



Why won't they go...?

Looking at absenteeism in a local high school setting

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Wetherby Community Church Of The Salvation Army

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ABSTRACT

This piece of research was undertaken by Wetherby High School (WHS) and The Salvation Army at Wetherby (WSA). The partners wanted to address the subject of school attendance to help them understand more fully the issues that particular children are facing within the school context and in so doing, seek to remove any obstacles that prevent children from attending school.

WHS allowed WSA access to school data and Local Education Authority (LEA) information on attendance. A number of one to one interviews with individual young people and their parents were undertaken and then children and parents brought together as peer groups to review the same questions.

Evidence and data gathered resulted in four clear themes:

- **curriculum based issues** – Year 10 and 11 boys in particular found the classroom was “boring”. Some of these boys had been involved in an alternative timetable but it still revolved around the curriculum core and therefore was not “different enough”;
- **social challenges** – parents felt trapped because they were often at work when the school contacted them to say their child had not arrived and they had often struggled with attendance at school;
- **home and family related issues** – a number of young people felt trapped in homes where they had either experience the trauma of a parents’ marriage breaking up or where they stated that home was a ‘far from happy place’;
- **emotional challenges** – a number of young people had at some point been under the care of the Educational Psychologist, experiencing emotional trauma caused by a ‘crisis’ or struggling to cope with the demands that school life was throwing at them.

It is clear there are some very real challenges in enabling young people and their families to address their educational needs. This research has gone some way to helping WHS and WSA consider how to support young people and their families, one result being the employment of a family support worker.

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The Salvation Army is a Church and Charity whose vision and aims includes a strong focus on social action and within that the Wetherby Community Church of The Salvation Army (hereon referred to as WSA) is privileged to work in close partnership with Wetherby High School (hereon referred to as WHS).

The work of this specific church commenced in 1993 and during the last five to seven years became more closely linked to High School to the point where WSA is now officially acknowledged as a major community partner within its school structures. This growing relationship, born out of a desire to engage with and transform the community, has led WSA to work out of three buildings within the school grounds.

The main emphasis of WSAs work has been to deliver pastoral support to the young people as well as delivering a varied curriculum to young people who are on the edge of mainstream education and/or are at risk of exclusion.

This relationship has led WSA on a journey of discovery as to how they can best understand the needs of young people and their families and then once these needs have been identified, how they go about seeking to meet them.

WHS in recent years has sought to build its vision, ethos and values around a desire to help every child fulfill their potential. As part of this, the school has looked at alternative methods of educating children by offering a broad and varied timetable as well as built in the government's post 14 and 16 agendas to include various vocational diplomas.

WSA has been involved in providing alternative provision by helping educate young people through one to one support and embarking on delivering BTEC level 2 qualifications in the construction industry. The partnership is currently in the process of exploring other possibilities and ways this can be further developed.

In the recent Ofsted report (June, 2009) the work of the WSA was acknowledged as adding significant value to the school community but, rather than being content with this, the team wanted to provide a more effective service within their community and therefore decided to undertake this research project.

Aims of the project

Absenteeism is acknowledged by the government and by many local authorities as one of the biggest challenges facing education today. The aim of the project is therefore to better understand how this impacts the local setting.

There are a number of young people who do, but should, not attend WHA but should and so the aim of this research was to explore:

- a better understanding of the underlying reasons for this
- how can WSA and WHS reach the young people and their families
- what barriers these communities have come against that relegates education to a low priority, and
- and what appropriate communication techniques and programme support needs to be provided to help change attitudes

Context

It became obvious to the researchers that much has been written about young people and absenteeism in recent years and the subject of is very much on the national agenda at this time. This further emphasised that the questions being asked as part of this research were important ones that needed to be understand in a local context. The following statements give a taste of what the government, education tsars, and local authorities understand to be the challenges facing families and their children within education today.

