Absence from School:
A study of its causes and effects in seven LEAs

Heather Malcolm, Valerie Wilson, Julia Davidson and Susan Kirk
The SCRE Centre, University of Glasgow

department for
education and skills
creating opportunity, releasing potential, achieving excellence

Research Report RR424

Absence from School:
A study of its causes and effects in seven LEAs

Heather Malcolm, Valerie Wilson, Julia Davidson and Susan Kirk
The SCRE Centre, University of Glasgow

Contents

List of tables

List of figures

Acknowledgements

Glossary of Acronyms

DfES	Department for Education and Skills
EDP	Education development plan
ESWO	Education social welfare officer
ESWS	Education social welfare service
EWO	Education welfare officer
EWS	Education welfare service
FSM	Free school meal
KS2, KS3	Key Stage 2, Key Stage 3 etc
LEA	Local Education Authority
OMR	Optical mark recognition
PSHE	Personal, social and health education
SATs	Standard assessment tests. Those referred to in this report are taken at Key Stage 2 in Year 6 and Key Stage 3 in Year 9. Key Stage 1 tests are taken towards the end of Year 2.
SCRE	Scottish Council for Research in Education Centre
SEN	Special educational needs
SPSS	Statistical Package for the Social Sciences
Y5, Y6	Year 5, Year 6 and so on; ie the fifth year of compulsory schooling, the sixth year and so on

Executive Summary

Introduction

The issue of school attendance is currently the focus of intense activity in schools and LEAs in England. It is also a high priority policy concern (DfES, 1999; DfES, 2002) for which the Government has set a target to reduce levels of non-attendance by one third by 2002. Despite these efforts, pupils' absence remains a puzzling and complex problem. This report presents results from a 12-month study of absence from school. The study explored the views of younger pupils, parents, teachers, and others working closely with pupils about the causes of absence, the roles parents play in non-attendance, and the measures taken by LEAs and schools to reduce absence levels. Information was gathered from 13 primary schools and 14 secondary schools in seven LEAs in various parts of England. In all, 143 education professionals, five police service representatives and 528 secondary school pupils were interviewed, and 662 primary school pupils and 373 parents completed questionnaires.

Key findings

- All LEAs and teachers believed that attendance was important because it was related to attainment, disruptive behaviour and children's safety.

- Several LEAs thought that schools were over ready to accept the reasons given for absence and also authorised too many absences because they were under pressure to reduce unauthorised absence.

- Most parents thought it was very important for children to attend school regularly. They associated regular attendance with children doing well in schoolwork.

- Parents perceived the main cause of truancy to be bullying, problems with teachers and peer pressure to stay away from school.

- Parents of children with attendance problems perceived regular school attendance to be less important than did parents of children who do not have attendance problems.

- 27% of primary school children said they had truanted without the collusion of their parents. This creates a cycle of poor attendance, which is hard to break. In 17% of these cases, the child was able to leave school without being detected.

- Many truants said the reason they wanted to miss school was boredom and over half said they were not sorry afterwards. Most truants believed their parents would be angry to discover they had truanted.

- 16% of secondary school pupils admitting to truanting from school. White girls in Years 7, 8 and 9 in all-white secondary schools are more likely to truant than boys, but less likely to truant than white boys in Years 7 and 8 in schools with a mixed racial intake. Very few secondary pupils from ethnic minority groups admitted to truancy.

- Secondary school pupils are more likely to attribute their absence from school to school-related factors than home-related factors. These reasons included problems with lessons, problems with teachers, being bullied, peer pressure and social isolation.

- Most LEA representatives and teachers thought that truants had parents who placed a low value on education and were more likely to condone absence.

- Most primary teachers believed absence from school is always parentally condoned. Only a small number of primary school staff believed that school factors contributed to primary school children's absences.

- LEAs supported schools and promoted work with parents, general awareness raising with the general public and multi-agency working to combat truancy.

- Schools promoted good attendance through reward schemes, improvements to school ethos and facilities, closer links between primary and secondary schools, and building good relationships with parents.

- Nearly all schools used electronic registration systems to track pupils and analyse attendance figures. Some undertook truancy sweeps. Despite these systems determined pupils continued to skip classes, especially when being taught by supply teachers.

- Most schools reintegrated poor attenders by utilising Education Welfare Officers (EWOs), pastoral systems and one-to-one discussions. Some used learning mentors, social inclusion units, adapted timetables, clubs, group work, befriending and collection schemes. Views of their efficacy varied.

Summary of findings

The importance of good attendance

All the **LEAs and teachers** in our sample believed that good attendance was important because it is linked to pupils' attainment and future career prospects. They pointed out that poor attendance has adverse effects on Key Stage 2 and 3 tests and is associated with disruptive behaviour. Nevertheless the priority given to attendance varied amongst LEAs and schools because some had been more successful at addressing the problem. Many LEA representatives thought that schools were over-ready to accept the reasons given for absence. In contrast, teachers stressed that they followed advice on attendance given in LEA guidelines and DfES Circulars.

Several LEA representatives and some headteachers thought that it was unhelpful to distinguish between different types of authorised and unauthorised absence because parents often condoned their children's absences. Most thought it was important for schools to be proactive in investigating absences, work in partnership with other agencies and build a culture of learning within a community.

Parents' views about truancy

In the main **parents** believed that school-related factors were the cause of pupils' poor attendance. However, most parents still thought that their children's education was valuable and believed that good attendance was important. Parents of poor

attenders were less positive about school and more likely to keep their children off school.

The causes of truancy

27% of the 662 **primary school children** said that at some time they had truanted without their parents' knowledge. They highlighted *school-related* reasons for their truancy. Being bullied was the most likely cause. Other reasons included boredom, dislike of teachers and avoidance of tests. Most pupils thought their parents would keep them off school for reasons which schools would consider acceptable, but a few indicated that their parents authorised absences which were unacceptable to the school. Personal reasons to miss school included the desire to impress friends and moodiness.

16% of the 528 **secondary school pupils** admitted to having skipped school at some time. In schools with all-white intakes, girls in Years 7, 8 and 9 were more likely to truant than boys. Very few pupils from ethnic minority groups admitted to truancy. Secondary pupils' reasons for absence focused on school rather than home and included boredom, problems with lessons and teachers, anticipation of trouble, frustration at school rules, the size and complexity of secondary schools and fear of returning after a long absence. Bullying, having no friends and peer pressure to 'bunk off' were also mentioned. Some pupils mentioned home-related factors such as distress when parents split up, and a few noted *personal factors* such as laziness and the habit of poor attendance.

LEAs and teachers suggested a wide range of causes of truancy. Most mentioned home factors, which included parents putting a low value on education, disorganised lifestyles and inadequate parenting. Primary school teachers believed that parents condoned most truancy. In contrast, LEA representatives and secondary school teachers thought that school factors were an important cause of absence. These included inappropriate curriculum, teaching, school attitudes, racial harassment, bullying and peer pressure. In addition, secondary school teachers noted the influence of personal factors such as low pupil self-esteem and embarrassment at perceived inadequacies.

The effects of truancy

LEAs and teachers believed truants spent their time near home or with their parents. They would most often be relaxing but some were occupied as carers of their parents or younger sibling. Even when out of the house, absentees were most likely to be with their parents or in parks, woods or public places, such as shopping centres. Only a few truants were thought to become involved in crime. Evidence from self-reported truants gives a similar picture.

Almost all the **LEAs and teachers** thought that truancy affected pupils' academic achievement. It could also isolate pupils from their classmates. Teachers pointed out that truancy could affect regular attenders. When truants returned to school, they were more likely to be disruptive, and demand teachers' attention. This not only disrupted the work of other pupils but also caused resentment. Secondary school pupils were resentful that truants appeared to go unpunished and some

teachers worried that regular attenders might emulate truants. Many teachers believed poor attenders added to teachers' workloads as they tried to help them catch up. Some teachers were frustrated and saw little return for their efforts. They were also concerned that poor test or examination results might reflect badly on their teaching and impact on the schools' reputations.

Most **primary school truants** said they were glad to have missed school. In contrast, most **secondary school truants** were bored: they reported that staying away had not been worth it. Pupils used an inventive range of tactics to fool parents and take advantage of supply teachers. In half the LEAs many secondary school truants had escaped detection. They held mixed views about whether their schoolwork had suffered.

Measures to improve attendance

Most **LEAs** encouraged schools to take responsibility for dealing with attendance issues. Several discouraged them from authorising term-time absences, and were revising their guidelines on this. All LEAs provided Educational Welfare Service (EWS) assistance to schools but this varied. Some LEA representatives stressed the need for the EWS to remain independent of schools. Schools were encouraged to support parents and prosecution was seen as a last resort. Most LEAs conducted public awareness-raising campaigns and all had links with other agencies. Multi-agency links were considered to be essential but were also problematic because other agencies had their own priorities.

Headteachers and teachers varied in the evidence they required to authorise absence. Nearly all used electronic registration systems and most undertook 'first day calling'. Those with staff dedicated to supporting school attendance were more likely to call on the first day of a pupil's absence. More secondary than primary schools had this capacity. Schools promoted good attendance in five main ways. These included group awards, individual awards, improvements to school ethos and facilities, closer primary–secondary school links and building good relationships with parents. The success of these was increased by the use of staff dedicated to supporting school attendance. Strategies to deal with poor attendance included use of the EWS and input from other agencies, such as the social services. The frequency of EWO visits to schools varied, being more frequent to secondary schools. Many teachers appreciated the work done by LEA-based EWOs but some wanted more of their time. Schools engaged a wide range of measures to support and reintegrate truants. Most utilised pastoral systems; some had installed tight security systems, and others organised truancy sweeps. Views varied about the efficacy of these measures and few were able to provide evidence of improved attendance. Several teachers expressed doubts about the sustainability of reward schemes.

Implications

A number of important issues emerge from this research which have implications for the way LEAs and schools encourage attendance and deal with poor attendance. Our findings confirm the following points.

- *The causes of truancy are complex*. Respondents identify a combination of home, school and individual factors, which cause some pupils to skip school. The problem is unlikely to be resolved by a single approach.

- *Truancy starts young*. Many pupils begin truanting in primary school and continue to do so in secondary school. Therefore, early intervention would be worthwhile to prevent pupils developing the habit.

- *An unrecognised problem*. Although boys are more likely than girls to truant in primary school, the position is reversed in Years 7, 8 and 9 in all-white secondary schools. Further research is required into how girls and their families can be supported.

- *The causes of truancy are contested*. Parents and pupils stress school-related factors as the main cause of truancy, but LEAs and teachers believe that parental attitudes and home environments are more influential.

- *Truancy causes harm*. Most harm is done to the truants themselves, who are a minority of the school population. The effects on other pupils and teachers varied, but returning truants disrupt the learning of other pupils, divert the teachers' attention and frustrate and demoralise teachers.

- *Truancy is costly*. Despite the fact that only a small proportion of pupils are regular truants, LEAs, teachers and other professionals spend a disproportionate amount of time encouraging good attendance and dealing with poor attendance. The value for money of these measures needs exploring.

- *Distinguishing authorised/unauthorised absence is unhelpful* because schools apply the terms in different ways. In addition, the classification masks the scale of the problem faced by schools and focuses teachers' attention on ways of presenting the statistics rather than seeking solutions to the attendance problem.

- *A variety of strategies are employed*. LEAs and schools employ a variety of strategies to encourage good attendance and deal with poor attendance. These include electronic registration systems, truancy sweeps, contact with parents and support for pupils with poor attendance. However, the efficacy of each has not been established.

- *Multi-agency working is advocated*. LEAs and schools have begun to work with other agencies in order to address the complexity of truancy. There are, however, tensions inherent in multi-agency working because each agency has its own priorities.

- *Schools need to change*. Many persistent truants reported that they were bored with school. In addition, they were more easily able to truant when taught by supply teachers. A stronger focus on retaining staff, developing appropriate curricula, teaching styles and school ethos is needed. Very persistent truants might benefit from alternatives to school.

1: The Research Project

1.1 Introduction

The issue of school attendance is currently the focus of intense activity in schools and LEAs. The agenda was set by the Social Exclusion Unit report (1998) and reinforced by the strategy document *Tackling truancy together* (DfES, 1999). The target set by the Government to reduce levels of truancy by one third by 2002 has given rise to many related initiatives at school and LEA levels, and many Education Action Zones and Excellence in Cities projects have placed attendance high on their agendas (OFSTED, 2001a). Despite these efforts, non-attendance remains a puzzling and complex problem. In order to explore these issues further, the Department for Education and Skills (DfES) commissioned the Scottish Council for Research in Education Centre (SCRE) to conduct a year-long investigation into the causes and effects of pupils' absence.

1.2 Aims and questions

The project had five main aims, which were to:

- carry out an update of recent literature on absence

- examine the views of younger pupils about the causes and reasons for absence

- examine the views of parents, teachers, and others working closely with pupils about the causes of truancy and non-attendance

- examine the roles parents play in non-attendance; and

- examine the measures taken to reduce levels of absence.

1.3 Sample and method

The research was case study based. It drew on information from 27 schools (13 primary schools[1] and 14 secondary schools) located across seven Local Education Authorities (LEAs) in various parts of England. The sample included city, urban and rural LEAs; all had mixed socio-economic profiles and varying percentages of pupils from ethnic minority groups. All but one of the LEAs reported attendance levels below the national average. LEA 6 indicated that attendance in its primary school was above average. At secondary level, however, its unauthorised absence rates rose above the national average by an extra 5 half-days[2]. Tables 1.1 and 1.2 below provide basic statistical information about the schools in our sample. Information was also gathered from two groups of parents: 296 were associated with children in the case study schools; and 77 were clients of Educational Welfare Officers (EWOs) in LEAs 1–6 and had no connection with the project schools.

---

[1] LEA 3 identified only one primary school that was willing to participate in this study.

[2] DfES, National Statistics Bulletin, Statistics of Education: *Pupil Absence and Truancy from Schools in England*, 2000/2001, Issue No. 13/01, December 2001

Table 1.1: Some characteristics of the project primary schools

Primary schools		Absence rates (%)		% pupils eligible for FSM	School roll no. (approx)	Demographic intake
		Auth	Unauth			
LEA 1	School 1	6	0	54	310	City; mixed gender and ethnicity
	School 2	7	3	67	390	City; mixed gender and ethnicity
LEA 2	School 1	5	1	72	180	City; mixed gender and ethnicity
	School 2	5	2	31	320	City; mixed gender; ethnicity mainly white
LEA 3	School 1	6	0	45	230	City; mixed gender and ethnicity
LEA 4	School 1	6	2	31	650	Urban; mixed gender and ethnicity
	School 2	8	1	43	600	Urban; mixed gender; almost all pupils white
LEA 5	School 1	–	–	61	290	City; mixed gender and ethnicity
	School 2	7	2	56	280	City; mixed gender and ethnicity
LEA 6	School 1	6	0	29	330	Rural; mixed gender; almost all pupils white
	School 2	4	0	7	240	Rural; mixed gender; almost all pupils white
LEA 7	School 1	6	2	16	340	Urban; mixed gender; almost all pupils white
	School 2	6	0	25	240	Urban; mixed gender and ethnicity
Note: All percentages in this table have been rounded to the nearest whole number.						

