

School Non-attendance: Definitions, meanings, responses, interventions

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This article reflects on the behaviour commonly known as ‘school refusal’. After reviewing its established descriptions, the article argues for a different definition, namely ‘extended school non-attendance’, which describes the visible behaviour neutrally, aims to direct one’s attention to the school environment, and stresses its persistent nature. The article scrutinises dominant and alternative discourses on school non-attendance in Western and Japanese societies. Finally, it reviews some of the assessment tools and intervention strategies used to support school non-attenders, their families and their schools, to redress this behaviour.

Introduction

School is one of the main social agencies contributing to the creation of the ‘citizen’. It plays a paramount role in instilling the values of a society and culture in children, as well as teaching them essential skills to enable them to function in their environment. It is therefore not surprising that school non-attendance is considered detrimental for children and society, and while occasional truancy may be construed as, “somewhat common, perhaps even normal, behaviour” (Evans, 2000, p. 183), extended non-attendance, without extenuating circumstances, is perceived as aberrant.

A considerable body of research has focused on extended school non-attendance, its aspects, causes, and interventions, and literature typically refers to extended non-attendance as ‘school refusal’ or ‘school phobia’. After setting the scene, this article will analyse these definitions and argue for the use of different terminology to refer to this behaviour. Further, it will scrutinise some of the competing discourses about extended school non-attendance, to interrogate how this is constructed by different subjects and agencies. A discussion of current practice in the assessment

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and intervention with persistent school non-attenders based on recent research evidence will follow. Finally, the article will consider some of the implications for professionals. The phrase ‘extended school non-attendance’ will be used throughout this article instead of ‘school refusal’ and ‘school phobia’, and these terms will be used only if directly quoted from the literature, or in reference to literature that employs them.

Setting the Scene ...

‘Extended school non-attendance’ is exhibited by a small percentage of the school-age population, who do not attend school for prolonged periods. Over the years, it has been conceptualised in different ways, and an established view is that some pupils suffer from forms of anxiety about school and do not attend, with their parents’ knowledge. Conversely, other pupils are believed to stay away from school due to lack of interest and motivation, in the absence of any clinically significant characteristics, and without their parents’ knowledge. Recent reviews suggest that the percentage of school non-attenders ranges between 1 and 5 % of all school children. ‘Extended school non-attendance’ is described as sex, race, and socio-economic non-specific. Specific peaks in non-attendance appear to emerge at transition points in the life of school-age children, i.e., entry to school, between ages 5- to 6-years-old, and transition from primary to secondary school, between ages 11–13 (Elliot, 1999; Fremont, 2003; King & Bernstein, 2001a; King, Heine, Tonge, Gullone, & Ollendick, 2001b). Overall, ‘extended school non-attendance’ has been described as a heterogeneous behaviour, which does not appear specific to a particular population. It has been linked to poor academic outcomes, psychiatric disorders and poor achievement in adult life (Berg, 1992; Malcolm, Wilson, Davidson, & Kirk, 2003; Van Ameringen, Mancini, & Farvolden, 2003), with costs for individuals and society. A number of studies have highlighted risk factors within the family, such as enmeshed child-parent relationships, anxious parents, parental mental health issues, parental conflict, separation and single parenting (Bernstein & Borchardt, 1996; Bernstein, Warren, Massie, & Thuras, 1999; Coulter, 1995; Martin, Cabrol, Bouvard, Lepine, & Mouren-Simeoni, 1999; Place, Hulsmeier, Davis, & Taylor, 2000).