The Secretary of State stated that; *'Parents bring up children, not Government, but sometimes families need extra help and support.....the first ever Children's Plan, a vision for change to make England the best place in the world for children and young people to grow up. It put the needs and wishes of families first, setting out clear steps to make every child truly matter...'* (The Children's Plan, February 2007)

Sir Alan Steer, the government's education tsar, states:

'The need for schools to operate in partnership with each other and with those organisations supporting children should be beyond question...The emphasis on collaboration and co-operation in the Children's Plan is now being developed through the current consultation on the creation of a 21st century education system...All schools have a responsibility to promote

the interests of the children in their care and those in the wider community. (Fourth and Final Review, February 2009, page 6)

A persistent absentee is a student who misses at least a fifth of the available sessions in a school for any reason or combination of reasons. If more than nine per cent of students at a school are persistent absentees, then the school is classified as a persistent absence target school. (1996 Education Act amended in Section 109 of the Education and Inspections Acts (2006)

Having read the Leeds LEA (2009), *Attendance strategy persistent absence research report*, WSA concurred that for the purposes of this research they would only look at children who had unexplained absenteeism i.e. not holiday or illness.

Methodology

Because of the sensitivity of the work, it was considered appropriate to utilise existing relationships with WHS, parents and children. Once the research started it became even more apparent to the researchers just how intrinsic the links were. This sampling strategy fits closely with purposive sampling but could also be seen as convenience sampling.

One of the biggest lessons learned in the formative stages of the research was the assumption that it would be relatively easy to access the children and their parents to gain the necessary information. However, and quite rightly, the issue of governance and safeguarding meant this process took much longer than the researchers had initially imagined despite the fact they had a strong relationship already in place with the school, parents and children.

The researchers set to work within a tight framework and gain the information needed. Their intention was to start by speaking to WHS staff and pupils to identify a cohort of young people who were already thought of as persistent absentees. It was important that the sample included only young people who were already repeat non-attenders at school.

The interviewers wanted to understand the participants real reasons for non-attendance rather than work with those who may have been identified as being possible non attendees in the future, and therefore not a fully representative sample. To achieve this selection of participants it was acknowledged that both parents and children would need to be contacted

and their permission and co-operation sort. Likewise, it was recognised that the researchers would need to contact the Local Education Authority (LEA) representative in regard to the governance of data.

To ensure that a clear ethical route was followed, the school was fully consulted in the initial stages with regard to acquiring participants contact details. All parents and children were contacted (see appendix 3) and asked if they would be prepared to be part of the research. Everyone who was involved in the research went through this process.

The manner and intention of gathering information was to create a series of questions which each young person would be asked. Again in recognition of the sensitive nature of this process, it was decided this interview process would take place using a soft furnished room within the school complex which most of the young people had been in previously. It was hoped this would more easily facilitate the questions and make the young people feel comfortable.

The interviewing was led by two youth workers, who were suitably trained to work with young people. Both had received safeguarded training and been CRB checked. They also worked in and around the site and therefore were recognizable by the participants.

The same kind of questions was asked to the parents, the majority of whom expressed a wish to be interviewed in their own home rather than at school. The participants wished to be part of the research but stipulated that the interview could only take place at their own home rather than a school location. This preference was related to the parents' own experience of school and given the parents' insights and experiences were paramount to the research, it was agreed that it did not matter where they were interviewed. This qualitative form of one to one interviewing was vital for the project to gather enough information and the right kind of information to measure against.

After the one to one interviews had taken place with the identified children and parents, the young people were brought together in a peer group and the same questions were discussed within the group setting and a discussion was had to further develop individuals answers which gave further evidence of the underlying issues. The same process took place with some but not all of the parents present.

Almost all the young people invited to take part in the project agreed to do so of their own volition with only one of those originally identified who did not want to be involved. There was some hesitancy with the rest of the group mainly about their own anonymity. The purpose of the research was also stated again and explained in greater detail to some of the young people.

Once the participants understood that the purpose of the research was to better understand why young people like themselves do not feel the desire or the ability to attend school, they all agreed to take part. The researchers then asked the participants, both the young people and their parents, how much they felt able to trust the researchers and at what level they were prepared to share information?

