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Disaffection with Schooling

George Head

Disaffection, as far as it can be identified through non-attendance in schools, is problematic, to varying degrees, in all 'Western' countries. In the UK, the US and most of Europe, for example, the state provides free education in nursery, primary and secondary schools. In common with the rest of the UK, the law in Scotland requires children between the ages of 5 years and 16 years to be in education, normally in schools, thereby entitled to eleven years of compulsory education. Disaffection with schooling is notoriously difficult to 'define' and is often associated with disengagement, which is equally complex, entailing notions of non-cooperation, non-participation and non-attendance. A number of studies in both Scotland and England have focused on pupils identified by their teachers as disaffected, usually based on their (mis)behaviour in school. Almost inevitably, school disciplinary procedures lead to such behaviour resulting in exclusion or pupil self-withdrawal from school, referred to, in Scottish Government statistical publications, as unauthorised absence including truancy. Whilst truancy may be seen as a negative and irresponsible reaction to school and learning, exclusion is often seen as a socially and legally acceptable decision on the part of schools as a means of addressing pupil disruption and poor behaviour. Absence, truancy and poor behaviour (leading to exclusion), therefore, have been considered as markers of pupils' disaffection with schooling and, historically, the Scottish Government's published statistics on exclusions and unauthorised absence have been used to identify the extent of pupil disaffection in Scottish schools. This chapter explores the complexities of what is considered as disaffection with schooling, the extent of the problem, the factors that contribute to pupil disaffection and the measures chosen by schools and local authorities to address it.

DEFINITION AND TERMINOLOGY

Defining what exactly constitutes problematic non-attendance and hence disaffection in school is complex and complicated by a number of factors, some of which pertain to schools and others lying beyond the school. Consequently, this leads to difficulty in how levels of absence are calculated and how research and literature are interpreted. For example, some authorities and schools consider term-time holidays as absence, which, whilst it can be considered non-attendance, is not necessarily a marker of disaffection. In June 2003, the then Scottish Executive Education Department (SEED) issued a circular on non-attendance that included definitions of what constituted attendance, disaffection with schooling, authorised absence and unauthorised absence in Scotland. Attendance was defined as, 'participation in

a programme of educational activities arranged by the school' (Scottish Executive Education Department, 2003, p. 2). In addition to attendance at school itself, this definition allowed for work experience, educational visits, study leave during exam times, other events organised in conjunction with the school, and education through outreach services or hospital teachers.

Unauthorised absence in Scotland, therefore, remains simply any unexplained absence, truancy and family holidays during term time. The one context that remains within a 'grey' area is absence as a result of exclusion. Whilst it is recognised that exclusion is 'imposed by the school and not the action of a pupil or parent' (Scottish Executive Education Department, 2003, p. 4) and therefore does not constitute unauthorised absence, it nevertheless remains a contested area and is reported separately from other absence. Within a schools context, Charlton et al. (2004) argue that there is a close relationship between exclusion and truancy and their negative impact on behaviour and the relationships among pupils and teachers. Hilton's (2006) Scottish study found similar relationships among long periods of truancy, exclusion from school and pupil disaffection.

Shute and Cooper (2015, p. 66) point out that the fifteenth-century etymology of truancy refers to 'one who wanders from an appointed place', which provides a generally understandable working definition that allows for nuances and variation in recent and current studies. In Scotland, truancy is described as 'unauthorised absence from school for any period as a result of premeditated or spontaneous action on the part of pupil, parent or both' (Scottish Executive Education Department, 2003, p. 4). This definition was confirmed in subsequent bulletins on attendance and absence statistics for Scottish schools up to and including December 2011. Recent literature has widened the scope of truancy research to include in-school truancy (Shute and Cooper, 2015) and truancy and wellbeing (Attwood and Croll, 2016). Indeed, in order to reflect children and young people's experiences, there is recognition that truancy is variable from casual (infrequent, less than e.g. three days, skipping single classes), to moderate (four to nine days) and chronic (frequent, longer, e.g. ten or more days).

The range of terms used to identify or describe young people who are not in school reflects the complex nature of non-attendance in schools. Terminology can be as obvious and transparent as, for example, 'absentee', most likely to be used to describe someone who is not at school for a short period. Where unauthorised absence or periods of non-attendance are more persistent and long term, the terminology applied to young people becomes more sophisticated, with connotations of deficit in social, psychological and learning aspects of their make-up. The choice of term for young people who are persistently absent from school depends on how the problem of non-attendance is perceived and the way in which schools and teachers deal with the pupils concerned. They may differentiate, for example, between truants on the one hand and school refusers on the other, with the former attracting perceptions of being harder working and less badly behaved than the latter. The label assigned to students is not just a matter of semantics, as the explanations for and subsequent management of persistent absence is dependent on the perceptions that underpin the terminology.