While the school environment has not often come under scrutiny as a contributing risk factor, some studies over the years have considered the role schools can have in promoting good attendance, but also in precipitating and maintaining ‘extended school non-attendance’ (Elliott & Place, 1998; Lauchlan, 2003; Malcolm *et al.*, 2003; Rutter, Maughan, Mortimore, & Ouston, 1979). In addition, contrary to the commonly held epidemiological views described above, one recent study has argued that the typical heterogeneous portrayal of persistent school non-attenders may not always be accurate. Place *et al.* (2000) examined data from a ‘non-clinical’ sample of school non-attenders and some of their findings show a picture at variance with typical descriptions of this population. Out of 17 children, 11 were boys. Half of the families were in the lower social class categories, experiencing evident poverty. There was evidence of conflict within families, a risk factor identified in other studies, but

pupils' accounts also gave clear indication that their refusal to attend school stemmed from persistent bullying and social isolation in school and in their neighbourhoods. While a large section of the sample showed traits of anxiety and depression, a quarter did not show any clinically significant traits. The authors argued for an interactionist analysis of extended school non-attendance, to provide the most appropriate support to the child and to address the dysfunctional factors in the child's environment, which maintain extended school non-attendance.

Interrogating Definitions

Students of extended school non-attendance are confronted with labels such as 'school refusal', 'school phobia' and 'truancy', and the way these labels are used in the literature, and what they aim to signify for writers and their audiences, vary. These have been identified as obstacles in gaining a shared understanding of this behaviour (Elliot, 1999). 'School refusal' is often used as an umbrella term to refer to all "child-motivated refusal to attend school and/or difficulties remaining in classes for an entire day" (Kearney & Silverman, 1996, cited in Kearney & Albano, 2004, p. 147; Ollendick & King, 1999). Some authors use both 'school refusal' and 'school phobia' but acknowledge that these labels aim to differentiate between elements believed to underpin the behaviour, i.e. lack of motivation in 'school refusal', and social phobia or anxiety in 'school phobia' (Archer, Filmer-Sankey, & Fletcher-Campbell, 2003). Other authors have argued that the term 'school refusal' should be applied only to describe the behaviour, and that diagnoses of separation anxiety or school phobia should be used to improve effectiveness of intervention (Phelps, Cox, & Bajorek, 1992). This brief review of terminology highlights the lack of a shared definition of this behaviour, reflected in the ways it has been conceptualised by different agencies.

Some authors defend the use of the term 'school refusal', as it refers to the full spectrum of school non-attendance problems (Kearney & Silverman, 1999), but this term appears to connote wilful behaviour, while 'school phobia' implies psychopathology. However, there is evidence that while some school non-attenders may exhibit traits of both anxiety and conduct disorders, others do not show any clinically significant characteristics, which makes these labels unhelpful tools (Place *et al.*, 2000; Lauchlan, 2003). Further, the labels suggest 'within-child' explanations for this behaviour, thus deflecting attention from the school environment as an important element in understanding and addressing it.

While a shared label can be useful in establishing collective insight, the crucial issue is to understand the functions of this behaviour, and the needs it serves. The label should not colour our understanding of the behaviour by directing attention to what could possibly be an incorrect hypothesis. For this reason, this article argues for the use of the phrase 'extended school non-attendance', similar to 'chronic non-attendance' (Lauchlan, 2003). While arguably more cumbersome than the simpler 'school refusal', it describes the visible behaviour neutrally, without attempting to suggest what underpins it, which requires careful assessment and analysis. It

includes the word 'school', because it aims to direct one's attention to the school environment, a major factor in understanding this behaviour. Finally, it stresses the persistent nature of this behaviour, by including the adjective 'extended'.

Exploring Meanings and Dominant Discourses

As argued above, the terms commonly used to refer to 'extended school non-attendance' suggest a 'within-child' explanatory model, and so does one dominant discourse used to construct the concept of school non-attendance. Discourse has been defined as "a system of statements which construct an object" (Parker, 1992, p. 5) and discourse analysis is a critical method, which aims to interrogate forms of discourse, spoken interactions and written texts, their organisation, specific features and functions (Potter & Wetherell, 1987). Discourse analysis considers language to be performative and aims to scrutinize the variations in discourses, according to the different contexts in which they are used, in order to unearth the functions a specific discourse may be serving. It also considers the ways in which each speaker constructs an object as they evaluate it through language, which runs counter to the commonly held idea of a 'given and stable' reality. When analysing discourse, the aim of a 'discourse psychologist' is to identify 'interpretative repertoires', "building blocks speakers use for constructing versions of actions, cognitive processes and other phenomena" (Wetherell & Potter, 1988, p. 172). These are used by speakers to warrant their discursive versions of reality, and analyses of instances of discourse show how it is possible that within different, or even the same, passages of discourse, 'interpretative repertoires' may be deployed to construct arguments with different functions.

