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Truancy and coercive consent: is there an alternative?

Karen McIntyre-Bhatty*

This paper suggests that rather than criminalising or pathologising truancy as a “deviant” behaviour in need of either treatment or punishment, truancy should be considered as a rational enactment of dissatisfaction with State educational provision. It should be of little surprise that attempts to “solve” the truancy “problem” by recourse to coercion or legal action have proved ineffective. Indeed, such practices may exacerbate rather than ameliorate the truancy and exclusion “problem”. While attempts to improve staff–student relations, curriculum relevance and the school environment may prove beneficial in encouraging some absentees to return to school, further attention should be paid to alternative educational provision, and in particular to raising the awareness among staff, students and parents of the legality and potential benefits home education may offer for persistent school refusers.

Keywords: truancy; disaffection; absenteeism; coercion; alternative education; home education

Introduction

Over the past quarter of a century a substantial body of literature has amassed concerned with the causes and possible remedies for the culture of truancy, absenteeism and disaffection¹ that appears endemic in the British State education system. Over the same period, a significant sum of money has been spent on various schemes, initiatives and highly publicised prosecutions designed with the purpose of eradicating these behaviours within British schools. Yet as Reid (2004) has noted, there has been little improvement in attendance rates during the last 30 years. Dwyfor Davis and Lee (2006), and Boyle and Goodall (2005) of New Philanthropy Capital also support this view, the latter noting:

Despite a plethora of initiatives and over £1 billion spent on tackling poor attendance and challenging behaviour in schools, rates of unauthorised absence have not changed in ten years, and permanent exclusions have risen by 20% since 2000. (Boyle and Goodall 2005, 1)

The links between persistent non-attendance, poor educational attainment levels, poor employment prospects and even criminality have been well established (Ball and Connolly 2000; Boyle and Goodall 2005). However, the assumption that retention within school is always the best or most suitable protection against non-desirable outcomes for those students who appear either unwilling or unable to sustain their attendance remains unchallenged in the majority of research studies. Gabb (1994) has drawn attention to this tendency, noting how the acknowledgement that school may not always be best is difficult for educational researchers to accept either on ideological grounds, or because of professional self-interest. Yet the tendency persists. This paper therefore seeks to interrogate established attitudes and responses to unauthorised absence in schools and to provide both an alternative

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understanding of school absenteeism and new remedies for it; remedies, it shall be argued, that will also contribute significantly to the prevention of low attainment, poor employability and criminality.

Education and the State

While considerable time, energy and money has been expended on determining the causes of persistent school absenteeism, little consideration has been given to the motivation behind either the initiation, or continued dominance of State educational provision and how this may impact upon decisions made by young people not to attend school. As Neumann and Aviram (2003) have noted, while children's education has always been the responsibility of their parents, in late nineteenth-century Europe, and later in the USA, "the need for a factory-oriented socialisation process arose in response to changes wrought by the Industrial Revolution. The school filled this role for society, and thus the State took responsibility for children's education" (2003, 132). Carper (2000) suggests that State education was not just seen as a solution for rapid economic and industrial development, but that compulsory schooling would "mold a moral, disciplined and unified population" prepared to participate in political, economic and social life, adding that "some reformers viewed the common school as a substitute for the family" (2000, 12).

The initiation of State-based schooling can thus be seen to mark the beginning of the State's deliberative intervention into family life and family-led values, and its control and politicisation of education. This has not changed significantly; many see school as an important shaper of socialisation skills and as having a significant influence on encouraging its students actively to participate in society. State schooling is routinely looked upon to assume the duties of moral, spiritual, personal and social, even *dietary*, education once attributed to parents. The State and its schools have even been described as "parental" (Carlson 1998).

The government takes a keen and detailed interest in continuing to shape and mould the British education system, its curriculum and the values schools impart upon their students, not least because, as the Leitch report (2006) has indicated, the future economic success of Britain can be seen to depend on the qualities and skills learned by today's young children. Thus it is possible to describe elective withdrawal from school, in the form of persistent absenteeism or truanting, as withdrawal from interaction with democratic society (Apple 2000), or as a rejection of the values promoted within that society, and ultimately, as a threat both to democracy and the economic prosperity of the State.