One of the things the young people were praised for by the researchers was their honesty and the depth of their answers. The researchers concluded that the participants did not only share what they thought people might have wanted to hear, but rather what was really going on in their lives. The main reasons for this included;

1. they knew and trusted the interviewers, based upon previous contact and relationship
2. they felt that WSA is not strictly part of the school system e.g. teachers

This basis of belief which the young people expressed made the interviewing a far more purposeful experience. The fact that they not only felt comfortable with the researchers but also the environment, soft furnishings and sofas, resulted in the interviewers gaining good reasoned information to help formulate the basis of the findings.

This basis of belief also helped the researchers that to recognise the young people needed to feel, from the start of their interview, that their opinion was valued. This was continually affirmed throughout the interview process, by stating to the children and young people that they were helping to formulate a strategy that will hopefully address the educational challenges that they had experienced and maybe in the future make it easier for other young people. They expressed that this made them feel good about themselves therefore and this was not a pointless exercise.

The young people began to discuss with the research team their feelings towards being continually condemned for not going to school without seeking to understand why this was the

case. Out of this clear methodology and experience evidence was gained to help shape the findings and subsequent action points.

Findings

Statistical data was gleaned from the school using the LEA profile for WHS. This was a key starting point from which to base our research upon. The pie charts shown in Appendix 1 clearly highlight the major attendance issues being prevalent in Years 9, 10 and 11 and in terms of gender a higher proportion (62 per cent) being male compared to 38 per cent female. This data instantly threw up the following question:

What happens between Year 8 and 9 to bring about this change in young people's desire to attend school? Because of this we decided to interview a broad range of children. The rationale had been to target a cohort from across one year group, such as year 10, which would have resulted in a very targeted and narrow piece of work.

However, after looking at the data and also after the initial pilot interviews it was felt to be more beneficial on this occasion to take a broader cross section of participants and see if this would identify any main themes. This is indeed what happened and resulted in four main themes which came up from the children and parents. These being:

- curriculum based issues
- social challenges
- home and family related issues
- emotional challenges

Before these themes are unpacked more fully, it is right to point out something with regard to the interview process. As each young person became more engaged in the process their confidence and levels of trust grew. Each of the interviews was conducted in an objective manner and mature environment, where the interviewers interacted with the young people, no matter what their age, as equals. The way that the young people spoke is to be highly commended.

The first theme was;

1. Curriculum

The Head Teacher of WHS stated that;

“Education has been encouraged in recent years to look at the ways in which it seeks to deliver the national curriculum. This has particularly recognised the need to engage with those who find the normal classroom delivery style a ‘turn off’”

What was interesting within the group of boys from year 10 and 11 was exactly this point. From the interviews with this cohort the dominant reason for their non attendance was that the classroom was *“boring”*. Statements such as *“I hate having to sit still all day long”, “what is the point, I don’t need this subject for my future career”*, were indicative of the feedback received.

A number of respondents were involved in an alternative timetable although this still revolved mainly around the curriculum core subjects – Maths, English and Science. The majority of the young people felt that on some level the alternative options, were only a small part of their school experience and not *“different enough”*, to use their words, to have a major impact upon the way they felt towards school. *“I still have to do the things I am no good at though”*.

The parents and guardians of the children were also asked about the level boredom linked to the curriculum. The responses of the children and their parents were very different in regards to the question of boredom and most parents expressed a belief that their child became easily disinterested in things and would move from one activity to another, this is something they had done from a very early age and throughout their lives.

The parents stated were not children who ‘knew how to sit still’. Therefore in the view of the parents, school was always going to be a challenge to their child. As the parents saw it the child was at school to sit still and be taught *“they are just children, and that’s what children do”*.