A detailed discourse analysis of written texts about 'extended school non-attendance' is not possible here, but an overview of some of the literature on this topic, as well as of the audiences at whom this literature is aimed, identifies a dominant clinical discourse. Articles on school non-attendance abound in journals with a clear focus on pathology such as *Journal of Anxiety Disorders*, *Clinical Psychology and Psychiatry*, *Journal of the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry*, *British Journal of Psychiatry*, *Australian and New Zealand Journal of Psychiatry*, and less so in journals such as *Psychology in the Schools* or *Educational Psychology in Practice*. 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. The function the clinical discourse appears to serve is to direct the reader's attention to the child, and her or his family, as the loci of the problem, while it appears to exonerate the rest of the child's environment. Further, a review of article abstracts on school non-attendance reveals a range of 'interpretative repertoires' used to construct extended school non-attendance pathologically, by using an overtly clinical language. Vocabulary and phrases such as 'treatment', 'diagnosis', 'symptoms', 'disorder', 'co-morbidity', 'in-patient treatment', 'family history of psychiatric illness' are common in the literature, and are the building blocks of a dominant clinical discourse which constructs a mainstream view of extended school

non-attendance. Without denying that young people who display this behaviour may benefit from the support of mental health professionals, to adopt a 'within-child' view on this issue would be extremely limiting. As Place *et al.* (2000) suggest, an understanding of the interaction between environmental factors and school non-attenders is necessary to promote effective and lasting change, and generate alternative discourses around this issue.

Another dominant discourse about extended school non-attendance is the legal discourse of Education Acts and legislation on the rights of minors. The Education Act 1996, chapter 56, section 437, states that:

If it appears to a local education authority that a child of compulsory school age in their area is not receiving suitable education, either by regular attendance at school or otherwise, they shall serve a notice in writing on the parent requiring him [sic] to satisfy them within the period specified in the notice that the child is receiving such education.

Legal procedures such as education supervision orders can be actioned to ensure that parents make certain their children have access to suitable education, and education welfare officers (EWOs) can offer them advice on attendance. The legal discourse above appears to direct our attention to the parents of the child non-attender, as the locus of the problem, while the child is construed as a passive subject who will be talked about, but does not appear to have a voice in the matter. The performative aim of the legal discourse is to 'make' parents provide suitable education for their child and, failing this, some of their parental duties will be taken over by the State and its representatives. Without denying the importance of legislation to protect children's rights, the legal discourse appears narrow in the way it constructs school non-attendance. It focuses on the family only, and does not appear to consider systemic factors, which may play an important role in school non-attendance.

Exploring Meaning and Alternative Discourses

While dominant clinical and legal discourses appear to construct extended school non-attendance as a problem ensuing from the child and/or the family, competing discourses emerging from children and their families construct non-attendance differently. A useful discussion on school non-attendance (Yoneyama, 2000) stresses the importance of considering the meaning of 'Tôkôkyohi' (school phobia/refusal) within the society where it happens. He considers its significance in Japanese society, where the discourse on school attendance as essential for the individual's prosperous future is hegemonic. He also reflects on the 'socialising' aspects of Japanese school, where individuality is 'tamed'. In the light of these powerful discourses, it is not surprising that 'Tôkôkyohi' is perceived as a direct threat to the dominant Japanese society view of itself, as conformist and highly-educated.

