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Attendance: the next pandemic? The psychology of school attendance

A think piece by Scottish Division Of Educational Psychology National Action Enquiry Programme for Educational Psychologists November 2023

Introduction:

School attendance remains one of the leading priorities in Scottish education with a rich body of evidence investigating the role it plays in wellbeing, attainment and child development. This paper will explore the importance of the psychology of school attendance and pose a series of questions to support current debates on improving attendance at school in Scotland in a post-pandemic and cost of living crisis context.

Summary of key points & questions:

- No one size fits all – it is a complex area that is influenced by culture, community, family, school and individual factors
- Interventions need to consider all of these influences. Educational psychologists are well placed to be key partners, as they work at all levels of the system.
- Research advises of school factors which support attendance including relational approaches, holistic ethos of school belonging, high aspirations for all, adaptive teaching approaches, scaffolding transitions, etc.
- Emotional based school avoidance has been exacerbated by the pandemic. Non-attendance due to emotional factors has a cyclical impact.
- Multi-agency approaches are being developed across local authorities to address the complexity of the underlying reasons around children's non-attendance at school.
- Questions:
 - Do we have mutual vision for what attendance looks like and what it should be? Has this changed since the pandemic?
 - Are we intervening early enough to support children and families?
 - Do we know enough about part-time/ flexible timetables and their impact?
 - How accurate is the data we are using to support decision-making around attendance supports and interventions?
 - To what extent are children and young people authentically participating in the conversations about attendance at local and national levels?

Complexity, consequences and equity of school attendance

Regular attendance at school is positively associated across a number of domains in a child or young person's life (e.g., psychologically, socially and academically) (Kearney, 2008). Crucially, we know that the risk factors linked with school non-attendance affect the short and long-term prospective of pupils. Those attending school less frequently put themselves at higher risk of disengagement from education and developing unhealthy behaviours in adolescence, such as substance use (Engberg & Morral, 2006). In the long-term, school non-attendance can increase an individual's risk of developing mental health conditions (e.g. anxiety and depression) and a reduction to their lifelong earning potential (Allison, 2019).

Research findings indicate rates of school attendance vary widely and are likely to disproportionately negatively affect pupils who are vulnerable. Pupils from lower socio-economic backgrounds are more likely to have reduced levels of attendance than their peers from higher socio-economic backgrounds (Kearney et al., 2022). This only helps to accentuate the ongoing challenge of addressing the poverty-related attainment gap at a time where the number of pupils living in poverty has risen to approximately 1 in 4 in Scotland (Scottish Government, 2023). These numbers are expected to have risen in light of the cost-of-living crisis.

The complexity and inequity of attendance highlights the need for effective partnership working at all levels of the education system: level of child, school and local authority. Educational psychologists work at all these levels therefore they can be key partners in leading this work. Educational Psychology Services across Scotland are aware of the evidence base highlighting the benefits of and the barriers we face in improving school attendance. Services have:

- produced guidance for their schools, authorities and partners eg Renfrewshire, [Emotionally Based School Avoidance \(EBSA\) – Renfrewshire Educational Psychology Service \(glowscotland.org.uk\)](https://glowscotland.org.uk)
- conducted pilot studies eg Stirling's small scale study of attendance and autism, [Stirling EPS research 2019 \(education.gov.scot\)](https://education.gov.scot)
- created audit tools and resources to tackle universal and targeted attendance issues eg Educational psychologists across Forth Valley and West Lothian worked with their Regional Improvement Collaborative to develop their self-evaluation, [Attendance – Forth Valley & West Lothian Regional Improvement Collaborative \(glowscotland.org.uk\)](https://glowscotland.org.uk)

These local approaches are necessary to flexibly account for the different contexts, communities, and unique contextual challenges across the country. However, given the multi-stakeholder partnerships involved in tackling school attendance, do we also need to establish a mutual vision across the partners involved? Could this be considered nationally?

MUTUAL VISION OF ATTENDANCE:

- Do we need to establish a mutual vision of what school attendance and engagement looks like across partners?
- Who could be best placed to do this? Should it be at national, regional or local levels?
- Should attendance at school be considered as part of the education reform discussions? Does education have to be in a school building?
- Are all the right partners involved in supporting families, schools and communities?
- Are any voices not being heard?
- How are children and young people authentically participating in the conversations about attendance at local and national levels?

