Thames Valley Partnership Encouraging School Attendance

A briefing and discussion paper
Mark Dewhurst
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Context for this paper

This overview has been undertaken in response to discussions among educational and other professionals at **Thames Valley Partnership's School Inclusion Forum**. The original topic under discussion was the usefulness, or otherwise, of Truancy Sweeps. The sweeps were initiated, at least in part, as a response to assumed criminal activity by young people absent from school. However, more fundamental issues of child welfare and educational entitlement soon emerged. This paper, derived from informal discussions with a range of colleagues and limited reference to existing research, considers the broader question of constructive responses to truancy and poor school attendance. Thanks are due to all those who have contributed ideas and generated lines of enquiry.

Mark Dewhurst is a Thames Valley Partnership Associate with experience as a teacher and youth worker and has worked with a variety of school inclusion initiatives.

Ideas stemming from the truancy sweeps

The first point to register is that truancy sweeps can **play a part in addressing low threshold, casual non-attendance** (which is often condoned by parents). This is a preventative function, raising the profile of attendance and the responsibility of parents. It is seen to have at least a short-term impact on attendance (occasional high profile prosecutions can have a similar effect). However, it is not seen as a useful response to persistent and established non-attenders.

As part of the **Street Crime initiative**, the sweeps can be characterised as removing potential offenders from the streets. However, the rationale for ensuring that children and young people are in school should be at least as much about keeping **them** safe from crime/abuse (which also prompts one key question to consider in relation to persistent absentees; 'Is school experienced as a safe place to be?')

The **Report on the Truancy Sweeps and accompanying ministerial briefing**(DFES August 2002) suggests at least two relevant themes beyond the raw statistics:

- *'This (experience in Blackburn and Darwen) highlighted a key issue - truancy sweeps in town centres will pick up parents with children, targeted sweeps in known trouble areas pick up young people on their own.'*

We should be clear what we are doing and why. Truancy sweeps as a preventative/awareness-raising measure are a blunt instrument and probably best focused at areas of maximum numerical impact (ie town centres). My own experience as a detached youth worker and home tutor indicates that children who don't **want** to be found are generally not stupid or unsophisticated and are unlikely to be caught (a second time!) by sweeps. This indicates more sophisticated, targeted intervention with persistent non-attenders (see below throughout).

- *'Reintegration, helping pupils...back to regular school attendance, is a problem in some authorities...returning pupils to school can be disruptive to the school and other pupils in the class, especially where there has been long-term non attendance. It was preferable in those cases not to return them*

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without a pupil attendance plan or reintegration programme in place.'

No surprise there I think! However I do believe this points to a hazard which frequently frustrates our best efforts - due to pressures of numbers and time and sometimes professional demarcation issues, students are frequently thrown back into situations where they are almost certain to fail and so reinforce their previous 'delinquent' behaviour.

A thought bubble

What is the **status** of students who do not attend? I don't mean legal but personal and social status. I suspect that, even among their peers, the stock of many non-attenders does not stand very high compared to, say, those who attend, disrupt and are in danger of exclusion. They can also have ambiguous status for a class teacher – their non-attendance is not a presenting problem (the opposite in fact!) whereas their return to class does present problems, inevitably in terms of work missed and new work not understood and often in terms of disruptive behaviour. How does it feel to come back? Students most frequently recount a sarcastic welcome:

*'How **delightful** that you have decided to honour us with your presence today!'*

The response at the front desk to latecomers signing in is also often a frosty one (I have known students who do attend school but accept being marked absent as preferable to signing in late).

Is it possible to speak to returnees in a way that accepts and welcomes their return without condoning their absence? What makes a school welcoming? These may be the detailed interactions which can make a real difference.

Government initiatives

The **14 - 19 Green Paper**. In the medium term (projected full roll out from 2005/6) this has the most profound implications and, if its aspirations are realised, should have a major (positive) impact on attendance and participation. Reduction of truancy is an explicit aim. Individual review and planning at 14, equality of status for vocational and academic qualifications, an emphasis on work related learning, recognition of the importance of personal skills development and flexibility of curriculum offer would all contribute to making participation in learning a much more attractive proposition.

The successful implementation of the 14 - 19 Green Paper for disengaged students and students at risk places a huge reliance on the effective evolution of the **Connexions Service**. In its aspirations Connexions should work entirely to the benefit of disengaged young people. However, the feedback so far from local colleagues is that the implementation of Connexions has created a confusion of roles and a reduction in sometimes high quality existing provision of Careers advice. Of course it is early days for Connexions, but failure to recruit well enough and in sufficient numbers to this demanding new role could leave a gaping hole at the centre of the 14 - 19 proposals which indicate, among many other things, specialist skills such as brokering flexible learning programmes.