Yoneyama provides an analysis of four Japanese 'adult' discourses on extended school non-attendance: the 'psychiatric discourse', which defines 'Tôkôkyohi' as mental illness requiring hospitalisation; the 'behavioural discourse', which describes

it as laziness and prescribes strict discipline administered in private facilities, where 'a number of students died' (Yoneyama, 2000, p. 83); the 'citizen's discourse', which directs people's attention to the inflexible and harsh Japanese school system as the cause of school refusal and believes the solution can only be found in a change in schools and society; the 'socio-medical discourse' which blames schools for the strict regime they impose on pupils, but also describes school refusers as suffering from chronic fatigue. Adult discourses are polarised in two main camps, competing over 'within-child' *vs.* systemic constructions of the issue. Yoneyama also investigates school non-attenders' discourses, thus providing an insight into how they construct their own behaviour. Student discourses on 'Tôkôkyôhi' are powerful reminders of the need to listen to young people's perceptions, as they illustrate personal journeys from physical exhaustion to critical awareness about school and society and the final 'rebirth' of individuals, who refuse a stifling society and its school system or choose to go back to school on their own terms, having rejected the hegemonic construction of normalcy in Japanese society. While there are clear differences between Japanese and British societies, there are also some underlying similarities, such as the belief in schooling as a means to human betterment and the importance of conformity, despite the apparent dominance of discourses about the 'individual' in the Western world. Yoneyama (2000) provides a useful framework for a critical sociological and psychological analysis of competing discourses about extended school non-attendance, and an alternative to clinical discourses, which appear to abound in western academia.

In the UK, Malcolm *et al.* (2003) investigate how school non-attendance is construed by a sample of children, their parents, and education personnel. While pupils rarely identified home factors as the cause of non-attendance, school factors featured highly as reasons for missing school. A number of factors related to the school environment and school effectiveness, such as problems with lessons or teachers and the complexity of secondary schools. Other factors related to peer pressure, social isolation and bullying. Some pupils reported fear of getting into trouble in school. Parents of children without attendance problems, as well as parents of non-attenders, believed that bullying was the principal reason why their children did not want to go to school, followed by problems with teachers or schoolwork. Lack of motivation and social isolation featured low as reasons for non-attendance in the parental survey. Most parents thought regular school attendance was important and believed in a correlation between poor attendance and poor academic achievement. However, more parents of the non-attenders believed that occasional school absence was not a serious issue, and their belief in the importance of school attendance was weaker than that of the parents whose children attended regularly. Conversely, LEA and school personnel constructed non-attendance as a behaviour fostered by low parental interest and belief in the value of education, domestic violence, atypical parental working patters, and the expectation that children should act as carers for younger siblings. Some school factors, such as difficulties with school staff or other pupils and the transition between primary and secondary school, were identified as possible causes of non-attendance, but only a small number of primary teachers did

so (5 out of 42). It appears that different parties use competing discourses to construct different versions of extended school non-attendance and, in order to reintegrate the child in the school, these parties need to be supported in understanding each other's discourses and devise intervention plans which address the maintaining factors of school non-attendance at individual (within-child), group (family/peer group) and systemic (school) levels.

Archer *et al.* (2003) refer to systemic factors such as the size of schools and the structure of the school day, which includes unstructured times and transition times between lessons, often involving movement from one part of the school building to another, as possibly influential in the onset and maintenance of school non-attendance. Lauchlan (2003) reviews a range of studies which identify high levels of disruption and instability amongst school personnel, as well as authoritarian management styles and hostile pupil–teacher relationships, as possible risk factors in precipitating non-attendance. He also mentions specific areas in schools, such as toilets and corridors, which are not monitored by staff, as potential 'hotspots' for bullying and aggressive incidents between pupils.

While the dominant clinical and legal discourses may have exonerated school factors from playing a role in precipitating and maintaining non-attendance, the alternative discourses described above suggest schools have an active role in redressing some of the problematic issues around attendance, and in facilitating the reintegration of persistent non-attenders, in conjunction with the child, her or his family and other agencies involved.

Responses to School Non-attendance

This article critiques some of the labels and discourses used to construct extended school non-attendance, and while it recognises that individual characteristics of the child and family dys/functioning may be risk factors in the development of this behaviour, it also stresses the importance of considering risk factors in schools, to gain a better understanding of this behaviour and address it more effectively.