Table 1.2: Some characteristics of the project secondary schools

Secondary schools		Absence rates (%)		% pupils eligible for FSM	School roll (approx)	Demographic intake
		Auth	Unauth			
LEA 1	School 1	5	0	46	1490	City; mixed gender and ethnicity
	School 2	14	3	52	840	City; mixed gender and ethnicity
LEA 2	School 1	7	2	15	1470	City; mixed gender and ethnicity
	School 2	12	3	48	990	City; mixed gender; ethnicity mainly white
LEA 3	School 1	10	3	56	600	City; mixed gender and ethnicity
	School 2	10	6	55	1150	City; mixed gender and ethnicity
LEA 4	School 1	11	1	29	610	Urban; mixed gender and ethnicity
	School 2	12	1	35	940	Urban; mixed gender; almost all pupils white
LEA 5	School 1	9	2	65	1100	City; mixed gender and ethnicity
	School 2	8	1	48	1040	City; mixed gender and ethnicity
LEA 6	School 1	8	1	12	970	Rural; mixed gender; almost all pupils white
	School 2	8	0	11	530	Rural; mixed gender; almost all pupils white
LEA 7	School 1	6	2	12	1050	Urban; mixed gender; almost all pupils white
	School 2	8	2	16	710	Urban; mixed gender and ethnicity
Note: All percentages in this table have been rounded to the nearest whole number.						

Four methods of data collection were employed. These are shown in Table 1.3 below.

Table 1.3: Data collection methods by types of data providers

Data collection methods	Informant type	
Face-to-face interviews	LEA representatives	17
	police service representatives	5
	project leaders	3
	headteachers/ deputy headteachers	26
	teachers	78
	support staff	15
	Y8, 9 and 10 pupils	528
Postal questionnaires	Parents	373
Telephone interviews	Parents	18
Short questionnaire in class and small group discussions	Y5 and 6 pupils	662

Headteachers[3], teachers, educational welfare and school support staff were asked what kinds of absences they thought were unacceptable, and why children missed school. The role played by parents, the school systems for monitoring and dealing with absence, the levels of unacceptable absence in their schools and the effects of absence were also explored. LEA representatives were asked about their authorities' levels of concern about absence, their policies to encourage attendance, and measures being taken to deal with non-attendance. Parents were asked about their attitudes to regular school attendance and how happy they were with this in relation to their own children. They were also asked what they thought put children off going to school, and what they had done to improve their own children's attendance levels. Pupils were asked if they had ever missed school 'when they knew teachers would say they should be there', and why. To encourage honest responses from pupils, researchers explained the project, stressing confidentiality and making it clear that they were not obliged to take part. Primary school teachers stayed in the rooms but did not see what the children had written. All the secondary schools provided private rooms for the pupil interviews.

Further details about respondents can be found in Appendix 1. Additional case study information about the seven LEAs is presented in Appendices 2–8. This report draws on information from all data sources.

1.4 The report

1.4.1 The nature of the information

This report is based mainly on informants' opinions. Throughout we have indicated the range and weight of opinion, sometimes numerically but also through terms as follows:

'a few' = one or two 'most' = more than half

---

[3] In one primary school the researcher was unable to secure either a headteacher or deputy headteacher interview. In a further one primary school and five secondary schools headteachers delegated the interview to a deputy headteacher.

'some', 'several' = more than one or   two,   'nearly all'   = three quarters or more
but fewer than half

1.4.2   Confidentiality

We have done our best to disguise the identities of the LEAs and individuals who generously participated in this study.

1.4.3   Terminology

The word 'truancy' means different things to different people. Previous research highlighted a number of definitional issues. Stoll (1990) defines truancy as 'absence from school for no legitimate reason'. Atkinson, Halsey, Wilkin and Kinder (2000) point to differences in the extent of absence, from avoidance of single lessons to absences of several weeks. Kinder, Wakefield and Wilkin (1996) note that 'post-registration truants' were not necessarily absent from school, but sometimes remained lurking within sound of the school bell so they could attend those lessons which interested them and avoid others. A recent report from OFSTED (2001b) points out that 'truancy is not synonymous with unauthorised absence' as some unauthorised absences result from the school's refusal to authorise excessive absence for holidays during term time. Finally, the Audit Commission (1999) estimated that at least 40,000 of the 400,000 pupils absent from school each day are 'truanting or being kept off school by their parents without permission'.

In this report, we use three terms to describe pupils' non-attendance:

- 'truancy' means absences which pupils themselves indicated would be unacceptable to teachers

- 'unacceptable absences' are absences which are unacceptable to teachers and LEAs but not recognised as such by pupils; and

- 'parentally condoned absences' result from parents keeping pupils away from school.

2: The Absence Problem

Key findings

- Previous research indicates that absence is a significant challenge. Boys are more likely to truant than girls.

Our findings indicate that:

- All LEA representatives thought that attendance was important but the scale of the problem varied in each authority.

- LEA representatives thought their objective of getting children into school was defeated when schools authorised absence too readily.

- Although schools followed LEA and DfES guidance, this may be interpreted differently by different schools.

- Headteachers varied in their willingness to authorise up to ten days for term-time holidays. In some cases this willingness was influenced by the time of year in relation to examinations.

- Schools accepted a range of evidence for the authorisation of absences; these varied from verbal messages from siblings to medical certificates.

- Most LEA and school staff believed that there are links between attendance and attainment. This accords with previous published research.

- In some cases, school staff gave attendance high priority because of concerns about children's safety.

- Nearly all teachers believed that the absence problem focused on a small number of pupils in each school.

- Many teachers said they would begin to worry if pupils were absent for blocks of time. Only a few teachers said they would begin to worry immediately.

- Boys in primary school Years 5 and 6 were more likely to truant than girls.

- Few secondary school pupils from ethnic minority groups admitted to truanting.

- Girls in all-white secondary schools were more likely to truant than boys.

- White girls in mixed-ethnicity schools were more likely to truant than white boys in Year 9, but less likely in Years 7 and 8.

2.1   Introduction

How great is the challenge of improving school attendance? In 1999, the Audit Commission (1999) noted that at least 40,000 of the 400,000 pupils absent from school are 'truanting or being kept off school by their parents without permission'. Other research (eg Malcolm *et al*, 1996; Easen *et al*, 1997; Atkinson *et al*, 2000) suggests that the 40,000 absentees do not constitute a homogeneous group. The differences within the group lie not only in the extent

of truancy (occasional truant to habitual non-attender) but also in the causes of the truanting behaviour. Kinder *et al* (1996) also highlight the preponderance of boys in their sample, which they believe reflects 'the gender bias of disaffected behaviour' (p. 2). In this chapter, we explore the absence problem with LEA representatives, teachers and pupils in seven LEAs. We identify the way that absence levels are recorded and provide a profile of the children who admit to staying away from school.

2.2 Views from the LEAs

Attendance rates in the 13 primary schools in our sample varied between 90% and 96% (see Tables 1.1 and 1.2 in Chapter 1 above). In the 14 secondary schools, overall attendance rates were generally lower, and ranged between 83% and 94%. In all 27 schools, rates of authorised absence were higher than rates of unauthorised absence. The range of authorised absences in primary schools is between 3.6% and 8.0%; in secondary schools it is between 5.2% and 14.1%. In primary schools unauthorised absence rates ranged between 0 and 3.3%; in secondary schools they were between 0.2% and 2.9%. On average, attendance rates in the city authority schools were lower (by 1% to 2%) than those in the urban and rural settings. Part of the explanation for these variations is likely to result from the different contexts in which each school operated, ie the catchment areas served by the schools and the percentage of free school meal entitlement (FSM) in each. FSM entitlement ranged from as low as 7% in a rural all-white primary school to as high as 67% in a city primary school with pupils drawn from different ethnic minority groups. However, as we shall see below, LEAs and schools had different perceptions about the scale of the problem and adopted varying approaches to authorising absences.

All the LEA representatives interviewed saw the issue of raising attendance as highly important. For some it was a particularly great challenge. For example, in the city LEA 1, 15% of the school-age population was out of school at any one time. At the opposite end of the scale, the Assistant Director of social inclusion in the rural LEA 6 felt the LEA had been so successful that its challenge was to aim at higher targets for attendance than those stated in its education development plan (EDP). All thought attendance was important because it was bound up with the challenge of raising attainment. This belief accords with findings from earlier research[4] which showed a clear association between absence and attainment.

Some LEA representatives raised the following points.

- Three LEAs linked attendance issues to pupils' behavioural problems. This accords with Kinder *et al's* (1995) earlier research which identified a connection between truancy and disaffection. Both pupils and teachers could become disaffected, which led to problems particularly for supply teachers.

---

[4] Malcolm, H., Thorpe, G. and Lowden, K. (1996). *Links Between Attendance, Truancy and Performance*. Edinburgh: Scottish Council for Research in Education.

Supply teachers can lead to youngsters being disaffected because they [the youngsters] *have no respect for the young teacher who may be only a few years older than them, trying to control the class.*

<div align="right">Principal education social worker</div>

- One EWS representative stressed that children could be at risk if they were absent from school.

- Two officials believed schools felt under pressure to keep rates of unauthorised absence low, and that the levels they reported masked the real extent of truancy. 'There could be child protection issues [or] underlying medical conditions making mainstream schooling difficult,' commented a representative for the city LEA 3.

- Three LEA representatives pointed out that if schools authorised absences too readily, it was difficult for LEAs to prosecute parents or guardians.

- Four LEA representatives doubted the value of distinguishing between authorised and unauthorised absences. As the head of social inclusion in a large city LEA put it:

  This distinguishing between the types of reasons for absence encourages us to concentrate on the wrong aspects. [Teachers say] *"I want to get a note from your Mum" – but I'm not interested in notes, I want kids in school! If* [as a teacher] *I argue about the note, I'm missing the point, which is "Are you going to be in school tomorrow and how can I make sure you will be there?"*

2.3 School perspectives

All the headteachers in our sample reported following their LEAs' guidelines on attendance, which in turn were based on DfES guidance[5]. This meant that they authorised absences for ailments, medical and dental appointments, following deaths in the family and so on. Most emphasised that they took a strict line on this, saying they would challenge 'flimsy excuses' such as needing to take children shopping or have them wait for the gas man.

Some headteachers stressed the following points.

- One primary school headteacher suggested that the guidance given by her LEA was open to different interpretations. In her opinion it was very good but 'a bit "Over to you, deal with it in your own school" '.

- Several headteachers stressed the need for some discretion, saying they were less likely to authorise absence for pupils who were often off school.

- One headteacher reported that in each class there were between two and three children with attendance below 85% (approximately 20 children in all).

- A secondary school headteacher commented that flimsy excuses were relatively easy to challenge but schools could not challenge sick notes.

---

[5] eg DfEE (1999) Circular 11/99, *Social Inclusion: the LEA Role in Pupil Support.*

- Nearly all the headteachers (20) authorised ten days of term-time holiday, but varied in their readiness to do this. One primary and three secondary school headteachers believed term-time leave was necessary to meet the needs of local families. On the other hand, five headteachers tried to dissuade parents from taking it, or set very clear conditions. One headteacher said that if families abused the authorisation by extending their holidays further, their children's names would be taken off the school roll.

- Three headteachers stressed that they would never authorise term-time holidays in the run up to or during Key Stage 2 tests in Y6 or Key Stage 3 tests in Y9. One explained that the school's performance in Level 4 Science had dropped by 4% owing to two children having been on holiday just before assessment, and a further 2% had failed to meet their English targets for the same reason.

- Two headteachers thought that parents had a right to 'the statutory ten days' of absence, one telling parents that the school could neither give nor withhold permission for it. In complete contrast, three headteachers, two primary and one secondary, completely refused to authorise extended leave. One explained:

    [For] *holidays we have zero tolerance, even though it knocks our attendance figures ... Generally we are not keen on giving absence for routine dental treatment: if parents write a note saying there is no other time they can go, we will agree to that.*

- Three headteachers in city LEAs 1, 3 and 5, where intakes included a high proportion of families of Asian and Middle Eastern origin, noted the frequency with which many families wanted extended term time leave to travel abroad. This was usually for holidays but sometimes after bereavements.

It is clear from the evidence that schools varied not only in the circumstances in which they would challenge reasons for absences but also in the evidence they required to authorise them. Most insisted on notes from home, and some required medical certificates. In other schools, telephone or face-to-face contact with a parent would suffice, and in one, even verbal messages from siblings were accepted as evidence, although some teachers were unhappy about this. Most schools encouraged parents to telephone on the first day of absence, and also to send a note when the child returned.

A few headteachers voiced their frustration at the system of recording absences as authorised or unauthorised. One in an LEA 2 school believed that it 'allows the political administration to say they are cracking the truancy problem. And they are NOT cracking the truancy problem. What the schools are doing on their behalf is cracking the statistics problem.'

Some secondary school staff thought that education was a valuable one-off opportunity for children and that it was 'a form of cruelty' if pupils were hindered from taking full advantage of it. The headteacher of a rural secondary school believed that local employers were reluctant to take on known poor school attenders.

All the secondary school headteachers and staff said they gave attendance issues the highest priority, but the extent to which they were prioritised among primary schools varied. Priority was lowest when schools felt attendance levels were under control and highest in schools with high proportions of refugees, ethnic minorities and travellers' children.

One reason why a small number of primary schools gave attendance lower priority was that they felt their hard work had improved their attendance rates. For example, the headteacher of a city school in LEA 3 said that Key Stage 2 test results in Year 6 were high because 'parents [were] very good at providing acceptable reasons for absence and no children truant'. The issues challenging this school were seen as punctuality and lateness.

For some of the secondary schools attendance issues presented a particularly demanding challenge. The headteacher in one of the city schools in LEA 1, for example, with a whole school attendance rate for 2000/01 of only 82%, commented that 'On any day I've got 200 pupils missing. And I could extract any number from the register with attendance levels of 25% or 26%.' Another in the city LEA 5 said it felt 'like we're knocking our heads on a stone wall'.

Nearly all the teachers believed that the problem centred on a small number of pupils (from one to five in each school) whose absences caused particular concern. Many said they would begin to worry when pupils had blocks of time away, three to five days were cited. Concern would intensify if pupils missed a block of learning or whole topic. It would also be triggered if time off began to form a pattern, whether of long or short duration, or of lateness. Several teachers said any absence level below the targets set by their school would alert them. These ranged from 70% to 90%. Several teachers said unusual absence could be a sign of something amiss, and a few said that they would begin to worry almost immediately.

• **Pupils' profile**

Information on the absence problem was gathered from pupils in the 27 case study schools in our study. This included findings from a questionnaire used with a random sample of 662 pupils in Years 5 and 6 and individual interviews with 181 self-reported truants in secondary schools.

2.4.1 *Primary school level*

Most primary school pupils in our sample had at some time wished they did not have to go to school. Eighteen per cent of boys and 10% of girls had actually walked out of school when they knew they ought to be there and almost a third of boys and 18% of girls admitted to skipping school (see Table 2.1 below). This accords with the gender differences reported by Kinder *et al* (1996).

Table 2.1: Percentage of boys and girls responding 'yes' to four questions

	Boys % n=327	Girls % n=321	Signifi- cance rating
• Have you ever wished you didn't have to go to school?	76	65	*
• Have you ever just walked out of school, in school time when you knew you ought not to?	18	10	**
• Have you ever really skipped school?	31	18	**
• Do you think your Mother/Carer would be cross if you walked out of your school when you knew you shouldn't?	93	98	*

* = significant finding   ** = highly significant finding

Significantly, the overwhelming majority of boys and girls believed that their mothers or carers would be angry with them if they missed school. However, there were further gender differences amongst the pupils in our sample. Girls were far more likely than boys to go to school even when they were worried about getting into trouble or when coming under peer group pressure. In addition, when experiencing difficulties with school work, girls were more likely to go to school and ask for help, compared to boys who were more likely to go to school and keep trying on their own or skip school altogether. Boys and girls were equally likely or unlikely to skip school when they were bullied, disliked a teacher, or were under pressure from home. Clearly, this finding has implications for the way in which teachers encourage pupil attendance, a point we shall return to in Chapter 6.

Pupils also provided information about the age at which they first truanted (see Figure 2.1 below). This indicates a gradual rise from four years old to a peak around nine for boys. Interestingly, there does not seem to be a similar peak for girls.