The term 'school refuser' may be chosen in preference to other common usages such as 'truant' and 'school phobic' for two principal reasons. First, the terms 'truant' and 'phobic' carry with them connotations that can serve as distractions when considering the learning of the young people involved. Truants are often characterised as being disaffected or disengaged with schooling and the approach suggested is one of alternative, usually vocational, education. Consequently, young people considered in this way are likely to find themselves

attending further education colleges for at least part of their education. Phobic, on the other hand, carries connotations of a quasi-medico-psychological deficit.

Whilst there is a tendency in some of the literature to equate the terms 'phobic' and 'refuser', in both cases the student's problem is constructed as not belonging to the school, curriculum or pedagogy, and responsibility for creating the context in which the young person can learn is located outwith the mainstream classroom. However, 'refuser' does not carry the psychological weight as 'phobic'. The common experience of young people in Scotland considered phobic is referral to an educational psychologist (see Chapter 79) and, in extreme cases, removal from mainstream to segregated education in a special school. 'School refuser', on the other hand, simply describes what happens and makes no social, psychological or moral judgement on the young person or his or her behaviour. All school refusers are simply that: they refuse, for whatever reason or none, to go to school. The decision whether a student is described as phobic or truant is subjective, dependent on the opinions of teachers and others who work with the pupil. The description may well be accurate but can limit the approach adopted and act as a distraction from the main goal of education and prime focus of schools and teachers, that is, the young person's learning. In such cases, the terms 'truant' and 'phobic' suggest a deficit approach, assuming that the disaffection or phobia has to be 'fixed' before learning can be addressed.

EXTENT AND VARIATION

The Scottish Government publishes biannual statistics on school attendance that indicate that overall absence rates are under 7 per cent and falling, the actual figure for 2014/15 being 6.3 per cent (Scottish Government, 2015). These figures cover attendance at mainstream primary and secondary schools as well as special schools and there is considerable variation among the sectors. Scottish Government statistics indicate, for example, that the level of absence in primary schools is consistently lower than in other sectors. The figures for December 2015, when percentage attendance is taken into account, indicate absence in primary schools at 4.9 per cent whilst the levels in secondary and special schools were 8.2 per cent and 9.3 per cent respectively. Whilst these percentages might seem low, they represent a significant number of pupils in Scotland who are absent from school on any one day. In addition, children with additional support needs, looked-after children, children whose first language is not English and children from urban areas of deprivation are likely to be over-represented in these statistics.

Research literature and other documents provide data that allows elaboration of government statistics. The Scottish Government (2007) document, *Included, Engaged and Involved*, estimated that one in five pupils had been involved in casual truancy, although less than 2 per cent were responsible for half of casual truancy. Furthermore, Shute and Cooper (2015) argue that 62–71 per cent of students truant *at some point*. Similarly, Attwood and Croll (2016) indicate that in their longitudinal study in England, one in five students reported truanting, though the most serious cases were limited to less than 1 per cent of their sample over the period of their research.

FACTORS AFFECTING DISAFFECTION

Research has highlighted the connections between poverty, deprivation, low socio-economic class and non-attendance at school. Relationships between attendance and a number of other

general educational factors such as the negative correlation between absence and attainment are suggested as significant, although no causal link has been established. It can also be argued that reasons for absence and the main barriers to regular attendance depend on the individual perspectives of pupils, parents, teachers, social workers and paraprofessionals, and research has established three sets of influences that encompass the range of reasons for non-attendance. These are home influences, school influences and pupil influences. Bimler and Kirkland (2001) speculate that there may be eight 'styles' of truanting that accounted for each of the individual reasons that young people offered for their non-attendance. The reasons themselves were identified as belonging to five clusters of truanting, two of which were associated with parental influences and three related to delinquency. Regarding non-attendance in terms of these clusters in turn suggests interventions based on school factors, family factors and factors related to teenage rebellion and delinquency. Broadhurst et al. (2005) similarly identify the relationship between home and school as significant, but discriminate between 'enduring' and 'discontinuous' forms of disengagement with school.

Home influences include family problems, attitudes towards school, and cultural and neighbourhood influences. In a range of studies, teachers and schools also identify home background as a crucial influence on attendance. In addition, depending on family history and academic performance, teachers may hold low expectations of some students. For example, Reid (2004a) found that the vast majority of unauthorised absences in primary schools were parentally condoned and that teachers believe that a pattern of parentally condoned absence, related to poor parenting skills and drug and alcohol abuse, is the reason behind most non-attending behaviour and disaffection.