The parents had little or no awareness of the variety that is now on offer as part of the curriculum. They acknowledged that an alternative timetable was a step in the right direction from the school but they also raised a concern that children who were on the ‘alternative curriculum’, namely vocational courses or who attended the Sanctuary (one of WSA’s buildings), were perceived to be *“thickies”*. This message was confirmed by some of the children who were interviewed who suggested that they had friends who had seen this alternative route as a *“punishment”*.

The children interviewed appreciated the possibility of learning in a different manner but they also recognised that the curriculum still did not work for them. This was one of their major reasons for non-attendance at school.

2. Social challenges

Another major theme that came out of the interviews with the young people could be classed as social challenges. These challenges were alluded to by several children but strongly expressed by a number of parents. They often felt trapped by their own needs and expectations. One example is the problems that arise when the parents are informed that their child has not arrived at school. However, as the parents can not afford to live without working and often the only jobs they can get results in them either having to leave home before their child is due at school or working into the night, they are often unable to make sure that their child is at school. This problem is compounded by the parents who were receiving calls from school as part of the school's attendance strategy, to say that their child was not there, and this added further to the pressure that the parents felt.

Many of the parents had been poor school attendees when they were young, and confessed that school was not their highest priority. To them it is their ability to earn money which has a much higher priority. It was also an interesting point that all the children felt it was unfair to penalise their parents for them not attending school. One parent had even been threatened with a fine which the children and young people felt was unacceptable because at 13 years old they feel they are responsible for themselves and therefore capable of getting to school.

3. Home and Family

Sadly, another point which came out of the data was related to home and changes which had taken place there over the last few years. This seemed to be the issue on which young people were the most honest. There was no doubt that a number of young people felt trapped in homes where they had either experienced the trauma of a parent's marriage breaking up, or where the home was a far from happy place. All the children who expressed this as an issue recounted stories of living in an environment where the 'norm' was an experience where their parents seemingly argue all the time. This constant tension had a profound emotional impact upon the children, and one child explained that they do not go to school because the

only quiet place in their lives was when their parents were at work and they could just “*be themselves*”.

Very few of the children who spoke about this felt able to share these experiences with the school but did chat with friends who had gone through similar experiences. All parents who touched on this recognised that it cannot have been easy for the children but they themselves had felt helpless to do anything. The parents also felt trapped, as well as hurt and damaged, by the experience.

4. Emotional Challenges

The final observation point which came out of the interview process was the subject of emotional needs. A number of the young people had at some point or other been under the care of an Educational Psychologist. The young people had been referred through the school as they were either experiencing emotional trauma caused by a ‘crisis’ or were struggling to cope with the demands that school life was throwing at them, with particular reference to bullying.

What was clear during the interview conversations was that a number of children needed emotional support and either were unsure where to get this from, or felt unsupported in this at home. When this was raised with parents the response was almost unanimously a sense of helplessness as they did not know what to do or how to help.

One child in particular just could not bring herself to come to school mainly due to bullying, and despite all the various support agencies working with her, she could not bring herself to walk across the school gates. This level of emotional challenge was a real dilemma for the child and parent as they were unable to address the bullying issue and yet still being punished for non attendance at school. This further emphasised the feeling of total helplessness which they experienced.

Implications for practice

It should be stated that this has been a very helpful piece of work in regard to the ongoing development of WSA’s community partnership with the school. This has identified various

components in regard to how WSA can better serve both the school and the young people and their families who should be their primary focus.

The findings have shown that for the young people interviewed, the changes they had experienced with regard to the curriculum had come too late in their education. It is important to highlight here that many of these young people already had ingrained habits regarding attendance, which were proving very difficult to alter. With one exception, all of the year 10 and 11 boys interviewed had poor attendance records since they had begun at the high school. This raised a question. If the issues relating to the curriculum had been addressed earlier in the young people's school lives, would they still be registered as a 'non attendees'?

Sadly, the label of 'thickies' that these young people had been given appears to be accepted, albeit subliminally, as most of the children interviewed were in the lower achieving school classes.