Figure 2.1: Percentage of primary school pupils first skipping school at various ages (n=176)

* no boys reported beginning to skip school at age 11
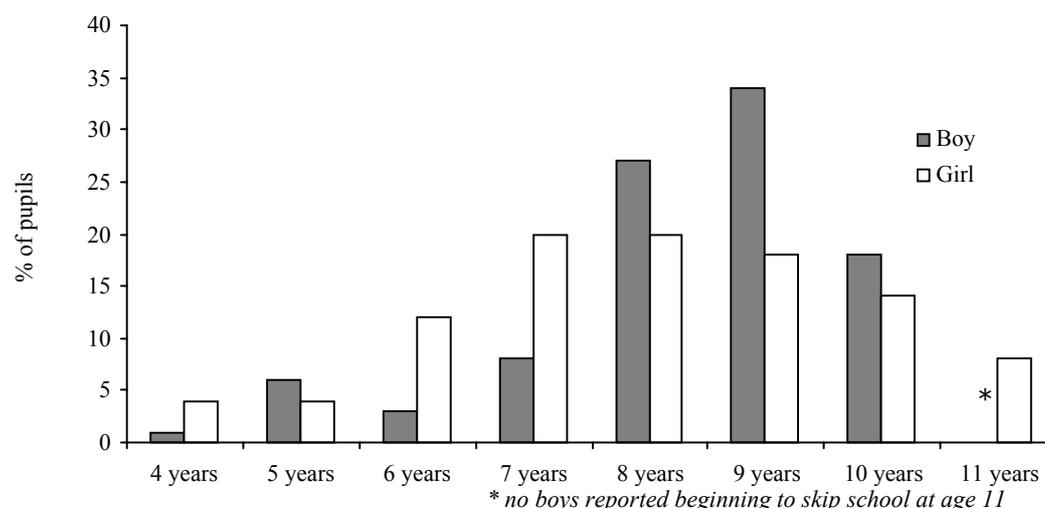
2.4.2   Secondary school level: the effect of gender and ethnicity

The fourteen secondary schools in our sample could be divided into three groups: all-white mixed gender schools (7); single-sex mixed ethnicity schools (4) and mixed gender and mixed ethnicity schools (3). This allowed us to undertake a limited comparison of the effect of gender and ethnicity on absence.

All-white secondary schools

It is clear that in all-white secondary schools a higher per cent of white girls report that they have truanted than do white boys (see Table 2.2 below). This result stands in contrast to findings from the primary schools in our sample, in which boys are more likely than girls to have truanted. The biggest difference between boys and girls truanting occurs in Year 7 but the percentage of girls truanting peaks at 30% in Year 8.

Table 2.2: Self-reported truants in all-while secondary schools

% aggregated distribution of truancy across year and gender

	Boys % reporting truancy	Girls % reporting truancy
Y7	2 (1/42)	4 (2/50)
Y8	21 (8/38)	30 (13/44)
Y9	22 (10/46)	24 (8/34)

Numbers in brackets, eg (1/42) are the fractions answering affirmatively of the total pupil numbers in that particular gender/ year group category who were questioned.

Mixed ethnicity secondary schools

Seven schools in our sample contained pupils from different ethnic minority groups: five were located in inner city areas and two within urban settings; four were single sex and three were mixed gender schools. The most significant finding to emerge from our sample is that only 19 pupils from mixed ethnicity groups were prepared to admit to truanting. The number is so low (only 7% of 267 secondary school interviewees) that we have excluded it from further analysis and have retained only information on white truants within mixed ethnicity schools.

Table 2.3: Self-reported truants within secondary, mixed ethnicity schools

% aggregated distribution of truancy among white pupils across year and gender

	Boys % reporting truancy	Girls % reporting truancy
Y7	13 (2/15)	10 (3/30)
Y8	31 (5/16)	26 (9/35)
Y9	19 (3/16)	25 (6/24)

Numbers in brackets, eg (2/15) are the fractions answering affirmatively of the total pupil numbers in that particular gender/ year group category who were questioned.

We can see in Table 2.3 above that white girls in Year 7 and 8 in mixed ethnicity schools are less likely to truant than boys. This accords with findings from our primary school respondents. It is, however, reversed in Year 9 when again girls outnumber boys skipping school. These gender differences may in part be explained by the fact that girls are more likely to be required as carers and in some cases are tempted to join older boyfriends, who have already left school. Educational professionals also believe that children become progressively more disenchanted with education as they get older.

2.5 Chapter summary

The main points to emerge may be summarised as follows.

- Previous research indicates that absence is a significant challenge but that absentees do not constitute a homogeneous group. Boys are more likely to truant than girls.

- All LEA representatives said attendance was important because it was related to attainment and other problems. Some thought schools authorised absences too readily, making it difficult for LEAs to prosecute. Some doubted the value of distinguishing between authorised and unauthorised absences.

- All headteachers said they followed LEA guidance on attendance. Most stressed that they were strict in this but a few thought the guidelines were open to interpretation, and others stressed the need for flexibility.

- Almost all the headteachers authorised ten days of term-time absence for extended leave, but varied in their readiness to do this.

- Some headteachers voiced frustration at having to record absences as 'authorised' and 'unauthorised'.

- Schools accepted a range of evidence from home to authorise pupils' absences.

- All school staff believed attendance was important because it was linked to attainment, and some feared that a record of poor school attendance would reduce a young person's chance of employment.

- Some teachers voiced fears for absentees' safety, and many said they would become especially concerned about absences once a block of time had been missed or a pattern had developed.

- Boys in primary school Years 5 and 6 were more likely to truant than girls.

- Few pupils from ethnic minority groups admitted to truanting in secondary school.

- Girls in all-white secondary schools were more likely to truant than boys.

- White girls in mixed-ethnicity schools were more likely to truant than white boys in Year 9, but less likely in Years 7 and 8.

3: The Effects of Absence

Key findings

- Previous research links pupil absence with disruptive behaviour and disaffection.

Key findings from this project indicate that:

- Most LEAs and teachers thought that absence led to underachievement.

- Primary school teachers believed that attainment was affected because absence broke the continuity of learning and pupils missed important work.

- Teachers believed that all absence is damaging.

- Teachers could not always give children the help they needed to make up lost time.

- Secondary school teachers believed that academic underachievement would damage children's future job prospects.

- Secondary school teachers thought that truanting behaviour was difficult to change because of the cyclical effect.

- Pupils who were often absent were said to have trouble making and keeping friends. Poor attenders' friendship groups shrank and eventually closed, leading to further isolation.

- Primary school staff thought that on returning to school, poor attenders suffered a loss of confidence due to the fact that they are unable to understand the work.

- Secondary school staff thought that this loss of confidence led to attention seeking through disruptive behaviour.

- Most of the teachers thought unacceptable absences had a negative effect on peer relationships.

- Secondary school truants underplayed the effects of their absences, but a few knew their work had suffered.

- Many LEAs and teachers believed regular attenders were affected when truants returned through the diversion of teacher time and class disruption.

- The main effects of truancy on teachers were that teachers felt that their attention was diverted from the rest of the class and that they had to give up their free time to help non-attenders catch up.

- Some teachers felt disillusioned about the impact of help they gave to children who did not attend regularly. They feared that poor examination results from these children would reflect badly on their teaching.

- Most pupils who attended school regularly did not feel they were much affected by others' truancy. Some were sympathetic, but most felt irritated by truants' behaviour and many felt relieved when they were away.

- 89% of primary school truants said their mother/guardian would be angry if they were aware of their truancy.

3.1   Introduction

Previous research has highlighted a number of effects which result from pupils' absence from school. Some (eg Learmonth, 1995) link truancy with the wider issue of pupil disaffection. Kinder, Harland, Wilkin and Wakefield (1995) note that many teachers saw truancy, disruption and exclusion as closely interrelated. Teachers believed that both truanting and disruptive pupils chose 'flight or fight' as parallel responses to schools from which they felt alienated. Others (eg OFSTED, 2001b) argue that truancy impacts on pupil attainment and suggest that attempts to improve attendance and behaviour should be linked to efforts to improve pupils' attitudes to learning and attainment. A possible association between truancy and crime has also been noted (DfES, 1999; DfEE and Home Office, 2001), although the evidence of a connection is stronger for excluded pupils (DfES, 2002). Finally, Coles *et al* (2002) identify truanting from school before the age of 16 as a risk factor for not being in education, employment or training at age 16–18. The purpose of this chapter is twofold: we build upon previously published research; and explore the effects of non-attendance on younger truants, other pupils and their teachers. It draws on evidence from LEA informants, teachers and pupils.

3.2   School staff perspectives

3.2.1   *Effects on the absentee pupils*

Teachers identified six interconnected effects of absence on children who missed school. These were:

- academic underachievement
- difficulty making friends
- loss of confidence and self-esteem
- engagement in premature sexual activity
- stress amongst young carers; and
- impaired socialisation for work.

More information about each is given below.

3.2.1.1   *Academic underachievement (mentioned in all LEAs, in 12 of the 13 primary schools and 13 of the 14 secondary schools)*

Most teachers thought that the major effect of absence from school was upon pupils' academic underachievement. At primary school level teachers stressed two main reasons for this: first, absence broke the continuity of learning, and second, the curriculum was so full and tightly structured that absence invariably meant a child would miss something important. Year 6 teachers seem to have been especially aware of this: one in LEA 4 commented that Year 6 was particularly intensive as it led up to Key Stage 2 tests. 'If they miss the revision work or foundation material, even for a short period,' she said, 'there will be gaps in their knowledge that will cause them problems and affect their learning later in the year'. Although all absence was damaging, teachers were unsure

about which pattern of absence was the most damaging. Some stressed that even sporadic absences mattered, and others that in so short a period as two days or a week children could miss something vitally important. Some said that frequent short absences were the hardest to deal with because they gave no opportunity to establish continuity:

> *A child off for a fortnight with a bug – you can do nothing about that, but you can recover from a two-week absence. Three-day-weekers, you can't … That kind of absence impacts differently but it has the more undermining effect.*
>
> Primary school headteacher, LEA 1

Others felt long absences were worse as they made further absence more likely: children might then delay their return to school, for fear of being told off and difficulty re-integrating into school. Some teachers thought that regular absences were the hardest to compensate for because 'they're missing the continuity'.

Although they tried, teachers said they could not always give the children the help they needed to make good the lost time: one LEA 1 teacher said that sometimes all she could do when absentees returned was give them 'holding exercises' which she acknowledged was not good educational practice.

Similar points were made by secondary school teachers, who also pointed out that that academic underachievement was likely to damage pupils' future job prospects. All the secondary school teachers agreed that truancy was cyclical: pupils 'got into the swing of staying off' or into 'the rut of non-attendance'. It became increasingly difficult for pupils to return to school and catch up on the work they had missed. According to an LEA 4 form teacher truant pupils were caught in a vicious circle and hated seeking help. This 'snowball' phenomenon thus became an unending pattern of cause and effect.

3.2.1.2   Difficulty making friends (mentioned in all LEAs)

Teachers thought that pupils who were often absent had trouble making and keeping friends. Other primary school children sensed that the habitual truant displayed a 'funny attitude' to them, showing them less respect and being generally scornful. If friends were made, they were quickly lost because the friends disliked being left alone. The poor attenders' friendship groups shrank and eventually closed, so that the non-attenders became isolated. On their return to school, absentees were frequently lost, bewildered, not understanding work, not fitting in, left behind in work and play:

> *The children seem not to see the child when the child is there, so ... the children who are here all the time play their games, and it is as if the child who has been off does not know how to play the games, does not know who to go to – so they become lonely.*
>
> Home-school liaison teacher, LEA 2

Secondary school teachers thought that poor attenders tended to lose their friends, thus becoming isolated and easy prey to bad company. An LEA 1 form tutor had observed that other girls would pick on those they thought were absent without good reason. Several teachers predicated a bleak future for poor

attenders 'if they are having problems fitting in and their attendance is poor, they won't ever fit in really,' said an LEA 2 form tutor. Three teachers in LEAs 2 and 5 believed that pupils excluded socially because of their unacceptable absence would make friends either with other poor attenders or people outside of school.

3.2.1.3   Loss of confidence (mentioned in six LEAs)

Primary school staff thought that poor attenders became frustrated, bad-tempered, undisciplined and insecure. After losing the 'security of a routine', their performance dropped and with it, their confidence and self-esteem. Not surprisingly, they disliked school more and more, and wanted to be there less and less:

> *When they come back they feel out of sorts, and that ends up reinforcing their*
> *not liking school because their friends have been playing other games and*
> *the teacher's teaching a lesson they don't understand because it relates to the*
> *day before. And I think it's very self-perpetuating.*
>
> Headteacher, LEA 1

At secondary school level, staff in four authorities thought that poor attenders lost their confidence, showed behavioural problems including attention seeking through disruptive behaviour, and personality changes. 'They are bored when they return as they are not up-to-date with their work and they can't contribute to the class,' said an LEA 5 teacher, 'so their behaviour suffers'. In some cases, an LEA 1 teacher thought, young people grew tough and resistant to anything that school staff suggest.

3.2.2.4   Premature sexual activity (mentioned in two LEAs)

The danger of non-attenders becoming prematurely sexually active was only raised at secondary school level. As one headteacher of an LEA 5 school pointed out, children could:

> *become sexually active very early… Their mother is their role model, who*
> *has many relationships and partners herself … When they stay at home they*
> *see things they shouldn't at home or on the television with no supervision…*
> *They become removed from the school and start sexually experimenting…*
> *sometimes becoming young mothers themselves.*
>
> Headteacher, LEA 5

3.2.1.5   Stress in the case of young carers (mentioned in one LEA)

A head of pastoral care in a large secondary school in LEA 1 pointed out that those truants who were also young carers could experience acute stress. He explained: 'Of course the kids suffer. It's a double-edged sword because they're here [but they're] feeling guilty that they're here. They want to be at home looking after the parent and we're saying, "Are you taking some work home? Let me give you some work." The pressure on them is tremendous.'

3.2.1.6   Impaired socialisation for work (mentioned in one LEA)
An attendance officer in LEA 3 was concerned that poor attenders missed opportunities to develop their communication and language skills, as well as training for working life because they were not 'getting the discipline of getting up every morning and going to a place. That can really affect their ability to get a job.'

3.2.2   Are the effects of absence worse for habitual poor attenders?
Teachers accepted that all absence is damaging but held mixed views about which pattern was the most damaging. 'At bottom, absence is absence,' stressed a secondary school headteacher in LEA 4. An LEA 1 form tutor believed that ultimately the intensity of the effects of absence was down to 'individual pupils, their attitude and approach'. At both primary and secondary school levels many staff believed that children who were absent for genuine reasons, such as long-term illness, would ask for extra work and would get it done. Some teachers, however, stressed that much depended on the attitude of an individual child. A Y6 teacher in LEA 4 made the point that encouragement from home was an important factor. 'Some families would insist that they did it [work sent home] and some wouldn't bother,' she said.

Nearly all the teachers thought the negative effects of absence were limited to truants. Other pupils would be sympathetic and understanding of classmates with genuine illnesses and keep in touch by sending cards and making visits.

3.2.3   Do poor attenders realise the effects of missing school?
LEA representatives and teachers expressed mixed views about whether truants realised the impact of their non-attendance. Some thought that poor attenders realise but either don't care or think they can make up the work when they return; while others believed that non-attenders just do not realise the damage that they are doing to themselves. Some secondary school teachers in LEA 5 felt that many pupils who realised that absence was likely to have adverse effects continued to do so, because not coming to school regularly was accepted behaviour in the family home. One headteacher commented that because many of these pupils were kept away from school with their parents' consent, even being rewarded for it, they could not understand that it was wrong:

> If their mother condones missing school and thinks it's all right, they will accept it as all right... When they are babysitting they get paid for it which rewards their bad behaviour.
>
> Headteacher, LEA 5

Another secondary school headteacher in the same LEA also remarked on the 'mixed messages' that children received from home and school. 'Their parents say one thing and the school says something else,' she said. 'This has a big effect on the children.' Secondary staff in LEA 1, 2 and 3 schools believed some pupils realised they were heading for problems but chose to shut the knowledge off.