From this perspective, the purpose of school may be determined not as the education of the child for his or her own sake, but for the production and/or preservation of an economically successful, democratic society, for the whole nation's sake. School education, configured this way, is not seen as a right for the child as an individual, but for the child as a cog in the wheel of State. Apple (2000) notes that after the Second World War school was seen as benign and neutral; teachers were considered impartial purveyors of knowledge and because of this they, and the judgements and decisions made by governments and educational authorities, were insulated from critical scrutiny. The State was thus provided with legitimacy. Given this idealistic and benign perspective, rejection of school in the form of persistent absenteeism or truanting appears "deviant". If school is the dominant site for the

inculcation of government-approved “appropriate” societal values, children who truant may be considered incompetent for society or even anti-society (Bagdonas 2006). Indeed, some researchers have gone so far as to suggest that market and moral panic have become significant factors in decisions about truancy policies (Hoyle 1998). This is because the absence of school “parenting” is seen to *ensure* moral and social degeneration; truancy is perceived to perpetuate and reflect “a sick society” because of the abandonment of moral and social values implied by school absence (Dwyfor Davis and Lee 2006). From this perspective, appropriate moral and social values cannot be available outside of school, because this would undermine school’s position as guardian of the nation’s well-being. Thus with the ascendancy of school as the dominant and privileged site for learning an appropriate system of values, alternative sites of learning such as the home are at best disregarded, and at worst demonised as sites of dysfunction or risk in need of a cure (Ivatts 2006; Lauchlan 2003).

But, with increasing interventions by the State into educational practices in recent years – leading in Britain to the imposition of the National Curriculum and compulsory SATs – mistrust has replaced benign trust, as Gabb (2004) has demonstrated:

Added to declining education standards is the growth of bureaucratic control over the whole system. The National Curriculum was introduced in 1988 as a means of raising standards across England. It has become an inflexible burden on schools, effectively centralising control over education. It determines the content of what will be taught, and sets attainment targets for learning. It also determines how performance will be assessed and reported. Naturally, it constrains all effort at innovation, and prevents the tailoring of curriculum to the actual or perceived needs of children.²

Clarke and Newman (1997) also draw attention to the gradual shift in public perceptions of the State from passive acceptance to active mistrust, noting how professionals have come to be: “arraigned as motivated by self-interest, exercising power over would be customers, denying choice through the dubious claim that ‘professionals know best’” (1997, 15). Apple (2000) goes further, suggesting that for many the State is for no longer considered the legitimate and neutral upholder of the public good. Given this global change in attitudes towards authority in general and State intervention in schooling in particular, truancy can perhaps no longer be described as “deviant”; it may be more accurate to describe it as quasi-conformist: as the reflection and albeit extreme enactment of a commonly felt dissent. Alternatively it may be seen as “the resistance of an oppression, a criticism of certain aspects of our schools [...] connected to our powerlessness to effect change” (Southwell 2006, 93). By privileging the needs of the State over the need for a quality educational experience for the child, State schooling becomes viewed as reminiscent of factory farming: run with a “production line” mentality and with national economic imperatives and/or politics, rather than the needs or wishes of the individual child, at the centre of its policies and practices. Privileging the needs of the State over individual children’s needs or desires is difficult for students to comprehend, and can be considered to contribute to feelings of powerlessness and disaffection that may consequently develop into truanting behaviours. Dwyfor Davis and Lee’s research (2006), for example, found that non-attendance was directly related to the perception that the social and economic system was unjust.

Further consideration should perhaps be given to the perceived lack of accountability of schools, and the concomitant lack of power parents – or more