School factors include ethos, leadership, curriculum and systems. Perhaps surprisingly, however, whilst teachers may have considered the academic aspect of school as a factor precipitating truancy, it was not universally deemed problematic by young people (Davies and Lee, 2006; Attwood and Croll, 2016). In those studies where pupils cited schoolwork as an influencing factor, it was not so much the curriculum itself but how it was taught that was identified as being an issue. In these instances, pupils identified teaching as instruction and teachers' perceived lack of interest in them as individuals as contributing towards feelings of disaffection and subsequent truancy. Moreover, assessment-driven learning, league tables and lack of adequate support for learning were considered significant influencing factors (Hilton, 2006; Reid, 2006). In Hilton's (2006) study, difficulties with schoolwork included large class sizes, the formal academic nature of the curriculum and lack of support for learning. Moreover, she reported that the constant focus on assessment undermined enjoyment of practical and creative activities. In Reid's (2006) study of educational social workers, his participants also identified the inflexibility of the national curriculum in England and Wales and the consequent lack of an appropriate alternative curriculum with an emphasis on practical activities as significant.

School factors considered to have a strong influence on pupils' decisions to truant were mostly related to school ethos, management and systems that left pupils feeling alienated. In each of the studies discussed in this chapter, pupils cited bullying (especially being bullied) as a reason for absenting themselves from school. This appears to have been exacerbated by a perception that some schools' pastoral care systems were inadequate for dealing with issues between pupils.

Closely related reasons given for non-attendance were illness (particularly in cases where the school was perceived to be unconcerned) and exclusion or suspension, which was equally interpreted as a sign of lack of concern on the school's part. 'At the heart of the disaffection

the young people expressed was their sense of alienation from the key adults who embodied the values and priorities of mainstream school' (Hilton, 2006, p. 307).

Pupils with high levels of non-attendance acknowledge school-based factors as influencing decisions to absent themselves from school, but from their perspective, other factors were more significant. For example, in Attwood and Croll's (2016) study, they found that there was little complaint about the nature of the curriculum, but the general school atmosphere and poor relationships with teachers were the main reasons for non-attendance. Relationships with other pupils were also cited as significant factors. Bullying, lack of friends, unruly behaviour and peer-group pressure were cited in a number of studies as having a strong influence on pupils' decisions to truant (Hilton, 2006; Attwood and Croll, 2015). Indeed, the school as a social setting, rather than its role as an academic institution, would appear to be a much more noteworthy factor. Davies and Lee's (2006) study particularly highlighted the social nature of school.

The young people involved in studies considered in this chapter were clear that the social aspects of schooling were the major factors affecting their attendance and were able to project the impact of these factors on their lives beyond school. For them, their relationships with teachers depended on their and their friends' perceptions of the professional stance and personal traits of individual teachers, how they taught and their attitudes towards young people. Appropriate classroom interaction for them was based on mutual respect and being treated in an adult fashion, and teaching was about generating insight and understanding rather than instruction. Neither the subject nor the content of the curriculum was problematic for them.

Similarly, peer relations were powerful factors, especially for girls. In addition to negative relationship factors such as bullying and behaviour in classes and around the school, friendship was also a factor taken into consideration prior to absenting from school. For example, a significant number of participants in Attwood and Croll's (2006; 2016) studies were able to identify a negative precipitating event or series of events such as bullying or behaviour in class prior to withdrawing from school, but also reported going with friends as influencing a decision to truant.

This is similar to Head and Jamieson's (2006) finding, where the 'perceived constant surveillance by school, teacher and peers' (p. 38) contributed towards the creation and reinforcing of an identity related to students' reasons for not attending school. Hilton's (2006) study revealed a similar focus on relationship issues, especially those between pupils and teachers, rather than curricular matters. In addition, there was a perception among her participants that where relationships among pupils were difficult and problematic, teachers were unwilling to interfere. When pupil relationships were dealt with as a matter of school discipline, this was perceived as a mechanistic response that did not attempt to address the root of the problem and was considered symptomatic of teachers' and schools' lack of real concern for their pupils' welfare. Even when school was spoken of in educational terms, participants expressed dissatisfaction with the problems of obtaining adequate support. This led to a growing sense of isolation and not being valued, which in turn affected students' behaviour, including non-attendance. For these young people and those in other studies, there was a real sense of disappointment with school and school systems, and they perceived them to have failed them as people. For pupils, therefore, in contrast to the perceptions of their teachers and other professionals, it is school as a social setting and especially the relationships between pupils and teachers that are the most persuasive and powerful factors precipitating a decision not to attend school.