Several primary and secondary school teachers in LEAs 1, 2, 3 and 5 thought poor attenders did realise that absence was likely to have damaging effects, and worried about it. A primary school teacher in LEA 1 thought girls in particular worried about the effects of not being at school, because their absences were largely due to wanting to fall in with their parents' wishes. She contrasted their attitudes to that taken by a boy who also missed school who 'wouldn't be bothered' by the experience.

In contrast, secondary teachers in LEAs 1 and 5 thought that pupils who took time off did not understand or realise the effect this was likely to have on them. 'Even if you drum it in,' said an LEA 1 Year 8 teacher, 'They think "Oh, I've missed a lesson here and there, I can copy it up" '. And a LEA 5 form teacher pointed out that truants 'just don't see school as important'.

Several teachers suggested that short-term thinking prevented truants from seeing the damage they were inflicting on themselves. A primary school headteacher in LEA 1 explained that the families in her area were not in the habit of forward thinking. 'They live in the here and now,' she said. 'I don't think they look at things in a long-term way.' An LEA 4 teacher at a secondary school expressed a similar opinion. 'They get told,' she said, 'but it's hard at Y9 to see Y11 and thereafter'.

3.2.4   Effects on other pupils

Some teachers believed that absence impacted upon other children who attend school regularly. It could affect them in the following ways:

- friends and partners were deserted

- disruption in class when absentees return

- resentment among good attenders

- good attenders disappointed and puzzled; and

- poor attenders may become role models.

Detail is given below.

3.2.4.1   Friends and partners deserted (mentioned in all LEAs)

Truancy affects poor attenders' friends who may then be lonely and isolated, and also children who partner poor attenders for various work purposes. Sometimes groups felt that poor attenders let them down, a feeling that was particularly evident when a school gave attendance rewards.

3.2.4.2   Disruption in class when absentees return (mentioned in six LEAs)

Some teachers in most LEAs agreed that other pupils were affected when poor attenders returned to school, because they had to help the truants catch up. Other pupils did not think this was fair. A secondary school teacher in LEA 1 made the point that although repetition was consolidation to some extent, 'all the same [the pupils] see it as a step backward', and some pupils make 'snide remarks' to the truants. It could be particularly disruptive to primary school

pupils who share tables with truants. 'They are constantly being stopped and asked "How do I do this?" or "What's this?",' a Y5 teacher in LEA 1 said.

3.2.4.3   Resentment among good attenders (mentioned in six LEAs)

Many teachers thought that good attenders frequently resented absentees because they were disruptive and went unpunished. An LEA 1 teacher explained how when two particular boys returned they 'would do as much to disrupt things as they possibly could, and it did affect everybody else'. In a class of thirty it was a big problem. Teachers faced a real dilemma: either to punish truants knowing that this might encourage them to be absent again, or to refrain from punishment and incur the resentment of the regular attenders. In the view of the headteacher of an LEA 4 primary school, the disruption they caused was 'out of all proportion to any good that you can achieve with them,' so that their being away could be a bonus.

3.2.4.4   Good attenders disappointed and puzzled (a primary school concern in three LEAs)

Other children showed a range of attitudes towards poor attenders. This included disappointment and puzzlement A very experienced LEA 1 teacher said that usually the children she taught could not understand why some came to school so irregularly. Some laughed it off, but other more mature pupils were sad. 'They say "These children don't have friends and don't know us",' she told us.

3.2.4.5   Poor attenders may become role models (mentioned in five LEAs)

Some primary school teachers admitted that good attenders – especially those with sympathetic natures – might be inclined to stay off school with the poor attenders, to keep them company. Other good attenders might even see truants as daring, and want to be like them. Secondary teachers in five LEAs voiced similar fears. 'Those children who get away with truancy appear acceptable to the others in the class,' said a form teacher in LEA 5. She added that sometimes when children see their peers bunking they then feel that they can, too.

3.2.5   Effects on teachers

Staff in all seven LEAs identified ways in which they were affected by truancy. These were:

- attention diverted from the whole class
- loss of free time
- frustration at having to re-train poor attenders
- difficulty in keeping accurate records
- more frequent adjustment to forward plans
- impaired ability to build teacher-pupil relationships; and
- demoralisation.

3.2.5.1   Attention diverted from class (mentioned in five LEAs)

Both primary and secondary school teachers resented having their time diverted from the class to help truants catch up. This was stronger amongst primary teachers. A Year 6 teacher remarked, 'You end up spending so much time with just them, and not the rest of the class. It's frustrating when nothing seems to be working.' An LEA 7 teacher felt irritated at the futility of backtracking, over and over, with the same children.

3.2.5.2   Loss of free time (mentioned in six LEAs)

Secondary school teachers in particular spoke of their frustration and irritation at giving up their breaks and lunchtimes to help absentees catch up or monitor their movements. Some teachers considered that poor attenders were more demanding children than regular attenders in any case. 'They expect to be looked after there and then,' said one teacher in LEA 4.

3.2.5.3   Frustration at the need to re-train poor attenders (mentioned in two LEAs)

A particular problem for primary school teachers was that when poor attenders returned to class they often had to be re-trained in the procedures and expectations of the school day. It was frustrating and time consuming for teachers. One remarked that truants 'never get into the same way of behaving as everybody else. They don't really know how to just get in and get on with their work.'

3.2.5.4   Difficulty in keeping accurate records (mentioned in five LEAs)

A small number of primary and secondary teachers in LEAs 1, 2, 4, 6 and 7, maintained that keeping accurate records of what truants achieved when in school meant more work for teachers and limited the use that could be made of classroom assistants. A secondary teacher in LEA 1 said he found it hard to write a meaningful annual report about a child who had often been away from school.

3.2.5.5   More frequent adjustment to forward plans (an issue in two LEAs)

Teachers experienced difficulties planning work for truants. A few teachers in LEAs 2 and 4 stressed that when they had notice that an absence was expected, or likely to last some time, they could more easily take account of it.

3.2.5.6   Impaired ability to build teacher-pupil relationships (mentioned in one LEA)

A primary school teacher in LEA 1 believed that if a child was often away it was hard for teacher and child to build a secure and trusting relationship. She felt the problem was exacerbated because teachers could not readily include frequent absentees in whole-class activities, such as concerts, because 'you might long to give them a part but you feel you can't, because you know they won't come'.

3.2.5.7 Teachers demoralised (mentioned in five LEAs)

The cumulative effect of increased pressures of these kinds on staff was that some primary and secondary teachers in LEAs 2, 3, 4, 5 and 7 felt deskilled and demoralised. A primary headteacher in LEA 5 explained: 'They [teachers] work so hard for the children and they feel they are not getting anything in return'. An LEA 4 primary school teacher doubted if the effort she and other teachers put in was justified, particularly with children known to be transient. And an LEA 5 teacher felt guilty because she felt unable to give poor attenders the help they needed. 'I feel the children miss out on the work,' she said. 'I try to help them catch up … but that takes time and the other children are missing out.'

Some teachers believed that absentees contributed to low test scores at Key Stage 2 in Y6 and Key Stage 3 in Y9. These reflected badly on teachers, and they were worried in case performance-related pay took such low scores into account. A primary school teacher in LEA 7 explained that she felt 'so down-hearted, because ... we are trying so hard to get these children to an acceptable level before they go up to secondary school'. Similar fears were expressed in secondary schools. '[Absence] drags down their marks, and I have to explain why their marks are low,' said a teacher in LEA 7.

3.2.6 Effects on the school

Staff in all LEAs thought that poor attendance could affect the whole school in three ways:

- the ability to meet attendance and attainment targets
- damage to a school's reputation; and
- difficulty in maintaining standards of discipline.

Detail are discussed below.

3.2.6.1 Reduced ability to meet targets (mentioned in five LEAs)

Teachers thought that truancy impacted on a school's ability to meet its attendance and attainment targets. A headteacher feared that it could push a school into a downward spiral so that staff would have to work even harder to counter its negative effects. Several headteachers commented that the system by which schools were judged was unfair. 'How could you compare my school's results to the school across the park that's got [only] 30% free school meals?' asked a headteacher of an LEA 1 primary school. Another primary school headteacher in LEA 6 wondered why very poor attenders were entered for KS2 tests at all. 'I don't think these children with less than 80% attendance should be included in the overall 'SATs' for the school,' she said. 'They are highly unlikely to achieve without the education, so why include them?' Secondary school staff in LEAs 2, 3 and 7 expressed similar views.

3.2.6.2 Damaged school reputation (mentioned in four LEAs)

Primary school headteachers in LEAs 1 and 2 and secondary school headteachers in LEAs 3 and 4 believed truancy affected their schools'

reputation. One suspected that word would get round among parents and in the community.

3.2.6.3 Difficulty in maintaining standard of discipline (mentioned in one LEA)

A learning mentor in an LEA 2 secondary school commented on the possible erosion of overall school discipline if habitual absentees were allowed to get away with it. Other pupils might wonder why 'You phone up my Mum when I have been off a day: he has been off six weeks and you have not phoned his Mum'.

3.2.7 Effects on society

Teachers in an LEA 5 secondary alluded to the impact of truants on society. A headteacher explained that 'society suffers as the children are hanging around the streets, often intimidating [other people]'. Other teachers thought that groups of truanting children were associated with public disorder and crime. A form teacher claimed that when not at school the children were generally 'causing havoc', and the school's education social worker said that 'bunking' children affected local crime rates as they broke windows and caused social unrest. She thought that members of the community were afraid to report misdemeanours because 'their parents are abusive and offensive'.

3.3 Pupils' perspectives

3.3 The effects of their truancy

Overall 27 % of primary school pupils and 16% of secondary school pupils in our sample admitted to truanting without their parents' knowledge. This section explores the truants' perceptions of the impact of their non-attendance. Approximately one third had been punished, some by their schools, some by their parents and many by both, but the largest group of truants claimed they had received no punishments and that their school work had not been adversely affected.

3.3.1 School and parental reactions

Pupils described a number of ways in which being caught for truanting affected them. These included being put 'on report', given detentions, having to do work in isolation, meetings with staff and/or education social workers that resulted in their parents having to come to the school, and threats of court action. At home, punishments included the withdrawal of privileges such as the use of a TV and computer, but particularly 'being grounded':

> *Dad said I couldn't go out if I didn't go to school. I've been coming for past week.*

> *I was grounded for a month with no spends. Mum wouldn't let me out of my room except for my tea. And I got a report in school.*

> *My parents took my TV away and I wasn't allowed to use the computer … If I didn't bunk every week they'd give me something back as a reward.*
>
> <div align="right">Self-reported truants, LEA 1 and LEA 5</div>

In many cases, however, pupils' truancy had gone unpunished at home because parents had not found out. However, most pupils stressed how angry their parents had been to find out they had been truanting, or how angry they would be if they did. 'Dad was gutted,' said a boy in LEA 4. One Y9 girl in LEA 1 said that her mother had avoided telling her father because 'he'd hit the roof'. Nearly all the pupils said they cared about what their parents thought. One girl had been surprised to discover how strongly her mother felt about it. 'I didn't realise how much my Mum was upset,' she said.

3.3.2 *Effects on truants' work*

Pupils had mixed views about whether truancy affected their schoolwork. Over half the truants felt they had not been adversely affected but the majority in LEAs 1, 2 and 7, acknowledged that they had. This was especially true of pupils in Year 9, who said they had:

- missed tests

- not understood examination questions

- did not know where their classmates were up to in terms of work

- had gone down a set; and

- in one case, suffered worsened relationships with their peers.

In the other case study authorities most of the truant pupils thought their work was unaffected by their absences largely because they thought school work was easier than it had been in primary school. They thought they could, therefore, miss lessons without any consequences.

Another reason was that the pupils were so out of control that keeping discipline and order rather than teaching and learning took up lesson time:

> *You learn, but you don't learn every lesson. Most of* [it] *is just spent with the teachers trying to get everyone quiet, so you don't learn anything.*
> <div align="right">Self-reported truant, LEA 3</div>

Three truants said their work had improved because of their absences, because it had provided a chance to get on with work. All the Year 9 truants in LEA 5, however, recognised that the quality of their work had declined and one had dropped down a class.

3.4 Comments from regular attenders

Most regular attenders claimed that they were not affected by other pupils' truancy or at least, not to any great extent. Feelings varied, ranging from disdain to sympathy and from sadness to anger. Irritation was predominant. Most of the good attenders distanced themselves from those who opted to miss school, because they thought truants were unlikely to do well. 'They just waste their own education' and 'They turn out to be the thickos … It's their own fault if they don't get a good education' were typical of these pupils' views.

Several pupils also linked truants with troublemakers and thought that school was better when truants were absent. They reported that 'the noisy cocky ones are the ones who wag it. It helps you in a way when they're not there' and 'It makes it better as there are less people in class and the ones who skip are usually the troublemakers'.

A few pupils expressed sympathy for their hard-working teachers. 'I think it's out of order on the teachers,' said an LEA 5 pupil. 'They come to teach 30 children and only seven or eight of us turn up. It's not fair on them or us.'

Others showed sympathy and empathy for the non-attenders. Some were friends with the pupils who missed school and were lonely when their friends were absent. Loneliness like this could make them turn away from their truant friends:

> I wouldn't want to be friends with them afterwards. There's no point if you don't see them.
>
> Regular attender, LEA 4

On the other hand, some pupils said that when others truanted they felt a bit unsettled, and wondered if they ought to do the same, especially when truants tried to persuade them to do so.

The most commonly expressed feelings, however, were irritation and resentment. Many pupils pointed out that their own education was being spoiled as teachers' time was wasted on waiting for latecomers, going over work and trying to keep order. 'Teachers spend time looking after kids who truant when they should be looking after those who do come to school,' was a typical remark.

To some extent teacher time was wasted even when truants were out of class, a point made by two regular attenders:

> The teachers all go 'Oh, I wonder where they are?' and that stops the others learning.
>
> The teacher took time at the beginning to find out where they'd gone. It stops everyone else's education as well as theirs.
>
> Regular attenders, LEA 4 and LEA 6

In addition, one girl in LEA 1 was worried about her class's reputation. 'It lets us all down because people think differently of us as a group,' she said. 'And we don't get taught properly because of all the shouting.'

Others felt a keen sense of unfairness in that truants did what they wanted to while they themselves toiled away in school. This was especially so if truants returned and wanted to profit by their work by copying up notes or borrowing books. One pupil expressed some bitterness that good attenders could be penalised for others' absences. 'Today is supposed to be a Fun Day,' he said. 'It will only happen if no one is off. But some are.'

Some pupils felt resentment that the work of a partnership or group fell to those who turned up. One regular attender explained how this could affect group

work and practicals in music and science. Another gave a graphic example of how partnership with a truant could have awkward practical consequences:

If you are a partner with them in class, you have to do all the work on your own. I don't like it, but I don't mind. Sometimes we keep the same partners throughout the term. For instance, in IT if you don't know the password to get the work you have start all over again ... I would like to get a better partner that I can trust.

<div align="right">Regular attender, LEA 6</div>

3.5 Chapter summary

Previous research had linked absence with disruptive behaviour and disaffection: the evidence presented in this chapter supports that general conclusion. Our respondents believe that truancy affects schools, teachers, truants and pupils, who attend school regularly, in various ways. Specifically:

- Most LEAs and teachers said that absence led to underachievement.

- Primary school teachers thought this was because absence broke the continuity of learning and pupils missed important work.

