Navigating School Attendance Challenges:

Towards a Collaborative, Equitable and Unified Community Response in Limerick

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Executive Summary

Whilst attending school is a positive and rewarding experience for most children and young people, concerns surrounding school attendance problems are increasing both in Ireland and internationally. The term School Attendance Problems (SAPs) is used internationally to refer to difficulties labelled as school refusal, and more recently termed school avoidance or emotionally-based school avoidance; as well as other types of school absenteeism, such as truancy, school withdrawal or school exclusion (Heyne, Gren-Landell, Melvin & Gentle-Genitty, 2019). The reasons for SAPs are complex and multifaceted and they have been made more challenging by the COVID-19 pandemic (McDonald, Lester & Michelson, 2023). It is increasingly clear that the world is changing, students' needs are more diverse, and as a result, our approach to school attendance and each student's relationship with education must be different too (Heyne, Gentle-Genitty, Melvin, et al., 2024).

In Ireland, Children and Young People's Services Committees (CYPSC) have taken a lead role in supporting the coordination of local responses to SAPs and providing guidance to families, schools, and professionals. Like other CYPSCs, Limerick CYPSC identified school attendance and associated issues of retention, reduced timetables, and school refusal, as priorities in its 2021-2023 Children and Young People's Plan. Consequently, Limerick CYPSC and partner organisation, Southill Hub, commissioned this research, which involved undertaking consultations with multiple interested parties or 'stakeholders' in Limerick, including young people, parents, school staff, other relevant professionals. A key component of the project was to harness the insights from the research consultations to inform the development of a suite of user-friendly resources for professionals, parents, and students.

Research Design & Methods

The research consultations were guided by trauma-informed values and principles (i.e., collaboration, empowerment, trustworthiness, safety, respect for diversity; Fallot & Harris, 2001; O'Toole, 2022) and concerned with people's lived experience, including their experience of themselves, of their interactions and relationships, and of the complex patterns that co-arise between individuals and the larger systemic context (Goleman and Senge, 2014). We were interested in understanding 'what it is like to be' a professional, parent, or young person impacted by SAPs. Thus, the methodology was designed to inquire into the affective, cognitive, and bodily/somatic experiences of interested parties within the education and social system (Fuchs, 2017; Herrman, Nielsen & Aguilar-Raab, 2021).

Four cohorts of participants were purposively sampled: 1) school staff (n=15, including principals, guidance counsellors, teachers, alternative education teachers, home-school-community liaison co-ordinators), 2) allied professionals (n=12, including psychologists, social workers, community and family support workers), 3) parents (n=2, both mothers), and 4) young people (n=11, aged 14-18 years). Online focus groups were conducted with the professional groups. In-person interviews were carried out with parents. The young people participated in either individual interviews or focus group interviews; and arts-based methods, including self-portraiture and body mapping were used to facilitate thoughtful, embodied communication in a safe and supportive space (Bagnoli, 2009; Orchard, 2017). All data was recorded and transcribed. Transcripts were

anonymized and then analysed using Braun and Clarke's (2023) reflective thematic analysis (RTA) approach. Data from the professionals was analysed separately to the data from parents and young people.

Findings & Discussion

Five themes were identified from the professionals' data. These were 1) A perfect storm: the conditions impacting school attendance problems, 2) Grappling with the rigidity of the education system, 3) Over-worked and under-resourced, 4) Lessons learned around what works, and 5) Looking to the future: what's needed next?

Four themes were identified following analysis of the focus groups and interviews with young people and parents: 1) You're not welcome here, but you're also not allowed leave, 2) Fighting for your life – disability and mental health, 3) 'I was broken': The realities of parenting a young person with school attendance problems, and 4) Envisaging a better education system.

Overall, the findings highlight that there are considerable barriers to school attendance for many students in Limerick; and this is particularly true for disenfranchised groups, including Travellers, neurodivergent and trauma-affected young people, those with mental health difficulties, special educational needs, and those from working class backgrounds. Our findings further highlight the difficult dilemma that parents face in holding their child's wellbeing as the central concern, while at the same time experiencing pressure to enforce attendance. The findings suggest a need to advance a more inclusive, responsive, and flexible mainstream education system, that can meet the needs of diverse learners within a fully resourced continuum of support model. A special focus is required to help address the inordinate structural barriers faced by Traveller students. This study reaffirms the importance of creating space for collaboration and for considering new ways of working that are relationship-centred and grounded in a strong sense of purpose. A suite of resources (for educators and practitioners, parents and young people) has been designed based on the findings of this project. We hope that this report, the accompanying resources, and the conversations that stem from this project, contribute to a culture of working together in partnership to transform educational practices, and to shaping a future where all students feel a sense of belonging in school and are enabled to thrive in harmony with our evolving world.

Literature Review

For most children and young people school is a positive experience. There are the here-and-now benefits of spending time with friends, feeling cared for by teachers, and intellectual stimulation that comes from engaging with the curriculum; as well as long-term benefits, such as educational progression, career opportunities, and financial stability. However, it is evident that school is not a positive experience for all children. Indeed, concern about School Attendance Problems (SAPs) is increasing across the globe (e.g., Määttä et al., 2020; New Zealand Ministry of Education, 2019; United Kingdom Department of Education, 2018; United States Department of Education, 2019).

Since COVID-19, the situation and experience of students has become more complex. Some students found themselves thriving in an online environment where they had greater autonomy and/or support from home, whilst others struggled to stay connected with their teachers, peers and their learning.

Many children experienced difficulty returning to school following periods of school closures (McDonald, Lester & Michelson, 2023; Tomaszewski et. al., 2023).

Types of School Attendance Problems

SAPs may take many forms, such as struggling to arrive on time, frequently leaving early, skipping certain classes, being seasonally absent, or not attending at all (Haddad, 2021; Kearney, 2022). As such, SAPs is an umbrella term used to refer to many different types of attendance difficulties. In an attempt to offer clarity, Heyne and colleagues (2019) identified four types of SAPs and differentiated between them. These four types are: school refusal, truancy, school withdrawal, and school exclusion.

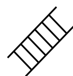
School refusal refers to difficulty in attending or remaining in school for the duration of the school day due to emotional upset, such as fear, anxiety, sadness or other internalising problems. Children experiencing school refusal typically stay at home with the knowledge of parents. In recent years, some have abandoned the term *school refusal,* referring instead to *school avoidance* or *emotional-based school avoidance (EBSA) or reluctant attendance*. The latter terms are an attempt to shift the focus from a negative connotation associated with the word “refusal” to a more compassionate perspective by emphasising the emotional factors involved. This shift in language is particularly notable in Ireland and the United Kingdom.

Truancy occurs when youth are away from school, without a ‘valid reason’ (such as illness or medical appointment) and try to conceal this from their parents and authorities. Unlike school refusal/school avoidance, truancy tends to be associated with externalising problems, including anti-social behaviour.

The other two types of SAPs receive less attention in research and policy literature. School withdrawal is predominantly motivated by parental factors such as withdrawing a young person from school to provide comfort or care to family members, to assist with family business or paid work, to conceal maltreatment, or due to ambivalence, perhaps arising from personal

negative experience, regarding the benefit of education/schooling. School exclusion stems from problematic school-based decision-making, including the use of biased or unwarranted suspensions or expulsions; poor allocation of resources for students in need; and attempts to satisfy school-based performance indicators. Full definitions of each of these types is provided in Box 1.

Whilst these definitions provide guidance and clarity for researchers and professionals, they have limitations, as there can be overlap and movement across categories. For instance, it stands to reason that a young person who has experienced exclusionary practices (school exclusion) may go on to develop an aversion towards school, which may manifest as school refusal or truancy. Moreover, O'Toole and Devenney (2020) highlight how these categories position students in different ways which can have far-reaching consequence for how young people are viewed and treated. For instance, school refusal paints a picture of young people as vulnerable and fragile, whereas truants are cast as emotionless and deviant. The categories can have the effect of creating simplistic, one-dimensional or delimiting characterisations of young people. Thus, identifying the type of SAP should not be lieu of developing a holistic understanding of the student's situation, including how they themselves understand and make sense of their own situations (O'Toole & Devenney, 2020).



Box 1: Definitions of four types of SAPs (Hayne et al., 2019)

"School refusal is said to occur when: (1) a young person is reluctant or refuses to attend school, in conjunction with emotional distress that is temporal and indicative of aversion to attendance (e.g., excessive fearfulness, temper tantrums, unhappiness, unexplained physical symptoms) or emotional distress that is chronic and hindering attendance (e.g., depressive affect; sleep problems), usually but not necessarily manifest in absence (e.g., late arrivals; missing whole school days; missing consecutive weeks, months, or years); and (2) the young person does not try to hide associated absence from their parents (e.g., they are at home and the parents are aware of this), and if they previously hid absence then they stopped doing so once the absence was discovered; and (3) the

young person does not display severe antisocial behavior, beyond resistance to parental attempts to get them to school; and (4) the parents have made reasonable efforts, currently or at an earlier stage in the history of the problem, to secure attendance at school, and/or the parents express their intention for their child to attend school full-time (Heyne, et al., pgs 22-23)

"**Truancy** is said to occur when: (1) a young person is absent from school for a whole day or part of the day, or they are at school but absent from the proper location (e.g., in the school-yard rather than in class); and (2) the absence occurs without the permission of school authorities; and (3) the young person typically tries to conceal the absence from their parents." (pg 23)

"**School withdrawal** is said to occur when a young person's absence from school (e.g., late arrivals; missing whole school days; missing consecutive weeks, months, or years) is: (1) not concealed from the parent(s); and (2) attributable to parental effort to keep the young person at home, or attributable to there being little or no parental effort to get the young person to school."(pg 23).

"**School exclusion** is said to occur when a young person is absent from school or specific school activities, for any period of time, caused by the school: (1) employing disciplinary exclusion in an inappropriate manner (e.g., unlawful expulsion; internal suspension for the school's convenience); or (2) being unable or unwilling to accommodate the physical, social-emotional, behavioural, or academic needs of the young person (e.g., parents of a student with a mild intellectual disability are told to pick their daughter up two afternoons per week because her teaching aide will not be available); or (3) discouraging a young person from attending, beyond the realm of legally acceptable school policy (e.g., a youth who is struggling academically is asked to spend the day at home on the day that national academic assessments are undertaken). (pg 24).