especially children – feel they have to be heard and to voice their concerns within the State school system. As Hoyle (1998) has noted, children are constructed as “powerless non-beings in the domain of schooling” (1998, 106), and (until the recent introduction of the Children Act [UK Parliament 2004]) have been subject to “complete disregard in education law, policy, and practice” or in terms of their “right to a voice” (Hoyle 1998). State schools are non-competitive. Places are often limited and allocated according to fixed criteria – or more recently, lotteries – so parents and children cannot register their unhappiness with a particular school merely by switching to another. Schools are effectively semi-monopolies; they have no economic need to consider parents’ and children’s concerns unless those concerns directly affect the schools’ status within the community. Indeed, in 2003 Ofsted reported that only one third of secondary schools adequately met the needs of students with social, emotional and behavioural difficulties. In fact 64% of the students given permanent exclusions in that same year had special educational needs (Boyle and Goodall 2005). Obviously many schools will have a professional and ethical commitment to ensure the best possible educational experience for their students, but it is where this concern breaks down, or is superseded by financial or other issues, and the education experience is thus compromised, that disaffection and therefore absenteeism are likely to occur. Yet in these situations, fighting the system from within is less likely to achieve the desired results because there is no impetus at school level for change: schools are unlikely to lose “customers” for the “customers” have nowhere else to go, unless they can afford private, or other alternatives, to State schooling.

Perhaps this explains children’s tendency for flight, rather than fight, in the face of disaffection. It may also account for some parental collusion in truanting behaviours. Southwell (2006) supports this view, and suggests, “the parental condoning of truancy, so demonised by the Government at present, can also be more usefully understood in terms of unmet special educational needs” (2006, 95). The sustained levels of school absenteeism experienced in Britain,³ despite increased spending on a multitude of anti-truancy initiatives, may thus be seen at least partially as a (largely misunderstood) democratic act marking dissatisfaction with a “dysfunctional” education system rather than a necessarily deviant, criminal, or pathologically-inscribed act. As Lubienski (2000) notes, “when an organisation is designed to be responsive to voice but arouses exit, it is in a state of dysfunction” (2000, 225). It is schools’ status as semi-monopolies that leads, according to Lubienski, to pathology. Hence it is not the student but the institution that needs “treatment”. The “pathologising” of children – labelling them “phobic” or as having separation anxieties – may occasionally be appropriate, but the medicalisation or even hospitalisation of students for anxiety-related absenteeism, which may more accurately be described as “cry for help” with their education, or an “enactment of criticism” of their schooling (Lauchlan 2003; Southwell 2006), is ill-conceived and may have long-term consequences. However, as schools are more responsive to political rather than localised parental or child pressure, the likelihood is, as has been seen as an increasing trend,⁴ that schools may prefer to label such children or ultimately “to get rid of ‘difficult’ individuals” (Lubienski 2000, 225), rather than address the causes of their disaffection. Indeed, research has shown that while most local authorities are concerned about absenteeism, only one in three attempts to analyse the *reasons* for non-attendance (Boyle and Goodall 2005). If local authorities

are unable fully to ascertain why students are failing to attend school, it is hardly surprising that attempts to increase rates of school attendance have proved so ineffectual.

Hoyle (1998), and more recently, Boyle and Goodall (2005), both draw attention to the quasi-commodification of children that has resulted from the publication of league tables introduced by the Education Reform Act (UK Parliament 1988). The pseudo-competition this public measure has introduced into the education “market-place” has had the negative effect of placing a “market value” on students according to academic ability. Thus while high achievers are extremely desirable for schools, lower achievers, children with behavioural disorders and those with special educational needs are therefore less desirable and have the potential to become disenfranchised. It is this academic and social marginalisation, perhaps, that encourages low self-esteem and consequently contributes further to the tendency to truant, which, in the case of less desirable students, is more likely to lead to exclusion. This point has been raised most succinctly by Reid (2006), who notes: “It is interesting that almost a quarter of a century since the statistical significance of low levels of self-esteem and academic self-confidence among resistant school absentees [...] was established this aspect continues to be neglected” (2006, 52). Such students are doubly disabled: both by the school system itself – which devalues them as commodities – and by the laws designed to retain them within that system. Given that one in six children is considered disaffected (Boyle and Goodall 2005), and that 7.8% of secondary-aged students missed 20% or more of their schooling in 2005–6 (Knight 2006),⁵ this is not insignificant.

This double disenfranchisement is clearly apparent in the case of Gypsy, Roma and Traveller children. Research studies have revealed that, while up to 12,000 Gypsy, Roma and Traveller children are considered to be “missing” from education (Ivatts 2006), attempts to maintain them in full-time schooling are often obstructed by forcible evictions which disable their families’ abilities to ensure their attendance in school (Gypsy and Traveller Law Reform Coalition 2005). Thus not only do these students have to deal with the devaluing and disaffection that occurs as a result of commodification through league tables; they are also disabled (by legal process) from attending, labelled as “missing” or as non-attenders and, where this is perceived as persistent truancy, potentially subjected to legal action that criminalises them or their parents.

