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Extended school non-attenders' views: developing best practice

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Despite the abundance of legislation and research initiatives concerning children's participation in decision-making, there is less research in this area with regard to extended school non-attenders. Using semi-structured interviews, this research explores how the views of children and their families who have experienced school non-attendance can be incorporated into best practice within an Educational Psychology Service in the UK. Analysis of the interviews revealed the highly complex nature of school non-attendance and how the interrelating factors behind it have been somewhat lost due to the current medical approach. The rhetoric surrounding this use of the label "school refuser" was also examined.

Keywords: school refusal; extended school non-attendance; young people; experience; qualitative methods; Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis

Background

Students fail to attend school for a variety of reasons; it may be due to a particular anxiety regarding the school experience; for example, the student may fear a particular teacher or an aspect of the school environment, such as corridors, or the student may be rejected by their peers. Alternatively the young person may be anxious about leaving their parents (Elliott & Place, 1998). For the majority of students, these problems are usually resolved quickly and the student returns to school. However, there is a minority who continue to experience school non-attendance over a prolonged period of time (King et al., 1998). Currently, extended school non-attendance is defined as "child-motivated refusal to attend school or difficulties remaining in school for an entire day" (Lyon & Colter, 2007, p. 552).

The incidence of extended school non-attendance is not reliably known although it is thought to be relatively low, affecting less than 2% of students in their school careers (Emmerson et al., 2004). Extended school non-attendance appears to be equally common in both sexes. Berg (1992) considers extended school non-attendance to be relatively uncommon before adolescence, when it then increases significantly. Extended school non-attendance has been linked to poor academic outcomes, psychiatric disorders and poor achievement in adult life. There is also some evidence which indicates that separation anxiety is more a feature of younger female children, whereas fear of school tends to be more prevalent in older, male children (Last, Francis, Hersen, Kazdin, & Strauss, 1987). Discourse

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surrounding extended school non-attendance, particularly in Western academia, has a strong clinical focus, with emphasis on pathology (Pellegrini, 2007).

The literature has focused on the distinction between truancy and extended school non-attendance, making links between truancy and conduct disorder. Extended school non-attendance however is, in a number of studies, linked to separation anxiety, with the young person experiencing extreme distress when forced to go to school. Parents of extended school non-attenders[1] are usually fully aware of their child's absence (Berg, 1992). Furthermore, extended school non-attendance is, in some studies, linked to problems regarding the person's mental health. Extended school non-attenders are thought to have an increased risk of neurotic disturbance in adulthood (King et al., 1998), therefore highlighting the potential link between long-term school refusal and adult mental health and the possible benefit of intervention for this group.

The *Educational Psychology Services (England): Current Role, Good Practice and Future Directions* – Research Report states that "The Educational Psychologist (EP) will help to support successful inclusion of children within local mainstream settings" (Department of Education and Employment, 2000, p. 35). The report also states that one of the outcomes of successful EP work with groups of children should be that "There is effective social inclusion of children at risk of exclusion from school and other settings" (Department for Education and Employment, 2000, p. 35). The responsibility of EPs to promote inclusive schooling therefore relates to extended school non-attenders. In the 1990s there was a move away from the distinction between extended school non-attendance and truancy in understanding non-attendance. Kearney and Sims (1997) argued that there should be a clearer examination of the *reasons why* children and young people are not going to school. What are the function(s) served by school refusal? Kearney and Silverman (1993) put forward four categories:

(1) Avoidance of specific school-based stimuli that provoke negative affectivity, for example, toilets, corridor.
(2) Escape from aversive social situations, for example, negative relationships with peers, teachers.
(3) Attention-getting or separation anxious behaviour. This may be displayed by somatic complaints or tantrums where the child seeks to remain at home with the parent.
(4) Rewarding experiences provided outside of school, for example, watching television, spending time with friends.