Factors that contribute to School Attendance Problems

Attendance problems are complex – they may take many forms, such as struggling to arrive on time, frequently leaving early, missing particular classes, or not attending at all (Haddad, 2021). It can be helpful to consider factors that contribute to SAPs within an ecological framework, which acknowledges the various interacting systems that influence children's behaviour (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998). The following are some key factors contributing to SAPs within this framework.

- **Microsystem: This includes the immediate environments in which the child directly interacts, such as family, peers, and school. Within the microsystem, factors such as family dynamics, parenting style, peer influence, and the quality of relationships with teachers and peers can impact school attendance. For example, conflict within the family or bullying at school may contribute to a child's reluctance to attend.**
- **Mesosystem: This layer involves the interactions between different components of the microsystem. For instance, conflicts or inconsistencies between home and school expectations can create stress for children, leading to attendance problems. Lack of communication between teachers and parents can also hinder early detection and intervention.**
- **Exosystem: This includes external environments that indirectly affect the child, such as the parents' workplace, community resources, and social support networks. Economic factors like poverty, inadequate access to transportation, or living in neighborhoods with high crime rates can contribute to attendance issues. Conversely, community programs or services that support families can positively influence attendance by addressing underlying issues.**
- **Macrosystem: This layer encompasses the broader cultural, social, economic, and political context in which the child lives. Socioeconomic disparities, cultural attitudes towards education, and governmental policies related to education funding and attendance regulations all play a role. For example, socioeconomic status can impact access to resources and opportunities that affect attendance, such as quality of housing, healthcare, and extracurricular activities.**
- **Chronosystem: This refers to the dimension of time and how changes over time can impact the child's experiences. Life events such as**

family relocation, parental divorce, or trauma can disrupt routines and contribute to attendance problems. Additionally, historical events, societal shifts, or policy changes can influence educational practices and resources available to support attendance.

Understanding SAPs within this ecological framework allows for a comprehensive assessment of the multiple factors at play and informs the development of interventions that address the complex interplay between individual, family, community, and societal influences (Gubbels et al., 2019; Melvin et al., 2019; Thambirajah et al., 2008).

Responding to School Attendance Problems

Whilst research concerning effective interventions for SAPs is varied, four clear themes for 'what works' have been identified (Heyne et al, 2001). First, rather than adopting a 'wait and see' or 'wait to fail' approach which can allow SAPs to become intractable, prevention and early intervention are key. Preventative approaches include tiered models, such as the Continuum of Support (NEPS, 2017) or Multielement Tiered Support System (MTSS, Kearney & Graczyk, 2014; Kearney & Graczyk, 2022), where schools work to create engaging, welcoming environments for all students before SAPs become an issue (Tier 1). With close monitoring of absences, students beginning to struggle with attendance can receive early interventions at Tier 2 or 3, depending on the severity of the issues.

Second, interventions must be individualized to the student. As reasons for SAPs are not homogenous, no intervention plan will be the same (Corcoran et al., 2022; Kearney & Graczyk, 2022). For instance, a student who is not attending because they have care responsibilities at home will require different interventions than a student not attending due to bullying they face at school.

Third, team-based intervention plans are key to successfully reintegrating students back into education. Team-based interventions where the student, the family, the school and the community are involved in an action, have greater chances of success (Kearney & Graczyk, 2014). Most importantly, the input of the student and family in any interventions is crucial (Heyne et al., 2021). Families that feel safe, empowered and free of judgement are

more likely to engage with professionals attempting to bring a student back to school. The same goes for the student. This also means recognising that not all students will reintegrate back to education through traditional schooling. Some may find alternative schools better suited to their needs.

Fourth, an ecological approach to intervention is needed, recognising the complex and multifaceted nature of school avoidance and the various influences at micro, meso, and macro levels (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Melvin, et al, 2019). Intervention plans must be prepared to engage in factors influencing a student's avoidance of school at all levels within the individual, the home, the community and the school. This often means coming to terms with and tackling systemic issues such as poverty, ableism, mental-health stigma and inequalities present within the education system. Without engaging with these systemic issues, intervention plans may succeed in temporary fixes but will not see long-term decreases in SAPs (Heyne, et al., 2021).

New Directions in the field of School Attendance

In a recent article, the executive committee of the International Network for School Attendance (INSA) have called for the re-imagining of the field of school attendance (Heyne, et al., 2024). The authors highlight that education systems around the globe are adapting to meet the demands of a rapidly changing world, characterized by demographic shifts, technological advancements, globalization, economic, cultural and social transformations. As a result, contemporary schooling is different, students' needs are more diverse, and our approach to school attendance and each student's relationship with education must be different too (Heyne, et al., 2024).

Thus, when we advocate for school attendance we are advocating for more than just physical presence in a brick-and-mortar building. School attendance is not just about 'seat time', nor is it about completing compulsory education by a specific age (e.g., 18 years). School attendance is always in the service of engagement with learning and students' relationships with education. What matters is the quality of interactions and experiences that students have with learning environments, curriculum, teachers and peers (Heyne, et al., 2024).

The INSA executive also note the need to think broadly about the influences on attendance, which means recognising and attending to broad socio-political and economic issues, systemic inequalities, and intergenerational trauma (Heyne, et al., 2024, see also Devenney & O'Toole, 2021). Many schools with high rates of chronic absenteeism are in areas where there are deep structural inequalities and few support services which are often fragmented. Adopting a broader perspective helps us move away from a deficit narrative around absenteeism, in which the problem is located within the child or young person (O'Toole & Devenney, 2020). Absence from school may be a reasonable and intelligible option for children and young people, allowing them to pursue employment, avoid victimization, or reject an education system that is biased against them (Kearney et al., 2022). By expanding the focus from specific risk factors (e.g., a young person's mental health challenges; family dynamics) to broader contextual influences outside a family's control (e.g., the physical environment at school; housing insecurity; neighbourhood violence), less blame is placed on young people and families and they will experience less undue burden for resolving attendance problems (Kearney et al., 2022).

Furthermore, in our changing world, education occurs in increasingly diverse setting. School closures necessitated by the COVID-19 pandemic, propelled teachers and students into remote, online learning environments. Now, with greater confidence in the use of digital tools to facilitate engagement with schoolwork, there is interest in the use of hybrid solutions for learners who find it difficult to attend school regularly. Online learning programmes, alternative education settings, and home-based tuition offer flexible ways to facilitate school completion, taking account of individual circumstances and interests. Nevertheless, we need to be mindful of segregating students; there is a balance to be struck between the provision of alternative options, and ensuring mainstream educations systems are truly inclusive of all children and young people, including those with attendance difficulties.

All of the above, suggest there is a need for greater collaboration between all interested parties (student, parents, teachers, community organisations, and researchers), enhanced equity in interventions, including the adoption of trauma-informed and culturally responsive practices, and the provision of alternative, creative and flexible pathways to school completion, which may include personalised approaches based on student interest or circumstances.

The Irish Context

In Ireland, Tusla Education Support Service (TESS) has statutory responsibility for ensuring school attendance, participation and retention. The Educational Welfare Service (EWS), which is part of TESS, deals with children and families who have difficulties in relation to school attendance. It operates under the Education (Welfare) Act 2000, with the aim of ensuring that every child either attends school regularly or otherwise receives a minimum education, so that their entitlement to education is safeguarded. Educational Welfare Officers (EWOs) work with families and children to overcome barriers to their school attendance, participation and retention; and work closely with schools, educational support services and other agencies to support school attendance and resolve attendance problems.

TESS has two additional strands: the Home School Community Liaison scheme (HSCL) and the School Completion Programme (SCP). These strands operate under the DEIS (Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools) scheme, a government funded scheme that provides additional resources for schools serving communities in low socio-economic areas. As such, these strands only operate in a subset of schools nationally. The SCP aims to retain a young person to completion of the Leaving Certificate, equivalent qualification, or suitable level of educational attainment, which enables them to transition into further education, training or employment. The HSCL scheme seeks to promote partnership between parents, teachers and community family support services. A HSCL Coordinator is a teacher from participating school/s who is released from teaching duties, for a maximum of five years, in order to work intensively with and support parents/guardians. The overarching goal of the HSCL Coordinator is to improve educational outcomes for children through their work with the key adults in the child's life.

Primary and post-primary schools are obliged to record data on school attendance and non-attendance and report it to TESS, at an aggregated level. This is done via the Annual Attendance Report (AAR) and at the student level through the Student Attendance Report (SAR). The AAR dataset consists of four variables: 1) total number of days lost through student absence in the entire school year, 2) number of students who were absent for 20 days or more in the school year, 3) total number of students

expelled in respect of whom all appeal processes have been exhausted, and 4) total number of students who were suspended. The SAR is submitted by schools twice each year on those students that have been absent from school for a cumulative total of twenty days or more during the academic year. The SAR dataset contains data about the type of absences reported and categorised into: illness, urgent family reason, holiday, suspended, other, and unexplained. Only children over the age of 6 years and children who have not reached the age of 16 years or have not completed 3 years of post-primary education, whichever occurs later, are included, in accordance with the legislation which stipulates that attendance is compulsory from ages 6 to 16.

Patterns in the data show that across all measures of non-attendance (days lost, 20-day absences, expulsions and suspensions), DEIS schools record significantly higher rates of non-attendance compared to non-DEIS counterparts. Urban schools also tend to have higher rates compared to rural schools, and special schools record more days lost then mainstream schools (Denner & Cosgrove, 2020; Millar, 2018). The COVID-19 pandemic had an enormous impact on attendance rates. In 2019–20, there were over 19,000 primary students with 20 or more absent days. These absences increased twofold in 2020–21, rising to nearly 40,000, with a further fourfold increase to over 170,000 in 2021–22. Post-primary students had a similar, albeit less severe pattern (TESS, 2023). Again, DEIS schools were disproportionately represented in the data, suggesting the presence of systemic inequalities.

Data from other sources further confirms severely unequal educational attendance, retention and progression for particular groups, including immigrant children and those with disabilities. The figures for Travellers are most concerning. Research shows that there are significant barriers to educational progression at all stages; from primary school to the junior cycle in secondary school, from junior to senior cycle, and from secondary to further or higher education. For instance, only 13% of Traveller children complete second level education compared to 92% in the settled community, and the number of Travellers who progress to third level education represents just 1% of the entire Traveller community (NTRIS, 2017). Data also shows that Traveller and Roma children are 12 times more likely to be placed on reduced timetables compared to settled children

(O'Kelly, 2023). The reasons for these gross disparities can be examined at multiple levels, but have root causes in extreme marginalisation, exceptionally high levels of prejudice, discrimination and intergenerational trauma (AITHS, 2010; McGrath, 2023; Quinlan, 2021).