- No pattern of absence would not be damaging, but teachers were divided as to which pattern of absence was the most damaging.

- Teachers could not always give truants the help they needed to make up lost time.

- Secondary school teachers believed that academic underachievement would damage children's future job prospects.

- Secondary school teachers thought that truanting behaviour was difficult to change because it is cyclical.

- Pupils who were often absent were said to have trouble making and keeping friends. Poor attenders' friendship groups shrank and eventually closed, leading to further isolation.

- Primary school staff thought that on returning to school, poor attenders suffered a loss of confidence due to the fact that they are unable to understand the work.

- Secondary school staff thought that this loss of confidence led to attention seeking and disruptive behaviour.

- Most of the teachers thought unacceptable absences had a negative effect on peer relationships.

- Secondary school truants underplayed the effects of their absences, but a few knew their work had suffered.

- Many LEAs and teachers believed regular attenders were affected when truants returned through the diversion of teacher time and class disruption.

- The main effects of truancy on teachers were that teachers felt that their attention was diverted from the rest of the class and that they had to give up their free time to help non-attenders catch up.

- Some teachers felt disillusioned about the impact of help they gave to children who did not attend regularly. They feared that poor examination results from these children would reflect badly on their teaching.

- Most pupils who attended school regularly did not feel they were much affected by others' truancy. Some were sympathetic, but most felt irritated by truants' behaviour and many felt relieved when they were away.

- 89% of primary school truants said their mother/guardian would be angry if they were aware of their truancy.

4: The Causes of Absence

Key findings

- Other researchers suggest that the main causes of truancy are the influence of friends, pupils' relationships with teachers, the curriculum, family factors, bullying and the classroom context.

Significantly, and in contrast to other research, we found that:

- 27% of primary school children said they had truanted without the collusion of their parents. In 17% of these cases, the child was able to leave school without being detected.

Other key findings include:

- Many children said the reason they wanted to miss school was boredom and over half were not sorry afterwards. Most of the self-reported truants believed their parents would be angry to discover they had truanted.

- It is critical that primary school children are able to rely on parents, teachers or peers to help them deal with situations that may cause them to think about skipping school.

- 16% of secondary school pupils admitted to truanting from school.

- Some secondary school pupils were put off truanting by approaching examinations or the possibility of their parents being prosecuted.

- Secondary school pupils are more likely to attribute their absence from school to school-related factors than home factors. These reasons were varied but included problems with lessons, problems with teachers, being bullied, peer pressure and social isolation.

- Most LEA representatives and teachers thought that pupils who had problems with school attendance had parents who placed a low value on education and therefore were more likely to condone absence. Some teachers thought that those parents who placed a low value on education often had poor parenting skills, which led to them condoning absence.

- Most primary school teachers believed absence from school of primary-aged children is always parentally condoned.

- Only a small number of primary school teachers believed that school factors contributed to absence from school in primary school children.

- Most LEA representatives and secondary school teachers believed that the school curriculum was not always suited to the child's needs and therefore failed to engage pupils. This could lead to attendance problems.

- All LEA representatives and many teachers thought that the quality of teaching received by pupils had an impact on their attendance.

4.1 Introduction

Earlier research identified a variety of causes of pupils' absence from school. A study of Year 7 children (Kinder *et al,* 1996) reports that the main causes of truancy are: the influence of friends and peer group; their relationships, or lack of them, with teachers; the content and delivery of the curriculum, which may seem irrelevant; family circumstances; bullying; and the classroom context in which the teacher is unable to control the class or where problems arise from the child's personality or learning abilities. In contrast, educational professionals point to individual factors, such as the child's lack of self-esteem, social skills, confidence, academic ability, and to family circumstances. A further study by Kinder and Wilkin (1998) explored the views of truanting children's parents. The parents blamed school-based factors, such as peer pressure, bullying, boredom with school, relationships with teachers and lack of school discipline, for their children's absences. This chapter focuses on the central question for this study: why do pupils, particularly younger ones, skip school. Information is presented from primary and secondary pupils, and teachers and support staff in 27 schools and adult informants in 7 LEAs.

4.2 Primary school pupil views

The information from pupils was collected in two ways: first, from a questionnaire administered after researchers had read pupils a story[6] about a girl who 'bunks off' school; and second, from short discussions with a small number of pupils in each of the sampled classes.

4.2.1 Do primary school pupils ever truant?

70% of primary children admitted that at some time they had wished that they did not have to go to school and 27% had actually skipped school. Proportions varied across the 7 case study LEAs and ranged from a low of 13% in LEA 5 to a high of 44% in LEA 1. Overall responses to the two main questions which tested for pupils' truancy are shown in Table 4.1 below.

Table 4.1: Primary school pupils reporting truancy without parental collusion

	N=662	**Yes**	
		No.	%
1. Have you ever just walked out of school, in school time when you knew you ought not to?		84	13
2. Have you ever really skipped school and done any of these things? (the previous question had asked pupils to say what they would do if they ever skipped school)		141	21

Interestingly, 30 children (17%) claimed to have walked out of school undetected.

---

[6] Wilson, J. *The Dare Game*. Corgi Yearling Books, London, 2001.

4.2.2   Why might pupils want to miss school?

Those who had skipped school gave a variety of reasons for doing so: some said little more than that they just did not like school; many complained of general boredom at school, and just not seeing the point of it. These formed the largest group. Some identified more attractive options like playing out or doing what they wanted.

More specific reasons were:

- being bullied: *They might get bullied or always getting hurt*

- dislike of teachers: *They might always get shouted at school*

- wanting to avoid tests: *They have tests and they hardly know anything*

- bravado: *They try to act hard*

- trouble at home: *They are getting picked on or have problems at home*

- laziness: *They don't want to get out of bed.*

These same reasons were also raised by children in discussions. Children in LEA 1 were particularly vocal on the subject of bullying. 'They [teachers] think they have sorted it out but they don't know how bad it is,' said a Y6 girl in the city LEA 1, 'They don't believe you when you tell them'. 'They [bullies] wait for you by the gate,' added another. In several case studies children suggested that teachers could be unfair. 'Teachers' behaviour and homework is a problem,' said a Y6 boy in rural LEA 6. 'You want to be praised and if you can see that this is not possible it is a problem.' One of LEA 1's self-reported truants remembered one occasion when he had got in trouble without deserving it. 'I was accused of doing something when I hadn't. I was so upset I legged it.' Well over half (61%) of all pupils had had no regrets about truanting.

4.2.3   When is it all right to miss school?

Pupils identified a variety of occasions when their parents would condone their absence from school. The following are examples:

When your brother or sister is ill

When my Mum and Dad have had an argument

When I'm tired

When there is no-one at home and you have to go somewhere else

When we stay at my auntie's house for the weekend and come back on Monday night

I'm going to see my Grandma and haven't seen her for ages

When we have to go shopping, your birthday.

Some children wrote of being allowed to stay home if they were being bullied and a LEA 4 child said that he could stay off school when he said he was ill. The vast majority (96%) of pupils thought that their parents/carers would be

cross to find out they had missed school, but a small minority (24 children or 4%) did not think so.

4.2.4   Children's attitudes to attending school in various situations

Additional information about children's attitudes to truancy emerged from their responses to different 'scenarios'. The average and range of responses to five of these questions is shown in Table 4.2 below.

Table 4.2: Primary school pupils' responses to five imaginary situations

	Go to school	Skip school	Go conditionally	Don't know
	average %, with range amongst all case studies in brackets			
1. Pressure from friends to truant	71 (61–90)	14 (3–19)	No option offered	14 (7–25)
2. Belief that teacher is 'picking on' child	9 (5–15)	12 (0–19)	72 (63–85)	7 (0–11)
3. Fear of bullies	8 (3–18)	16 (7–22)	72 (65–85)	5 (1–7)
4. Worry about getting into trouble	75 (61–91)	9 (3–17)	9 (3–13)	7 (2–12)
5. Work is too hard	18 (15–22)	6 (0–11)	73 (63–82)	3 (0–5)

Figures rounded up to nearest whole number

* Various options were offered for items 2–5: confide in mother/guardian or a teacher, wait and see if other children are going to truant as well

In all the situations only a small proportion of children in each of the case studies said they would skip school. However, being bullied and pressure from friends to truant put pressure on children to compromise (16% and 14% respectively). Reactions to the other two scenarios, which tested the influence of parents, are presented in Table 4.3 below.

Table 4.3:   Primary school pupils' responses to two situations suggesting condoned absence

	Go to school	Compromise	Skip school	Don't know
	average %, with range amongst all case studies in brackets			
Help with shopping	24(16–33)	31 (24–57)	39 (9–50)	6 (0–9)
Look after Gran	20 (9–24)	31 (19–62)	43(19–52)	5 (0–10)

Figures rounded up to nearest whole number.

Most children indicated that they would go to school or compromise when asked by their mother to do some shopping or look after their bedridden grandmother. A substantial proportion claimed they would go to school without doing the shopping but were more likely to skip school to look after a bedridden grandmother (43% agreed). In general, the proportions indicating that they would skip school in either situation is greater than for any other reason. This strongly suggests that if mothers want their children to stay at home, or indicate that they will allow it, large groups of children between the ages of nine and eleven comply with their wishes. As one boy in LEA 1 explained 'family is more important than school'. The others in the group nodded.

4.3 Secondary school pupil views

16% of secondary school pupils had truanted. The proportions were highest in LEA 2 with its predominantly white population and in multi-cultural LEA 3 (26% and 24% respectively). They were lowest in LEA 6, at 6%. The numbers of boys and girls admitting truancy were almost equal: 41 of the former versus 44 of the latter.

38 of the self-reported truants admitted that they began to truant in Year 7 or earlier, and 12 said they had started at primary school. Most were reluctant to describe themselves as habitual or regular truants, however. The frequency of truancy they described ran from 'now and then' through 'fortnightly' and 'twice a week' to 'every few days' or 'constantly'. Several of those who said they would not do it again were put off by approaching examinations and by the fear that their parents might be prosecuted. Others said their truanting had been a one-off and they had no further interest in doing it. In LEA 3, where most truancy was internal (ie pupils missing parts of lessons), pupils pretended to run errands for other teachers, faked illness and deceived supply teachers.

Secondary-level pupils linked their absences to school-related factors of various kinds far more often than they did to home factors. Some, however, were also disarmingly honest about their own habits or personalities, saying that these lay behind their truancy. The reasons they gave are explored in greater detail in the following paragraphs.

4.3.1   Home factors

Very few self-reported truants identified home factors as a cause of their truancy, only four pupils in each of three authorities. One of these pupils had been upset by his parents' separation. Three pupils in different case study areas mentioned staying off, with their parents' permission, for minor social occasions.

4.3.2   School factors

School factors was the largest group of reasons given for missing school. Many pupils (12) said no more than 'School's boring' but others were more specific. Some reasons were related to the function and structure of school; the most common of these were:

- problems with lessons
- problems with teachers
- opportunism
- not wanting to get into trouble
- the complexity of secondary school; and
- fear of returning to school.

Others factors concerned with school as a social institution included:

- being bullied

- peer pressure; and

- social isolation.

A final group of reasons had to do with pupils' individual personalities.

More information about all of these reasons is given below.

4.3.2.1   Problems with lessons (mentioned by 16 pupils in all LEAs). Wanting to miss particular subjects was common, and in two cases was clearly associated with 'internal' truancy rather than skipping school entirely. As one LEA 6 girl explained, 'Sometimes when I'm at school I go to the first lesson but don't go to the second and third, if it's boring and friends are leading me on at the time'. Supply teachers were especially mentioned in connection with disliking lessons.

4.3.2.2   Problems with teachers (mentioned by 16 pupils in all LEAs). Many pupils disliked the teachers who taught them. Some pupils in LEA 1 and LEA 3 had no respect for teachers who shouted a lot and got angry or 'go mad at you' about things that pupils did not see as important. In such cases it was sometimes easier not to go to school than face dealing with teachers and their expectations. As one pupil explained: 'I just didn't want the hassle off my teachers'.

4.3.2.3   Opportunism (two mentions). Opportunism was a cause, particularly of internal truancy. Some pupils said they had absconded when the chance had arisen, sometimes to other classes where their friends were. They considered supply teachers were easy to fool in this way. 'I do it when we have supply teachers because they don't know or care who's in the class,' said a LEA 5 boy.

4.3.2.4   Not wanting to get into trouble (three mentions). A few pupils were afraid they would get into trouble if they attended school. 'I miss because I just feel like I can't take it and if I come into school I know that I am just going to get into trouble anyway,' said a pupil in the city LEA 3. Not having done homework sometimes gave rise to fears of trouble; being on report or having a history of being in trouble were inhibiting factors. As one girl explained: 'They say I'm a pain …it's just school, does it matter?'

4.3.2.5   The complexity of secondary school (one mention.) The transfer from primary to secondary school caused difficulties for some pupils. One girl in LEA 1 explained that she found secondary school so overwhelming that she wanted to escape from it. 'Secondary is harder and there are more people,' she said. 'I'm not frightened of it, but it's just more … complicated.'

4.3.2.6   Fear of returning to school (one mention). An LEA 4 boy, who had been out of school for three years while his family was on the move, was afraid to return.

4.3.2.7 Being bullied (12 mentions in four LEAs) Bullying was a recurring cause of truancy. An LEA 6 girl revealed that she had taken time off to avoid unpleasantness with peers: '…I did fake it. I said I had a pain in the stomach and asked to go home because people were picking on me…' For two other girls bullying had begun in primary school. One, who truanted from Year 3, explained how: 'The boys in my class were pinching me and picking on me the whole time … I didn't want to go to school so I didn't'.

4.3.2.8 Peer pressure (six mentions in four LEAs) Some pupils said they had truanted simply to be with friends.

4.3.2.9 Social isolation (six mentions in three LEAs) Some pupils truanted because they felt lonely or isolated because of difficulties fitting into new schools or following disputes with existing friends. An LEA 5 boy explained how he had 'bunked off' with his first friend in a new school.

4.3.3 Individual factors

Several pupils in five case study authorities blamed missing school on various characteristics of their own personalities, such as laziness, curiosity or temper.

- Four pointed to laziness: they had not wanted to get out of bed, or found it too inconvenient to get themselves there.

- Five young people in three different LEAs revealed that curiosity and daring were the reasons for their truancy. As one boy in LEA 3 put it: 'I wanted to see what it was like. I just wanted to do it, I just wanted to try it out.'

- One girl attributed her truancy to her temper, and said that sometimes she needed time to 'cool off' after a particularly stressful incident at school. 'If you're at school you can't concentrate, it makes you feel ill,' she said. Three LEA 4 boys admitted not coming to school sometimes when they felt 'moody'.

4.4 Views from LEA and school staff

LEA representatives and teachers gave a wide range of views about why some pupils do not attend school. Many of the reasons were related to pupils' home circumstances. These included:

- parents putting a low value on education

- children expected to act as carers

- domestic violence

- parents working long and atypical hours; and

- families not being able to provide school uniforms or equipment.

Other reasons, to do with school, were:

- dislike of particular teachers, subjects or lessons

- bullying and social exclusion

- peer pressure

- primary-secondary school transition; and

- disruptive behaviour in class.

The remaining reasons were associated with individual personalities.

All these reasons are explored further below.

4.4.1   Parents putting a low value on education

LEA representatives and teachers believed that parents putting a low value on education was the most frequently cause of truancy. (This was mentioned by all LEA representatives, 35 primary school teachers, and 17 secondary school teachers.) It was associated with parents condoning truancy in all but the rural LEA. Interestingly, all the primary school teachers thought that independent truancy, ie pupils missing school without the knowledge or collusion of their parents, was virtually unknown. (This contrasts with pupils' self-reported behaviour in which 27% of primary pupils reported being absent without their parents' knowledge.) Teachers also believed that negative parental attitudes were sometimes associated with parents' ignorance of their legal responsibilities towards their children; some parents genuinely believed they had the right to keep children at home as they wanted. It could also be associated with transient families, poor housing and ill health.