Kearney goes on to describe how knowing the type or the function of school refusal can help inform the appropriate intervention. EPs should therefore aim to link the assessment of non-attendance to an intervention programme designed to address the presenting problems (Elliott & Place, 1998). A number of techniques have been employed to ascertain the type or cause of extended school non-attendance. These include child self-report and self-monitoring, child and parent interviews, teacher and parent reports, behavioural observations in school and at home. The School Refusal Assessment Scale (SRAS) (Kearney & Silverman, 1993) is also an assessment tool which seeks to identify those needs served by the child's extended school non-attendance with reference to the four categories put forward earlier. The SRAS has been adapted and used within Educational Psychology Services in the UK based on the findings from a project conducted by West Sussex County Council

Educational Psychology Service (UK). This project aimed to promote awareness of extended school non-attendance through the delivery of training to schools by EPs and Education Welfare Officers (EWOs) and to enable schools to take responsibility for some of the maintaining factors in extended school non-attendance.

Since Kearney and Silverman's research on the different categories of extended school non-attendance in the 1990s, there has been an increased awareness of the importance of the child's voice and this is reflected in national and international legislation (Woolfson et al., 2008). The legislation highlights the duty professionals have to consult with children with matters that affect their lives. The *Special Educational Needs Code of Practice* (Department for Education and Skills, DfES, 2001) states that "all children should be involved in making decisions where possible right from the start of their education" (p. 28). EPs need to take an active role when considering recent legislative changes to ensure that the child's voice is obtained.

Malcolm, Wilson, Davidson, and Kirk (2003) investigated how extended school non-attendance is construed by a sample of children, their parents and education personnel in the UK through the use of semi-structured interviews. They found that students rarely identified home factors as the cause of non-attendance; rather, school factors featured highly in their responses as reasons for being absent from school. An effective method, therefore, of eliciting the child's voice is through the use of a semi-structured interview. Given the clinical focus of previous research on extended school non-attendance and the limited emphasis on the voice of the child, this research will further explore school non-attendance by seeking the child's voice through the use of a semi-structured interview.

Methods

The aim of this research is:

(1) to identity the key concerns and experiences of extended school non-attenders and their families;
(2) to use the findings to inform service delivery.

The research question was: Can the views and experiences of extended school non-attenders and their families be elicited in order to inform best practice in Educational Psychology Services?

Participants

The sample was selected in the following way: the Educational Welfare Service wrote to all parents/carers of secondary age children on the register for elective home education (many of these parents had identified school non-attendance as a factor in deciding to home educate their child). In addition to this, the staff at the Home Tuition Service contacted pupils who attend the home tuition service. A total of 30 letters were sent to the sample inviting participation in the study. Ten responses were received; six families gave consent to be interviewed and four declined to be interviewed. One of the families who had given consent to be interviewed withdrew their participation at a later date. Therefore five families took part in the research, five parents and three young people. All parents that were interviewed were mothers.

This notably low response rate could be due to the fact that children and families experiencing extended school non-attendance are reluctant to discuss this sensitive topic.

This has implications for the representative nature of the sample. It is recognised that the people who responded to the request could have experienced a very different set of circumstances to those who refused. This issue is discussed in the limitations section.

Procedure

Those that agreed to take part in the research completed a consent form. Parents were invited to indicate a suitable time in which they could take part and the researchers contacted them to arrange the interview. Both researchers interviewed the parents and their child separately.

Design

A semi-structured interview was used consisting of a parent and child version. The child's version explored a range of issues including the child's experience in primary school, their current situation and their hopes for the future. The parent version explored the same issues from their perspective. The interview was developed through drawing on a number of themes recurring in the literature, namely the four categories identified by Kearney and Silverman (1993): anxiety in relation to the school setting, social anxiety, attention seeking and tangible reinforcement at home. The interview was designed to allow the participant to recount their experiences freely, and the categories were only used as prompt questions if the participant had not referred to this area.

It was also considered vital to take a history of the primary school experience from both the child and parent. The pilot study ascertained that the interview schedule was an appropriate tool for gaining an holistic view of the family's experience of extended school non-attendance.