Concern around the prevalence of SAPs is growing in Ireland, as it is internationally. In recent years, several counties including Clare, Fingal (Dublin), Meath, Roscommon, Waterford, and Wicklow have developed resources for schools and for the parents of students struggling with school avoidance (collated here: Ireland (insa.network). More recently, the National Educational Psychological Service (NEPS) have updated their national guidance on 'reluctant attendance' for school staff and parents at primary and post-primary levels (NEPS, 2024). In addition, at the time of writing, TESS are rolling out a National School Attendance Campaign (2023-24), which has included a conference, webinars for school leaders, with additional activities planned in the coming months.

The Limerick Context

Limerick is a vibrant, growing, and increasingly diverse county, with children and young people making up a third of the total population. There are many positives associated with growing up in Limerick, however, the Limerick CYPSC Children and Young People's Plan (2021–2023) recognises that a significant number of children and young people in Limerick are living in deprivation, impacted by intergenerational cycles of poverty. The Traveller community in particular, face "high levels of prejudice and discrimination" and "extreme disadvantage in several domains including, education, employment, housing and health" (p. 78). Mental health is also of concern; Limerick city had the highest suicide rate in the country from 2019-2021, which has been connected to high rates of poverty, deprivation and unemployment. Long wait times for support services, in many case over 12 months, exacerbates the issue.

Regarding SAPs, figures show that the number of 20 or more absences and lost school days, are higher in Limerick than the national average at both the primary and post-primary level. However, the level of retention-referring to those who entered into post-primary and completed their Leaving

Certificate exam, was on par with the national average. In their 2021-2023 Children and Young People's Plan, Limerick CYPSC cited school attendance and associated issues of retention, reduced timetables and school refusal as priority areas for action.

The Current Study

Against this backdrop the aim of the current study was to explore experiences of SAPs in Limerick from the perspectives of young people, parents, educators and other professionals. Guided by participatory, trauma-informed approach, the study explored what it is like to be a parent, professional, or young person impacted by SAPs. The overarching purpose of these research consultations was to inform an integrated and cohesive approach to addressing and responding to SAPs in Limerick.

Methodology

Research Design and Approach

The research is informed by an ecological, dynamic systems approach recognising the complex and multifaceted nature of SAPs and the various influences at micro, meso, and macro levels (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). The importance of a situated understanding of children and young people's development within the local school and community context in which it occurs (Fogel & Kawai, 2008; Overton & Learner, 2014) is reflected throughout the methods and analysis. This approach also recognises the important role of parents, carers, professionals and school emotional climate in facilitating school attendance and student engagement, as well as wider social-political and cultural forces that impact school systems, parenting practices, and shape contemporary norms and expectations for children and young people.

The research is also concerned with people's lived experience, including their experience of themselves, of their interactions and relationships, and of the complex patterns that co-arise between individuals and the larger systemic context. Goleman and Senge (2014) refer to these three layers as the inner, inter, and outer levels. We were interested in understanding *'what it is like to be'* a professional, parent, or young person impacted by SAPs. Thus, the methodology was designed to inquire into the affective, cognitive, and bodily/somatic experiences of interested parties within the education and social services (Fuchs, 2017; Herrman, Nielsen & Aguilar-Raab, 2021). The values and principles of trauma-informed practice (Fallot & Harris, 2011; SAMHSA, 2014) also guided the research. Given this theoretical framework, qualitative research methods were chosen to explore the subjective experiences, insights and expertise of participants.

Key research questions included:

- **What are the experiences of professionals, parents/carers, and children/ young people in Limerick who have been (or continue to be) impacted by SAPs?**
- **What are the challenges that these participants experience, and what has helped (would have helped) alleviate or resolve the situation?**
- **What supports/resources/structures are needed at various levels (micro, meso, macro) and by families and agencies to facilitate successful resolution of SAPs?**
- **How can insights from this project and international best practice by synthesised to create a suite of user-friendly resources to support key actors impacted by school avoidance?**

Participants and Sampling

Limerick CYPSC (and by extension, Limerick School Avoidance Subcommittee) functioned as gatekeepers, supporting the recruitment of the professionals, parents and young people who participated in this study. A purposive and snowball sampling strategy was employed, whereby individuals who had particular insights and experiences in relation to SAPs were invited to partake. We provided information leaflets and consent forms to gatekeepers, which were then circulated to professionals/educators in their schools and organisations and to relevant parents/guardians and young people.

Two groups of professionals were targeted in this recruitment process: educators and allied professionals. The educators group consisted of those working in the education sector who had experience supporting students experiencing SAPs, including school-based personnel (teachers, principals, guidance counsellors) and educators in alternative education settings, such as Youthreach. The allied professionals group consisted of professionals working in various sectors such as psychology, social work, youth work, and the criminal justice system who also had experience working with young people experiencing SAPs. As shown in Table 1, participants came from a broad range of professional backgrounds and supported young people in different situations.

Table 1. Profile of the Educators and Allied Professionals

Educators		Allied Professionals	
Educ A	School Completion Coordinator	**Prof 1**	Youth Worker
Educ B	School Completion Coordinator	**Prof 2**	Clinical Child Psychologist
Educ C	Post-Primary Home School Liaison Co-ordinator	**Prof 3**	Child Psychologist
Educ D	Youth Coordinator-Community	**Prof 4**	Psychologist (Disability Services)
Educ E	Primary Home School Liaison Co-ordinator	**Prof 5**	Youth Justice Worker
Educ F	Education Welfare Officer	**Prof 6**	Project Leader, Family Services
Educ G	Primary Deputy Principal	**Prof 7**	Youth and Afterschool Coordinator
Educ H	Post-Primary Deputy Principal	**Prof 8**	Community Development Officer-Traveller Health
Educ I	Post-Primary Principal	**Prof 9**	Project Worker-Family Services
Educ J	Post-Primary Deputy Principal	**Prof 10**	Social Worker
Educ K	Post-Primary Teacher	**Prof 11**	Community and Family Support Worker
Educ L	Youthreach Coordinator	**Prof 12**	Community Development Officer-Traveller Health
Educ M	Youthreach Coordinator		
Educ N	Guidance Counsellor		
Educ O	Post-Primary Transition Year Coordinator		

Regarding the recruitment of parents and young people, gatekeepers were encouraged to invite individuals from diverse backgrounds, including those ‘seldom heard’ in research outputs (minoritized families and young people). Given the sensitivity of the topic, they were advised not to invite those who were, at the time of recruitment, experiencing acute distress or mental health difficulties.

Our final sample of young person included a queer and transgender young people, boys from the Traveller community, young people of colour, young people with learning disabilities, a gifted and a neurodivergent young person. They were drawn from both urban and rural areas in Co Limerick. At the time of interview, seven of the eleven young people were attending/receiving alternative education following significant and extended SAPs; the remaining four were currently experiencing SAPs and intermittently attending their mainstream school.

In total, we conducted two individual interviews with parents; one focus group with Traveller parents was cancelled, which the gatekeeper attributed to a legitimate distrust in authority figures and/or research institutions. Both of the parents interviewed were mothers, each had a son with a long history of SAPs; one was currently experiencing SAPs and the other had recently transitioned to Youthreach.

Table 2. Profile of young people and parents (all names are pseudonyms)

Young People			Parents/Guardians	
Sean	18-year-old boy	Individual interview	Emer	Mother of Sean
Sarah	16-year-old girl	Individual interview	Monica	Mother of 14 y/o boy currently engaging in school avoidance
Emma	16-year-old girl	Focus group A		
Leigh	15-year-old girl	Focus group A		
Orla	15-year-old girl	Focus group A		
Shane	15-year-old boy	Focus group A		
Eoin	16-year-old boy	Focus group A		
Patrick	16-year-old boy	Focus group B		
Alex	15-year-old boy	Focus group B		
Connor	14-year-old-boy	Focus group B		
Daniel	14-year-old-boy	Focus group B		

Procedure

The data gathering method for the professional groups consisted of a series of online focus group interviews. Non-directive, semi-structured interviewing techniques were used to explore participants' sense-making in relation to SAPs. Five focus groups, each lasting approximately one hour, were conducted over the course of two days via MS Teams. In total 15 educators and 12 allied professionals participated. A collaborative, empowering and trauma-informed approach underpinned interview procedures. Questions followed four main sub-themes: the participants' understanding of SAPs in Co. Limerick, experiences responding to SAPs (barriers and successes), the professional toll that SAPs has had, and finally 'blue sky thinking' whereby participants were prompted to imagine possibilities and solutions.

With regard to the participation of young people and parents, all interviews took place in-person, in settings chosen by participants; these included local community centres, participants' homes, and organisations in which young people were in receipt of services. In the case of one mother who was interviewed at home, the gatekeeper who introduced us was also present for her comfort. Some young people were comfortable being interviewed individually, while others who had established strong peer relationships preferred to be interviewed as a group (see Table 2).

Arts-based methods were used in the interviews/focus groups with young people. These methods included self-portraiture and body mapping. Self-portraiture is a projective technique that allows the young person to contain their inner experiences on paper (Berberian, 2017) with the aim of encouraging reflexivity while thinking holistically about their identities and lives (Bagnoli, 2009). Self-portraiture invites introspection that allows participants to explore emotional and potentially triggering materials without pressure of finding accurate vocabulary to explain themselves. Body mapping also enables this, creating embodied awareness (Cariaga, 2019) to allow participants access information and feelings relevant to certain situations that may be difficult to express verbally. Sensations of sadness, stress, anger, or frustration are held in the body (e.g., tension in the shoulders, fluttering of the chest) and can be expressed through body mapping. Body mapping also allows researchers to guide participants into thoughtful, embodied communication in a safe and supportive space (Ochard, 2017).

Young people were given a choice between self-portraiture and body mapping. Both young people in individual interviews chose self-portraiture while one focus group chose to do a group body-mapping exercise. A second group also chose body mapping, but ultimately did not feel comfortable having their art works shared; they did however consent to the recording and transcription of the session. These methods were used in conjunction with semi-structured interview questions concerning four main themes: their experiences in school, their history with SAPs, what helped and what hindered them during their experiences, and blue-sky thinking around imagined solutions (similar to the focus groups with professionals and educators).