Ollendick *et al.* (1999) highlight the importance of taking into account the observable behaviour of the child as well as her or his cognitive and affective processes, and the impact of the social contexts on the child's behaviour. They describe child behavioural assessment as an "ongoing, exploratory, hypothesising process in which a range of procedures is used in order to understand a given child, group or social ecology, and to formulate and evaluate specific intervention techniques" (Ollendick *et al.*, 1999, p. 427). The authors review the application of child behavioural assessment in a number of studies with school non-attenders and conclude that, while the results are encouraging, this type of assessment may not be sensitive enough to identify the needs of individual non-attenders. They argue for more individualised assessment and intervention strategies which may be more effective in addressing the specific needs of each non-attender.

Kearney and Silverman (1990, 1999) address some of the weaknesses identified by Ollendick *et al.* (1999), shifting the focus of investigation to the different functions

that school non-attendance serves in individual children. Kearney *et al.* (1990, 1999) highlight the heterogeneity at the basis of this behaviour, compared to the narrow focus of preceding research that focused on ‘school phobia’ ensuing from separation anxiety. They propose a functional analysis model (Figure 1), which considers school non-attendance in its varying degrees of severity, the different factors that may instigate it, and the different needs it serves.

The four functions of school non-attendance identified in this model are: (1) avoidance of specific fear and anxiety-provoking stimuli/settings; (2) escape from social situations which are perceived as unpleasant and/or where an element of evaluation is present; (3) attention-seeking; (4) positive reinforcement. The first two categories describe children who do not attend school for negative reinforcement and will avoid exposure to elements of school that they find aversive. The latter two categories describe children who do not attend school for positive reinforcement and will obtain rewards by staying out of school, such as spending time with their parents or with their friends. However, as Kearney *et al.* (2004) point out, there are children who may exhibit more than one category in their school non-attendance history. This model includes parent-motivated factors which can precipitate school