Some existing literature on school based responses

The extent and purpose of this project doesn't allow for a comprehensive or even substantial literature search. However I have considered two volumes, *Here Today, Here Tomorrow* - **Roaf 1995** and **Working** *with Disaffected Students* - **Riley 2002**. Both are slim and readable, eschew 'quick fix' solutions and aim to be practical responses to problems faced by schools trying to encourage attendance.

Both acknowledge that the causes of truancy are multi-faceted and that blame can be laid at many doors (the pupil, the family, the wider community, the school) and both quickly conclude that apportioning blame gets you no where and move to consider more constructive options.

'There are many issues to do with poverty, health and employment, as well as family circumstances, which lie beyond the efforts of schools. [Although not necessarily beyond the efforts of interagency responses MD] *However the practices and perceptions of schools, agencies and organisations can make a crucial difference. The key challenges are:*

- *What changes can be made within school?*
- *What can practitioners do to help young people succeed against the odds?*
[Riley 2002]

Here today, Here Tomorrow outlines practical ways in which schools can develop practice and policy under five heading:

- *Assessing the pattern of attendance*
- *Promoting a positive school environment*
- *The daily management of attendance*
- *Improving liaison outside school*
- *Developing, communicating and evaluating policy*
[Roaf 1995]

Some things have changed in the seven years since this booklet was written (such as the proliferation of mobile 'phones and the rise and retreat of the National Curriculum as a sacred text). However, the headings and proposals stand as valid, ongoing responses, particularly considered alongside with the following proviso from Riley:

'...we also found that the development of a few, but simple and clear goals, linked to strategic objectives, work far better than overwhelming schools and teachers with a barrage of goals and targets. All too often, 'do it all' approaches are attempted. Achieving inclusion will not happen overnight. It is a step-by-step process through which practice can be improved upon, lessons learnt and success built over time.' [Riley 2002] (A particularly interesting aspect of Riley's book is inclusion of Headteachers' challenges to her proposals).

Continuing the theme of positive school based responses, **CSIE *Index for Inclusion*** should now be in every school. Encompassing the inclusion of young people with disabilities and learning difficulties, this document does offer a structure for addressing whole school issues, working on three dimensions: creating inclusive CULTURES, producing inclusive POLICIES and evolving inclusive PRACTICES. This big picture approach offers a comprehensive response to addressing barriers to participation and learning within the school community. These are surely universal factors which encourage students to attend (is the school safe? Is it relevant? Is it friendly, respectful and so on).

I feel that the index shares a lot with **Belinda Hopkins'** locally implemented approach to **Restorative Justice** in schools – acknowledging the need to look at the big picture whilst recognising each school's individual need and right to find its own starting point and take things forward at its own speed. More information can be obtained from www.transformingconflict.org

I know that day to day pressures make many schools baulk at the big picture and they often want specific (if not quick fix) solutions. However, it is worth referring to the ambitious overview, if only to verify that our limited interventions are at least consistent with that bigger picture.

A bit of theory

***Disaffection and Inclusion* (Giles Barlow 1998)** is specifically concerned with measures to prevent exclusion in Merton. However it offers a brief theoretical outline of a range of perspectives employed with troubled and troublesome students: Transactional Analysis, behaviour management, psychodynamic, cognitive, eco-systemic.

Now, **before you turn off completely**, I believe that most of these are strategies we employ anyway without giving posh names to them. Barlow's point though is that we need to take a consciously varied and selective approach

in our interventions, being aware of what we have tried and being prepared to take a different tack:

'Each perspective has its limitations and teachers can become exasperated when a particular approach fails. The tendency in such situations is, understandably, to claim that the pupil's behaviour has so far deteriorated that he or she is beyond redemption. However, what is less common is for teachers to critically appreciate the basis of their interventions and question the validity of the chosen perspective'.

If nothing else, I believe there is a strong argument to ensure effective **supervision and teamwork** to support teachers in their pastoral and curricular roles. Of all professionals working with young people, teachers are undoubtedly required to respond to the greatest numbers and yet are frequently isolated as well as pressurised in formulating effective responses. In striving to make schools both safe and inclusive we can bring all sorts of new initiatives to bear but we must first of all support the teachers to respond to increasingly complex and challenging demands.

Locally and of more specific application, **Nick Luxmoore** (until recently at The Children's Society, East Oxford Schools Inclusion Project) is exercised by the **concept of attachment** and the idea that poor attenders may struggle to attach appropriately to their schools, people and places within them. Teachers and other professionals are often anxious that young people will become over-attached and over reliant - how can this be managed so that students who struggle have sufficient and appropriate opportunity to attach?

An allied question concerns the **creativity curriculum**. It is proposed that creating things helps people to attach to the place where they do the making and the person they do it with. Think about the opportunities for doing and making in primary school compared to the limited scope in secondary school.