The data gathering methods outlined above were intentionally flexible and reflexive in order to facilitate the needs and comfort levels of each participant or group. With regard to the two parents, both mothers, a semi-structured interview technique was used. In both cases, a timeline was created, which included their child's experiences in school, factors precipitating SAPs, through to current day issues and reflections.

Ethical considerations

The ethical considerations from this study were informed by trauma-informed practice in order to address power differentials as well as the difficulties in discussing sensitive topics. Safety, choice, collaboration, empowerment and respect for diversity were central. Participants were reminded throughout the process that they were collaborators in an inquiry and that their lived experiences were central. All participants were informed of their right to withdraw at any point during the process of this research, and special care was taken to explain this process in youth-friendly language to young participants. Information on local support services was offered via information sheets in case difficulties were experiences after focus groups and interviews.

The study involved adult researcher and child participants, thereby entailing a power differential. We recognised the possibility that young people may not be accustomed to being asked their personal views on important issues, or conversely, that given their experience with SAPs, they may be fatigued

by having to explain themselves to school and community services. To help address these challenges, the Lundy Model of Participation (2007) was used, which highlights four elements (Space, Voice, Audience, and Influence) offering a practical way of promoting children and young people's participation.

Consideration was given to the comfort of all participants as they discussed potentially sensitive issues. In the case of in-person interviews and focus groups, young people and parents chose the setting, a space that felt safe to them. Young people and parents were also given the option to have their designated gatekeeper present or within eyesight. In the case of the two focus groups in youth centres, legally two adults were required to be present. In both cases, trusted adults were chosen by the young people for this purpose. One parent also chose to have their gatekeeper present for their comfort.

Special care was taken towards young people and their needs. Some young participants were neurodivergent, self-identifying as Autistic in the early stages of the process. This meant that an informed approach was necessary not only to create a comfortable space for sharing, but one that was sensitive to their sensory and social needs. Participants could mould the environment to their needs. For example, some chose to turn off overhead lights while others kept a window open to allow white noise. The arts-based methods involved in the interview process also allowed for easing of social tensions, and particular attention was paid to respecting comfort levels for particular social cues including eye contact, body language and sarcasm.

Approach to Data Analysis

Each interview and focus group was recorded and transcribed. Transcripts were anonymized and then analysed using Braun and Clarke's (2023) reflective thematic analysis (RTA) approach, which embraces reflexivity, subjectivity and creativity as assets in knowledge production. As part of this RTA process, transcripts were read and re-read by one researcher (TC) to become familiar with the data, which included taking notes for early impressions. Then, initial codes were generated in the first phase of coding informed by theoretical thematic analysis (Maguire & Delahunt, 2017).

Following this, transcripts were read by the second researcher (CoT), in line with the collaborative and reflexive data analysis approach advocated by Braun and Clarke (2023). This re-reading aimed to achieve richer interpretations of meaning, rather than attempting to achieve consensus of meaning. Data from the professionals was analysed separately to the data from parents and young people. We did not attempt to triangulate the data (seek commonalities across groups), as we anticipated that the views of parents/young people might diverge from those of professional groups.

Limitations of the Study

As part of this research, we purposively recruited young people who had, or were currently, experiencing SAPs. These young people invariably had very negative experiences of mainstream schooling, as reflected in the data. As such, our findings do not provide a full picture of how young people, in general, experience school life. A planed consultation with a group of parents fell through and as a result our final sample consisted of just two parents. Whilst this is a very small subsample, our data gathering methods facilitated deep conversations, enabling rich and meaningful data. Finally, whilst this study delved into the experiences of participants specifically within County Limerick, it's important to note that the findings may not be broadly generalizable. However, they do align with research conducted in other locations, suggesting a degree of consistency and relevance beyond this particular geographic area.

Findings Part I -Educators & Allied Professionals

This section presents the findings from the consultations with professional groups. We identified five themes; each is discussed in detail below.

1. A perfect storm: the conditions impacting school attendance problems
2. Grappling with the rigidity of the education system
3. Over-worked and under-resourced
4. Lessons learned around what works
5. Looking to the future: what's needed next?

A Perfect Storm: the conditions impacting school attendance problems

It was felt that a complex array of factors were creating “a perfect storm” for increased school attendance problems; these are discussed starting with personal/individual factors, family and community factors, followed by wider global and cultural issues.

Regarding personal factors, SAPs were associated with a range of mental health issues, including anxiety, low mood, depression and Obsessive Compulsive Disorder (OCD). Anxiety was most often cited and frequently manifested physical symptoms, with some participants referencing students “actually physically being sick at the thought of going to school” (Educ F). In severe cases, levels of anxiety were such that attending school was not a realistic goal; instead setting a goal to get out of bed or engage with everyday activities were prioritised. It was evident that levels of anxiety amongst children and young people had increased since the COVID-19 pandemic, an issue we discuss further below. Despite widespread concern regarding youth mental health, some participants questioned how the language around mental health was taken up by young people. This resulted in concern about the validity of young people’s self-expressed mental health concerns: “some of it is imagined” (Educ L); “unfortunately at times, learners do take advantage of the mental health card” (Educ M).

Along with mental health difficulties, the presence of learning difficulties, including specific learning difficulties and mild-moderate intellectual disability were noted as precipitating factors. Being neurodivergent (e.g., on the Autism Spectrum) was widely acknowledged to present particular challenges, given the social expectations and levels of sensory overload associated with busy school environments. When young people have co-occurring diagnoses, “it just makes going at school incredibly difficult” (Prof 3).

In relation to young people’s home environments, some professionals felt that there was a “lack of control in the home” and that parents “have relinquished their parenting role” (Educ F.) There was a view that “homes are so nice now compared to what they were…when a teenager stays

at home, they're in a lovely warm house, they've Wi-Fi all day long and they're on their device" (Educ G). However, there was also recognition of acute levels of adversity and trauma that some children and families were experiencing. Issues included homelessness, abuse, poverty, addiction, domestic violence, parental/sibling incarceration. For those living in very challenging, chaotic, or dangerous situations, it was acknowledged that school attendance was not the most pressing concern. The following quotes are illustrative of some of the challenges facing families:

> *"I had a family who had to go to a different hotel every week for about a year. And the young person was on the autistic spectrum and that just didn't suit him. So, you know, he was smashing up the hotel room…and then they weren't allowed back into that hotel again. So, he was moving around. So obviously then he just wasn't in a position… like, they were worn out and they weren't in a position to go to school" (Prof 10).*

> *"The condition that some people are living in, in this day and age in Ireland; it is absolutely appalling" (Educ L).*

> *"They've just got so much chaos going on. School is that far down the pecking order, it may well be irrelevant" (Prof 12).*

> *"When you know the situation the kids are coming from, it's a bloody miracle they're in school" (Educ N).*

In addition, a school guidance counsellor noted that sometimes the realities of what young people are experiencing is not known to professionals at the time; it might only come to light later. She spoke of three recent court cases dealing with retrospective allegations of child abuse, including sexual abuse, that had been reported in the media. She noted that "*it was only when they were adults that they were able to [disclose] it. And then when I've seen it in the paper… I'm like, 'of course that's why they wouldn't come to school'*" (Educ N).

However, not all professionals working with children understood the impact of trauma on children's behaviour and future aspirations. For instance, one HSLC felt that many of her school-based colleagues (teaching staff/ principal) did not appreciate just what a "*remarkable achievement*" it was for some of these young people to make to school at all. Despite her efforts to explain children's situations to her colleagues, she remarked, "*they still don't get it*" (Educ C). Participants recognised that stress and hardship impact family life and parenting, but despite the challenges, one noted, *"I haven't come across a parent that says education isn't important to them (Educ E*). Another reflected that, "*they dearly love their children, they may be lacking particular skills or capacities, but they have love*" (Educ A).

Regarding school related factors impacting attendance, issues included aspects of the curriculum that could be triggering (e.g., Physical Education), imbalances of power in relationships (e.g., conflict with teacher, peer victimisation/bullying), transitions (e.g., transitioning from a relatively small primary school to the overwhelming busy-ness and relative anonymity of larger post-primary schools); insensitivity to student's needs (e.g., a student with literacy difficulties being asked to read aloud in class; a student with sensory needs having to wear an uncomfortable uniform); and intense pressure for academic attainment. In addition, there was a belief that sometimes schools exclude young people by "*turning a blind eye*" to school attendance problems (Prof 12) or by subtly conveying to young people that they have "*already been written-off*" (Educ C). All these factors contribute to the school environment feeling unsafe, overwhelming, and trauma-inducing. Many of these issues are discussed further under the theme, 'Grappling with the rigidity of the Education System' and in parent and young people's accounts, as outlined below.

In addition to the factors outlined above, participants noted that certain global and local circumstances were having an enormous impact on school attendance. There was consensus that COVID-19 was a *“common denominator, which resulted in an exponential increase in school attendance difficulties” (*Educ J*)*. Families that were struggling before COVID-19 were now struggling even more; and families that previously unaffected by attendance difficulties were faced with a new and foreign issue. A youth worker flagged that *“COVID has done massive, massive damage to the young people.* Similarly, a family support worker stressed that, *“this is unprecedented, this is everybody…This is across the board, everybody is affected…and I think that should frighten us in a way” (Prof 11).* Some suggested that the school closures normalised staying home, while others suggested that a break in routine left many struggling to reintegrate into ‘*work as usual’*. Others may have experienced an increase in anxiety, low mood or other health conditions that have lingered post-COVID.

Proceeding with the curriculum as normal on returning to school was viewed as problematic, because many young people have *“taken a real shock to the system regarding where they are now academically...and it’s affecting brand new people that would never have come under our radar before”* (Prof 7). Many of those that struggled academically before the pandemic, have fallen further behind; one educator stated that post-COVID many students felt like “*dunces*” (Educ D), which drove them further from school. It also appears that the problem is affecting younger students, with a rise in under 16s experiencing SAPs.