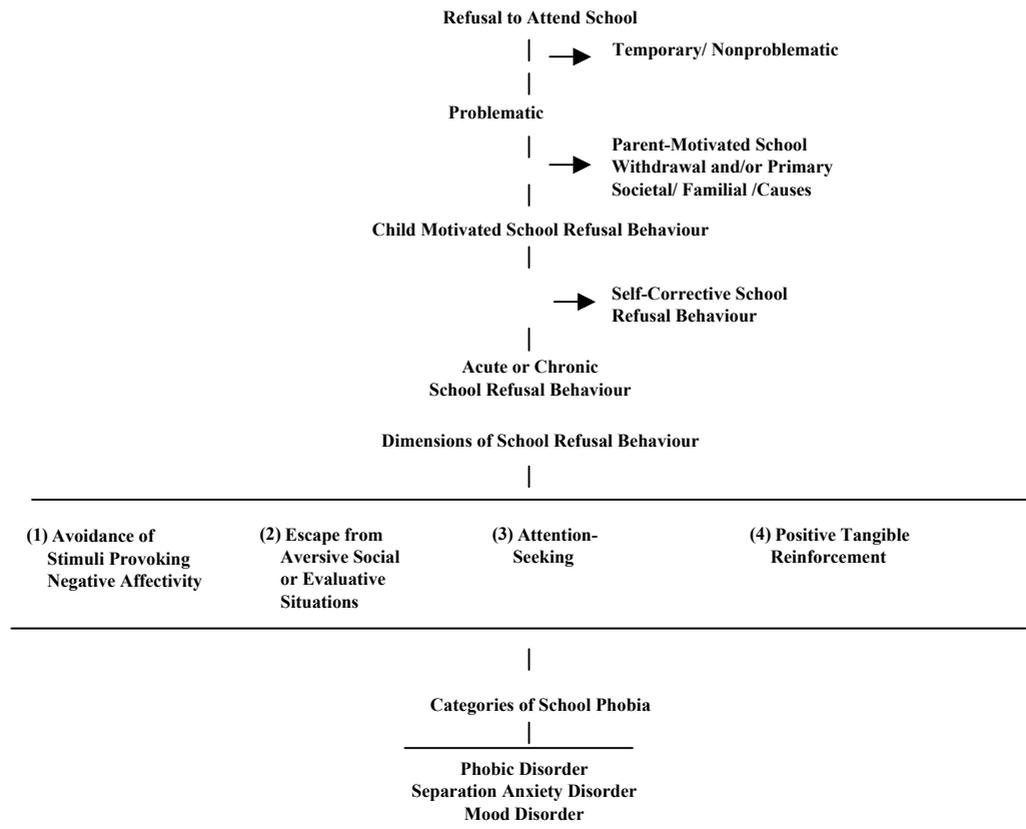


Figure 1. Functional analytic model of school refusal, from Kearney and Silverman (1999), p. 67

non-attendance. The authors do not focus on possible parental motivation for keeping their children away from school, but refer to parental training on child management, as an intervention for child-motivated non-attendance.

Kearney and Silverman (1990) have also developed a 'School Refusal Assessment Scale' (SRAS), which can help identify the needs this behaviour serves for individual children, and provides useful information to plan the most effective intervention. The SRAS is administered to child and parents and measures which of the four hypothesised functions of non-attendance described above is rated higher than the others. It is used as part of a multi-level assessment process, to measure self-perceptions as well as clinically significant levels of fear, anxiety, and other risk factors in school non-attendance. Once the highest SRAS function-related score has been identified, intervention programmes designed to address the specific patterns of needs in the child are offered. The treatment validity of the SRAS, its ability to predict the best intervention for individual children exhibiting 'extended school non-attendance' was trialled, with and without controls (Kearney *et al.*, 1990, 1999). Kearney *et al.* (1999) carried out an evaluation of the SRAS with eight participants, four experimental and four controls (mean age: 11.2-years-old; five boys, three girls). Six participants were Caucasian, one African-American, and one biracial, from diverse socio-economic backgrounds. All participants were referred by their parents or school personnel, with school non-attendance as their primary behaviour difficulty. All participants and their parents were assessed using the SRAS in addition to other assessments, and school personnel were asked to rate the children's behaviour.

The participants were split into an experimental group, which received the most appropriate intervention programme based on their highest mean SRAS scores, and a control group, which initially received an intervention based on their lowest mean SRAS scores. Eventually, all controls were offered the most appropriate intervention, based on their highest mean SRAS scores, once it appeared that the first intervention was not successful, but not before enough intervention sessions had taken place to ensure that the lack of success and any worsening in children's behaviour were not due to the short length of the intervention. All interventions were carried out by Kearney, on a weekly basis. An expert independent arbiter rated treatment integrity, and compliance with treatment protocols was rated as 100%. The post treatment result indicated the validity of the SRAS measure in predicting the most effective intervention for a range of pupils who exhibited extended school non-attendance, with time out of school reduced by a mean of 94.2%, a marked decrease in anxiety, and improvement on other measures.

The results indicate the effectiveness of the SRAS as a predictive measure for most effective intervention for extended non-attendance, but the authors also point out that SRAS should be used in conjunction with other data on the child and family environments. In addition, they suggest that their research indicates that a short-term intervention can be effective (median number of sessions in this study was four), but successful intervention and reintegration may prove more complex if the child has been absent from school for more than 15 months. Limitations of this research include the small sample size, the fact that the interventions were carried

out by one of the authors thus possibly colouring expectations for the two groups, and the lack of control of any other factors that may have enticed the children into attending school again. Despite the limitations, the study highlights the potential of the SRAS in identifying the different functions of a specific behaviour, and the most appropriate interventions to ameliorate the difficulties experienced by children who exhibit this behaviour. Nevertheless, this is an example of the dominant clinical discourse which aims to intervene at 'within-child' and/or family levels, and fails to consider the role that school factors may have in this behaviour. In order to redress this imbalance, agencies involved in supporting persistent non-attenders need to consider carefully the impact of social context as well as risk factors within the child and the family, and their interactions.