The Psychology of Non-Attendance

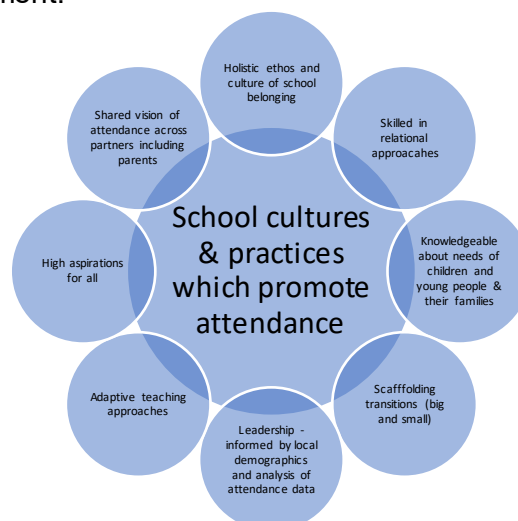
The Anna Freud National Centre for Children and Families indicate that the reasons for children and young people not attending school exist at different levels – those of the child or young person, the family and home, the school level or community and the interaction between these factors. The increase in the individual profile of need is undoubtedly related to the pressures that families are under. The cost of living is having a significant impact across many social sectors, but, as noted above, worst hit are:

- families who were already living in poverty;
- families who have experienced loss, bereavement and conflict such as domestic violence;
- families where there is physical and mental illness and the young person acts as a carer and of course,
- families where addiction is present.

These family pressures can be compounded if the school environment is not sensitive to individual or family issues or where the focus is solely on academic attainment and achievement. Instead fostering readiness to learn via a culture, ethos and staff which is supportive of the wellbeing of pupils and their families is beneficial. This supports a more holistic and ecological view of the child (Jindal-Snape, 2016). Schools which hold high aspirations for their pupils and provide high levels of support are those which provide a balance of challenging young people to develop skills and experience new situations, but also a place where relationships are valued.

Many schools are committed to a nurturing environment and have put in significant measures to support pupils. These schools have an understanding of the importance of scaffolding the big and small transitions for children and young people. This can be crucial for vulnerable learners in particular. In nurturing schools, teachers ensure that adaptive teaching methods are employed for all children. This ensures that every child can access the curriculum, no matter what their needs and strengths. Having a workforce which is skilled in relational approaches, knowledgeable about the needs of young people and a leadership which drives a school, informed by its local demographics and analysis of data related to attendance is crucial.

All of these factors interlink to describe a school culture and ethos which promotes school attendance and engagement.



Knowing the needs of the children and young people within the wider context of their lives is vital to developing support strategies for them and their families. Ecological theories explore the dynamic relationship between children and their environment (Jindal-Snape, 2016), including the experiences which affect others in their ecosystem. Part of this understanding of the child within their context needs to recognise the possible change in parental attitudes towards full-time schooling. Public First's 2023 research in England highlighted a "seismic shift in parental attitudes to school attendance that is going to take a monumental, multi-service effort to change." This shift is due to a number of factors including impact of COVID-19, rise in mental health and wellbeing issues, cost of living crisis, 'family time', physical health and logistical demands. Pre-COVID school and ensuring attendance at school was viewed as fundamental to being a good parent, whereas post COVID it is viewed amongst several competing factors that are important in a child's life. The breakdown of this 'social contract' between schools and families is across the socio-economic spectrum, although there appear to be different underlying factors around this (Public First, 2023). It ranges from mistrust of schools to ambivalence and resentment. There is limited research evidence based solely on the Scottish context, but EP experience denotes anecdotal evidence that this is also the case for Scotland.

CULTURE & SYSTEMS

- In Scotland has there been a shift in the 'social contract' between children, families and schools about school attendance? If so, how do we address this? Is it through a new 'social contract'? Or do we try to repair the old one?
- Are we intervening early enough? Do we have the correct data to do this? Are our policies based on what is possible within our current systems and resources (eg letter when attendance drops to 90%) or are they based on what is needed to make a difference?

Emotionally Based School Avoidance?

There is a well-documented increase in mental health issues for children and young people in the UK resulting in more school age children and young people experiencing depression and anxiety (Deighton, et al., 2019). These issues can become barriers to accessing school and present themselves as difficulties in regulating emotions; confidence and self-esteem issues and developing a pattern of avoidance for situations that heighten stress.

Whilst the creation of a nurturing environment is a fundamental part of supporting pupils when they are in school, more specific emotional support is needed to assist pupils who are struggling with emotionally based school avoidance (EBSA). EBSA is a broad umbrella term used to describe a group of children and young people who have severe difficulty in attending school due to emotional factors, often resulting in prolonged absences from school (West Sussex Educational Psychology Service, 2022). Approximately 1-2% of the school population are absent from school due to emotional factors, with a slightly higher prevalence amongst secondary pupils (Elliot, 1999; Guilliford & Miller, 2015). Although this was a problem before the Covid pandemic it has definitely been exacerbated by lockdown and long periods where pupils did not attend school (McDonald, Lester, and Michelson, 2023).

