

An Exploration of the Potential Link Between Attendance and Inclusivity in Education and the Impact on Children and Young People with ALN in Wales: A Parental Perspective

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ABSTRACT

This study aimed to identify themes and concerns to inform practice and influence positive change in school attendance, particularly for young people with Additional Learning Needs (ALN).

At the time of writing, post-pandemic school attendance in Wales has not returned to pre-pandemic levels, with young people with ALN having poorer attendance compared to their peers. Absence rates for students with additional learning needs and those under School Action Plus (SA+) are significantly higher than the all-Wales average.

A questionnaire was used to collect data from parent/carers (n=149) across various local authorities in Wales. The data was analysed using an interpretative methodology and thematic analysis.

The research identified clear themes from parent/carers feedback on how to improve school attendance for children with ALN. It highlighted the importance of parental perspectives in addressing attendance issues and provided insights to help local authorities and the Welsh Government implement changes to improve engagement and attendance.

Keywords: attendance, ALN, parental perspectives, engagement with learning for children with ALN

Introduction

The wider literature and evidence from across the UK indicates that the education sector is facing an acute challenge in terms of attendance rates. In Wales, 16.3 per cent of pupils aged between 11 and 15 were persistently absent from school, representing a percentage three times higher than that observed prior to the pandemic (Rowlands, 2022). Children with additional learning needs and pupils living in poverty were more likely to be persistently absent. This was matched in England, where it was reported attendance had not returned to pre-pandemic levels with a quarter of pupils who were persistently absent at an alarming rate of 25.1 per cent in 2023, when compared with 13.1 per cent in the autumn term of 2019 (BBC News, 2023). With the UK Government highlighting an attendance programme to tackle the concern in England (Department for Education, 2023).

In a report published by the Welsh Government in 2022 (Rowlands, 2022), the prevalence of absenteeism among pupils with additional learning needs (ALN) in primary and secondary schools in Wales prior to the onset of the pandemic was highlighted, with the data indicating a significantly higher rate of absence compared to the general pupil population, as identified in Table 1 below.

In a statement in 2022, the then Education Minister, indicated that the overall absenteeism was 5.7 per cent in 2018/2019 and the provisional data for post pandemic in 2022/2023 indicated a rise to 10.5 per cent, when comparing the data across the pupil population from pre-pandemic in 2018/2019 (Welsh Government, 2022). The data presented prompted the National Autistic Society Cymru, which had participated in the Welsh Government review, to expressed that they are 'deeply concerned about the high levels of non-attendance among autistic young people' (Rowlands, 2022).

Table 1: Pupil Attendance data Pre-Covid-19 (Rowlands, 2022)

<i>Table 1: Pupil Pre-COVID-19 absences 2018-2019</i>	Secondary	Primary
Average – percentage of all	6.2%	5.3%
Non-free school meals percentage	5.3%	4.7%
Free school meal percentage	10.5%	7.9%
Special Educational Need Statement	7.8%	7.7%
SA+	10.3%	7.0%

Regular attendance at school enables pupils and schools to strive for excellence and to become the best they can be, thereby laying the foundations for a young person's success (Rowlands, 2022).

Literature Review

Numerous legislations and statutory guidance govern school attendance (Welsh Government, 2017). The pre-devolution Education Act (1996) mandates that parents/carers for learners with an SEN/ALN have to ensure their child's regular attendance at school, with Section 444 stating they may be guilty of an offence if their child fails to attend school regularly (Education Act, 1996). The UK Supreme Court defines 'regular attendance' as attending school each day it is open. Schools lack legal powers to enforce attendance, so local authorities must intervene if pupils regularly fail to attend, as per the statutory guidance to help prevent children and young people from missing education (Welsh Government, 2017) and under the relevant regulations in Wales (The Education (Pupil Registration) (Wales) Regulations, 2010).