A sense of place may be important to this. It is hard to attach to an institution but more possible to attach a part of it. Think about students' habits at break time. Some hang out round the basketball hoop (the teacher who runs the basketball club may have found a sufficiently safe way for students to attach). Others always 'hide' behind a particular wall and smoke (mind you, so do some teachers). Some more vulnerable souls will be seen to haunt the small back room inhabited by a trusted learning support worker (sometimes approaching retirement - grandparents can provide safe attachment figures). Yet others will gravitate to the art department, more or less always occupied at lunchtime with 6th formers finishing course work and teachers with cups of tea.

For a full treatment of the question of attachment and its practical application in schools see 'School Attachment and Attendance' (Nick Luxmoore 2003).

The significance of attachment has also emerged as a significant factor in Thames Valley Partnership early intervention work – published in *'Never too Early'* and available from the Thames Valley Partnership.

Success factors proposed by local colleagues

Multi agency responses

- Establishing a system which competently responds to young people's wider needs, beyond the classroom. This can be structured as a multi professional 'triage' system to 'catch' students at point of need.
- Non-teaching professionals need to understand how schools work but also need sufficient status and experience to 'rattle and shake' the status quo where necessary.
- Clarity of roles is crucial - young people and professionals need to be absolutely

clear what each extra professional does and how to access them. Where this doesn't happen you get waste and muddle.
- Attitudes need to shift from 'Sorry, that's not my job.' to 'This is what I can do ... and here is where we are going to go so that you can get the next bit of help'.
- This work is labour intensive. Reliability and long term investment are important. Prompt responses to seemingly trivial issues may be more helpful than scheduled specialist interventions.

Numerous multi agency initiatives are being developed throughout the Thames Valley area.

Examples can be found at Banbury and Drayton schools in Banbury, where restorative approaches are extended to the community as well as the school. In Reading, the BEST team is developing its own model of multi agency working and the LINKS project has a specific focus on supporting children at risk a the point of transfer to secondary school, also forming part of a very locally focused community initiative operating through Lower Caversham Intervention Board.

<u>Teacher focused responses</u>

- (Linked to the appropriate multi agency responses, above) Teachers can then be freed to devote their energy to encouraging attendance by focusing on the quality of teaching and learning. The capacity to support attendance through strengthening curriculum delivery and classroom practice should not be underestimated (see also 'Essential Motivation in the Classroom' by Ian Gilbert. This may be a bit 'pop' for some serious thinkers but it is up to date and considers aspects of teaching and learning which, in my experience, often have little currency in schools).
- One radical alternative to deploying other agencies is to take a suitably skilled and accessible teacher off timetable to deal with meeting and greeting and home visits and so engage with students and parents specifically as a learning professional.

<u>Responding progressively and appropriately</u>

- Children who don't attend do so for a reason. A recent series of interviews with looked after children in Reading (Jackie Higgs, Reading Social Services) verified that they failed to attend school for quite specific reasons, for instance, the lack of a sufficiently motivating adult or an overwhelming sense of embarrassment which was often linked to special educational needs.

So, there is a need to investigate and address the reason(s) for non-attendance systematically:

- ➢ Bullying?
- ➢ Home pressures or lack of support?
- ➢ Domestic violence?
- ➢ Physical or emotional problems of student or family?
- ➢ Learning difficulties?
- ➢ Relevance of curriculum offered?
- ➢ Visits to family member in prison?

But then, when all avenues have been explored, it is felt proper to retain the criminal justice route – the culture of ensuring attendance rather than condoning absence requiring enforcement as well as encouragement.

<u>Rapid Response</u>

- There are at least two and probably more models of rapid response to truancy. One version would have a specialist worker dedicated to the school and responding promptly to absence by working with students and families in their homes (St Augustines Upper School in Oxford had good results with this). Another version has a minimal administrative first day response from the school backed up by a designated ESW working on radical responses with families, sometimes across several schools (this model operates in the Oxford EAZ). Both approaches have proved effective whereas simply maintaining 'first day calling' is unlikely to be effective with persistent absentees.

<u>Other thoughts from colleagues</u>

- Don't neglect the importance of attendance with very young children and families – it can be habit forming.
- We need to count attendance consistently and accurately (it doesn't always happen!) but also find a way to recognise 'value added' in terms of attendance. 80% attendance may look like failure against a government target of 94% but it should be celebrated as success against, for instance, previous 40% attendance.

References

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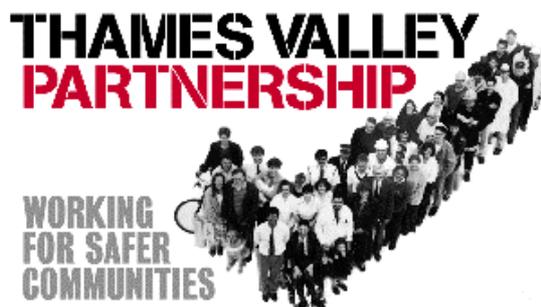Riley, A & Rustique-Forrester, E (2002) *Working With Disaffected Student*s; Paul Chapman Publishing

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Nick Luxmoore: nickluxmoore@lineone.net
Belinda Hopkins: belinda@transformingconflict.org

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