Reid (2004) suggests, “too many schools threaten or start prosecution proceedings only to withdraw them. This final deferment is itself sometimes then undermined to the point that both parent(s) and pupils feel untouchable” (2004, 66). While clearly intended to illustrate the disempowerment school staff and educational social workers can sometimes experience during failed prosecutions for truancy, this also serves to highlight the level of powerlessness and oppression the “customers” of education may be subject to, when attempting to exercise their dissatisfaction with State educational provision. If truancy is defined as a radical act of dissent in the absence of real choice in the school marketplace, or as “voting with one’s feet” about the state of the State school system by an otherwise largely unheard and disempowered youth, enforcement of school attendance may be considered a means of disabling choice, or the right to protest. As Irving and Parker-Jenkins (1995) point out, ensuring school attendance is the responsibility of parents, not the police, or educational social workers.⁶ Consequently, according to their argument, educational

welfare officers and police have no legitimate power to detain or return truanting pupils to school, for they are not contravening any laws. Furthermore, the result of police returning such children to school is often undesirable; “the forcible return to school of ‘hard core’ non-attenders” Irving and Parker-Jenkins note, “is often followed by displays of disruptive and/or unacceptable behaviour, exacerbating the situation or, alternatively prompting a quick exit again. Fortunately, schools have not yet created ‘secure units’ or ‘locked rooms’ for pupils who do not wish to attend”. In fact, research has determined that there is absolutely no relationship between the number of prosecutions for truancy and subsequent levels of school absenteeism (Zhang 2004). This finding is supported by educational social workers, among whom there is very little support for controlling absenteeism through prosecution or other legal measures (Reid 2006). Furthermore, the policing of school attendance through truancy patrols, a police presence in schools and the privileging of attempts to enforce attendance over resolving the *cause* of non-attendance, could be seen to undermine the human right⁷ and legal duty of parents to ensure their child receives a suitable and efficient full-time education “either by regular attendance at school or otherwise”.⁸ Such measures serve to criminalise children and their families whilst simultaneously precluding the need for attention to be paid to the specific needs underlying and informing the “criminalised” behaviour.

Education and the individual

A significant amount of research has been undertaken into the reasons why children become disaffected and/or persistent truants. As a result, it has become increasingly apparent that non-attenders do not form a coherent, homogenous group, but rather may be characterised as highly individualised and possessing a variety of reasons for, and differing patterns of non-attendance (Edward and Malcolm 2002). Given that the reasons, “treatments” or solutions and the outcomes for persistent absenteeism are varied yet inter-related, there can be no “one-size-fits-all” approach to truancy prevention (Cooper and Mellors 1990). Individual problems with attendance need individualised solutions. This is why simplistic, universalised measures such as truancy patrols, electronic attendance devices and the prosecution of parents have not significantly impacted upon truancy statistics. Such measures concern themselves only with returning children to school – or attempting to keep them there – without tackling the specific causes of their disaffection and in fact risk increasing that disaffection by such heavy-handed tactics.

Research conducted by Stamm (2006) indicates that lack of academic challenge is a primary contributor to school disassociation for gifted students (2006, 2). Her study determined that absenteeism is a “complex of multi-component conditions” (3) including boredom (43.5%), stress with teachers (26.5%) fear of examinations (23.2%) and school refusal (3%) (7). The pathologising of truanting behaviour as “phobic” is for her, irrelevant; the majority of students she studied did not show any clinical symptoms. Kinder, Wakefield and Wilkin’s research (1996) found a similar complex of inter-connected “causes” including peer-pressure, poor relationships with teachers, dissatisfaction with the curriculum, family issues, bullying and learning and classroom control issues. Dwyfor Davis and Lee (2006) found the precursors of truancy to be unrelated to curricula, but to issues of mutual respect, being treated in an adult fashion, bullying and peer-relationships (2006, 205). Clearly