The high suicide rates recorded for Co. Limerick has put a particular strain on families and the professionals that support them. A recurrent theme was that parents (both of settled and Traveller backgrounds), were afraid to “*push their kids*”, for fear of making the situation worse: “*The parents say, ‘sure we can’t push them to go at the school because you know, there is that thing around the suicide*’” (Prof 1). A Social Worker recounted:

> *“I’m working with a family where the young person is vomiting every morning. And the dad saying, ‘Get to school, look, you need to just face your fears and get into school’. And the mam; she’s crying, going ‘Oh my*

God, like, am I gonna make this young person suicidal now because I forced him into going to school?' (Prof 10).

However, there was also a sense that a lack of parental control was an issue. Parents allowing youth to "*rule the roost*" was a common topic of discussion. Some professionals felt that parents lacked the skills to create boundaries and rules at home that would enable young people to go to school. Others felt that this was frustrating from an outside perspective but understood that there was more at play than just enabling behaviour; these are *"often parents who are afraid [their child] will escalate".* (Educ I).

Social media and technology also created particular challenges. The upset and humiliation felt by young people who had images or recordings of them uploaded to social media, was considered a major factor in school avoidance, as the following quote highlights.

"I can't stress enough the damage that smartphones are doing because as you know, if you drop your pencil in school, it's recorded and hilarious, and like… I have so many young people for whom that's the reason-one photograph went around the school four months ago and I'm never coming back! They really, really feel the victims of this kind of bullying and every single aspect of their life being recorded…One of your eyelashes falls off, it makes Insta[gram], your life is over. You know that that's the world they live in." (Prof 7)

Others noted that gaming and constant access to streaming services, like Netflix, function as significant 'pull factors' incentivising young people to remain at home. Watching videos and gaming into the night was highlighted as a reason young people had difficulty getting up for school in the morning.

A school leader noted, "*We've had this conversation so often with parents... their [child's] device should not be in the bedroom with them. They will be online till 3:00 and 4:00 in the morning*" (Educ H). Another said, "*We have gamers who turn night into day, and so they're online gaming all night and then they're sleeping all day*" (Educ N). It was acknowledged that limiting screen time was a challenge for parents, often resulting in power struggles. It was particularly difficult for parents who were not present in the home to supervise their children before or after school, due to work or other commitments.

Grappling with the Rigidity of the Education System

A recurring theme in focus groups was the rigid nature of the education system, which created barriers for particular young people, with some concluding that school is not for everyone. One said: "*I think sometimes is overlooked that actually school doesn't suit everyone*" (Prof 2). Another reflected:

> *"[There is an] issue of square-peg-round-hole with our education system, it's not fit for everyone. It's not suitable for everyone. And there's nothing really for those 12-to-15-year old's. There's no alternative education. And so we're really feeling in the dark with those kids and struggling to come up with the plan." (Educ F).*

A psychologist working in disability services, noted that for young people who "*are not particularly academic...there aren't a lot of options presented*", consequently, they can experience school as "*boring*" and "*limiting*". She said that when you really listen to these young people, their concerns about attending school are "*really valid*" (Prof 4). She continued, *"I think I spend a lot of time trying to fit kids into schools, and I'd like the school to fit to the kid."* (Prof 4)

The rigidity of the system was also reflected in the challenges teachers encountered around covering the curriculum in a model requires students to progress at the same pace and time as their peers. One post-primary school leader noted:

> *…you don't want to leave the child behind; but they show up one day a week and you have to backtrack that bit [of missed curriculum] for them; and then you're holding back the other children. So it's real frustrating, it's one of the most frustrating parts. I know for our own teachers, particularly in the [senior cycle] when they're preparing kids for the Leaving Cert….the other 24 kids who have been attending, they deserve to plough on. (Educ H)*

Furthermore, it was noted that the educations system proffers a distinctly White, settled, middle class value system; one in which young people from minoritized and marginalised backgrounds may feel a sense of othering and exclusion. The following quote from a HSLC is illustrative:

> *There's a value system here that we're trying to impose-our middle-class values, our expectations of what we had growing up; onto these kids who've got [for instance] siblings, parents in prison; they've got one parent who's in addiction trying to rear them… that's the reality of what I've experienced so far. (Educ C)*

Similarly, Prof 4 pointed out that our education system is built for the neurotypical majority, and it is one in which accommodations for neurodivergent young people are not easily accessible.

Over-stretched and under-resourced

Timely access to tailored, specialised supports was a huge concern across focus groups. Wait lists were considerable; one psychologist estimated that she has around 700 children on her caseload (Prof 4). This inevitably means that children are falling through the cracks. A youth worker referenced a first-year student who had only attended school on 9 days between September and January "*and she never came under the radar of anybody*" (Prof 7). Schools have a limited number of psychoeducational assessments that they can request; this allocation was widely considered to be inadequate. One participant felt that Traveller students in particular "*fall through the cracks...because other people are prioritised*" for these assessments (Prof 12).

Long wait times for services meant that families are waiting months or years, which can create disillusionment and distrust. A family support worker noted that the Traveller families she worked with, were *"all trying their best to get them [their son/daugher] in and they're trying to access services and there's no appointments or appointments aren't coming up for ages…they could be waiting months" (*Prof 8). It was noted that some Traveller students would prefer to attend segregated Traveller schooling; however, the number of places available were extremely limited. The prospect of attending mainstream school – and the bullying that was anticipated there - acted as a huge disincentive to continuing education.

Professionals were cognisant of the importance of investing in relationships, providing one-to-one personal time and wrap-around, multi-agency support. However, they felt there was insufficient staff or '*manpower*' to support and sustain such approaches. One HSLC noted: "*we're talking about a handful of families that I worked intensively with…. like, I probably missed another 20 [students] in the school*" (Educ E). Staff were at times working "*voluntarily"* to support students: "*we have a situation at the moment where we have a third year [student] and her year head… is meeting her twice a week voluntarily during her free periods to give her some extra time, you know*" (Educ J).

A lack of resources in schools meant that educators felt they were being asked to do too much with too little. They sometimes feel that they are at times working beyond the boundaries of their professional competence: "*we*

have to be psychologists or counsellors, we're trying to teach the curriculum, which we can't teach because we're busy bringing a child up to the sensory room for an hour... it's just over-stretched" (Educ G).Whilst DEIS schools have access to additional resources to help address social inequalities, one DEIS principal commented: "*trust me it doesn't last too long*" (Prof G).

There was a sense that resource gaps were impacting professionals' wellbeing. For instance, school principals raised the difficult ethical dilemma they face due to having, for instance, "only *two psychoeducational assessments for a student population of over 600 – who do you prioritse?"* (Prof H). For another school leader, working within the constraint of the system led to feelings of "*disappointment, frustration and upset, and almost feeling like as a school we did something wrong and wondering is there anything else we can do*?" (Educ H)

Knowledge gaps were also impacting professional wellbeing; a HSLC who had an understanding of the complexity of young people's lives outside of school, felt her school-based colleagues did not understand, leaving her feeling isolated and frustrated in her role;

> *"I just sometimes feel that I have a completely different set of eyes to my colleagues, I'm looking at these kids with a completely different set of eyes, and that can be very frustrating, and I can feel very alone in my work as a result"* (Educ C).

Another professional who works with, and advocates for marginalised young people was evidently frustrated: "*I'm saying the same thing every single year for the last 10 years. Nothing is changing" (Prof 12).*

Lessons learned around what works

Participants offered insights into what worked well in supporting young people experiencing SAPs. Positive relationships that foster a sense of trust and safety were considered central across all focus groups:

> “*I think it’s that ‘one good adult’ concept…that one trusted, constant person that they can rely on*” (Educ E)

> “*The kids that I’ve kind of had success at getting back are the ones that I’ve gotten to know really, really well* (Prof 4)

> “*using the relationship...it’s our greatest asset. It’s our best tool and it’s something that is proven to work”* (Prof 12).

Getting to know the young person allowed a deeper understanding of their unique strengths and difficulties and facilitated bespoke responses. Examples included, understanding a young person’s worry about revealing self-harm marks in PE classes; allowing a young person to wear a hoody (with hood up) to reduce sensory overwhelm; giving permission for a young person to leave class when feeling overwhelmed or unsafe (having a note in their journal, to this effect).

Within schools, nurture groups and the check-and-connect system were mentioned positively as ways of fostering relationships and belonging. Within nurture group, young people came together in the morning before class, “*they might have tea and toast, play games…have chats with the teacher, build relationships really, with the teacher and the SNAs and with the other boys within the group. And…it was just making them feel safe and secure and building that relationship of trust with the people* (Educ G). Within Youthreach contexts, the teacher-student mentoring programme was considered hugely beneficial.

Interagency collaboration was highly valued as a way of addressing the multiple influences associated with school attendance problems, and ensuring professionals were working toward a common goal: “*The most effective cases have been where there’s effective co-working in place…we’re all singing from the same hymn sheet”* (Prof 3). The Meitheal approach was

praised several times for facilitating the sharing of expertise, knowledge and skills to meet the needs of children and families.

There was consensus that flexibility in educational provision and was needed in responding to students with school attendance problems. The options discussed included adjusting educational tasks and offering out-of-school/alternative educational provision. It was felt that all schools need a HSLC to support parent and family partnerships. Similarly, participants believed all schools should offer the Junior Certificate School Programme (JCSP) and the Leaving Certificate Applied (LCA). Out-of-school options included Youthreach, which caters for 15–20-year-olds, iScoil, which provided personalised online learning, and home tuition, which is provided by the DES for young people in specific circumstances. All these options were considered positively, and it was deemed important to have a wide range of alternative options - given the complexity of SAPs it was not expected that 'one-size would fit all'.

Reduced timetabling is an example of an adaptation to the school context, which was frequently mentioned, but was more controversial than other solutions. Some professionals felt strongly that reduced timetables were counterproductive, that they facilitated and maintained patterns of school absenteeism; or worse, that they were used to exclude particular young people, especially those "*presenting with behaviors of concern that maybe are difficult to manage in school*" (Prof 4). One youth diversion worker disclosed that Traveller children have been greatly affected by this form of school exclusion (Prof 12). However, others found reduced timetables helpful when used as part of a phased plan toward increased attendance: "*we do find bringing them back, a reduced introduction and reduced timetable helps. So, start them on mornings for a week, after lunchtime the following week, full day the following week*" (Educ H).

Looking to the future: What's needed next?