It has been noted that school non-attendance due to emotional factors has a cyclical impact; pupils miss school, they miss out on key learning and social interactions which fuel their anxiety or emotional distress making it harder and harder to return. The more school that is missed the more this is compounded with relationships breaking down and the amount of schoolwork missed becoming perceived as insurmountable.

Many local authorities across the UK have been exploring addressing attendance issues and EBSA and have developed resources to support pupils, parents, and school staff. Although there are a variety of resources and toolkits available these are largely focused on the educational context, looking at creating nurturing environments, planning for school returns and supporting pupils when they do return. However, this is a far wider issue which has resulted in a multi-agency approach to manage it within some local authorities. These cross-agency groups often have a focus on parental mental health, general wellbeing and safety within communities, joint working with colleagues from Social Work, Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS), Homelink workers, counsellors and adult mental health services. Whilst a multi-agency approach can explore this issue through a wider lens, the research and pilots being undertaken are showing that a key adult and strong relationships are pivotal to breaking emotionally based school attendance cycles.

Several Educational Psychology Services have developed guidelines and toolkits around this area:

- Glasgow: [Emotionally Based School Non-attendance – Glasgow Educational Psychology Service \(glowscotland.org.uk\)](https://glowscotland.org.uk)
- Renfrewshire: [Emotionally Based School Avoidance \(EBSA\) – Renfrewshire Educational Psychology Service \(glowscotland.org.uk\)](https://glowscotland.org.uk)

EMOTIONAL BASED SCHOOL AVOIDANCE:

- Part-time or flexible timetables can be a vital support to children and young people returning to education and learning due to anxiety-related difficulties. Do we know how many children are accessing these? How are we recording them? How well are we reviewing them? Do we continue to have high aspirations for all children and young people who access these?

Other factors and questions that need to be considered in supporting attendance and EBSA

- 1. Accuracy and consistency of data:** A key aspect to tackling attendance and specifically EBSA, is an in-depth understanding of data across school populations and at local authority levels. At present, there is variation across local authorities and schools regarding coding of attendance and non-attendance through SEEMIS. The limited accuracy and consistency of recording can hinder data analysis, meaning that the data may not be able to help answer some vital questions necessary to help target support timeously and proportionately. This includes the scale of the non-attendance and the school stage/year in which the concern becomes most pronounced etc. It also means effective targeting of resources could be hindered by current data sets. To do this well, leaders and practitioners need data to confirm

where the issues lie and the profile of need attached to non-attendance in their context e.g. if a school knows that young people who have a neuro-developmental disorder have an increased chance of disengaging from school in 3rd year, this allows work to be done at earlier stages with staff and pupils.

- 2. Availability of research using Scottish context:** Klein and Sosu (2020, 2022) have carried out a variety of research on the impact of COVID on attendance in Scotland but there is currently relatively little research on non-attendance in Scotland.
- 3. Do we assess the function of children and young people's non-attendance or make assumptions on why they are finding it difficult to attend school?** Kearney (2008) has highlighted the importance of understanding the reason for children and young people's difficulties with attending school. We need to use a holistic lens to consider children's context and why they are not attending school, including challenges around the school environment. If we understand the underlying difficulties, we are more likely to develop appropriate supports and interventions. Stirling and West Lothian Education Psychological Services presented recently on supporting attendance through effective assessment, see workshop 4 and workshop 6, [The Attendance Symposium Brochure and Presentations – Forth Valley & West Lothian Regional Improvement Collaborative \(glowscotland.org.uk\)](#)
- 4. Is physical attendance a requirement?** As EPs and educators, we focus our efforts on supporting children and young people back into education in the physical sense. This leads to a question regarding whether or not a physical presence in school is considered a necessary for attainment? Some research conducted throughout and following the pandemic, highlights an improvement in the mental health and wellbeing of some young people as a result of home learning opportunities (Soneson et al., 2023). Other research has raised the question of whether physical distance has equal weighting to emotional closeness (Vargas-Madriz, 2018), leading us to consider alternative ways young people's emotional needs could be met, potentially through online means. If a young person had the motivation and capacity to engage in an alternative education offering, could removing the expectation of attending school in a physical capacity be an acceptable alternative?

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