truancy sweeps are not the ideal solution for absenteeism rooted in causes such as these. As Irving and Parker-Jenkins (1995) have observed, the forcible return to school of a persistent truant is often characterised by an increase in disruptive behaviour, exacerbating previous issues and perhaps resulting in further truancy or even exclusion. Rather than coercing children back into the same deficient system, they suggest that educational alternatives should be explored and introduced to overcome disaffection. Reid (2005) concurs, suggesting that not only do schools need to change, with a stronger focus being placed on retaining staff, developing appropriate curricula, teaching styles and school ethos, but that alternatives to school are needed. Dwyfor Davis and Lee (2006) found existing alternatives to standard State schooling to be effective, with many of their study-subjects expressing the view that “they had found alternative educational provision preferable to school” (2006, 205). If, as Irving and Parker-Jenkins observe, “potential causes of truancy are identified within a responsive system which can adapt accordingly, it is unnecessary to “blame the victim”“, and the pathology attributed either to student or school may become largely irrelevant.

Education, school absenteeism and the law

According to most of the research that has been undertaken into truancy, one would be forgiven for thinking that school is compulsory in Britain. In fact, this assertion is made repeatedly in academic papers on truancy and non-attendance. Irving and Parker-Jenkins (1995), for instance, misread the 1944 Education Act (Office of Public Sector Information 1944) (claiming school attendance *is* compulsory) to ask whether the “disaffected child” has given up their right to an education as a consequence of their truancy, “thereby rendering her/himself ineducable?” Simply eliding the difference between school and education, they continue by suggesting that, given that Article 2 of the First Protocol to the European Convention on Human Rights (1951) prescribes that that no person shall be denied the right to education, truants, in their rejection of schooling make education the “unfortunate casualty”. By defining school as the only location where legal education may occur, such research precludes even the possibility for alternative non-school educational provision, pinning its arguments instead on the use of alternative curricula to overcome disaffection.

Despite a multitude of other studies – far too many to cite here – making the same cognitive error in eliding the distinction between compulsory education and “compulsory schooling”, school is in fact not mandatory in Britain. According to section seven of the Education Act (UK Parliament 1996) (which repeats the wording of the earlier 1944 Act):

- The parent of every child of compulsory school age shall cause him to receive efficient full-time education suitable
- a) to his age, ability and aptitude, and
 - b) to any special educational needs he may have, either by regular attendance at school *or otherwise.* (*italics added*)

Therefore it is *education*, not school, that is compulsory; a fact often ignored by studies that appear overly concerned with getting the truanting child back into school, rather than back into suitable, efficient and appropriate education *per se*. As Rothmel (2000) observes: “We send millions of children to school everyday

without ever really searching for evidence of whether this is the best possible option for all children". This may, of course, be more to do with narrow perspectives and ideological biases borne of professional careers spent entirely within the school system (Gabb 1994); or merely with ignorance of, or disinclination to consider alternative options. However, for those educationalists who have highlighted the need for alternative educational practice for students unwilling or unable to attend mainstream school provision, this generally means (primarily) excluded children either attending a pupil referral unit, or having home tuition provided by the State. In fact, studies have shown that this kind of alternative provision, which costs approximately £14,000 per pupil per year, takes an average of three months to be provided. However, 14% of students have to wait six months to receive this alternative education (Boyle and Goodall 2005). If persistent truancy leads to heightened risk of criminal behaviour, poorer educational attainment levels and reduced success in employment, the potentially damaging effect on these children of spending three to six months with absolutely no educational provision is of considerable concern. Clearly, there has to be a more efficient and effective way forward for these students.

