

Exploring parental experiences of school exclusion: methodological implications of the COVID-19 pandemic

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Introduction:

The onset of the COVID-19 pandemic has brought challenges for doctoral researchers, not only with their personal lives but also having significant implications for data collection (Goldstone, 2020; Lambrechts and Smith, 2020). Carrying out sensitive qualitative education research during a global pandemic required careful interrogation of research ethics and design. This being important as methodological choices made during the pandemic, now had additional physical and emotional repercussions for all involved (Jowett, 2020). This paper explores some the implications of collecting data in a London-based doctoral research study with parent participants during Summer 2020. It suggests that a multi-faceted approach, including ethical considerations, strategic planning in line with COVID-19 guidelines, and an interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) research design, offered the opportunity to elucidate these frequently marginalised experiences during this unique time. In line with IPA, brief reflections on professional and personal identity are made.

Background and design:

School exclusion rates in England have continued to increase over time (Parsons, 2018). Recent figures from the Department for Education (DfE) corroborate concerns

that school exclusions disproportionately affect some children more than others e.g. special educational needs (SEN) boys – Black Caribbean and those receiving a free school meal (FSM) allowance (DfE, 2020). Implications of exclusions for individuals, schools and wider society are often debated. Despite parental involvement in the school exclusions process being a legal requirement, and some research indicating detrimental effects on excluded pupils' parents (Mesie and Michelmore, 2019; Parker et al., 2016), even a government commissioned report acknowledges there is little research which focuses solely on their lived experiences (see Timpson, 2019).

This doctoral research was formulated as a way of exploring parental experience of their child's permanent exclusion, with the aim that findings contribute to knowledge on school exclusions policy/ practice. It employed an IPA design, semi-structured interviews with 6 'parent' participants whose child/ren had been permanently excluded from a mainstream school in London. Sampling – purposive. Initial findings point to these parents feeling they have themselves felt 'excluded' in many ways by the schools and systems interacted with throughout their child's school exclusion process. Parents also share some of the immense and personal difficulties faced during and since their child's exclusion, in addition to their suggestions and hopes for the future.