Data analysis

The method used to analyse the data was Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA). IPA is a philosophical approach focusing on the world as it is subjectively experienced. This approach is therefore inductive as it allows the unanticipated to emerge (Willig, 2001). IPA enabled the researchers to investigate the diversity and variability of human experience (Willig, 2001), making it a particularly useful tool for this study. IPA in this research was based on semi-structured interviews and used quotes to support the themes identified. It took into account individuals within their particular social, cultural and historical contexts. The data were recognised as products of the interactions between the participants and the researcher, and acknowledged both the phenomenological (participants' accounts) and interpretative (researcher's interpretations of participants' accounts) nature of the data. IPA explored the meaning of participants' experiences. The researchers then facilitated the establishing of connections of predominant themes within and across cases.

Ethical considerations

Children and parents were asked to confirm at the start of the interview that they consented to take part and were reminded that they could refuse to answer any question.

It was also reiterated that all answers are confidential and that their responses would be anonymous in the final report. It was stated that any information given by the participant would be confidential, unless it was felt that they were at risk of harm.

Results

The following analysis is based on interviews with five families. In three of these families both the mother and the child agreed to be interviewed. The remaining two interviews were carried out with just the mother, as their child did not wish to take part. Analysis of the data from the interviews revealed a variety of recurring themes, which were grouped into clusters. The predominant seven clusters are presented in Table 1 and will be discussed later. The figure in brackets beside each theme (Table 1) indicates the number of families that had discussed issues relating to this theme. The data is illustrated with verbatim quotes from the participants.

Current situation

The current status of the education of the children interviewed varied. Two families were receiving input from the Home Tuition Service and three families were home educated. It is worthy of note that the families felt that the two provisions offered very different levels of support.

The families who attended the Home Tuition Service received visits from tutors and were given support with regard to returning to school either full- or part-time "the combination of school support and the Home Tuition Service is very good" (parent). In comparison, the families who opted to home educate reported that this was difficult as they received little support, for example, paying to sit examinations, not being offered routes back into education. They felt that information regarding their child's education and future was left in their hands both in regard to accessing information and financing education packages "I'm home educated a year now. I'm doing a correspondence course in maths and science" (child). The families that had elected to home educate felt they were perceived as opting out of the education system. Two of the parents reported that they were now unable to work as they were responsible for their child's education, and they noted that this was a forced, rather than elective choice "I can't work now but her education comes first" (parent).

Medical

The three young people in the sample had been diagnosed with a medical condition, subsequent to their extended school non-attendance. Two of them had a diagnosis of anxiety and depression "She is on Prozac and sometimes she takes herself off because she thinks she can cope" (parent). One child in the sample had a diagnosis of Asperger's syndrome "She now has a diagnosis of Asperger syndrome" (parent). It appears that these medical conditions may have been contributory factors in the child's extended school non-attendance. In the case of the young person with Asperger's syndrome, it seems that the difficulties associated with that syndrome were strongly related to her extended school non-attendance.

Social

There were a number of themes identified in this cluster. All of the young people reported limited social interaction "B doesn't really have friends over to the house.

Table 1. Data analysis: clusters and themes.

Cluster	Themes	Quotes
Medical	Medication – anti-depressants (2)	She's on Prozac and sometimes she takes herself off because she thinks she can cope.
	Medical condition (3)	She now has a diagnosis of Asperger's syndrome
Social	Technology for social contact (4)	Still in touch with friends – texting and internet – Myspace
	Hobbies – creative writing (2)	She writes stories and poems – she won a competition for her writing
	Hobbies – pets (3)	We bought her a dog for a companion
	Limited social interaction (4)	B doesn't really have friends over to our house – she doesn't have much of a social life.
	Positive peer group (2)	I go to home education group – Helen is my friend there
	Bored at home (2)	I wait for my sister to come home so I can play with her or I go on the Wii and wait for my cousin online
School experiences	Lack of discipline (3)	Would be easier to go to school if teachers were stricter with the silly annoying people.
	Fear of particular teacher (3)	He upset C a few times – she would come home from school crying
	Moving schools (3)	We moved and I went to another school and then we moved again
	Period of absence (4)	She had continuous viruses between November and January – she couldn't get out of bed
	Negative support from school (3)	If they hadn't threatened me with court action I would have waited and she would be back on a part time basis
	Other children's behaviour (4)	Would be easier to go to school if there … were less silly people, less annoying people.
	Parents felt blamed for absence (3)	Got the impression that I *should* make more of an effort to get her out of bed and get her to school
	Parents threatened with court action (1)	They said they were going to take me to court!
	Parents felt blamed by medical professionals (1)	The psychiatrist thought I should have been more strict with her
	Parent's felt unfairly treated (3)	School should have believed my mum – it wasn't very fair.
	Bullied (4)	They treat me like I am weird and it is not nice to feel different.
	Perceives education as unimportant (2)	There is no point in going to the tuition service
Emotions	Embarrassed in front of other people (2)	When people laugh at me I feel embarrassed … like I don't fit in
	Finds talking about school upsetting (3)	At weekends I don't think about school, don't dwell on it, ignore it.