Education outside of school

Interestingly, many of the reasons given for why students elect to withdraw from school mirror the reasons why children and their parents choose to home educate. The need for a moral and ethical education – one justification for the continued dominance of State schooling – is cited as a strong determinant for removing, or never placing a child in the State school system's care (Hepburn and Basham 2001). In this instance home education is seen as a way of taking direct responsibility for a child's education rather than following the "passive responsibility" school confers upon the parent. With such responsibility comes an ethical requirement to acquire knowledge and make intelligent, considered decisions that are implicit rather than explicit when families adhere to school-based education. Thus the family is brought back into the centre, and concern for moral, ethical and psychological development relocated with the parents rather than the State. The phenomenon of the economic and political concerns of government informing educational provision is replaced by a direct concern for the emotional, moral and educational welfare of the child. For truanting children with low self esteem, special educational or behavioural needs, or bullying issues, a home-based education may be a highly appropriate alternative to enforced school attendance. Given the sustained growth home education has achieved in recent years,⁹ it is plausible that such practice has already become, as Belfield notes, a viable option for those dissatisfied with State schooling (Belfield 2002), and for those who wish to find an alternative to State or private provision for disaffected children.

Many parents' decisions to home educate are also based in part on a reaction against a perceived ill fit between the State's approach, and their own children's specific educational, emotional and behavioural needs. Others have responded to what they consider the coercive nature of State education, the roots of which, as has been suggested, lie in the reasons behind the initiation of compulsory education itself. Whilst home educating may be an overtly political act – based on a desire to wrest back education from the State in favour of a more personalised, individualised approach to learning – it may also be based on a desire to educate more closely in

accordance with the child's needs, rather than those of the State. For State school students who may wish to question the axiom that school is a fundamental necessity in maintaining appropriate educational standards or social order, or who may consider their needs not to have been met by the State, protest through non-attendance is effectively considered a criminal act. Deregistration from school, in order to be home educated, is not.

It has been suggested that coercive deregistration – the act whereby schools encourage students with challenging behavioural difficulties or severe special educational needs to deregister – has increased. The Education and Skills Committee Report on Special Educational Needs (2005–06) notes this (House of Commons Education and Skills Committee 2006), referring specifically to observations by Dyson in 2005, “that the environment that schools operate in – driven by league tables, targets, and inspection regimes – is such that certain students are inevitably “less welcome” if it is thought that they might reduce the performance of the school” (2006, 65).¹⁰ Hopwood et al. (2007) have also noted that local authorities increasingly cite the risk of prosecution as a reason why families turn to home education. However, regardless of how students arrive at home education, the benefits have been well established.

The dominant modes of British State education – inclusivity and competition – can act as agents of disaffection for some children. Competition breeds failures as well as successes: you can only win if someone else loses (Jones 1999); and the use of competitive teaching methods and demarcations such as dividing children into academic “sets” and compulsory SATs testing, for instance, can be de-motivating and discouraging. Home educators have the advantage of time and space for non-academic intelligences to develop (Rothermel 2000), and on such a small scale educational advancement is apparent without the need for testing to measure achievement. Many of the anxieties attributed to school absentees may therefore be alleviated by this alternative educational practice. Rothermel (2002) has noticed how learning is negotiated and differentiated for each child within home educating families, enabling each child's individual learning styles/needs and issues to be fully considered in a way most schools are simply not equipped to provide. As home education is typically small-group based, home educators may easily pace and adapt their curriculum to suit each child's needs (Rudner 1999; Barson 2004). Thus for those able and willing to try it, home education may prove very beneficial. It is unfortunate that its legality is underreported in most mainstream educational research.

Significantly, the choice to home educate has frequently been made in response to inadequacies experienced with State provision for children with specific learning difficulties, children with other special educational needs, and children who are considered to be gifted, or exceptionally quick learners.¹¹ Indeed, Kendall and Atkinson (2006) noted an increase of 50% in the number of parents citing special educational needs as a reason for choosing to home educate in one local authority over the last five to six years. Given that 27% of all autistic children have been excluded from school at some point – 23% on more than one occasion – and that children are often denied access to specialist schools because local authorities had refused to fund places (House of Commons Education and Skills Committee 2006), there may be a benefit to promoting home education for more students with these particular learning needs.