In addition to the set of three influences discussed above, Attwood and Croll (2006) also identified two sets of factors that impact on truancy: those that render young people vulnerable to truancy, mostly what could be described as environmental factors; and those that precipitate truancy, or what could be termed causal factors. Whilst Attwood and Croll assign factors to each of these categories, it may be that what constitutes environmental or causal factors depends on the perspective of the individuals involved. For example, most of the adults in each of the studies appear to have interpreted school-based factors such as curriculum, assessment and exams, and young people's 'failure' to perform to a high level as causal factors. Other factors such as school ethos, pedagogy and matters of pastoral care and support for learning, almost by definition, would be construed as environmental factors.

The young people themselves, however, held an opposing view. Hilton's (2006) participants, for example, considered the academic challenge of schools as non-causal but the factors that precipitated truancy were related to school as a social setting, especially relationships with teachers and other pupils. Moreover, there also appears to be a possible dichotomy between the views of parents and those held by teachers, social workers and other adults. Parents see the main causes of non-attendance as in-school matters including bullying and teachers' attitudes towards children. Teachers and other professionals, by way of contrast, appear to view the home environment and the influence of parents as having a greater influence on attendance (Davies and Lee, 2006).

Whilst non-attendance may be a problem for schools, self-withdrawal, that is, a pupil deliberately and possibly openly choosing not to attend school may, in fact, be a solution for some non-attenders who find school difficult for a number of reasons, some of which are discussed below. In these instances, Davies and Lee (2006) and Attwood and Croll (2016) argue that pupils' decisions to disengage with school amount to the articulation of a critique of school and the educational system. Attwood and Croll (2016) argue that young people choose to truant not because they cannot cope intellectually with school but because they choose to absent themselves from a context which they consider irrelevant and where they feel they do not belong. Similarly, Hilton (2006, p. 310) argues that in some instances, the problem may lie with teaching and the curriculum and not the pupil: 'the narrowed academic focus of the current curriculum and formalized pedagogy has led some scholars to interpret truancy as an entirely rational and understandable choice for pupils who see little relevance in it for their own working lives'.

Truancy is also a social problem with social costs and therefore cannot be considered in isolation. Several studies since the turn of the millennium cite evidence that indicates that the majority of crime committed in shopping centres during daytime can be attributed to young people who should otherwise have been at school. Truancy is also associated with other social issues such as drinking, taking drugs, minor crime and other forms of anti-social behaviour. Reid (2006) also points out that longitudinal studies indicate that there may be links between poor attendance and a range of social factors that have an impact on later adult life. Attwood and Croll (2006) also highlight that levels of truancy become more marked in secondary school. Truancy and attendance figures for Scotland (Scottish Government, 2011) reflect that trend and also suggest that additional support needs and social deprivation, such as that indicated by registration for free school meals and the Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation, exacerbates the extent to which children and young people from disadvantaged backgrounds are likely to be absent from school.

ADDRESSING TRUANCY AND DISAFFECTION

Within the four UK countries, parents can be prosecuted if their children do not attend compulsory education either in school or at home. In England and Wales, there is an emphasis on the regulation of parents' and young people's behaviour with regard to attendance at school: a range of procedures are followed beginning with the issue of an attendance order and, if parents do not make appropriate arrangements for their child's education, fines can be imposed or they can be sent to prison. In Scotland, local authorities have statutory responsibilities to provide appropriate education for children and young people. Pupils who do not attend school can be referred to a children's panel (the hearings system in Scotland for supporting children and young people at risk – see Chapters 79 and 80) and sent to segregated provision, for example a special school or unit. In addition, under the terms of the Education (Scotland) Act 1980, parents of children who do not attend school and who have not made other appropriate arrangements for their education can be reported to the Procurator Fiscal. Indeed, the regulatory philosophy may be so ingrained in approaches to dealing with attendance that even some measures intended to support rather than punish, such as guidance teams and support bases, have been nevertheless interpreted by young people as forms of punishment (Hilton, 2006). However, issues of non-attendance at schools are complex and confusing, and measures taken to address pupil absence have been largely ineffective and lacking in coherence, coordination and a common understanding of the problem.