Concerns about school attendance are longstanding. Compulsory attendance in the UK was established in the 1880s, with average attendance rates around 82 per cent by the 1890s, comparable to modern persistent absence rates (McCulloch, 2020). It is more than just regular attendance at school; there has also been links to exploitation and criminality (Franklin, 2025). A five-year study in England found that among persistently absent youths, 90 per cent were young offenders, 83 per cent possessed a weapon, over half received a custodial sentence and over 90 per cent were male; this was supported by similar findings from the UK's Ministry of Justice (2022). Lave & Wenger (1991) and Kearney (2016) describe the influences young people can be exposed to, if they are not in school regularly, such as exploitation, poor social interaction, learning negative behaviours, not achieving academically and the impact on wellbeing.

Despite the complexities surrounding negative adolescent behaviour and the challenges that young people face, key theorists consider the environmental implications that can drive behaviour (Kearney, 2016). In 1913, Watson put forth the proposition that the environment exerts a more profound influence on the behaviour of young people than genetics. Similarly, humanism and situational learning theories such as Lave and Wenger (1991) posit that the acquisition of

knowledge is facilitated more by social interactions and relationships than by traditional classroom settings. Likewise, Piaget observed that external influences, such as peer pressure, which could affect learning (Inhelder and Piaget, 1958). These also suggest absence from school can result in young people seeking learning opportunities in potentially negative environments, as the statistics above highlight. However, Hughes (2023) indicates that other negative factors have influenced school attendance since the pandemic. These include an increase in anxiety, mental health and well-being, as well as the fact that school closures have led to a more relaxed attitude among parents and carers towards non-attendance.

However, what is important to recognise for this research is that young people with ALN have notably lower attendance rates than their peers (Rowlands, 2022; Senedd Research, 2024). Poor attendance at school will likely create a learning gap due to the poor engagement with learning. In Wales there are 105,000 pupils officially recognised with an ALN/SEN, which equates to 1 in 5 learners, who are characterised as experiencing learning difficulties (Senedd, 2021; Knight et al., 2024), therefore, the removal of barriers to engagement with learning is vital (Knight and Crick, 2022; Conn et al., 2024).

Poor attendance serves to exacerbate anxieties about re-engaging with learning (Welsh Government, 2023a; 2023b). For those with ALN, re-engagement is even more of a challenging process. In addition to learning difficulties, learning gap and a reduction in social interaction from irregular attendance at school, the combination may aid a young person to want to be at home other than at school, which may result in emotional-based school avoidance (EBSA), characterised by absences that are sporadic or prolonged (Thambirajah et al., 2008). As highlighted by Dannow et al. (2018) and Rowlands (2022), children may even experience anxiety when moving around the school. The transition from a small primary to a large secondary school can be particularly disengaging and students with ALN could potentially feel unsafe due to the physical and sensory issues that they may experience (Baker & Bishop, 2015; Rowlands, 2022).

Methods

This qualitative study explored the parent/carer perspectives of children with ALN or those awaiting diagnosis. In this study, interpretivism, a research philosophy that

prioritises understanding the subjective meanings individuals attach to their actions and experiences, was employed, thereby emphasising the necessity of selecting an appropriate research method to effectively align with this interpretive approach (Thomas, 2023). This research employed a questionnaire (Lune et al., 2016), enabling quick outreach to many participants and allowing them to express their opinions and concerns confidentially. This methodology is closely linked to qualitative research and its emphasis on naturalistic inquiry (Cohen et al., 2007; Thomas, 2023), acknowledging that the data collected is subjective, reflecting personal and potentially unique experiences.

Before starting a research project, ethical procedures must be followed, including successfully obtaining institutional approval (Brooks et al., 2014). Ethics in research encompasses openness, integrity, carefulness, and confidentiality; researchers must respect different cultures and viewpoints, and ensure data protection processes are followed (Darlington and Scott, 2002). The data gathered was anonymous to ensure confidentiality, with the findings designed to not identify anyone but to identify patterns and themes (Casio and Racine, 2018).

To analyse the data, a thematic analysis approach was employed (Braun and Clarke, 2022). Thematic analysis permitted a deeper examination of patterns and themes within the data, thereby enhancing the overall interpretive depth and providing valuable insights into the research question.