Home and Family

One of the key implications is the need for the 'partnership' to have more available options in regard to the level of support that it can offer to children and their families. It is for this reason that WSA and WHS have, with immediate effect, employed a Family Support Worker. This role provides a new resource which, it is hoped, will directly respond to the families and their needs identified through this research.

Social Challenges

This work has clearly identified the need not only to support the child but also the parents. There is a need, it would appear, to create some form of parental support group, not only for families with serial absentee children, but also as a point of reference and advice for parents from the wider school community. The parents also stated that they have benefited from talking together. Again, this gives the Family Support Worker an opportunity to explore in a more detailed way how they can make these happen, through for example, a series of parents' events.

Emotional Challenges

It is obvious that there is a need for the school to address sooner those who maybe at risk sooner in their school experience. This highlights the importance of creating comprehensive student profiles, which should help all, involved to more quickly respond to emotional/pastoral

needs such as bereavement etc. There are opportunities for more one-to-one support sessions to be offered which could include support at school or home for the young people. One idea, with parental agreement, is to meet the young people at home to transport them to school aiming to ensure the young person does not feel coerced but cared about.

As highlighted by the findings, it is important that the young people concerned can be recognised for their achievements and helped to develop in confidence and self-esteem.

Curriculum Challenges

WSA fully intend to discuss and look creatively at ways it can work with WHS to offer a more varied curriculum. Alongside one to one coaching, there are short dynamic programmes of activity which encourage young people to get directly involved in some of the planning and delivery, further stimulating interest and variety. This is paramount if WHS is to move forward in achieving an outstanding, inclusive school. It is vital that WSA as a major community partner helps to seek out ways in which they can together address this need.

Conclusion

It was made clear from the outset of this research that one of its purposes was to build on the growing partnership between Wetherby High School and The Wetherby Community Church of the Salvation Army.

There is no doubt that it is vital that together WSA and WHS seek to understand how and why young people become disengaged from attending school. This clearly defined purpose made the gathering of data and the methodology of such, a relatively straight forward process.

There was no doubt that the school and other agencies involved played a key role in helping to answer the question posed, despite the initial hurdles to accessing the data and speak to the children and their families. Heartfelt thanks and appreciation have already been extended to the children and parents but it is important to note this formally in this conclusion.

The ultimate success or not will be how the points raised within this document are addressed and how this research informs the school, supported by The Salvation Army, to put in place other techniques that will help to further improve its attendance record.

The partners are committed to providing one to one support in school for young people to learn how to manage particular behavioural issues. WHS will consider what additional support it will provide in terms of getting persistent non attending young people into school.

One of the responsibilities for the new role of the Family Support Worker is to provide some form of parental support group or classes whereby families can share the challenges they face, be an encouragement to one another and pick up some parenting techniques that could help them in their communications with, and care for, their son or daughter.

Every child does matter, every single one. So if WSA can help that one then this project has been worthwhile and of significant value.

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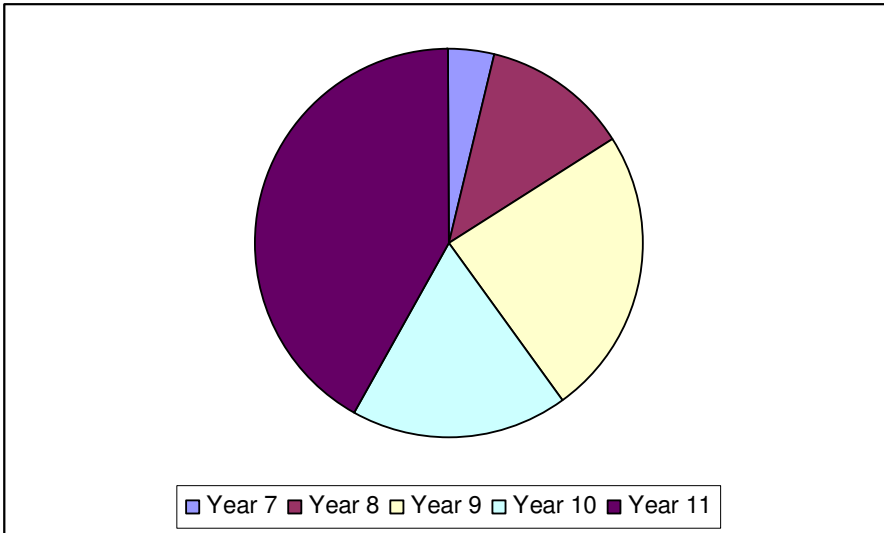
<http://keitherice.wordpress.com/2009/02/21behaviour-in-schools>