Gifted children who truant through boredom and under-stimulation, such as those identified by Stamm (2006), may also find alternative home-based education

beneficial. Kearney (1996) has noted how children with very high cognitive abilities can have trouble fitting into State schooling. Indeed, despite the well-documented difficulty gifted children have with social development¹² – a difficulty primarily resulting from developmental asynchrony – very little seems to have been done to address this specific problem within the State school system. Schools are not organised in ways necessarily conducive to how gifted children learn, and school policies often unfairly restrict these children from participation in appropriate educational opportunities, leaving them unable to work to their full potential, bored and unchallenged, or alternatively they may be put on gifted “summer school” type programmes involving more, rather than different work (Ensign 2000). Gifted children often need several sets of peers for intellectual stimulation (Silverman 1989), a need that may not be adequately served by the kinds of inclusionist policies often adopted in British schools. Without the stimulation of interaction with mixed-age peers, and individualised learning programmes designed to stretch and challenge them, such students are highly susceptible to disillusionment, disaffection and disengagement. They may feel stigmatised by their intelligence and “dumb down” in order to fit in, leading to further disaffection and ultimately to non-attendance (Ensign 2000).

In fact, where non-attendance and disaffection result from low levels of self-esteem or bullying, home education may act as a useful motivational tool. As Arora (2006) has noted, the age-related targets that often result in children being labelled learning disabled do not normally exist within home educational environments, and therefore motivational goals for learning can be designed to suit the developmental progress of the individual child, helping to instil notions of success and to raise self-esteem. Thus children may no longer feel so acutely limited, stigmatised or aware of their disabilities or giftedness. More than 20 children a year commit suicide because of bullying and other pressures at school. Over 12,000 students were suspended or permanently excluded from school as a result of attacking other pupils, while over 4000 were suspended or excluded for attacking adults (Gabb 2004). Where truancy is the result of bullying or stress, the security of the home may once again be a useful temporary or even permanent location for alternative education provision. Research by Education Otherwise (2002–3) – a leading home education charity – and by Rothermel (2003) indicates that a significant number of children are already being home educated as a direct result of instances of bullying and school-induced stress.¹³

Research suggests that children who are persistently absent from school are likely to underachieve academically and economically. In contrast, home educated children have been found to be academically ahead their peers on virtually every significant measurement (Kirkpatrick 2005). In fact, the largest study to date in Canada found that home educated children achieved, on average, scores at the 78th percentile (for reading, language and mathematics combined) compared to an average score on the 50th percentile for schooled children (Hepburn and Basham 2001). An American study found that home-educated children “out-performed” their schooled equivalents by between 30–37% in all subjects, with the results improving when children were home educated for longer (Klicka 2004). Further studies by Sutton and Oliveira (1995) and Galloway (1995), both show advantageous results among home educated children.

British research replicates these findings. Webb (1999) noted that out of 20 home educated children she had studied previously, three had later graduated from

Oxford, and none were unemployed. Rothermel (2002) found that 94% of 6 year olds, 77.4% of 7 year olds, 73.3 % of 8 year olds and 82.3% of 10 year olds achieved the top band in literacy assessments where one would normally expect to find 16%. Furthermore, none of the children were assessed to be in the lowest 16% band. Significantly, among the parents of the near 2000 children tested by Rothermel, 11% were single parent families, 71% had no teaching qualification and only 37% had higher education qualifications. Children were from traveller families, same sex families, from depressed and low economic backgrounds as well as from middle class two-parent families (Rothermel 2000). Interestingly, several of these very characteristics are used to account and serve as indicators for poor levels of attainment, even truancy, in schooled children. Yet in a home setting, these socio-economic “disadvantages” have no apparent impact on educational achievements. In one of the few studies conducted with children with special educational needs who are home educated, Duvall et al.’s (2004) comparison of the attainments of schooled and home educated children with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder found that they have a much better chance of academic productivity in a home education setting. According to the research, home educated children with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder were found to be academically engaged twice as often as school students.

Conclusion

For those children for whom truancy is an act of bravado, of laziness, or the result of family circumstances that require additional help from other agencies, a planned and carefully managed return into full-time State schooling may be the most appropriate course of action. However, for those students whose absenteeism can be characterised as the enactment of extreme dissatisfaction, disaffection or despair as the result of specific educational or other needs not being adequately met, enforced return to school may exacerbate rather than ameliorate the non-attendance “problem”. This can be evidenced by that fact that despite a substantial number of research articles having been about truancy, a significant sum of money having been spent on implementing various schemes and initiatives and highly publicised prosecutions aimed at preventing non-authorised absenteeism, truancy levels have remained relatively static for a considerable amount of time.