LEA and teacher respondents explained how parental under-valuing of education could impact on children's attendance.

- First, parents could give a low priority to ensuring that their children went to school. It became an 'optional extra', as an EWO in LEA 3 put it. This attitude led to a liberal interpretation of weekends, which could include Fridays and stretch to Mondays or later.

- Second, arguably more seriously, it was associated with parents taking their children out of school during term time, sometimes during crucial Key Stage 2 and 3 tests in Years 6 and 9 respectively.

- Third, it could lead to undue pressure on headteachers to authorise absences in order to reach attendance targets. One headteacher admitted that he sometimes authorised absences without telling parents, otherwise his school's 'unauthorised attendance figures would look absolutely shocking'.

- Fourth, parental attitudes could affect children's motivation either to come to school or aspire to high achievement. This was thought more likely when parents were poor role models. An ESW working in LEA 5 thought that parents assume 'that the children will get jobs as dockers as their parents and grandparents did,' he said. 'However, the docks are now closed and

34

those types of jobs are not available any more in the area.' Teachers thought that sometimes parents teach their children to resent the authority represented by a school.

- Fifth, several primary and secondary school teachers believed that parents who put a low value on education often had poor parenting skills. This was sometimes a reflection on parents' own naivety or immaturity. A Y5 teacher in LEA 7 remarked that 'Some of [the parents] are so young, they have no idea how to organise themselves, never mind their offspring'. In such families 'They [the children] don't get up for school and they just do as they want, and school is never encouraged,' said an EWO in LEA 7. Difficulties could get worse as children grew older. A Y8 form teacher in LEA 1 noted that it was common for parents to be 'quite happy to let the kids stay at home rather than get the grief'.

- Sixth, several teachers believed that an attitude which gave education low priority had particular impact on young children. As an LEA 4 representative put it:

  Around Year 7 or 8 or adolescence there is a change ... youngsters start to vote with their feet and decide they don't want to opt into school. But within the primary and infant sector it's parentally condoned, with few exceptions.

- Finally, many respondents believed that attitudes, which put a low value on education, were passed down and across the generations. As an education welfare officer in LEA 1 explained, 'when a child has experienced a negative role model 'then this child becomes an adult and doesn't really care about the education system being an important factor in [his or her own] child's development'.

4.4.2 Children as carers

Parents kept some children away from school to care for them or younger siblings. This could result from domestic difficulties when parents were unwell, either physically or mentally, or having problems with drugs or alcohol. Young carers are most likely to be girls. An EWO reported that teachers do not necessarily know the number or identity of young carers in their schools.

4.4.3 Other home-related factors

Small numbers of education professionals identified three other causes of truancy.

- *Domestic violence*: An education welfare officer in LEA 2 and a small number of teachers in LEAs 1, 3 and 4 commented that sometimes violent relationships between parents and disruption was so great that children stayed at home 'to take care of the house'.

- *Long and atypical working hours*: Teachers in rural LEA 6 and LEA 4, where tourism was an important source of income, pointed out that many parents worked long and anti-social hours or operated bed and breakfast

businesses during term time. This could result in children's absence from school or constant tiredness when they did attend.

- *Lack of school uniform or equipment*: In LEAs 3 and 4 secondary school teachers noted that some parents keep their children off school because they claimed to be unable to afford school uniforms or necessary equipment for their children.

4.4.4   School factors

Both LEA representatives and teachers associated absence from school with school-related reasons as well as home factors. However, only a small number of primary teachers (5 of the 42), identified school factors as a cause of pupils' absence. This contrasts with children's own admissions (see Section 4.2 above). LEAs and teachers believed that some children found school unattractive because of the following factors:

- *Difficulty with work*: Five LEA representatives and 15 teachers mentioned difficulties with pupils' work as a probable cause of truancy. Many young people thought the curriculum was over-academic, irrelevant to their needs and boring. This was exacerbated by undifferentiated teaching and led to a 'vicious cycle' of falling behind in their schoolwork and further absences. Several teachers believed that the embarrassment of getting behind could be as much a deterrent to coming to school as the demands of the work.

- *Dislike of particular teachers, subjects or lessons* (mentioned in all LEAs). Fourteen teachers, 13 in secondary schools, believed that children stay away from school because they dislike particular teachers, subjects or lessons. LEA representatives thought that unimaginative and unenthusiastic teaching, and unsympathetic, uncaring or sarcastic teachers could exacerbate the problem. Other teachers, especially supply teachers, were thought to be disengaged. As a community police sergeant in LEA 3 explained: 'If they [sporadic attenders] see a different teacher every time they come in, they are not going to feel any affiliation for that class or teacher.'

- *Bullying and social exclusion*: Both LEA representatives and teachers believed that peer group problems of various kinds prompted pupils to stay away from school. Being bullied and having no friends were often cited. However, three interviewees pointed out that bullying was used as an excuse to stay away: the root trouble lay with familial attitudes towards school. 'I feel we have an excellent bullying policy in place, and I feel that bullying should not be used as an excuse for unauthorised attendance,' said one in the city LEA 5.

- *Peer pressure to truant* (mentioned in four LEAs): A few respondents thought that some pupils were persuaded to stay away by friends and classmates or to demonstrate their toughness to their peers.

- *The transition from primary to secondary school* (mentioned in two LEAs): Some children appeared to be disturbed by the transition from primary to

secondary school. Respondents thought that large buildings, more teachers, different classrooms and new peer groups cowed many young people.

- *Disruptive class behaviour* (mentioned in one LEA). Some teachers were unable to manage pupil behaviour and, as a consequence, some children stayed away.

4.4.5 Individual factors

A small number of interviewees suggested additional causes of irregular attendance. These included pupils' psychological problems, learning difficulties, behavioural problems, and low self-esteem. An LEA representative suggested that children sometimes refused to go to school as a means of punishing their parents. Teachers in two LEAs noted that sometimes girls stayed off school because they were visiting the homes of older boyfriends, and a small number of pupils stayed away because of embarrassment at personal attributes such as being overweight, the inability to speak English well, laziness or mental health problems.

4.5 Chapter summary

Previous researchers identified a number of possible causes of truancy. These include the influence of friends, relationships with teachers, the curriculum, family circumstances, bullying and the classroom context. In this chapter we explored LEA representatives', teachers' and pupils' views on the causes of truancy. Three main groups of reasons emerged which accord with other published research. These are:

- home circumstances, in particular parental attitudes

- school, its curriculum, social organisation, teachers; and

- other factors related to pupils' personalities, characteristics, and peer group, eg laziness, temper, curiosity or bravado.

Significantly, and unlike other research, we found a high percentage of primary school pupils who claim to have truanted. Findings indicate that:

- 27% of primary school children said they had truanted without the collusion of their parents. In 17% of these cases, the child was able to leave school without being detected.

- Many of these children said the reason they wanted to miss school was boredom and over half were not sorry afterwards. Most of the self-reported truants believed their parents would be angry to discover they had truanted.

- It is critical that primary school children are able to rely on parents, teachers or peers to help them deal with situations that may cause them to think about skipping school.

- 16% of secondary school pupils admitted truanting from school.

- Some secondary school pupils were put off truanting by approaching examinations or the possibility of their parents being prosecuted.

- Secondary school pupils are more likely to attribute their absence from school to school-related factors than home-related factors. These reasons were varied but included problems with lessons, problems with teachers, being bullied, peer pressure and social isolation.

- Most LEA representatives and teachers thought that pupils who had problems with schools attendance had parents who placed a low value on education and therefore were more likely to condone absence. It was thought that those parents who placed a low value on education often had poor parenting skills, which led them to condone absence.

- Most primary school staff believed absence from school of primary-aged children is always parentally condoned.

- Only a small number of primary school staff believed that school factors contributed to primary pupils' absence from school.

- Most LEA representatives and secondary school teachers believed that the school curriculum was not always suited to the child's needs and therefore failed to engage pupils. This led to attendance problems.

- All LEA representatives and many teachers thought that the quality of teaching received by pupils had an impact on their attendance.

5: Parental Involvement

Key findings

- Previous research suggests that, directly or indirectly, family attitudes play a part in pupils' school attendance.

Our research confirmed this general finding but also provides more information about the complexity of the relationship between parental attitudes and their children's attendance at school. Specifically:

- Most parents thought that children who did not attend school regularly would do badly in school work, and that it was necessary for children to get qualifications.

- Many parents believed that children's safety was at risk when they were not in school.

- Many parents believed that missing school occasionally would not harm a child's education.

- Parents felt it was more acceptable to use school time for doctors' appointments than for dentists' appointments.

- Parents who were unhappy with their children's attendance identified problems with teachers, bullying and peer pressure to stay away from school as the main causes of truancy. Other parents added problems with school work to this list.

- Parents of children who had school attendance problems believed regular school attendance was less important than did parents of children who do not necessarily have problems with attendance.

- Fewer parents of children with school attendance problems believed that pupils who did not attend regularly would do badly in their school work. Similarly, a smaller number of these parents believed that children needed qualifications.

- Parents of children with school attendance problems were four times more likely to think that children might have something more important to do at home than at school.

- Parents of children with school attendance problems were more likely to keep children away from school for illness, family holidays and doctors'/dentists' appointments.

5.1 Introduction

Research has suggested that, directly or indirectly, family attitudes play a part in keeping children from school (Kinder, Wakefield & Wilkin, 1996; Kinder, Harland, Wilkin & Wakefield, 1995; Hallam & Roaf, 1997). Teachers believe that family and community factors, such as parentally condoned absence, parents not valuing education, domestic problems, inadequate or inconsistent parenting, economic deprivation and a community lack of self-esteem, were

contributing factors (Kinder *et al*, 1995). This chapter uses information from parents and pupils to explore further parents' views of school attendance. It also presents information about the circumstances in which children believe their parents will condone their absence from school.

5.2   Attitudes to school and attendance

5.2.1   Who took part in the survey?

In total, 373 parents returned questionnaires: 296 in Set One were parents of pupils in the 27 sample schools, who did not necessarily have school attendance problems; and a smaller group of 77 parents in Set Two who had no connection with the sample schools but were contacted through the Educational Welfare Service. In both sets, most respondents were mothers: 87% in Set One and 79 % in Set Two. In addition, Set Two contained a higher percentage of parents from minority ethnic groups: 29% compared to only 7% in Set One.

Table 5.1: Characteristics of parent/guardian providing information

	No. of responses	Relationship to child (%)			
		Mothers	Fathers	Guardians	Other
Set One	296	87	10	2	1
Set Two	77	79	13	3	5

Table 5.2: Racial heritage of parent/guardian

	No. of responses	Racial heritage (%)			
		White	Asian	African-Caribbean	Other
Set One	296	93	3	2	2
Set Two	77	71	16	8	5

5.2.2   What did parents think about school attendance?

More parents in Set One (whose children did not necessarily have school attendance problems) were happy with their children's attendance than those in Set Two (who were EWO clients): 95% and 57% respectively. High proportions in both sets made it clear that they thought education and getting 'certificates' (qualifications) were important, but there were interesting differences between the two parent groups, as can be seen from Figure 5.1 below.

Figure 5.1: Proportions of parents agreeing with various statements about attending school
N=296 (Set One); N=77 (Set Two)
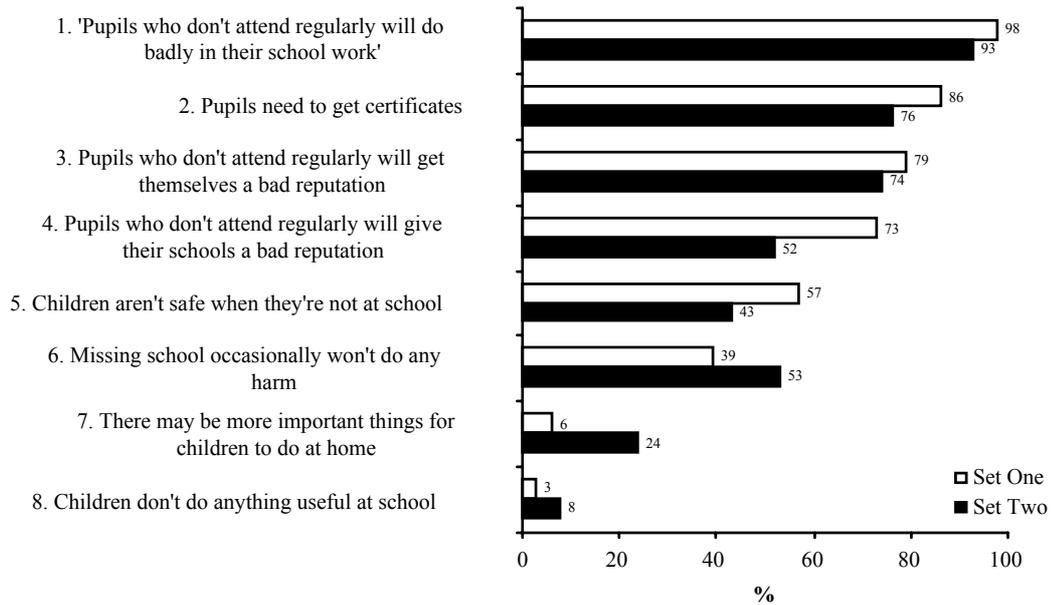
Both sets of parents held similar views on a number of issues. However, more Set Two parents believed that:

- missing school occasionally would not do any harm
- children had more important things to do; and
- children do not do anything useful at school.

95% of parents in each set also believed there were occasions when children should not go to school (see Figure 5.2 below). It is clear that Set One and Two parents have markedly different attitudes to keeping children off school. More Set Two parents consider it is justifiable to keep children off school to see the doctor or dentist and to help at home. These differences are statistically significant.[7]

Figure 5.2: Parents' views of when children should miss school
N=296 (Set One); N=77 (Set Two)

---
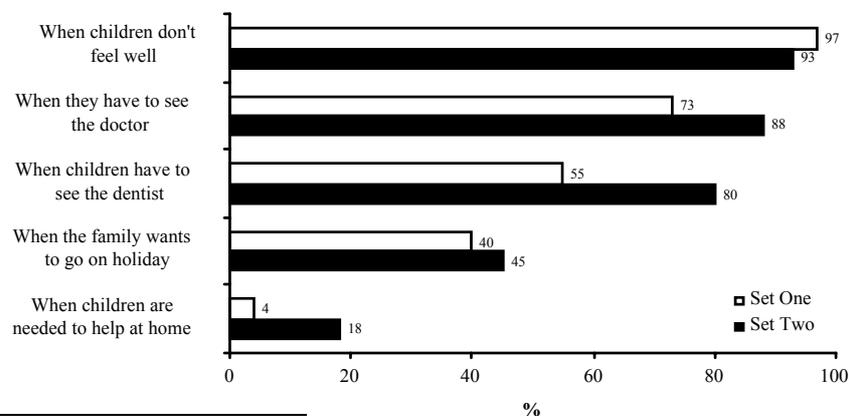
[7] Significance is at the 1% level, which means there is a 99% probability that any parents whose children have attendance problems will be more likely than parents whose children do not necessarily have such problems to keep them away from school to visit the dentist and to help at home.

In Set One no differences were found in the attitudes to school attendance of parents of primary and secondary school pupils.[8] Parents of secondary school pupils were more likely to agree that 'pupils who don't attend regularly will give their schools a bad reputation': 78% of parents with children at secondary school compared to 70% with primary school aged children.

5.3 Parents' views of why children miss school

Parents offered a variety of reasons for why children might be put off going to school. Both sets agreed that bullying was the most likely cause: 83% of Set One and 49% of Set Two (see Table 5.3 below). The latter percentage is more likely to be accurate as it comes from parents with direct experience of children who have absence problems.