Whilst overall the problem of truancy remains consistently at a relatively low level, there is nevertheless an enduring issue to be addressed for the small core of pupils responsible for most incidences of truancy. One appropriate way of addressing non-attendance for this group may be to consider the experiences of young people from the two perspectives suggested by the reasons cited for truancy, namely environmental factors and causal factors, which relate closely to Attwood and Croll's (2006) duo of precipitating events and school as a social setting. The combination of people and setting has been highlighted as the crucial mix in considering matters of non-attendance. For example, Broadhurst et al. (2005, p. 106) argue:

At the heart of debates about education and participation is the intractable debate around agency and structure ... Who or what is at fault in relation to the persistent disengagement of children and young people from schooling? There is concern that discourses associated with The Third Way place greater emphasis on strategies to enhance individual agency and are more punitive than pupil-centred or family-centred methods (Blyth, 2001), failing to account for the deeply intractable nature of school disengagement and alienation from formal systems.

Punitive measures, however, have not been the sole means of addressing disaffection, behaviour and non-attendance; what could be described as a more pastoral or holistic approach has also been adopted. In a pastoral model, agency is not conceptualised as a citizen's responsibility to participate in a social contract, but is considered more in terms of a human capability to be nurtured and developed and an entitlement that is to be fostered and met. Holistic approaches, therefore, mostly centre on measures aimed at reducing school exclusions and absences through addressing the educational and social needs of young people. For example, Charlton et al. (2004) evaluated an alternative curriculum approach and found that *inter alia* the young people involved appreciated and responded to being treated like adults, the

more relaxed atmosphere, better relationships with teachers and, most importantly, having control over their lives. They reported that some participants in the scheme chose to start attending school again as a direct result of their experience on the programme. Davies and Lee (2006) similarly argue that responding to non-attendance requires addressing the quality of relationships between teachers and pupils.

Holistic perspectives recognise that there can be a circular effect among the various factors affecting reasons for truanting and disaffection. Addressing non-attendance at school, therefore, may begin with an acknowledgement that for the student, it is often seen as a positive step to remove themselves from an uncomfortable, alien or even threatening context. In Scotland, for example, government advice recommends that where pupils are absent from school for no otherwise satisfactory reason, then schools should invoke a series of supportive procedures, including home visits by members of the school's pastoral care team or a home-school link worker and, where necessary, seeking the involvement of other children and family services in a multi-agency approach. In such cases, referral to more formal agencies, such as the Reporter to the Children's Panel, is seen as a last resort.

DISCUSSION

The way in which disaffection and non-attendance in schools is addressed depends, therefore, on how absence is conceptualised. Whilst some factors are suggestive of the breakdown of social networks requiring intensive, long-term and probably multi- and inter-agency intervention, others, especially those related to casual or moderate truancy, imply disruption rather than breakdown and that short- to medium-term intervention would suffice. Regardless of the conceptualisation, however, certain factors emerge as common. These can be thought of as belonging to one or more of three strands: the relationships between home and school; what happens in school itself; and school as a social institution, especially the relationships between pupils and teachers. Each of these strands can be addressed in terms of systems, with, for example, schools having policy statements on dealing with learning, behaviour, non-attendance and sharing information, and working towards greater cohesion in multi- and inter-agency initiatives (see Chapter 82 for multi-agency working). Consequently, in an overtly holistic and ecosystemic approach, some local authorities are encouraging better attendance at schools as part of strategies to address social inclusion (Reid, 2004a). However, the same author points out that his research reveals that where multidisciplinary measures are in place, it is often the case that teachers are unaware of the other professionals involved and that headteachers may in fact prefer resources to be entirely school based rather than belonging to the central authority (Reid, 2004a), and that the processes involved have come to be seen as problematic and frustrating (Reid, 2004b; 2006). In Scotland, initiatives to address behaviour in schools through Curriculum for Excellence and *Getting it Right for Every Child*, intended to develop greater coherence and collaboration among children's services, may also be taken into account when considering levels of absence, truancy and exclusion and hence indications of disaffection with school.

Addressing school disaffection in a holistic way entails, in the end, a pedagogical approach (in its widest sense). It concerns the values and beliefs that teachers, schools and the wider community hold regarding young people, their learning and their place in society. Ultimately, it includes the values and beliefs held by young people themselves and how they play out in the complex relationships and interactions between teachers and pupils in schools. The environment in which they grow up, including school, lays the foundations

of children and young people's development, learning and behaviour. Pastoral measures to address disaffection, therefore, recognise and affirm children and young people as members of the school community within the wider community with the rights, capabilities and entitlements that membership entails. Whilst in a punitive context, disaffection and its manifestations are seen as obstacles and barriers to learning and participation in schooling, in a pastoral approach these same features form the conditions that allow for the exploration and nurturing of pupil identities related to their sense of themselves as learners. Thus, these same young people cease to be 'disaffected pupils' and become instead young people whose relationships, behaviour and attendance indicate that they might be experiencing disaffection with schooling.

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