(Continued)

Table 1. (Continued).

Cluster	Themes	Quotes
	Parents unable to cope (2)	I felt like I was being forced to the edge of a cliff and I had no choice but to jump off – I never dreamed this would happen.
	Anxiety (4)	I knew there was nothing physically wrong with her – it was anxiety.
	Self-harm (2)	When the tutor visited she locked herself in the bathroom with a knife – it just indicates how serious it was.
	Lack of self-confidence (3)	I am just weird – I don't do socialising – I don't fit in.
	Reluctance to recount school experiences (2)	She doesn't like talking about school – it brings back all the horrible feelings
	Dislike of large groups of people (3)	I am not good with large groups of people, people as a whole worry me
	Parents' feeling of isolation (3)	No-one knows what it is like – no-one is in the same position
	Child's feeling of isolation (4)	I don't have close friends but there are people who don't laugh at me
Child's voice	Not sought (2)	No-one asked my opinion, I would have liked to have gone to school but I couldn't.
	Parents ensure child is heard	I am part of the decisions that affect me. They consider my feelings.
Current	Home tuition service (2)	The combination of school support and the home tuition service is very good
	Home schooling (4)	I am home educated a year now, I am doing a correspondence course in maths and science
	Parent unable to work due to child at home (3)	I can't work now, but her education comes first.
Future	Higher education planned (3)	After school I will carry on the animal care course – I'd like to be a veterinary nurse

She doesn't have much of a social life" (parent). This was a pertinent theme as it applied across all families. However, there were a number of compensatory activities that had been developed in order to facilitate social interaction. All families reported the use of technology to make and maintain social contact "I'm still in touch with friends – texting and the internet and Myspace" (child).

Two children reported that they were bored at home, whereas one reported that they had been able to establish and maintain strong peer groups outside of home "I go to the home education group. H is my friend there" (child). Respondents also discussed their hobbies. Two of the families discussed using writing as a creative outlet "She writes stories and poems. She won a competition for her writing" (parent). Three of the families discussed their pets as being companions "We bought her a dog as a companion" (parent). A number of issues arose around the limited social interaction of this group. It is difficult to ascertain whether the child's feelings towards social interaction were a contributory factor in their extended school non-attendance or whether this non-attendance has led to limited social interactions.

Even within this small group, this relationship is highly variable and therefore it would be inappropriate to propose a cause and effect relationship between extended school non-attendance and social interaction. However the issue of social relationships was both pertinent and a concern for all families interviewed.

School experience

All families reported a prolonged period of absence or upheaval within the first three years of the child's primary schooling. For three of these families this was due to illness "She had continuous viruses between November and January. She couldn't get out of bed" (parent). For the remaining two families, the upheaval and absence was the result of moving schools "We moved and I went to another school and we moved again" (child). The families also reported negative experiences in school during the period preceding the extended school non-attendance. All three of the children reported fear of a particular teacher "There was a shouty teacher. He would shout and I never knew why" (child). Four of the families reported feeling unsettled by other children's behaviour "It would be easier to go to school if there were less silly people, less annoying people" (child). Four families also reported incidents of bullying "They treated me like I was weird and it's not nice to feel different" (child). These incidents were identified by the families as contributory factors in their child's extended school non-attendance.