Table 5.3: Why children miss school: all respondents
N=296 (Set One); N=77 (Set Two) Total N=373

	Number and percentage of comments made					
	Set One	%	Set Two	%	All	%
Bullying	247	83	38	49	285	76
Problems with particular teachers (personality clashes, being afraid of them)	95	32	17	22	112	30
Problems with work (almost always too hard)	93	32	21	27	114	31
School or work is boring	25	8	4	5	29	8
Having no friends/quarrels with friends	15	5	3	4	1 8	5
Peer pressure	14	5	2	3	16	4

Percentages have been rounded up to the nearest whole number.

Other reasons for not wanting to go to school, mentioned less often, were fear of tests or examinations, tiredness, disruptive classes, poor learning facilities, being in trouble at school and family problems.

It is, however, important to note that Table 5.3 includes views from all parents, most of whom had no direct experience of attendance problems. Parents who were unhappy with their children's attendance at school (sixteen parents in Set One and 33 in Set Two) give a slightly different picture. They highlighted unhappiness with teachers, being bullied and peer pressure as the most common cause of absence. General lack of interest was also very common among parents in Set Two.

Nearly all the parents who were unhappy with their children's attendance indicated that they had tried to address the problem. Persuasion and talking with teachers and education welfare officers were common courses of action (see Table 5.4 below) for both sets of parents. Over half of Set One parents who were unhappy with their children's school attendance and almost two-thirds in Set Two thought that schools had been helpful.

---

[8] It was not possible to do this for Set Two. Because these parents were not linked to the project schools, there was no way to tell if their children attended primary or secondary school.

Table 5.4: Action by parents unhappy with their children's school attendance
N=16 (Set One) and 33 (Set Two)

	Set One		Set Two	
	No.	%	No.	%
I've tried to persuade my child to go to school regularly	9	56	25	76
I've discussed it with a teacher/teachers (other than the headteacher)	9	56	21	64
I've talked to an Education Welfare Officer or someone similar	9	56	30	91
I've punished my child/ren, or threatened punishment	7	44	19	58
I've discussed it with the headteacher	6	38	16	49

5.3.1   Telephone interviews

Eighteen parents, 15 in Set One and 3 in Set Two, elaborated their concerns over the telephone. Five stressed the importance of good communication between home, school and child. Two said how much they appreciated the efforts of school staff, but three, all in Set One, felt unsupported. One of these, a father, said that while the school complained if petty rules had been infringed, it could not be bothered to give feedback about his son's behaviour. A mother had gone so far as to withdraw her child, and was considering court action. The third parent felt that the school's scale of punishments was out of balance, giving pupils no guide to the seriousness of different kinds of behaviour. Concerns centred on bullying, peer pressure, problems with teachers and difficulties with work.

Examples of bullying

- A secondary schoolboy had been bullied by pupils who had held him down on the metro line rails. The parent believed that the school had not tackled the bullying and eventually the boy had lost his temper and was suspended. After this it was hard to get him to school (Set One).

- A boy with epilepsy was bullied in a secondary school. One pupil in his Y7 class had acquired a criminal record at primary school for hitting another child with an iron bar. Her son frequently came home bruised and saying he had had his dinner money taken from him (Set One).

- Another mother reported that her daughter was bullied after she returned to school after a long absence in hospital, followed by a holiday (Set Two).

An example of peer pressure

- A mother was very concerned about her son who no longer wanted to go to secondary school because two of his friends had been expelled and one had chosen to attend school elsewhere. Her son now wanted to be expelled so that he too could choose where and when to attend school and what to study, and be taxied to school in the mornings (Set One).

Examples of problems with teachers

- A mother reported that her daughter, who usually liked her primary school, had became withdrawn on moving into the class of a teacher who had the reputation of being unsympathetic to children who felt ill (Set One).

- Another mother indicated that her daughter's problems had begun at primary school when a teacher, whom the mother described as 'very demanding and not understanding', began to teach her (Set One).

> • Another parent was concerned about her daughter, who had a history of being in trouble at secondary school. Her daughter felt the teachers 'picked on' her. She was now depressed and had begun to lose weight and suffer panic attacks (Set Two).

Examples of problems with work

• One mother had a son who had done well in his primary school and been very excited about starting at secondary school. However, with a stream of supply teachers, especially for his favourite subjects (science and maths), he was often repeating work and was bored and disenchanted. His attitude to school changed and he began to report aches and pains, and wanted to stay at home (Set One).

• One secondary school had alerted a mother to her son's dodging off classes which he disliked. Sometimes he left the school to 'hang about' near the leisure centre and she was worried for his safety. She had tried to impress on her son how important it was to go to school and get qualifications for a good job (Set One).

It is clear that parents think children usually miss school for school-related reasons. This stands in some contrast to teachers' and EWOs' views reported in Chapter 4, which suggest that home factors play a major part. However, the differences in attitudes to attendance between parents in Sets One and Two gives some support to teachers' and EWOs' opinions, as does the information from pupils which we report below.

5.4 When did pupils think parents would sanction absence?

All 662 primary school pupils were asked in a short questionnaire when their mothers or guardians would agree to them missing school. Over a tenth (77 pupils), reported that their parents would condone their absence. Just under half (34) had also reported truancy. The circumstances they described are categorised in Table 5.5 below. The most common reason, offered by 20%, was 'something more important to do'.

Table 5.5: Situations in which primary pupils thought their parents would condone absence

	N=77	Numbers of comments	%
Something more important to do		16	20
Going to visit relatives (at home or in hospital) or relatives coming to visit		13	16
Family problems, emergencies		8	10
Birthdays		8	10
Keeping Mum company/helping her		8	10

Percentages have been rounded up to the nearest whole number.

Smaller numbers claimed that parents would allow them to stay at home when they were tired, had transport difficulties, during bad weather, when they had problems with teachers, bullying, on Monday and Fridays, after arguments between parents, and as a reward or punishment.

5.5 Chapter summary

Previous research suggests that family attitudes play a part in pupils' school attendance. Our research confirmed this general finding but also provides more information about the complexity of the relationship between parental attitudes and their children's attendance at school. Specifically:

Most parents

- thought it was important that pupils attended school regularly

- believed that poor attendance and poor work were connected; and

- believed that children needed to get qualifications from school.

However,

- Fewer parents whose children had attendance problems held these beliefs, and they were more ready to keep children at home, particularly if they needed help at home.

- More parents whose children had attendance problems thought it did no harm for children to miss school occasionally. They were also less likely to think that children's safety was at risk if children were not at school.

- Parents who were unhappy with their children's attendance were more likely to think that children missed school because of problems with teachers, bullying and peer pressure. Further reasons for absence included boredom with school and problems with friends.

- Parents who were happy with their children's attendance also identified difficulties with school as a cause of truancy.

- Over a tenth of the primary school pupils surveyed indicated that their parents would condone absence for a variety of reasons.

6: Ways of Improving Attendance

Key findings

Previous researchers identified a variety of ways to improve attendance. These included service level strategies, prevention strategies, initial response to absence, early intervention, strategies aimed at pupils who had attendance problems, and initiatives with disaffected pupils.

We also found that LEAs and schools had developed various ways of encouraging good attendance and dealing with poor attenders. Specifically:

- Most LEAs actively encouraged schools to take responsibility for improving pupil attendance and supported them in a variety of ways. These included setting targets, raising awareness and discouraging schools to authorise absences.

- All LEAs reported links with other agencies, such as EWO, police, social work and community-based organisations. Many of these links were in the early stages of development, and other agencies had their own agendas, which hindered co-operation.

- LEAs promoted work with parents, awareness raising with the general public and multi-agency working.

- Most schools made 'first day calls' when pupils were absent. Those with dedicated staff were most likely to do this for all absences.

- Secondary schools were more likely than primary schools to have dedicated staff able to make these calls. However, all staff thought they were useful.

- Schools promoted good attendance through reward schemes, improvements to school ethos and facilities, closer links between primary and secondary schools and building good relationships with parents.

- Nearly all schools used electronic registration systems to track and analyse attendance figures. Some undertook truancy sweeps. Despite these systems determined pupils continued to skip classes, especially when being taught by supply teachers.

- Many interviewees appreciated the work done by EWOs but satisfaction with the frequency and type of their input varied.

- LEAs and schools adopted a variety of ways of supporting and reintegrating poor attenders. The main ones were EWOs, pastoral systems and one-to-one discussions. Other measures used were learning mentors, social inclusion units, adapted timetables, clubs, group work, one-to-one counselling, befriending and collection schemes. Views of their effectiveness varied.

6.1 Introduction

Much recent research attention has focused on identifying ways in which LEAs and schools could encourage good attendance, while at the same time provide support for poor attenders (Hallam, 1996; Hallam & Roaf, 1997). Some have highlighted the importance of early intervention (Solomon & Rogers, 2001; Kinder *et al,* 1999) as a way of preventing attendance problems from developing. Atkinson *et al* (2000) believe there is a need for effective preventative intervention which focuses on creating a climate which encourages pupils to come to school, and on work with individual pupils who have attendance problems. Multi-agency working is seen as one way in which children at risk of poor attendance can be supported. However, as Atkinson and Kinder (2000) argue, in their evaluation of multi-agency support teams (MAST) in North Lincolnshire, team members can experience the tension between pressure to work with individual pupils and pressure to work with the school systems. Easen *et al* (1997) suggest that attendance projects aimed at younger children, who have not yet become disaffected, are likely to be a much more effective and cost-effective way of intervening than persuading long-term non-attenders to return to school. This chapter explores the measures taken to improve school attendance in the 7 LEAs and 27 schools in our sample. It draws on data from LEA representatives, teachers and members of other professions, who support schools and parents.

6.2 Views from the LEAs

LEA representatives identified a wide range of measures which they had introduced to address local circumstances. These included working with:

- schools

- parents

- general awareness raising; and

- other agencies.

Details of each are presented below.

6.2.1   Work with schools

Six LEAs focused their strategies on encouraging schools to deal with attendance issues mainly through:

- *Targeting efforts*: Four LEAs helped schools target their efforts in order to have the greatest impact on attendance. LEA 2 advocated supporting 'redeemable' poor attenders; LEA 6, focusing on schools where the discrepancy between primary and secondary attendance levels was greatest, had appointed a transitions officer; LEA 1 encouraged schools to give close attention to attendance patterns in order to identify poor attenders as early as possible, and was investing considerable resources in helping schools analyse their data.

- *Raising awareness of attendance:* Five LEAs aimed to raise schools' general awareness of attendance. As an informant from LEA 6 explained this included ensuring that the school ethos was inclusive and that teachers were able to deal with disruptive behaviour.

- *Discouraging schools from authorising absences:* Two LEAs reported that they discouraged schools from authorising absence, especially holidays taken during term time. One had produced new guidelines about this and the other was planning them.

Three LEA representatives stressed the need to shift responsibility for dealing with attendance from the EWS to schools. Nevertheless, the support of the EWS was appreciated. Interestingly, the location, 'ownership' and independence of EWOs were raised by some. LEA 2 maintained control of the EWO budget and LEA 7 wanted to retain the service at the authority level in order to maintain the objectivity of the service.

Other LEA support measures included:

- support materials, such as videos aimed at parents and children, 'good practice' templates, projects into which schools could buy and complete assistance packages

- LEA-based EWOs teaching Personal, Social and Health Education (PHSE) lessons

- a scheme to aid primary–secondary school transition

- rewards for good or improved attenders, often presented by LEA-based EWOs

- annual checks of registers as legal documents.

LEA 3 had also tried encouraging schools to use 'parent pagers'. These worked well in one school, where families were committed to ensuring their children attended school and nearly all had telephones. However, overall LEAs thought that they had been unsuccessful. None of the measures listed above was being officially evaluated.

6.2.2   Work with parents

LEAs worked with parents by using what the representative from LEA 6 called a 'pincer' approach: support and admonition. Three LEAs encouraged schools to break down barriers with parents through means such as mounting parenting skills, or even 'keep fit', classes for them. A senior EWO saw this as an important school obligation. 'If parents have a negative attitude to schools,' he said, 'then schools have to take responsibility for taking parents on board'. In LEA 6, a further supportive measure was the appointment of a social inclusion standards officer to work with the parents of the children most at risk.

Three LEAs had adopted:

- written contracts between EWOs, parents and schools
- the appointment of a parenting officer to work with a youth offending team; and
- school-based attendance panels bringing together parents and representatives from the ESW, police service and the Authority's legal department.

In addition to these supportive approaches, three LEA representatives indicated that their authorities would prosecute the parents of the most intransigent truants. LEAs' views on prosecution varied. One reported that the number of prosecutions within the Authority had doubled in the previous year. Another stressed that while the Authority was active in prosecutions it was essential that there should be a 'clear road to court', ie that everyone involved understood each step along the road. Two LEA representatives saw prosecutions as problematic. One believed the messages coming to the courts from the Home Office and the DfES were conflicting and sentences were inconsistent or inappropriate. The other was reluctant to prosecute because it did not necessarily result in the child's return to school.

6.2.3 Awareness-raising measures beyond the schools

Almost all the LEA representatives thought it was important to raise the public's awareness of attendance issues. Examples of actions taken include:

- LEA 1 produced publicity measures including the use of posters on buses and hoardings, local radio and press coverage.

- Three LEAs undertook truancy sweeps at various levels, although opinion about the efficacy of such sweeps was questioned by some (eg LEA 6). A number agreed that sweeps were good for public relations and raising the visibility of attendance but did not necessarily deter truants. As a senior EWO in LEA 7 explained:

    [Truancy sweeps] *are about saying to the community a) we are keeping you safe, if you think that truants are a source of community hassle; b) we are saying to parents, if you allow your children to wander around, they will be picked up.*

- Two LEAs intended to involve schools in following up what could be learned from the sweeps and identifying further interventions.

- One LEA was considering using learning mentors.

6.2.4 Work with other agencies

LEAs worked with a range of agencies in order to combat poor attendance. These included education-related professionals, such as school nurses and educational psychologists. Other frequently-used agencies were:

- the police service and youth liaison officers (mentioned by all LEAs)
- the social services (five LEAs)

- local businesses and projects (three LEAs); and

- health boards (two LEAs).

Individual LEAs were also working with:

- housing associations

- local religious leaders

- neighbourhood wardens

- transport groups; and

- the parks police.

Representatives in four LEAs made it clear they thought such links were important. 'Schools can't go it alone', said one. Others had mixed views. The head of social inclusion in LEA 1 felt it was too early to judge such links. LEA 4 valued well-established relations between the EWS and the local police service. The representative of LEA 6 had found links with the social services 'very helpful', saying they were 'changing the way we work with alienated children in the school'. There were, however, less positive aspects. Some links were said to be slow in developing, sometimes because of staff changes or agencies' differing priorities. As an LEA representative explained:

> ... some deeply entrenched home issues that for various reasons the social services and our partner agencies feel are not high enough profile for them. So we are carrying a lot of their workload of very early preventative stuff, which sometimes becomes quite hairy and then you have to demand a service ... That is one of our big areas where there is a hole.

Despite these reservations about multi-agency working, all LEA representatives believed the measures they had introduced would help. Some described them as 'quite good'; three reported that unauthorised absence levels had come down in the past few years, and Education Development Plan (EDP) targets had been reached for both secondary and primary schools. Interviewees in two of these LEAs also believed schools now accepted the need to 'get away from the reactive work'. Representatives in the remaining two LEAs were confident of future improvement.

6.3 Other professionals' views

The police and other community representatives interviewed were involved in a range of measures. The police service was more often involved in:

- truancy sweeps; and

- talks to pupils about drugs, pupil safety and crime.