In considering how to better support young people, there were strong and consistent calls for a more holistic approach in education and a re-evaluation of the purpose of education. A child psychologist questioned "*why do we want kids to go to school in the first place, what do we want them*

to learn, like...?" She argued for the need to *"look at school, re-evaluate, and change it completely"* (Prof 2). From a clinical and therapeutic perspective, it was recognised that systemic interventions that involve the young person, family and school are vital (Prof 3). Case formulation was also considered an important approach to build on, as it facilitates an understanding of the complexity of issues faced by children and families, whilst also acknowledging the child's expertise on their own life, relationships and circumstances (Prof 1, 2, and 3). Aligned with this, many professionals advocated for greater choice, voice and empowerment for children and young people: "*I think empowerment is key…I would love to see more choice. I'd love to see young people have more options, more choice*" (Prof 2).

The mandatory recording of attendance and reporting of absences (of 20 of or more days in a year) to Tusla was deemed important, since it was recognised that school non-attendance can be indicative of child protection and safeguarding issues (Educ L). However, schools have different approaches to recording absences (including partial absences such as missed/skipped classes); according to one school principal, "*schools are using different software programmes for recording attendance...so sometimes your attendance records are unclear* (Educ I). It was also suggested that schools may not report all absenteeism, perhaps in an effort to maintain the school's reputation (Educ D, Prof 12). This was a particular issue for Traveller students. Thus, it was felt that attendance data received by Tusla may not present an accurate picture. A co-ordinated approach to recording absenteeism is needed.

It was abundantly clear that more resources were required to facilitate wrap-around support, interagency collaboration, timely assessment, and a rapid response to children and families in need; "*definitely more resources, and a faster response time with a plan*" (Educ L). Recognising the importance of relationships, there was also an expressed need for additional staff who might be "*a dedicated person, the one good adult*" (Educ J) for a struggling child. Finally, participants were acutely aware that Limerick is not the only county grappling with attendance issues. The value of a national conversation and co-ordinated approach to addressing SAPs was highlighted.

“A national study in school refusal, just with an accurate up-to-date database of the figures. And politicians sitting up and taking note. And because there’s...it’s a huge issue and we need updated figures…we’ve had national campaigns around vaccination. We’ve had national campaigns around, you know, sneezing into your elbow. This is really important too. And I think we could have a national campaign that would support schools and support us” (Educ N).

Findings Part II – Young People and Parents

Four themes were identified following analysis of the focus groups and interviews with young people and parents:

1. You’re not welcome here, but you’re also not allowed leave!
2. Fighting for your life – disability and mental health
3. ‘I was broken’: The realities of parenting a young person with school attendance problems
4. Envisaging a better education system

You're not welcome here, but you're also not allowed leave!

Amongst most of the settled and Traveller young people we met, there was a distinct sense that they felt unwelcome in their mainstream schools. All reported negative and conflictual relationships with school staff. They often felt that “*nobody cared*” (Shane). If they were relatively quiet or introverted, they tended to feel ignored and invisible. If they were more vocal, they were typically labelled ‘bold;’ they often felt ‘picked-on’, even ‘hated’. They felt they were treated unfairly and sometimes blamed for things that were not their fault. The following quotes are illustrative:

> *“I just feel like teachers ignored us”* (Eoin)

> *“ I got given up on. Just stopped”* (Emma)

> *“I didn’t even get tried on”* (Leigh)

> *“Like, they think we’re doing everything wrong and stuff, they just hate us”* (Orla)

> *“They just have certain students that they want to pick on”* (Leigh)

> *“I think some teachers in the school take being loud and being talkative as being bold and they’re not”* (Emma)

Given their working-class backgrounds, some young people felt they did not belong in school and that they were not expected to succeed. Eoin disclosed that: *“It just felt like I didn’t fit in there. Just everyone coming round*

in big fancy cars, talking about their fathers being doctors and their mothers being doctors. Nah, being from this area they look at you different". Comparison to past family members who attended the same school was an issue for many young people, who felt that their family background affected how teachers interacted with them. Eoin felt that he was being judged and treated unfairly based on the actions of his father a generation ago: "*Everyone is different. Alright, my father did something in the school 20 years ago, I'm a different generation to him, it's not like I'm going to act the same…*" Emma had a similar experience: "*there's a teacher in there and she hated my sister and she was like, 'you're the same as your sister' and all this".* Another participant had a teacher call him by his older brother's name, even after correction. His older brother had been lured into crime and had a 'bad reputation'. That his teachers could not see that he was a different person to his brother, affected him deeply.

The young people sometimes felt that their voices were not being heard, and their concerns not taken seriously in mainstream education, particularly in terms of mental health or additional needs. For James, asking for help was difficult due to his shy nature, but when he did speak up he was met with resistance: *"nothing would be done about it"*. In other instances, reasonable accommodations were granted but still some teachers resisted: *"I was allowed to bring in my Kindle…few months later, I got in trouble for it".*

These kinds of experiences meant that school became a place of shame, alienation, and rejection. In addition, many of the young people had experience of being placed on reduced timetables, in-school detentions, suspensions, and expulsions. There was a clear sense amongst the young people in Focus Group A, that they had been pushed out of school, long before they made the conscious decision to stop attending. Eoin recalls,

> *"Every day I went to school I was in the office, the whole day [the Principal] just left me in there… so I just got sick of it, I went back in and done my Junior Cert and told them I was leaving"*.

Similarly, Shane volunteered, *"I got suspended in the first week…"* Another young person said, *"if I even laughed in class, I'd get thrown out straight away." (Eoin)*

Despite these very negative experiences, when students voiced a desire to leave school and avail of alternative provision, they were often met with resistance. Sarah struggled for years with anxiety which culminated in feelings of suicidality (see more on Sarah's story in the section *Fighting for my Life*, below). Ultimately, she felt her best option was home tuition, but she faced considerable resistance:

> *"I begged them to let me go home schooling because I was in a deep state. They kept refusing, they were like 'no!'... I sent a personal email to the school. Like, 'hey, listen, I need to be home schooled. You know, I'm doing horribly'. I think it's unfair how we're treating as if being home schooled is not an option. Like, just because of their own personal opinion, you know."*

Some young people highlighted that it was only when they requested release forms to attend alternative settings, that they were offered additional resources, which had not been suggested previously. For Orla, it felt too little, too late:

> *"When I was leaving the other school they wouldn't leave me go, they wouldn't give my mum the form for me to go, so my mother had to go in every day and try to get it... all they kept saying was, 'stay in school a bit longer, we can get you help' and I said 'no', and then they brought me in for a meeting...they said, 'we'll get help for you' and stuff and I said 'no, I just wanna get out of here'. The principal was trying to force me to stay in the school."*

Leigh believed her school only wanted to keep her because of the resource allocation they received due to her diagnosed learning difficulty:

> *"They wouldn't give me [the release form] because I'm dyslexic so they get a grant for me, so it took them three months to give the letter, so they got a grant to get me an SNA, and I didn't even have an SNA."*

Overall, the young people we spoke to had very negative experiences of schooling; they felt unwanted within their school, yet trapped, because the system was reluctant to offer alternatives.

Fighting for my Life – disability and mental health

Sarah is a 16-year-old artist. Her struggles with school attendance began in fifth class, *"so fifth class rolled around and that's when, it's like there was a lot of work and responsibility, so I started to get really stressed"*. She explains that she started feeling extremely anxious and had severe difficulty sleeping at night, she would often find herself drowsy or falling asleep during class. She recalls, "*when I was ten, eleven, like, Jesus Christ. Back then my anxiety was awful, like, Jesus, oh boy. You know…more flashbacks just thinking about it!".*

Her struggles intensified when she started secondary school: *"then, oh man, when I went to secondary school, that's when everything hit the fan. I started to miss so many days off school, like, I'd literally go in once or twice a week"*. Interactions with some teachers were anxiety-provoking. She revealed, that there were teachers "*who don't vibe with you…I don't want to come face to face with [them], especially if they're the type to shout or, like, be really, really strict and stuff like that….it makes me a lot more scared*".

Sarah was assessed by Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS) and received several diagnoses. She describes herself as Autistic,

and reveals she has anxiety disorders and executive disfunction. She started on medication, but then:

> *Depression hit, really bad depression, and throughout the months it got worse, really, really bad. To a point where, like, almost there wouldn't be a day where I wouldn't go without thinking about suicide. Like, trying to be as honest as I can…I genuinely believed that life had nothing left to offer me, and that, you know, I had no reason to be here whatsoever. It was truly a dark moment for me and that really impacted my ability to go to school even further.*

Sarah drew a self-portrait capturing her experiences of SAPs during this time, see Figure 1. The red eyes, which can be seen surrounding her head, symbolize the intense gaze and judgement of others. The talking mouths represent people whispering, a reminder of the bullying she endured. Fuzz and chaos surround her head, providing a visual illustration of how she was feeling, which she cannot fully verbalise to herself or to anyone else.

After starting home tuition, Sarah began to do research into her diagnoses, and she says, "*I've gotten to discover myself a lot more*". For instance, she now understands why the transition to secondary school was so difficult, "*how overwhelming it was, like, sensory-wise, because it's like people talking, pushing around*". However, she has also realised that having this knowledge "*did not help with school [attendance]. Even though it's like, okay, I'm Autistic I can get more support, the anxiety about school was still very much there, and it was still very much strong*". At the point of her diagnoses, after long wait times during COVID-19, Sarah had already struggled with sensory issues, executive dysfunction, anxiety and bullying for several years.

Sarah fought to be granted home tuition. She describes this as, "*legit fighting for my life*". It was a long process, convincing authorities that this was the right decision for her and getting all the forms and signatures required, but she and her mother persevered. With home tuition, Sarah says:

> *" I was able to still get my education in a more comfortable way if that makes sense. I was able to get my education at home or in the library, no large amounts of work. No large amounts of homework. No shitty people to deal with, no shitty teachers to deal with. Like nobody yapping in my ears. Just peace and also just getting bits of education done".*

Receiving home tuition also provided the time and space she needed to process her diagnoses and gain self-knowledge and understanding:

> *"...throughout the year that I've been home-schooled, you know, it's really given me the chance to discover more about myself, you know, my boundaries, whatever. How to cope with things, you know. Like really assure myself that hey, you know, it's like you can do this now".*

Home tuition offered aspects of primary school that she had enjoyed: a quieter environment, the same tutor each time, and more personalized approach to learning. Sarah says she is "*in a much better place now*", that her "*mental health is much better*". During our interview, she revealed that she was in the process of planning a return to mainstream schooling and at the time of writing this report, Sarah has done so. She says "*its my own decision, I was not pressurised...I was kind of considering it and I was thinking, you know, 'going back to my school wouldn't be a bad idea. I'd be the same as my friends'*. Her plan is to finish school and then apply to art college.