This highlights the impact of the school environment on children's behaviour and shifts the focus from a within child perspective of extended school non-attendance, to include the impact of the child's environment. Three of the families felt they were perceived by the school as being responsible for their child's absence.

Two of these families experienced a high level of anxiety as a result "I got the impression that I should make more of an effort to get her out of bed and get her to school" (parent). "They said they were going to take me to court" (parent). Three of the families felt unfairly treated by the school "school should have believed my Mum. It wasn't very fair" (child). In one case the family felt blamed by medical professionals "The psychiatrist thought I should have been more strict with her" (parent). The fact that the families felt blamed reflects a within family view of the child's extended school non-attendance. This within family perspective ignores the potential impact of the wider environment on the child.

Emotional responses

It is important to note that no family expressed positive feelings about their experiences surrounding the extended school non-attendance. A range of negative emotional responses were expressed by the families, ranging in severity from embarrassment to self-harm "People laugh at me. I feel embarrassed like I don't fit in" (child). Three of the families told the researchers that their child disliked large groups of people "I'm not good with large groups of people. People as a whole worry me" (child). The negative emotions surrounding extended school non-attendance were upsetting to recount for both children and parents "She doesn't like talking about school. It brings back all the horrible feelings" (parent). All families reported feelings of isolation as a result of these emotions "No one knows what it's like. No one is in the same position" (parent). "I don't have close friends but there are people who don't laugh at me" (child). In some cases there were reports of anxiety experienced by the child.

Four families reported feelings of anxiety that manifested itself as physical symptoms, such as sickness. The underlying anxiety was not addressed initially as the physical symptoms displayed were believed to be medically caused "I knew there was nothing physically wrong with her, it was anxiety" (parent). In the most extreme cases, one family reported actual self-harm while another reported threatened self-harm by their child. They felt it was directly related to their school experience "When the tutor visited she locked herself in the bathroom with a knife. It just indicated how serious it was" (parent).

Child's voice

Two of the families reported that their child's voice was not sought by school and professionals with regard to the difficulties their child were experiencing in relation to their schooling "No-one asked my opinion, I would of liked to have gone to school but I couldn't" (child). However, there was one family where the child's voice was given high priority, which was due to the parent strongly advocating on behalf of their child "I am part of the decisions that affect me. They (parents) consider my feelings" (child). The *Special Educational Needs Code of Practice* (DfES, 2001) recommends that children should have a voice and be directly involved in their education. This should be taken into consideration by services in their approach to children who may be at risk of extended school non-attendance.

The future

Three of the families identified higher education as a priority for the future. Two of these families were home educating and one family was part of the Home Tuition Service "I will carry on the animal care course. I would like to be a veterinary nurse" (child). This positive response suggests that despite the difficulties experienced with their schooling, some of the children still held aspirations for higher education.

IPA provided a useful way of identifying clusters and themes within the data. However, it was felt that these clusters imposed an artificial distinctiveness upon what was a complex and sensitive set of findings. It was felt that IPA did not acknowledge the interrelated nature of these themes. The following section will explore in more depth some of the issues arising from the themes.

Discussion

Labelling

In light of this research it was felt that the label "school refuser" did not provide an accurate description of the young people that participated in this research. Some of the young people had medical problems which posed a barrier to their attendance and some had experienced upheaval in their early schooling, for example, moving schools. Furthermore, the label "school refuser" views the problem as primarily a within child issue, thus deflecting attention from the school environment as an important element in understanding and addressing school refusal (Pellegrini, 2007). Labels of, for example, "school refuser", "school phobic" have been identified as obstacles in gaining a shared understanding of this behaviour (Elliott, 1999). For these reasons, Pellegrini (2007) argues for the use of the phrase "extended school non-attendance", which describes the visible behaviour neutrally, without attempting to address what underpins it. It uses the word "school" as it aims to direct one's attention to the school environment as a factor in understanding this behaviour. It also stresses the persistent nature of this behaviour, by including the adjective "extended".