The purposive sampling process involved parent/carers of children with ALN or those awaiting on the neurodevelopmental (ND) pathway for a diagnosis, this was collected via an online questionnaire shared by local authorities and through social media. This combined purposive and convenience sampling approach ensured that the participants were specifically relevant to the research aim. Dhivyadeepa (2015) emphasised the critical role of sampling in identifying appropriate sources, highlighting that effective sampling methods are essential for obtaining meaningful and contextually rich data. By selecting participants who fit the study's criteria of either having a diagnosed ALN or waiting a diagnosis, the research aimed to gather insights directly from those with relevant experiences, thereby enhancing the relevance of the findings.

From gathering data to understand barriers and inform practice to engage young people with ALN, this approach allowed parent/carers to voice their perspectives of their child's school experience, data was collected from each of the five local authorities as 'gatekeepers' plus parent/carers directly via social media.

Primary data was collected through questionnaires, with responses received from parents/carers from various local authorities in Wales: Neath Port Talbot, Cardiff, Powys, Vale of Glamorgan, Rhondda Cynon Taf and Merthyr Tydfil. Therefore, the parent/carers responses were both from areas of deprivation and affluence, which covers a good representation of the communities within Mid and South Wales. Participants were asked to answer 38 questions and could mark questions as 'not applicable' if they were not relevant. This number of questions is comparable to those used in similar research recently conducted by Parentkind on school attendance (Parentkind, 2024). Using 38 questions is reasonable as it allows for a comprehensive exploration of the topic while giving participants the flexibility to skip questions that do not apply to their situation.

Outcomes

A total of 71 per cent of the responses (n=149) indicated that children in all the local authority areas listed above attended a primary school. 38 per cent of respondents were parents or carers of children who had been diagnosed with an additional learning need. The remaining responses indicated that the pathway is still being awaited, with the estimated waiting period ranging from a few months to five years.

Upon inquiry as to whether the presence of an ALN or the status of being on the pathway had an impact on their child's attendance, 28 per cent of respondents indicated that it did, while 72 per cent were uncertain. 60 per cent of parents and carers were unaware of their child's attendance percentage, with 38 per cent indicating that they were not informed about what the percentage meant and the implications of this in terms of the impact on their child's learning. Parent/carers not understanding the significance of poor attendance may not be able to fully comprehend the implications linked to their child's development through regular engagement with learning. As highlighted in the literature review, this could result in a learning gap, in addition to ALN, creating further barriers to engagement, which then can lead EBSA (Thambirajah et al., 2008).

A total of 21 per cent of parents and carers indicated that they perceived barriers to their children's attendance at school. When queried as to how barriers to engagement might be removed, parents expressed the view that more ALN

training for teachers would be beneficial, that teachers should listen to parents more, that more training on ASD for teachers relating to girls would be helpful, and that there should be more permanent teachers.

With regard to the school support section, 17.4% of respondents indicated that improvements were required, which was again linked to teacher training in ALN. The majority of respondents expressed satisfaction with the support provided by the school Additional Learning Needs Co-ordinator (ALNCo), with only a small number indicating that they were unsure of the identity of this individual. When queried as to what could be enhanced, teacher training was once more identified as a priority, along with the necessity for more timely diagnosis and a greater range of available options, with one parent/carer stating, '100 per cent there should be units assigned to all mainstream schools'.

n=43 (28.8 per cent) parent/carers felt they were not listened too. Similar patterns were emerging in this section, highlighting the need for more training for teachers in ALN. Participants also shared that more permanent teachers are needed, with a parent stating that:

Coherent and holistic ASD training for staff and action plan per class, key stage and whole school approach. An IDP gives individualised insight and support but the bigger framework just doesn't exist. (Participant number 75)

Furthermore, participants indicated that schools should prioritise actively listening more to parents and caregivers, enhance communication channels between schools and parents and caregivers, and reduce waiting times for diagnosis. n=39 parents/carers (26.2 per cent) indicated that the school was not inclusive or was only occasionally inclusive. When queried as to how the school could provide greater assistance to their child, a considerable number of participants offered constructive suggestions. Nevertheless, the majority of participants identified the need for increased training for teachers on ALN and more rapid diagnosis.