Unlike the 'within-child' assessment tools described above, the 'Emotionally-Based School Refusal' (EBSR) project by West Sussex County Council Educational Psychology Service (2004), aims to redress the balance by promoting awareness of EBSR through training for schools from an Educational Psychologist (EP) and EWOs, to enable them to take responsibility for some of the possible precipitating and maintaining factors in school non-attendance. Further, it encourages early alert and intervention with schools at the centre of a multi-agency approach. Collaboration and information-exchange between key agencies are fostered to improve identification, monitoring and support of school non-attenders and their families. While this project is in its early stages, it will be useful to review its effectiveness when formal evaluations are produced.

Interventions

A range of strategies to support school non-attenders has been developed over the years, and many evaluative studies have scrutinised interventions at individual, group, and systemic levels.

At individual level, behavioural techniques based on classical conditioning aim to teach children to relax and face feared stimuli calmly. Exposure to school, either gradual, to build up desensitisation over time, or forced, to reintegrate the child full time and in the shortest time possible, is another behavioural intervention employed with school non-attenders (Blagg & Yule, 1984; Blagg, 1987; Roth & Fonagy, 1996). Blagg and Yule (1984) provide support for forced exposure as a successful intervention, compared to home tuition with psychotherapy, or hospitalisation with medication and psychotherapy. However, the lack of random allocation to treatment groups makes this study and its findings less robust. In addition, forced exposure is perceived as unethical, extremely stressful for all parties involved and not advisable when the child suffers from extreme forms of anxiety and the school cannot put in place resources to ensure a supportive reintegration strategy (Elliott, 1999). Conversely, gradual exposure is built over time to allow a smooth process of desensitisation, but it is important to control positive reinforcement in the home environment, to make it less attractive to the child, while making school attendance more attractive (Elliott, 1999). While reportedly highly rated by children and their

parents, at present there are limited well-designed studies to support the effectiveness of behavioural techniques in redressing school non-attendance (Elliott, 1999). Further, unless environmental factors leading to school non-attendance are addressed, behavioural-based interventions may result in failure.

Cognitive-behaviour therapy (CBT) combines behavioural techniques with direct work on the child's perceptions and anxiety-provoking thoughts. The aim is to challenge these perceptions and support the child in reframing her or his thoughts more positively. A number of studies on CBT as an intervention with non-attenders has been published, and while there is some evidence of success, more well-designed empirical studies are needed to confirm the effectiveness of CBT as an intervention with school non-attenders (King *et al.*, 2000). In addition, the use of CBT alone without addressing the aversive stimuli in the child's environment may result in failure.

Interventions at group-level such as parental training, and social skills training have been evaluated in Spence, Donovan, and Brechman-Toussaint (2000). They suggest that children with poor social skills may be at risk of developing social phobias, which can lead to school non-attendance, as a possible result of their limited social interaction skills or narrow coping skills in the complex world of school. Further, Spence *et al.* (2000) review evidence that parental behaviour may model and reinforce maladaptive behaviour in their offspring, such as anxious rather than coping behaviour, and that 'low warmth/high criticism' households are reportedly linked to anxiety in children. A number of parents may have poor child management skills, which affect their interactions with their children. Stressors on parents may also affect their ability to respond to their child's non-attendance effectively, and so might their belief systems about the importance of education. Training in teaching behaviour and contingency management can help parents enable their children to generalise skills learnt in social skills groups, and it is reportedly a very popular method in addressing school non-attendance (Lauchlan, 2003). Spence *et al.* (2000) evaluated the effectiveness of a CBT-based social skills training with school non-attenders, and the effect that parental factors could play in supporting the effectiveness of the training. Additional techniques used as part of the intervention included gradual exposure to school and cognitive restructuring. The authors worked with 50 participants (age range 7- to 14-years-old) with a primary diagnosis of social phobia who were randomly assigned to one of three groups: Group 1 in which both parents and children received support; Group 2 in which only the children were involved in the intervention; group three on a waiting-list. Post-treatment measurements suggested that the effects of social skills training were statistically and clinically significant, which suggested this may be a useful intervention in addressing the needs of school non-attenders. Conversely, parental training did not appear to make a significant difference, because children in both intervention groups had made comparable progress. The authors identified a number of methodological weaknesses in the study, including the small sample size, and the presence of additional techniques which made it difficult to isolate the effectiveness of social skills training on its own. Whilst work with parents, and social/coping skills training have been

identified by Place *et al.* (2000) as useful interventions to support pupils who reported bullying and social isolation as a maintaining factor in their non-attendance, both interventions may not be as successful unless coupled with strategies addressing the aversive stimuli in the child's environment.