Without denying the emotional component in "extended school non-attendance", there appears to be a bias towards a clinical construction of this behaviour in research and academic discourses, as suggested by Kearney and Silverman's (1993) categories of extended school non-attenders, as mentioned previously. It seems that the function of the clinical discourse is to direct attention to the child, and his/her family, as the cause of the problem, therefore ignoring the influence of the rest of the child's environment. Place, Hulsmeier, Davis, and Taylor (2000) suggest that an understanding of the interaction between environmental factors and extended school non-attenders is necessary to promote effective and lasting change for children and their families. Furthermore, the legal focus narrows the way it constructs extended school non-attendance. It locates the parents as the problem for the non-attendance, as expressed by one of the parents in the sample "they said they were going to take me to court". The child is constructed as a passive subject who will be talked about but does not appear to have a voice in the matter. EPs therefore have a particular role in eliciting the child's voice. In addition to it being a legal obligation to consult with the child in matters that affect their education, eliciting the child's voice helps the EP identify a more holistic view of what the child is experiencing.

Also, by interviewing parents, the EP can draw on the parents' knowledge of their child to help address the child's needs more effectively.

Beyond a within child perspective

Through the use of semi-structured interviews it has been found that there are many complex factors associated with extended school non-attendance. It seems from this research that there is no single contributory factor and the situation is usually a complex interplay between a number of factors. Currently many Educational Psychology Services use scales and checklists (for example, Kearney & Silverman, 1993) when working with an extended school non-attender, in order to inform interventions. This is one approach to understanding extended school non-attendance. However, this medical model approach places the school non-attendance within the child and places less emphasis on more complex social and environmental factors. Even

though questions regarding social factors are present in the scale, through the interviews conducted for this study, the researchers found that a great deal of meaning and background is not accounted for in the current approaches. The scale also neglects the child's voice regarding their extended school non-attendance. The medical model views extended school non-attendance as a within child issue. Explanation and intervention is considered in regard to the individual rather than looking to adapt the environment. Given that extended school non-attendance research has viewed children as exhibiting mental health problems, such as anxiety and depression, the medical model approach is understandable and useful in these particular cases, for example, with regard to the child in the sample who was being treated for anxiety and depression. However, even though this medical model has permeated across disciplines, it should not be seen as a stand-alone approach when working with extended school non-attenders.

In contrast to the medical model, the social model views the individual within their social context, as being part of an extended network. This network and the individual both impact upon each other. The social model has relevance in terms of educational psychology practice, as it looks beyond the individual and views them in terms of the social system. This is one of the principles of systems theory. Systems theory goes beyond the realms explained by the medical model, viewing the system in its totality. It looks beyond separate elements, taking into account the interaction between these elements. There is also recognition of the integrity of related subsystems and the circularity of influence between these subsystems. All components affect each other in a reciprocal way. Belsky (1981) used the model of mutual family influences to illustrate how systems impact upon each other. This focuses on the circularity of influence, acknowledging how the different elements are mutually involved. To apply this model to extended school non-attendance, the circularity of influence could involve the child, their mental health and the school environment. This circularity of influence demonstrates that extended school non-attendance will affect the child's mental state, which in turn affects the child's attendance at school.

The notion of a circularity of influence allows a consideration of the interplay between the elements. A social model approach, alongside systems theory, allows the EP to look beyond the individual in order to consider the wider aspects of extended school non-attendance "It located problems (or, more pejoratively, failure) within individuals or their families, rather than within classrooms, schools, local education authorities, government policies or societal attitudes. Adopting such a conceptual framework resulted in psychologists working towards solutions through direct contact with the individual referred case" (Webster, Maliphant, Felier, Hoyle, & Franey, 2000, p. 123).