Figure 1.
Sarah's self-portrait capturing her experience of school avoidance

"I was broken": The realities of parenting a child with School Attendance Problems

Monica is the mother of Peter, a 14-year-old-boy, with a long history of school absenteeism. Monica has older adult children and her parents live nearby. She has experienced housing insecurity; she recalls, *"there was hassle in the last house I was living in we had to leave so... we ended up going up into a hub and we were up there for nine months."* She wonders if this might have affected Peter more than she realised at the time. Monica has huge concern for Peter's safety. There have been violent incidents in her estate and Peter has been targeted. Peter tells her, "*I go to school and there could be a few of them outside the school waiting for me*". Monica says, "*his whole childhood has been kind of that, you know, from pre-school up, he's been bullied his whole entire time in school...They target him from day one".*

Peter is now experiencing what Monica thinks are panic attacks, which are terrifying for both of them:

> *"...he said it's like he feels he knows he's here, but he's out of his body. And he was snow white in the face. But I kind of kept him calm, do you know. Kept talking to him...I had him in there in the sitting room. My nerves! Checking to see if he was breathing and everything!"*

When he was in primary school, Peter would sometimes run away leaving the school grounds, precipitating many anxious trips to town to look for him, as well as stressful phone calls with school staff. Monica felt that the school did not understand that his behavioural issues were connected to the bullying he was experiencing.

> *"Oh they often seen it happening, pulling chairs, firing things at him... but it was always Peter that was sent home. Peter was always the child that was sent home and I had [enough of] it! I went down and I said, 'come here, he's the innocent one, and he's being sent home, and they're being kept in class?' Do you know, but they knew Peter was too quiet..."*

Peter was placed on a reduced timetable in primary school. This impacted his academic development. Monica considers, *"I suppose we kind of feel about how much primary school he missed that he kind of fell behind academically*." She has huge regrets about this:

> *"You see, I was very quiet and I was going by what primary [school] were doing with his reduced timetable, do you know. So, I said well, that's the way*

> *it is. But I was sorry now, I have regrets over that now like, I should have stood up and said no, he's like every other boy in the school, he'll come in at 9am and he'll finish at 2.40pm. Yeah, like if I had my time back over, given what I know now, you know, I would stand up and I'd say no!"*

Peter is now in first year of secondary school, but he rarely attends. He has experienced sustained school attendance problems for two years. He's not eligible to apply to attend Youthreach for another two years, and Monica is worried about what he will do between now and then. She fears that her son could either become further victimized by violence in their neighbourhood, or could be drawn into criminality while not in school. She has become worried about letting him leave the house alone.

> *"...I know he's not going to stay up in his room [all day] either. That's my main worry. We'd love him to go back to school obviously. He needs his education, but I can't really see that happening, do you know. I wish he was sixteen and he could get into a new place, like in Youthreach".*

Regarding her contact with schools, Monica says, "*I'd be getting hyper and the blood pressure would be through the roof*". She admits, *I had a lot of run-ins with them in primary.* However, she feels that she done everything she could to support her son's attendance: "*I feel like, I don't think there's any more I could do. No. Like we have tried everything"*, but she is still afraid that "*I'm going to get into trouble*" with the law or with Tusla. Despite the turmoil, she feels that she has maintained "*a pretty strong relationship*" with Peter.

A second mother, Emer, lives with her son, Sean; it is just the two of them at home. From the time Sean started school, Emer says he was '*resistant*'. She confides:

> *"I thought I was doing all the wrong things. And I thought, 'why is he like that? Why is he, was he, so resistant', you know, the intensity of his resistance... It wasn't like we gave up easy or anything. No, it was really hard. I couldn't really understand it".*

More recently, Sean has met the criteria for several diagnoses; he has sensory issues, an atypical cognitive profile, and can struggle in social situations. Emer's efforts to keep Sean in school negatively impacted their relationship and their wellbeing: "*I can only say I was broken. You know, I was just, I had nothing left in my arsenal, and I was exhausted. He was exhausted. Our relationship wasn't good*".

Monica felt judgement from others, who thought she was "*too soft*" on her son. However, reflecting on the struggles she says: "*You know in hindsight, I would have taken him out [of school] earlier, because it was just silly. Actually, it was like hurting yourself. It was horrible. And no good came out of it. It was really painful*". Sean, in a separate interview, offers the same reflection, wishing he had left school earlier given how much he suffered in that environment. Monica recalls a meeting with his school, where she explained:

> *"This has become diabolical, for me and for him. I asked school staff, 'what can we do?' Because he's not going to get to the Leaving Cert. He's not going to do it...we just have to do something different, this isn't working'. And they were all pushing the Leaving Cert., 'only another year, na na na'".*

Sean is now attending an alternative education setting and is getting on well. Monica says, *"it has been fantastic...I felt relief. And hope...I see him decompressing, and I see like the flickers of joy, and moments of, you know, laughter...Yeah, he's coming back into something, which was really gone*". Sean confides that he likes "the smaller class sizes" and that it is "*more easy to access the teacher because there's less people*". Emer and Sean's

relationship is now improving, Emer reflects, *“it’s been healing, you know? Yeah, the pressure has been taken out of the thing. And now we can all come back to some sort of equilibrium. You know, it’s not perfect, but it’s workable… it’s way better.”*

However, Emer is still concerned that Sean has been let down by the system; that he has been left feeling like “*a total failure*”. She feels ultimately that this is “*what society thinks…You should be able to do this [attend mainstream school]. That’s the way the game is played, and really, if you’re a sensitive person, you take away that, ‘I can’t play the game’*”. Regardless, Emer is in awe of her son’s strength: “*his courage is incredible”.*

Envisaging a Better Education System

We spoke to a group of Traveller boys (Focus Group B) about their school experiences. They all attend mainstream secondary school; their attendance can be erratic. At first, they were hesitant to share their views, saying, “*No, I’ll get in trouble again*”. But when reassured of confidentiality, they spoke a little more freely. They varied in aspirations for the future, one was clear he wanted to be an engineer, another a plumber. They mentioned some aspects of school that they liked, PE was mentioned and the school toilets (which were preferred to the ones at home). They disliked uniforms and considered the school day to be too long. For some schoolwork was “*exhausting*”, for others it was “*boring*”. Relationships with teachers were sometimes conflictual: “*when I walk into the class he [the teacher] comes straight for me*”. They felt their teachers weren’t often happy to see them. This is also reflected in the statements from a youth diversion worker who spends time with them (Prof 12), and who confirmed that there were low expectations for the boys, that their absences are not recorded, and that their relationships with school staff were strained.

In conversation, the boys imagined their ideal school. Classes would include, Math, Engineering, History, English, Irish, and other subjects, to cater for the interests “*of other people*”. Despite aforementioned conflictual relationships, when asked about the kind of teachers they wanted, they were clear that they could hire a number of their existing mainstream teachers or youth workers. They’d choose Mr X as principal, because “*he’s*

sound, he knows what he's doing. He's smart". Ms Y, a youth worker, would also be hired, she's "*nice enough*", and Mr Z who is "*a very, very nice teacher*". Their ideal school would have a "*massive boxing ring*" with a punching bag, and a pool hall; these facilities were highlighted by a number of boys. A basketball court and soccer pitch were also desirable. The aspiring engineer said, half in jest, "*I'd put in loads of elevators".*

The boys had different views on how the school day might be structured: One volunteered "*Start around 10.30am finish around 5pm;* another, *9am to 4pm*. Some suggested a three-or four-day school week. Some wanted activities in the morning, lessons in afternoon or vice versa. Either way, there would be choice of lessons, and a balance between classes and activities. One envisaged, *"And for all the people that like classes, I'd put on 20 classes, and then when they've done one class, straight out to an activity, and then into another class, back in, and out, and back in"*. The canteen might have Nandos and KFC. One young person found it too difficult to imagine an ideal school; he simply responded: *"I don't want a school".* Overall, the school envisaged by the boys was inclusive, in that it catered for varied interests, not just their own. It would be well-managed by a competent school principal and prioritise respectful relationships. It would take a holistic approach, ensuring a good balance between academic work and physical and social activities.

Another group of seven young people (Focus Group A) discussed their prior experiences of mainstream schooling and current experiences attending alternative education settings. Using a body mapping exercise, they reflected on how these settings made them feel. In their collective body map, shown in Figure 2, the left side of the body represents their previous secondary schools. "*Rude"* is written in large letters, reflecting how one girl felt she was treated. "*Depressed, out of place",* come next. "*Principal never liked me"* is drawn down a leg. "*They forgot about you"* above the head. One boy writes, "*more stubborn*", explaining how he acted at his old school. The young people were upset at how they feel they were treated, and some emotions bubbled to the surface.

The right side of the body reflected their current alternative education settings. A young person writes, "*You learn more",* another "*Easier to learn, small class sizes*". One girl writes, "*I fit in. 'Aloud (sic. allowed) to be you"*.

The word, “*Happy*” sits on one shoulder. As they wrote and debated back and forth, they recounted stories of how they get to do more activities, go on excursions, and take courses that align with their interests. It is evident from their discussions that they have a renewed sense of self-confidence and hope for the future. No one sitting in the circle claimed to have perfect attendance, but they all attested to a new-found interest in education, feeling better about themselves, and enjoying their relationships with teachers who treat them well.