Interventions at individual or group level can be useful in addressing some of the needs of school non-attenders, but systemic factors identified in research as contributing to the onset and maintenance of school non-attendance need to be addressed to ensure successful reintegration in school (Elliott *et al.*, 1998; Kearney, 2001). As Blagg (1987) suggests, in order to achieve an effective reintegration to school, a number of issues will have to be considered, including academic concerns, to ensure that the pupil will be supported to catch up with missed work and any other learning needs are addressed. In addition, peer-related concerns will have to be addressed by the school as well as teacher-related concerns when an adult's style of communication may be causing anxiety for a pupil.

Effective preventative interventions at systemic level include raising awareness of school non-attendance through staff training, and ensuring that a key member of staff is responsible for monitoring attendance, with the support of outside agencies, to provide an early response to pupils who may be struggling with their attendance. Early actions to support pupils identified at risk of non-attendance could include a careful multi-agency analysis of the systemic factors that may contribute to the pupil's non-attendance, which would result in different agencies responding at different levels. Short-term school-based interventions and responses may include organising staff support for the pupil, offering a flexible part-time timetable, establishing a peer-mentoring system to provide guidance and encouragement and reinforce attendance, and setting up a circle of friends (Newton & Wilson, 1999) to support vulnerable pupils. Longer-term school-based actions may include the establishment of areas in school for pupils to use as safe havens, the monitoring of areas in schools which have been highlighted as 'hot-spots' for bullying through canvassing pupils' views, the enforcement of anti-bullying policies, ongoing pastoral support, and whole-school work on emotional literacy to develop emotionally healthier relationships between staff and pupils.

Conclusions

This article has considered how extended school non-attendance is defined and construed by a range of agencies and their competing discourses. Lack of agreement on a common language to talk about this behaviour has sometimes hindered progress in understanding it, and caused confusion about the roles and responsibilities of the parties involved. There is evidence of progress, for example in the way assessment through SRAS focuses on the functions of this behaviour to provide individualised support, but much intervention is still based on anecdotal evidence and evaluations that are not empirically sound. Further, local projects are bringing more attention to systemic factors involved in this behaviour than before (West Sussex County Council EPS, 2004). In the light of this evidence, what are the implications

for some of the professionals and agencies who may be involved in supporting persistent school non-attenders and their families at different levels?

Researchers and practitioners could increase understanding of school non-attendance by working towards a shared definition of this behaviour, and engaging in well-designed empirical research to answer questions still unanswered about this behaviour and ways to redress it.

As a response to *Every child matters: Change for children* (2004), local authorities and children's services could issue clear guidance on school non-attendance to all staff involved with school age pupils, and parents. Multi-agency work could be promoted and facilitated to ensure an effective multi-level approach, with EWOs, EPs, teachers, other agencies and parents working together.

EPs can work with school non-attenders at many levels. At systemic level, they can provide training for school staff on non-attendance, and on ways to make their organisations more inclusive for non-attenders and their families. EPs can act as mediators between schools and families, to ensure common goals and a shared approach to intervention. EPs can become actively involved with families, specifically providing parental training, and modelling good practice in child management. Additionally, at group level, EPs can become involved in planning, running and evaluating social skills training and CBT. At individual level, EPs could assess children's needs, to inform multi-agency decisions on the most suitable interventions, and implement some of these, possibly with other professionals.

There is a wide scope for EP involvement in work with persistent school non-attenders, some of which could be direct intervention and some of which could be challenging common perceptions about school non-attenders to enable others to develop alternative discourses about this population.

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