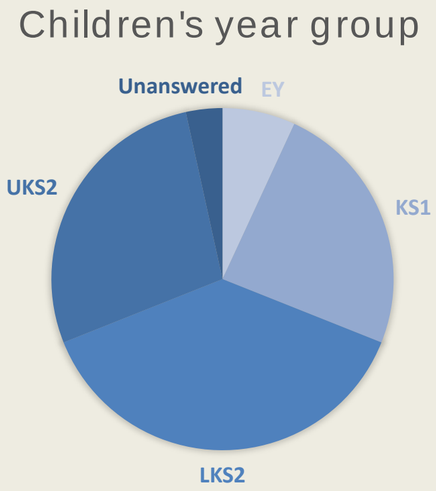
Demographics

Parents





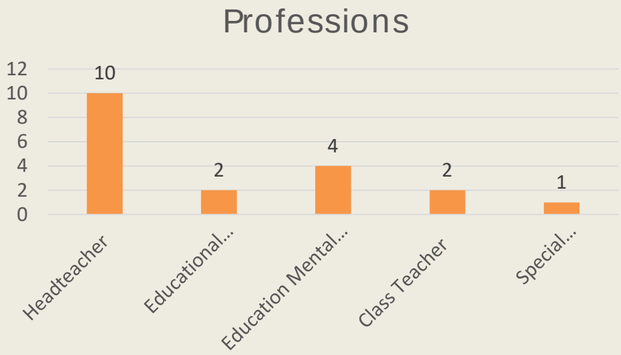
Children



10/29 children were eligible for free school meals

6/29 children had an EHCP, and additional 5 children had SEN.

EPs



Results

"So many changes! Rule breaking, rules changing. So much to comprehend for an 8 year old! Also changing teachers too."

"Parents modellin anxious and nervous behaviou about attending school."

"The most problematic for me are those who have a diagnosis of autism. These pupils have been extremely anxious about the return, the changes, expectations and restrictions in place"

"Being in 'bubbles' at school has also meant that some support he would normally have has not been as readily available (Nurture provision and alternative lunchtime provision for example)."

SEN

Anxiety

SEN

"Children are experiencing a higher level of separation anxiety from their parents than usual as they have become used to spending more time with them."

"Social anxiety - if children already experienced this, this has been heightened and causes them to fear being around large groups of people in school."

"He worries about being behind compared to his peer group"

"Her autism obviously has played a part as home is her safe place, and the lockdowns enabled her to stay in her safe place without having to leave. Her whole family was at home and that, for her, was the perfect life."

Results

Presentation of SAP

Distress trying to attend school

"Getting her into school each morning is a massive challenge, often resulting in meltdowns and huge anxiety for her."

Physical symptoms of anxiety (feeling poorly without medical reason)

"She says she has a tummy ache every morning before school and is quite anxious"

Results

Support for SAP

Flexibility and accommodations from schools

Schools and Home collaborating together

Children's wellbeing a priority

Helpful experiences of support for SAP

Supporting parents

Contributors of SAP → Unauthorized absences

Little or no support

"Her school have been great. Her mentor and SENCO did home visits before each return to school in order to prepare her for any changes." .

"In an ideal world someone removed from family to talk to when I have driven away with her screams ringing in my ears would be really beneficial (and unrealistic!)."

Conclusions and next steps

- Three higher order themes were identified from the surveys; Presentation of SAP, Contributors of SAP and experience of support for SAP.
- We are currently following up the surveys with qualitative interviews which were informed by the surveys (22 interviews with EPs and parents are being analysed)
- These results will inform the development of an intervention which will be co-produced with stakeholders (parents and EPs) in co-production workshops.

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Thank you

Any questions?

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