

PAPER 5 FOR CHILDREN'S COMMITTEE: RESPONDING TO SPECIFIC QUESTIONS.

QUESTION 1: THE POSITION OF CHILDREN.

Research shows that up to 80% of all children who miss school are parental condoned absentees; more especially of younger- aged children. However, significantly, approx one in four skip school against the specific wishes of their parents.

Research (eg Reid (1999) *Truancy and Schools*, Routledge) indicates that some parent/s/carer/s are frustrated by the failure of officials to make sure that their children attend school regularly despite their own best endeavours. Some parents, in order to avoid their children missing school, take them to their schools daily (eg as some do not like travelling on school buses) and even return them to school when they are found to be truanting. However, these pupils often simply go through one school gate and out of another. Scotland introduced checks on this post Dunblane but similar measures have not been introduced in the rest of the UK.

Research (see: Reid, K (2005) *The causes, views and traits of school absenteeism and truancy: an analytical review*, *Research in Education*, 74, 59-82; and Reid, K et al (2010) *The views of primary pupils at key stage 2 on school attendance in Wales*, *Educational Studies*, 36,5, 465-479) conducted with children shows that:

- 1) Other children consider it to be 'unfair' that their truant peers get away with so much, including both school work and homework;
- 2) Other children and non-attendees both understand the short and long-term consequences of missing school and/or behaving badly (eg achieving poorer academic results at school);
- 3) Secondary-aged children believe it is unfair that their parent/s or carer/s (often mothers) take the blame for their non-attendance and can be punished (eg fines/jail) when it is their own fault and often, specifically, not the fault of their parents.

It has therefore, been suggested that the laws relating to school attendance (eg *The Education Act, 1944*) may be out-of-date and need amendment given the much earlier maturation of children today, the current state of family life, and the fact that it is often parent/s or carer/s from deprived, working class homes (often mothers) who bear the brunt of both the blame and any legal penalties (eg fines). Many of these families are already reliant on state support so such penalties are inappropriate.

Most existing legal penalties do not work well in practice and are generally ineffective. However, they provide useful measures for both schools and LA's to keep some pupils' non-attendance in check. Some have suggested (especially on the right of politics) that if these penalties were removed, there would be a kind of 'truancy explosion' amongst those pupils who attend regularly but who actually dislike going to school and learning or participating in certain subjects.

Others feel that it is wrong for the children who play truant to get away with their actions without any penalty. Otherwise, how they ever change or progress? Certainly, my view is that children who miss school should be made to catch up with their work whenever possible. This may, in some cases, necessitate the introduction of 'catch up' classes.

Others argue that with the increase in children's rights, there should be an acceptance of greater personal responsibility for children's (especially mature adolescents) own actions. This is probably a majority view amongst head teachers and teachers. However, head teachers are especially sensitive to any action which could either worsen or destroy their relationships with either parent/s or carer/s or their pupils (eg fixed penalty notices).

QUESTION 2: GAPS IN DATA COLLECTION.

Apart from my own work, and a few minor small-scale studies, there has been little research or funding in this field in Wales. This is because Wales has never had a proper educational research fund of its own. For me to carry out my own research, I have had to reach agreement with individual LA's, schools or professional organisations (eg NASWE). Therefore, when I was at SMU, I had to agree to work with and assist for example, LA's in return for them allowing me to be able to publish my findings. I did this for around 20 years.

Every application I made in Wales for funding in this field was rejected. After 1999, when I applied for funds from England (ef DfES), I received written replies saying that I was ineligible for funding and should re-apply in Wales to DCELLS. What could I do? After being asked to return to SMU to manage their attempt to expand and improve their research profile, I was suddenly given one month's notice without any redundancy payment, after the HEFCW decided, as part of their educational 'cuts' programme, to immediately stop their QR Research Funding for Education, despite my reputation in international research in the field and my results in successive Research Assessment Exercises (RAE). Since then, I have continued with my work entirely in my own time and at my own expense out of my commitment and interest in the field.

Therefore, it may be unrealistic for you to ask this question without finding ways of overcoming inherent difficulties (eg having a funding base). These difficulties have been exacerbated in another way as well. Twice recently, post NBAR, I have received warning letters from the DfES when my name was used in making 'bids' to carry out work related to the NBAR recommendations; once when I helped an outside organisation to make a bid and once when my name was included in a bid without my prior knowledge (I subsequently received a written apology from this organisation for doing so. They indicated that they had intended to approach me subsequently to ask for my help in advising them about carrying out the research if their bid was accepted). It seems my former Chairmanship of NBAR now excludes me from further activity for some reasons related to probity which are beyond my understanding!