Listen to parents and children's concerns. There has been many of times that the teachers have been defensive whenever parents bring concerns up instead of addressing the issues and listening to how these issues affects the child. (Participant number 6)

Keep to the same teacher because they understand that child's needs. (Participant number 48)

The school used to host ALN meetings for parents. These always clashed with work so it would be nice to have them later in the day however I know the extra workload on staff wouldn't be fair. (Participant number 82)

For all staff to be trained to understand children with additional needs. (participant number 107)

Most parent/carers felt their school was meeting their child's educational needs, of those 11.4 per cent did not put a firm yes. One parent gave their view on how this can be improved:

Communication between school and parents more often and the school has to listen to parents as well not brush them aside. (Participant number 84)

With regard to the question of local authority support, the majority of parents and carers (81.2 per cent) indicated that they did not receive assistance in enabling their child to attend school. This however, identified a limitation in the question posed, as further exploration of this answer was needed to help to consider developmental areas in practice.

The research findings revealed a number of key themes, including the importance of staff training and communication. Communication was a key finding by Parentkind (2024, p. 5), which suggested

staff being more understanding and better communications/easier to contact were the most popular responses, followed by earlier diagnosis and/or intervention, for school staff to listen to the child directly, the ability to do school work at home, for concerns to be listened to and better support, including ALN support ... when asked how schools could improve the support they offer to parents, the most common responses were for schools to be more understanding of the situation and for there to be better communication between schools and parents around the child's absence, particularly in listening to what parents had to say. (Parentkind, 2024)

This highlights that effective communication is a fundamental aspect of all services provided to children and young people, including those provided to their families. This is a crucial element in facilitating change (Greenhouse Learning, 2024). If parents/carers perceive that they are not listened to, or that the responses provided by professionals are unclear, they may disengage from the process (Knight et al., 2022).

From the perspective of the parents/carers, it was evident that there were shortcomings in promoting attendance, given that the majority of parents/carers

were unaware of their child's attendance percentage. Furthermore, the majority of the parents and carers were unaware of their child's attendance percentage and its potential impact on their educational trajectory and post-16 progression.

Conclusion

This study has sought to present an overview of the legislative guidance in place across the UK, with a particular focus on the policies attached to attendance at school. The act of attending school is of greater consequence than the attainment of a qualification. It facilitates the development of social skills and interactions, and it also serves to reduce the likelihood of exploitation into criminality.

Consequently, the removal of obstacles to engagement with learning is crucial for a young person's success, both in the short and long term (Kearney, 2016). For young people with ALN, a combination of learning gaps, limited social skills and interactions can create significant barriers to learning. This raises the question of whether such circumstances contribute to the development of EBSA.

Attendance at school is the foundation to a child's success, if we do not get this right, the impact on other areas of a young person's life can be detrimental. Findings from this study suggest that effective communication between parents/carers, teachers/schools and local authorities is lacking. Therefore, further work is needed to prevent children and young people from becoming detached from education and potentially leading to the creation of an EBSA.

Recommendations for practice:

1. To further develop the knowledge and skills of current practitioners across Wales I would recommend engaging in professional learning opportunities, such as the Welsh Government-funded National Masters in Education (Wales), to help practitioners develop their awareness of ALN to allow them to support and advocate more effectively for learners.
2. For teachers and those training to be practitioners in the field, to have more of an understanding on the effects with positive engagement with parent/carers with more rewards systems, such as those involving parents or termly coffee mornings.

3. Teacher initial training and education should encompass the full range of areas related to ALN, including school attendance issues in order to facilitate the identification of these needs at an earlier stage.
4. Teachers to have ALN training as part of their whole school continuous professional development and learning, alongside dissemination of good practice and having meaningful discussions.
5. Having highlighted the challenges and complexities surrounding school attendance, the need for tailored interventions is considered holistically, particularly for those with ALN, to enable improvements in engagement with learning by regular attendance, ensuring students' success and well-being.

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