Given the firm link that has been established between persistent non-attendance, poor educational attainment levels, poor employment prospects and even criminality, it is unsurprising that there is such a strong focus placed on reintegrating non-attenders into State schooling. However, in the light of the lack of success of many of these schemes, and in the light of the government’s *Every child matters* agenda, which seeks to respect and listen more closely to the wishes of children, it would seem appropriate to refocus attention on alternative educational provision, and on home education in particular. A growing body of international research has served to demonstrate the educational efficacy of this alternative practice; achievement levels have been proved to be high, self-esteem and engagement levels have similarly been seen to improve in children educated in this manner, and concentration levels have demonstrably improved in children with specific educational difficulties such as attention deficit disorder. Perhaps it is time to stop the expense and distress associated with coercing resistant children back into State schooling and to think otherwise. School is not compulsory; education is, and by raising the awareness among

educational professionals, local authority staff and parents of the legality and potential benefits home education may offer for persistent school refusers, a new solution could emerge to address and remedy the most prescient concerns of persistent non-attenders. “We must not write off some children as unfit for the world of education,” Alan Johnson, former secretary of State for Education commented recently, “It is our responsibility to make the education system fit the needs of all children. We need to unlock everyone’s diverse capabilities.” (2006)

Perhaps home education may provide the key.

Notes

1. For the purposes of this paper, and because of the impossibility of dedicating sufficient space herein for a full discussion of the semantics of the various terms used to define unauthorised absences from school, this paper shall employ the terms truancy, absenteeism and non-attendance interchangeably to indicate routine, pupil and/or parent initiated “unauthorised” absences from school, rather than one off, infrequent, or in-term holiday absences
2. No page numbering is provided in Gabb’s document.
3. Around 400,000 children miss school daily, up to 50,000 with parental consent (Reid 2005). According to Zhang (2004), attendance levels have remained relatively static for a considerable amount of time. In Leeds, for instance, the level of school attendance in 2001 is exactly the same as it was in 1870: 89%. Boyle and Goodall, from New Philanthropy Capital (2005) also note that truancy levels have been constant since 1997.
4. According to New Philanthropy Capital (2005), permanent exclusions have risen by 20% since 2000.
5. In real terms this amounts to 225,000 students missing 38 days of schooling in one school year.
6. 1944 Education Act (Office of Public Sector Information 1944).
7. “No person shall be denied the right to education. In the exercise of any functions which it assumes in relation to education and teaching, the State shall respect the right of parents to ensure such education and teaching in conformity with their own religious and philosophical convictions”. European Convention on Human Rights, Article 2, first Protocol (1951).
8. Section seven of the Education Act 1996 (UK Parliament 1996).
9. Home education has grown at a rate of 776% in 18 years in Canada (Hepburn and Basham 2001); 20% per year in Australia (Hunter 1994); between 11–40% in the United States, (Ray 2000); 39% in 2005–6 (when statistics started to be collected) and between 0.3 and 1% of children are believed currently to be home educated in Britain (Meighan 1997; Nilsson 2004; Fortune Wood 2005).
10. Dyson, A. (2005) “Philosophy, politics and economics? The story of inclusive education in England 2005” in D. Mitchell (ed.) *Contextualising inclusive education: Evaluating old and new international perspectives*. Routledge: London.
11. An Education Otherwise research study found that 13% of home educating questionnaire respondents had chosen to home educate because of special needs (2003). Rothermel (2002) found that 22.54% of the home educated children in her research sample possessed special educational needs, with families citing both mismanagement of special educational needs (19.87%) and an inability of schools to make adequate gifted provision to be motivating factors in their decision to home educate.
12. Burks, Jensen, and Terman (1930) noted, “The child of 180 IQ has one of the most difficult problems of social adjustment that any human being is ever called upon to meet” (1930, 265)

13. According to Education Otherwise (2003) 22% of parents who had been motivated to withdraw their child from school indicated that bullying – by children or by staff – led to their decision, whilst 17% suggested that one reason was school phobia. Rothermel (Education Otherwise 2002–3) reported that 25% of her research sample cited bullying as the reason for deciding to home educate and 16.4% “child sickness, stress, exhaustion, depression”.

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