Appendix

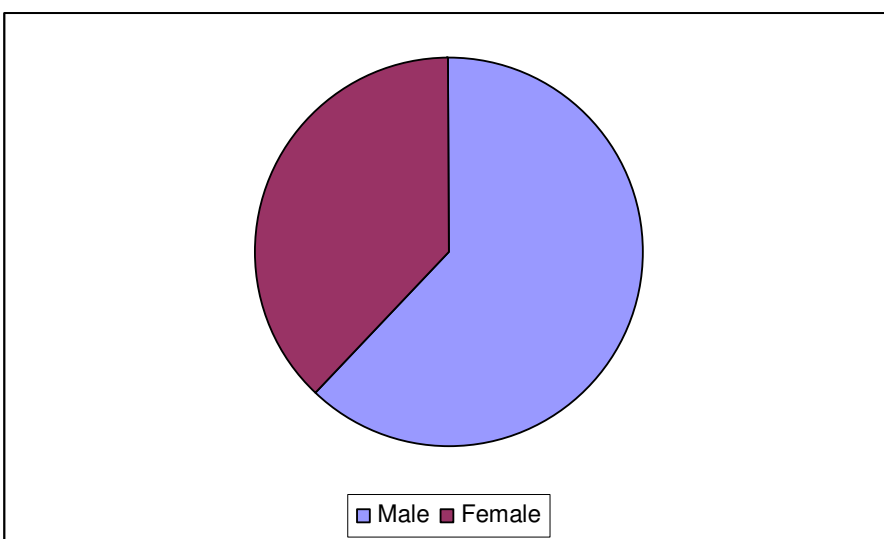
Appendix 1

In these findings, we have used the top 10 highest levels of absenteeism for each year group, to find where the main issue is for students not being at school.

This shows each year groups total level of absenteeism for the school year 2008/09.



This shows the balance between male and female, showing that males are responsible for 62% of the absenteeism in Wetherby High School.



Appendix 2

Student Questionnaire

1. What kind of activities do you enjoy taking part in?
2. How would you describe your experience of school?
3. What is your favourite lesson and why?
4. Why would you say you struggle to attend school?
5. If we could change one thing about school what would it be?
6. How do your parents feel about school?
7. Do you feel supported by your parents in regard to your education?
8. Have you ever been part of the Salvation Army projects

Parents Questionnaire

1. How would you describe your own experience of school?
2. What was your favourite lesson and why?
3. Why do you think your child struggles to attend school?
4. If we could change one thing about school to make it easier for you what would that be?
5. Do you feel supported by the school?
6. How could the Salvation Army help you?

Appendix 3

Permission Letter

Dear

I am writing to inform you that Wetherby Salvation Army which works in Partnership with Wetherby high school are involved in doing research into why students find it hard to attend school regularly. We are seeking to understand the reasons behind this and see if there are ways that we can support the child and their families.

We are interested in interviewing students and their families, and asking them a series of questions. We would like to invite you to come in for an informal meeting for a chat about with a few questions based on this topic.

It would be greatly appreciated if you were able to participate in our research. If you are willing then can you please sign below and return to the above address as soon as possible.

Your s sincerely

Iam/am not willing to participate in supporting the salvation army in this research

I.....am/not willing to attend an meeting to support this research.

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email info@cwdcouncil.org.uk
or fax us on 0113 390 7744

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