Checkland (1999) notes that systems methodology offers a more flexible yet systematic approach. The essential features of systems theory are that it has a holistic rather than a reductionist emphasis, which explains situations in terms of circular rather than linear psychology (Miller & Fredrickson, 2006), making it a more useful model to adopt when considering extended school non-attendance. Focusing on one cause of the problem can, at times, limit potential solutions to the problem "The more interventions can engage with a combination and conjunction of interests within the informal and formal school staff, family and peer subsystems, and break down barriers between these subsystems, the more likely are interventions to have significant and lasting effects for teachers, pupils and parents" (Miller, 2003,

p. 189). Perhaps systems theory can offer a more comprehensive approach for individuals, families and communities in supporting extended school non-attenders.

Conclusion

Historically children not attending school for a prolonged period have been viewed from a medical model perspective, which locates the problem as being "within child". This perspective limits the consideration of the potential impact of environmental factors, for example school, as playing a role in contributing to or maintaining the absence from school. The EP is well placed to bring an holistic view of the child's needs, taking into account family, social, school and child factors. As this research has illustrated, each case is different and complex, and professionals need to recognise that taking a broader perspective of extended school non-attendance, for example, considering the impact of possible factors such as medical diagnoses, social environments, school experiences and the voice of the child, may be the only way to gain an understanding of extended school non-attendance and how best to support these families. Research within the area of extended school non-attendance requires people to discuss a very emotive topic. Researchers should be sensitive to the difficultly experienced by subjects in describing extended school non-attendance and its associated negative emotions. This should not be underestimated when undertaking research in this area.

Recommendations

This research has highlighted a number of recommendations for schools and Educational Psychology Services. These include:

- Social provision for long-term non-attenders to enable them to establish or maintain peer relationship, for example, continued access to after school clubs.
- The importance of eliciting the child's voice with regard to matters affecting their education, for example, discussion with child regarding their feelings towards school.
- Awareness of factors that make children more vulnerable to school refusal, for example, anxiety disorder.
- Alerting schools to possible risk factors for non-attendance, particularly when more than one factor is implicated, for example, child returning to school after a long period of absence, moving to a new school.
- Utilising multi-agency working to consider the impact of the wider environment on the child.
- Emphasising the important role of the EP working in school at the systemic level, for example, staff training on anxiety, short-term school-based interventions such as circle of friends, flexible and/or reduced timetable, whole school work on emotional literacy.
- Emphasising the important role of the EP working at the individual and family level, for example, peer-mentoring system, parental training.

Limitations of the research and future direction

This research study has looked at a within child perspective on the issues and factors surrounding long-term school non-attendance. It should be acknowledged that this study was only able to take into account the views of those who would take part

and that this resulted in a small sample size. It should also be acknowledged that it is possible that this group had shared characteristics, such as a possible anti-establishment view of school or education, or particularly negative experiences they wanted to discuss. However, identifying such trends in a self-selected sample is very difficult. This can be further explored through using a demographic approach to explore this sample population in order to ascertain its representativeness. The results of this study should therefore be viewed as examples of the experiences of members of this group, but should not be taken as typical of this, or any other, group.

Further research to consider the views of those that did not take part could be elicited by giving the option of stating the reasons for not taking part on the return form or by taking a different approach of exploring this population by seeking the views of those who work with those children; exploring how different professionals construct school non-attendance and their views on the reasons for this. This will allow further exploration into the unheard group of children and young people that could help illuminate the issues beyond that of the small sample involved in this study. It could also add to assessing how typical the views of this sample are, and therefore how appropriate it might be to make more general assumptions from this research by exploring the demographics of this group.

Building on the demographic data, this paper has also highlighted the scope for the development of a more individualised assessment process when looking at school non-attendance. The focus of this is to gain further access to the child/young person's construction of their situation; and this could lead to individualised intervention to plan for the best outcomes for them. By working with those who apply this model, trends and "best practice" approaches can be explored, with the view to compiling a set of examples or approaches for these individuals, exploring wider reasons leading to school non-attendance. Definition of these reasons can also highlight those at risk in order to operate an early intervention approach to working with this group.

Note

1. The label "school refuser" views the problem as exclusively a within child factor, thus deflecting attention from the school environment, therefore the term "extended school non-attender" will be used throughout the paper.

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