But, for the record (unlike Ireland, Scotland and England), there has never been an all-Wales study on pupils' attendance and behaviour; therefore, we are forced to rely on studies and findings conducted elsewhere. This is one reason why the data obtained for the NBAR study was so important. For example, there is no research at all on 'patterned absence' (eg pupils who skip Monday and Friday's regularly).

There is much too little research into:

- a) The bully;
- b) Bullying in Wales.

A weakness of existing data on bullying in Wales is that it is collected differently by different LA's and schools in Wales. Currently, it is most unlikely to be accurate. There is no universal template for the task. There is no proper auditing of these data. The same is true for managed moves.

QUESTION 3: ANALYSIS FRAMEWORK

A good start but much more rigour required.

QUESTION 4: COLLABORATIVE ARRANGEMENTS.

It is probably fair to say that Education has suffered because of drafting errors in the Children Act (2004) legislation. I gave clear warnings about this at the time (see: Reid, K (2005) The implications of Every Child Matters for schools, Pastoral Care in Education, 23, 1, 12-18).

The key issues remain:

- 1) Differences in training and philosophy;
- 2) Staffing shortages/constant changes within the Social Services;
- 3) Professional pressures within the Health Services;
- 4) Time constraints within Education.

It would be much better (and this is the key thrust of the Children Act (2004) legislation but is still not happening properly), if the three agencies could agree who is the lead worker in each case for each particular family. There should be a single point of contact. Otherwise, as is currently happening all over Wales, it leads to:

- a) Duplication;
- b) Confusion for parents/carer/s (see: NBAR Report);
- c) Professional disagreements;
- d) Wasting scarce public resources;
- e) Diversity in practice
- f) A lack of consistency both locally and nationally.

QUESTION 5: GOVERNMENT INITIATIVES.

Families First is an excellent idea. The idea of supporting those families at risk of having children who may not reach or fulfil their potential is both an entirely correct philosophy and policy and is certainly worthwhile.

However, we need to develop proper Family Engagement Models. We should either join up the three services properly or enable them to work coherently and effectively on an individual basis. Families require consistency in approach.

A good example of a family-friendly approach is the Family Values Scheme (see: Ellis, Morgan and Reid (2013) Better Behaviour through Home-School Relations, Routledge) which was originally developed in South Wales but is now spreading out across the UK. Despite a presentation being given to officials within the DfES (formerly DCELLS) which was well received, nothing further has been heard from them despite:

- a) On three occasions supplying them with the requested CD's of the work, including examples of the practical work with families and children;
- b) Asking Herefordshire to carry out their own evaluation of the Scheme at the request of the DfES. Although this evaluation was sent twice to the designated official electronically (within the short timescale agreed and Herefordshire undertaking the task gratis), and by surface mail, no acknowledgement of its safe receipt has ever been received, despite follow up e-mail's.

QUESTION 6: THIRD SECTOR ORGANISATIONS.

Third sector organisations can provide useful support functions (eg with out-of-school, alternative curriculum or PRU work), especially when they are being used to enhance capacity and their work has an appropriate structure, purpose and content. However, this work should be properly accredited, evaluated and staff trained along 'fitness for purpose' guidelines.

QUESTION 7: PRIORITY ISSUE.

There could be several issues vying for this role. Personally, I believe that what is crucially overriding is that we achieve excellence in teaching and learning for all pupils irrespective of background, ability or any other needs (eg gender, race, disability or special or additional learning needs requirements). Without national improvements in pupils' performance at all levels, Wales will not climb international league tables. We must therefore, get our standards of teaching and learning right in all our schools.

However, even if this was achieved, there is likely to remain a core of troubled young people (and their families) who are entitled to be educated in mainstream provision and in high quality lessons, but who will continue to give children's services, education departments and teachers some difficulties. It is important therefore, that those staff who are engaged in both the teaching and management of these children are appropriately trained for their tasks. It is also worth considering whether the families of these often vulnerable children and young people also require some additional help and support.

ADDITIONAL ISSUE: HOME EDUCATION

I am adding this issue as it did not come up in our discussion or subsequently, but it is one which I think is worthy of your further consideration.

I understand that the DfES recently intended to issue new guidelines on home education. I looked at their document and considered it to be 'sound' with an appropriate 'hands off' approach. Despite this, I understand the DfES may have decided to withdraw this document following an outcry from a powerful home education lobby-group campaign. If so, I am disappointed. Why?

First, you need to ask whether it is right that the State should take an interest in children educated outside the mainstream (for whatever reason and these reasons can vary considerably).

Second, if so, you need to ask whether it is reasonable and fair for LA's to be responsible for local safeguarding issues in this field when they may not have any knowledge about these children's home education (and these children/families may not even be properly registered or accredited).

Third, under these circumstances, how can LA's be expected to give guarantees that these children are being properly looked after?

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