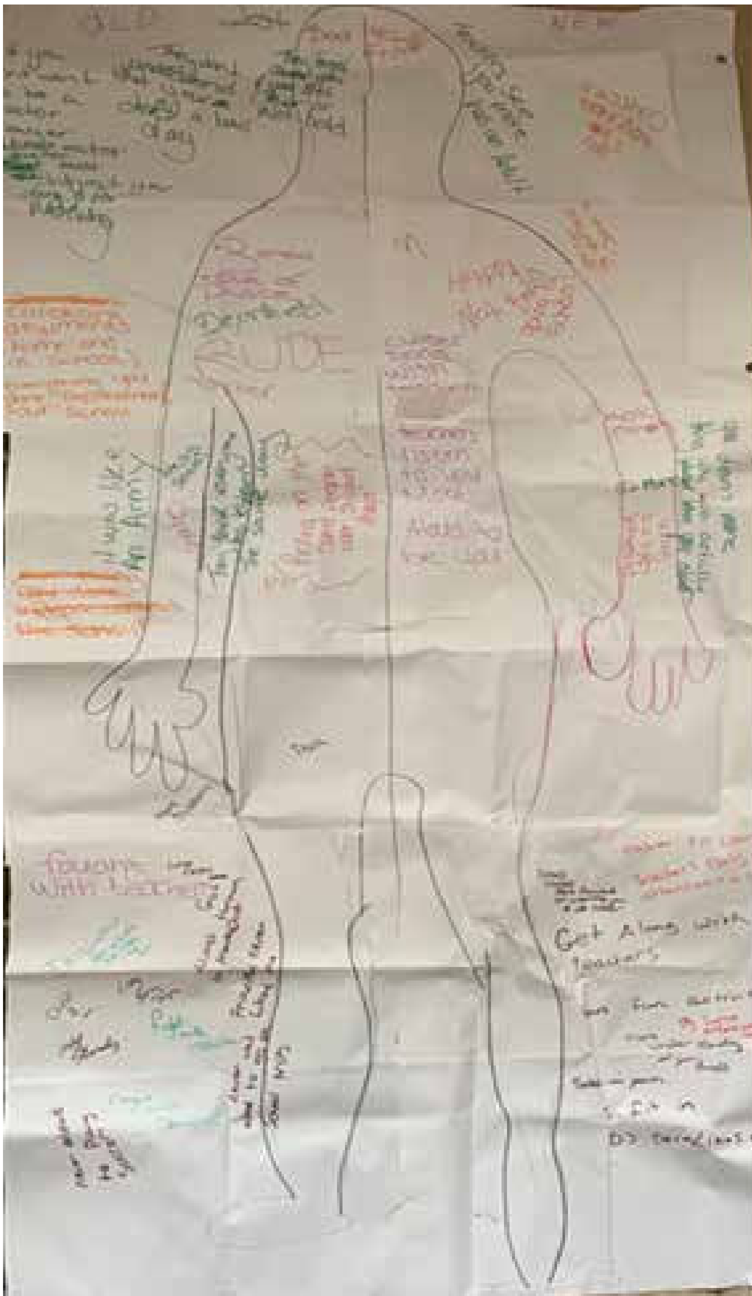


Figure 2.
Young people experiences of what school feels like for them – left side of body represents experiences of mainstream secondary school; the right side reflects alternative education settings.

Discussion

The findings of this study echo previous research which suggest that children and young people are growing up in an increasingly complex world, many aspects of which (technology, gaming, social media, high stakes examinations) are adding to everyday pressures and impacting school attendance (Gubbels et al., 2019; Melvin et al., 2019; Thambirajah et al., 2008). They also show that the COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated these difficulties, creating a *perfect storm* for increased SAPs. The pandemic may also have altered cultural expectations around school attendance in ways that are yet to be fully understood.

Whilst any child can experience SAPs, this study noted certain groups are more likely to experience barriers to attendance. These included young people from the Traveller community, neurodivergent and trauma-affected young people, those with mental health difficulties, special educational needs, and those from working class backgrounds. The barriers for these groups included experiencing difficult and unequal relationships, feeling disrespected by school staff, being bullied, feeling psychologically or physically unsafe, experiencing sensory overwhelm and difficult transitions, not being able to meet academic or behavioural expectations, and not fitting in.

For some young people the challenges were considerable; for instance, our findings revealed that attending school potentially exposed students to risks of suicide and gang assault. Whilst the benefits of schooling are well-documented, international evidence also points to a harsh reality that schooling can be trauma-inducing for some students (Hansen, Sabia & Shaller, 2021; Powell, 2020). Recognising that school attendance can be a source of distress is an important first step in addressing SAPs. For many of the young people we spoke to, absence could be considered a *solution*, rather than a problem per se. Non-attendance was a reasonable and

intelligible strategy to maintain physical or psychological safety. Hence, addressing non-attendance means taking seriously the barriers that young people face and developing a holistic and integrative picture of their unique situations (O'Toole & Devenney, 2020). This means actively listening to and young people and giving them more say in interventions or support plans.

Parents face a formidable challenge in the face of SAPs. The findings of this study revealed that some professionals felt that parents lacked capacity in their parenting role or that they are not sufficiently motivated to ensure attendance. Others offered more complex accounts, highlighting the pressures, stresses and (often intergenerational) inequalities that may account for parents feeling ambivalent about schooling. The parents we consulted with directly for this study, spoke of how attending school was negatively impacting their child's wellbeing. These parents were caught in a difficult dilemma: Should they ignore their parental instinct and risk damaging their relationship with their child in order to enforce attendance, or should they listen to their child and their own intuition, and risk being judged complicit, neglectful, and potentially face prosecution for non-attendance? This is a dilemma facing many families both in Ireland and internationally (Devenney, 2022; Morgan & Costello, 2023). It is especially poignant within Limerick, where high rates of suicide reported in the news loomed large in many parents minds. Moreover, extremely marginalized groups, particularly the Traveller Community face an even bigger crisis with mental health and suicide (AITHS, 2010). All of this cautions us to avoid simplistic and blanket assumptions about parental attitudes, values and behaviours.

For many young people and their families, alternative education (Youthreach, iScoil, Home Tuition) was perceived as the only credible option in safeguarding children's right to education and offering a more personalised educational experience. The mainstream education system was deemed too rigid and inflexible, valuing academic attainment and rule following above all else. Yet the alternative education pathways currently available have limited capacity, restrictive age-related criteria, and are unlikely to address the needs of all those experiencing SAPs. Moreover, there is concern that alternative pathways could create segregating practices that may be detrimental to the long-term educational outcomes of learners (Heyne et al., 2024). Thus, whilst acknowledging the vital role

of alternative provision, more emphasis needs to be placed on creating truly inclusive school environments in which all young people can flourish, including those who experience SAPs.

The lessons learned from this study about how to respond to SAPs correspond with themes identified in other literature (Heyne, et al 2001; Kearney & Graczyk, 2014; McKay-Brown, et al., 2019). They point to the importance of forging strong relationships characterised by compassion, trust and mutuality, at all levels (between children and young people, parents/carers, colleagues, professionals in other organisations). A whole-school, multi-tiered or continuum of support model is essential to facilitate a proactive approach that builds an inclusive school climate in which every student feels valued, safe and engaged (Tier 1). Targeted interventions (Tiers 2-3) for emerging or sustained attendance problems require individualised supports and reasonable accommodations, such as adaptations to the curriculum and/or adjustments to the social and physical environment (e.g., staggered entry time, adjustments to manage sensory overload). These need to be adequately resourced and monitored.

Professionals in this study supported co-designing interventions with children and families with input from the various professionals/agencies working with children. It was also recognised that interventions need to be flexible and create movement toward re-engagement with learning and social connections, rather than stagnation. For instance, a reduced timetable may be used to facilitate a graduated re-integration, where agreed between school, child, parents and SENO/psychologist, but should not be used without a plan for how gaps in learning will be addressed.

Special focus should be given to groups disproportionately affected by absenteeism. As noted in the Introduction, attendance, retention and progression figures for the Irish Traveller community are particularly stark. Echoing previous research, participants in this study highlighted several concerns, including the use of reduced timetables, a practice of not prioritising Traveller children for psychoeducational assessments (despite evident need), a culture of low expectations, a view that Travellers do not care about education, and a practice of turning a ‘blind eye’ to absenteeism. This amounted to what one professional referred to as ‘*state enabled school avoidance*’. Nevertheless, many of the Traveller young people consulted as

part of the study had clear educational goals and aspirations.

Moreover, previous studies provide insights into the reasons that the Traveller community might feel ambivalent toward schooling. Given how they themselves were treated in school, Traveller parents may find it difficult to advocate or be involved in their child's school (Quinlan, 2021). Traveller parents worry for their children's wellbeing due to bullying and mistreatment, and they are aware that even if their child succeeds in school, they are often unlikely to secure employment due to discrimination in wider society (FRA, 2019, Quinlan, 2021). This study, therefore, reinforces the need to address the significant structural barriers faced by Traveller children in education. Measures may include increased access to Traveller Culture and Awareness Training and the Yellow Flag programme for school staff, (Titley, n.d.), ensuring positive representation of Traveller culture and history in the curriculum (NCCA, 2019), and learning from and subsequently expanding the STAR pilot projects[1], currently initiated in four sites across Ireland, but not, as yet, in County Limerick.

None of what is recommended here is easy in practice. Developing a cohesive, community-wide, and equitable response to SAPs requires time, space, and resources for interagency collaboration (e.g., school staff liaising with other professionals and agencies, monitoring and evaluating the effectiveness of interventions, and most importantly being available to collaborate with children and families). Unfortunately, school staff and professionals across other relevant agencies reported feeling under considerable pressure in their professional roles. Nevertheless, they demonstrated a strong commitment toward meeting the needs of children, young people and families, and working collaboratively toward this common goal. A commitment to addressing SAPs, demands more than just launching a national school attendance campaign; it requires allocation of funding and resources to enable professionals to effectively fulfill their roles. Furthermore, working with SAPs can be emotionally challenging for professionals and lead to relationship ruptures (Devenney & O'Toole, 2021; Finning, Harvey, Moore, et al., 2018). To protect against compassion fatigue and burnout, professionals will need systemic supports for their own wellbeing, including for instance, opportunity for reflective practice, access to professional supervision, and supportive and encouraging leadership,

1 Initiated as part of the National Traveller and Roma Inclusion Strategy (NTRIS) 2017-2021

both within organisations and from central state departments (O'Toole & Dobutowitsch, 2023; O'Toole & Simovska, 2021)

In conclusion, grappling with the complexities of SAPs underscores the pressing need for innovative responses across education and community services. While these challenges may seem daunting, they also serve as catalysts for transformative change. In our rapidly evolving world, where traditional approaches may no longer suffice, there lies a unique opportunity to reimagine educational practices and prioritise holistic supports in ways that better resonate with the diverse needs of today's children and young people. By embracing innovative approaches, fostering community partnerships, and prioritising individualised support, it is possible to create inclusive school environments that inspire engagement and enable all students to flourish. Embracing these opportunities will not only enhance student well-being and academic success, but also contribute to the broader goal of creating equitable and accessible education systems for future generations.

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