Occasionally, police officers accompanied EWOs on home visits and became involved in truancy panels and multi-professional events. The police service representative in LEA 1 planned to work more closely with schools by basing officers in the school buildings. They would be able to follow up crime, take responsibility for pupil safety and help identify pupils likely to be truants.

Two community project leaders in LEA 1 also worked with severely disaffected young people for whom the school-based approach to learning had not worked. They planned to use youth centres and libraries for pupils who would not go to school, thus building a 'virtual learning centre'.

Views about the efficacy of such measures varied. A police service representative in LEA 2 believed his presence during home visits helped reinforce the EWO's message, and that truancy patrols and sweeps were generally useful. But a police sergeant thought that the effectiveness of truancy patrols was limited because pupils stopped in the borough could only be returned to schools within that borough, and if they 'escaped' into a neighbouring borough they could not be pursued. Police service representatives in LEAs 1 and 4 pointed out that the extent of police service involvement with truancy had to be limited, because the service had its own priorities. These were to reduce street crime and the numbers of its victims.

A senior court officer in LEA 6, who worked one-to-one with young people aged from 10 to 17 with statutory orders, believed her work was valuable. She had more time than EWOs to talk to the young people and isolate the causes of their frustration. Even then, however, she noted it was not always possible to fathom the reasons behind it. She advocated more places in pupil referral units to help reintegrate severely disaffected pupils into school.

6.4 School registration and immediate follow-up procedures

6.4.1   Systems in use

All but one of the primary schools and all the secondary schools visited used some form of electronic system to process their attendance data. The means of inputting data varied: six of the primary and three of the secondary schools transferred information manually from registers; others made use of optical mark recognition (OMR) sheets and four secondary schools employed a complete electronic package. Two secondary schools were planning to upgrade their systems either this year or next, but all the schools were able to generate class and individual statistics for pupil reports, reward schemes and identification of poor attenders.

6.4.2   Follow-up after registration

Schools varied in the way they followed up absences. Twenty-one of the 27 schools from all the LEAs made 'first day calls'; 14 called the homes of all absent pupils and seven targeted those of the most persistent absentees. Seventeen of the schools, six primary and eleven secondary, had dedicated staff such as attendance officers, learning mentors, home-school liaison teachers and school-based EWOs to help with attendance issues. Schools with dedicated support staff tended to make first day calls. However, a large secondary school in LEA 1 was considering the use of a commercial company to undertake first day calling because existing staff felt they could not cope with the volume of absences. Twelve of the 14 secondary schools operated a first day calling system, compared to only nine of the primary schools.

First day calling was complemented by other tactics to chase up absenteeism. These included letters to parents and visits to homes by EWOs, home-school liaison officers, teachers and even headteachers. At best, this could help establish a working relationship with the parent, especially if the class teacher or headteacher made the call; at worst, teachers would be given reasons which they felt bound to accept as authorised absence, but which some thought might be masking parentally condoned truancy.

6.4.3   *Satisfaction with registration procedures and immediate follow-up*

Teachers' satisfaction with existing registration systems was mixed. They made the following points.

- Many teachers expressed nostalgia for the old registers, in which it had been easier to look for patterns of absence. Most, however, also appreciated the advantages of electronic systems, which enabled rapid retrieval of statistics.

- Staff who were accustomed to all-electronic registration systems were generally pleased with them.

- First day calling was widely regarded as effective. An LEA 2 secondary school showed that 60% of those contacted on the first day of absence returned to school the next day. Several secondary schools reported a sudden drop in unexplained absence when first day calling had been introduced and pupils realised their parents would be contacted.

- Most teachers were happy to have someone else contacting parents.

- Staff making the calls, even when their remits were dedicated to attendance matters, did not always have time to call every parent on their list.

- Staff in some schools reported great difficulty reaching parents by telephone. This happened when telephone lines had been disconnected, mobile phone numbers changed or when parents possessed new caller display equipment.

- The efficiency of registration and immediate follow-up systems depended on teachers' prompt receipt of messages, which was not always possible when the attendance officer or equivalent was part-time.

Several of the secondary school pupils made additional points about registration and follow-up systems. These included:

- Electronic systems deterred internal truancy.

- Pupils were more likely to be internal truants when taught by supply teachers who may not detect their absence.

- Some pupils believed determined truants would find a way to cheat 'swipe-card' system, and others worried that they would be bullied into 'swiping' cards on behalf of absent classmates.

6.5 School strategies to promote good attendance

Schools described five broad means of promoting good attendance:

- group competitions
- individual awards
- improved school ethos and facilities
- building good relationships with parents; and
- information-sharing between primary and secondary school staff.

6.5.1   Group competitions

Thirteen of the 27 schools employed group competitions. these were especially common at primary school level. These usually took the form of 'attendance challenges' in which classes competed with each other for the best attendance and fewest late arrivals. The winning classes received rewards which might be tangible prizes, their choice of a class activity, or the status of being recognised at school assemblies.

6.5.2   Individual awards

Almost all schools (11 of the primaries and 12 of the secondaries) used individual awards. Definitions of 'good attendance' varied from better than 90% to not less than 100%. Rewards were often badges or certificates, sometimes supplemented by voucher prizes or sweets. In one secondary school the overall winner each year could choose a prize or a trip. Winning pupils in two schools, a primary and a secondary, were given membership of an 'over 95% club' for which attendance had to have been 95% or better in the preceding half term period. This entitled pupils to privileges such as non-uniform days, trips out of school and entitlement to enter a draw for local Premiership team football tickets (with alternative prizes for those not keen on football). Winners in four of the secondary schools were given automatic entry to prize draws, with cash prizes of (typically) £100 or desirable items such as mountain bikes and televisions. Teachers in two LEA 4 schools reported that they sometimes used their own incentives within their form groups, giving prizes 'from their own back pockets'.

6.5.3   Improved school ethos and facilities

Interviewees in five LEAs tried to make the school's ethos and facilities more attractive to pupils. These included activity clubs to encourage poor attenders to come to school clubs and Breakfast Clubs to provide children with a good start to the school day.

Three secondary school headteachers in LEAs 1 and 5 emphasised the need to treat pupils more like adults and give them greater ownership of their school. In an LEA 1 secondary school the headteacher had re-introduced school uniform in an effort to raise school ethos. The head of the other secondary school aimed to improve the quality of teaching and learning by reducing class sizes. 'Staff will be able to teach smaller groups and give them more attention,' he

explained. Pupils said they were more likely to come to school if relationships between staff and pupils improved and where there were improved facilities for them to meet their friends.

6.5.4   Building good relationships with parents

Primary teachers believed that building good relationships with parents from as early a stage as possible was important. Four primary school headteachers thought it particularly important to get to know parents who had difficult lives because they were more likely to have problems in getting their children to school regularly.

Human resources to build these relationships varied widely and having an attendance officer, learning mentor or liaison teacher with time to go out and visit the family was seen as helpful. One headteacher became personally involved by taking a box of biscuits as a 'thank you' to a mother whose children's attendance had improved. 'The staff thought I was absolutely crazy,' she said, 'but as a result of that [the mother's] six children's attendance improved and one of them actually got 95% in one of the terms'.

6.5.5   Information-sharing between primary and secondary school staff

Staff in three secondary schools in LEAs 1, 2 and 7 drew attention to their focus on primary–secondary school transition. The head of Year 7 in a LEA 7 school visited all 34 of her school's feeder primaries in the autumn term. She used information about pupils' primary school attendance to identify pupils likely to find transition difficult and prepare support for them. The attendance officer attached to an LEA 2 secondary school held individual meetings with each primary school child about to transfer who had less than 90% attendance.

6.6 School strategies to deal with poor attendance

The first half of this chapter looked at ways in which LEAs, schools and other agencies supported good attendance. We now turn to the measures they take to deal with pupils whose attendance is poor. These can be grouped into three categories:

- EWS and other agency involvement
- supporting and reintegrating pupils; and
- catching and punishing truants.

6.6.1   Educational welfare service and other agency involvement

EWOs supported parents by visiting them at home or meeting them in school. This not only supported families but also reminded them of their legal responsibilities and the possibility of prosecution. The frequency of EWO visits to schools varied according to LEA policy, but usually entailed weekly or fortnightly visits to primary schools and at least once a week or more in secondary schools.

Teachers' satisfaction with the work done by EWOs varied. A Year 6 primary school teacher in LEA 1 expressed concern at the approach taken by the EWO appointed to her school, because she appeared to be over-reluctant either to make home visits or to go out into the community looking for absentees and bringing them back to school. In contrast, the home-school liaison teacher in one of the LEA 2 primary schools appreciated the flexible relationship she had with her school's EWO, whom she felt she could telephone for advice anytime. 'We try to work together,' she said.

Staff in three of the secondary schools in LEAs 6 and 7 praised the input of the EWOs pointing to their flexibility, skill and knowledge of professional networks. The headteacher of an LEA 1 secondary school felt that the EWO allocated to the school helped only marginally because of the size of the school and scale of its problems. He stressed that he understood why many local schools were buying the services of former LEA EWOs for themselves. 'They are being snapped up,' he said. Other obstacles to seamless school-EWO working included communication difficulties with other LEAs when schools took in pupils from outside its own LEA, and EWOs' inability to share all the information uncovered in their case work with school staff, for reasons of confidentiality.

Views in schools were mixed with regard to the support that came from other professionals. Secondary teachers in the two LEA 6 schools were satisfied with the multi-agency input they received from workers from outreach, health and youth agencies. Both schools praised the efforts of a social worker who ran an extra-curricular programme for disaffected young people, including poor attenders. In contrast, the headteacher of an LEA 4 primary school expressed dissatisfaction with the support that her school received from health and social services. The difficulty was especially acute in relation to the social services because they required parental consent before getting involved. She viewed the future with foreboding:

> It's that watching the back and playing the legalistic game which in the long run is going to harm children, because schools can't do it alone. We can only do it [in] co-operation with health, with housing, with the education welfare service, the psychological service. Unless that support is forthcoming, our ability to do our job is going to be seriously limited and children are going to suffer, fall through the system.

6.6.3   Supporting and reintegrating pupils

EWOs in all schools were able to support and reintegrate absentees. They drew on social services, mental health professionals and other agencies to help them achieve this. Established pastoral systems in secondary schools were also an important ongoing element of the support for pupils with poor attendance. Form tutors emphasised their own roles here, and stressed the need for one-to-one discussions with the pupils in their groups because, as one put it: 'These kids would rather die than lose their street-cred'. However, some tutors pointed out that there was little time for extended discussion of individual issues in the meetings with their form groups.

In addition to these systems staff in approximately half the schools reported that special arrangements were in place to support and reintegrate poor attenders on their return. They included:

- the availability of learning mentors

- social inclusion or equivalent units staffed variously by teachers, learning mentors, Connexions staff, pastoral staff and counsellors

- adapted or negotiated timetables

- school-developed work packs

- group work for poor attenders, including sessions for anger management, boosting self-esteem and bereavement counselling

- attendance clinics aiming to understand the cause of pupils' absence and encourage attendance; and

- sports leadership projects for Y9s to boost self-esteem

- one-to-one counselling

- clubs, such as the Attendance Club of a LEA 5 school, which brought together poor and good attenders

- other 'buddying' and befriending schemes whereby older pupils mentored young poor attenders; and

- arrangements for staff to collect children and bring them to school if their parents could not.

Primary and secondary school teachers acknowledged that it was helpful to have other adults with whom children could talk. These included learning mentors, social inclusion managers and home-school liaison officers. Their ability to visit homes during the teaching day was especially valued, as was the possibility of their finding solutions without referring truants to the EWS. Staff in two schools pointed out how learning mentors could make, 'dramatic changes' in helping teachers build relationships with poor attenders. A learning mentor explained how it was helpful to have 'a lot of bodies' working on poor attendance so that a 'whole range of tracking and support' measures could be put in place.

However, not every school had this level and variety of support. One teacher in an LEA 2 secondary school argued that as schools tried to become more inclusive:

> *There should be more other professionals established within school or in a group of schools, that we can call upon, who can get to know children, mentor them and counsel them. We simply don't have the time and I am not trained to do that…*

However, a headteacher in another school had no desire to manage such multi-disciplinary teams and suggested that a designated appointee would be helpful.

6.6.4   Catching and punishing truants

Schools used a variety of measures to detect truancy. These included:

- tight security systems controlling entry and exit points, sometimes with CCTV cameras and security guards on the gate

- truancy patrols in the school vicinity; and

- school-based truancy sweeps, sometimes requiring the help of other schools' EWOs as well as a school's own.

In one school, senior staff started the day by rounding up post-registration truants who congregated in an adjacent sports ground to plan their day. They also used reports from shopkeepers or local residents (especially in the rural LEA 6), and formal truancy sweeps in conjunction with the police. School-based truancy sweeps were mentioned in three secondary schools, but were very demanding of staff time.

Despite the security, pupils reported that there were still ways to 'escape' from school. Pupils suggested that internal truancy often went undetected, especially in the presence of supply teachers. Some pupils, who would not skip whole days of school because they knew that their parents would be informed, were prepared to skip some classes, because they were less likely to be detected and reported.

Punishments usually involved putting the pupil 'on report', which meant that each teacher had to sign a form for them at every lesson, and detention. Pupils did not think that this was an effective deterrent. In LEA 3, a form tutor explained how the pupils were more likely to stay away to avoid designated detention days. 'Children are clever at manipulating when they are to be in school and when's best to stay away', she commented, 'so avoiding detention is normal'. In a LEA 5 school, a teacher reported that persistent absentees would be excluded from special activities. Most pupils indicated that the greatest deterrents were fears of parental reaction, and that parents would be taken to court and fined, or sent to jail.

6.7 Effectiveness of measures dealing with attendance

Teachers had mixed views on the efficacy of measures taken against truants. Teachers in five schools thought it was difficult to judge; while those in three primary and one secondary school thought the measures were succeeding. However both groups offered no real evidence to substantiate their views. In contrast, the headteacher of an LEA 1 primary school could point to an overall rise from 91% to 94% in the school's attendance figures. A school-based attendance officer in an LEA 5 primary school attributed her success to the lunchtime attendance club. Teachers in a secondary school felt the improvement in the school environment, an all-electronic registration system and removing the names of very long-term absentees from the school register had resulted in attendance rates rising from 70%'s to the 90%'s.

In contrast, staff in a large LEA secondary school felt that little headway was being made in spite of a heavy investment of staff time in different measures, and the school's attendance figures had dropped since the previous year. In most schools, however, staff opinion about the effectiveness of various measures was mixed.

6.7.1 Features associated with effectiveness

Teachers associated the following with effective ways of dealing with poor attendance:

- offering returners a gradual way back into learning, through negotiated timetables, social inclusion units, help from learning mentors and being taught by a limited number of teachers

- developing pupils' and families' pride in the school

- ensuring that families saw education as offering something positive

- an improved school environment

- appropriate rewards for different age groups

- perseverance; and

- using different approaches with different pupils and families.

6.7.2 Obstacles to effectiveness

Obstacles to dealing effectively with poor attendance were:

- concern that reward schemes were not sustainable, because pupils got used to them and expected more sophisticated and costly rewards

- the limited value of some award schemes, which some classes and children felt they would never win

- the difficulty of reaching 'hard-line' poor attenders with award schemes

- the amount of staff time and effort given to setting up and running some of the measures

- the amount of staff time spent in communicating with parents who spoke no English

- children's dislike of measures that targeted them because of their ethnicity, and reluctance to make use of this help; and

- the difficulty of improving stabilised attendance levels.

6.8 Chapter summary

This chapter presented the evidence on how LEAs, schools and members of other professions encourage good school attendance. The findings accord with other published research by identifying a variety of strategies currently in use, which aim either to encouragement good attendance or to provide ways of dealing with poor attendance. Specifically in our sample:

- Most LEAs actively encouraged schools to take responsibility for improving pupil attendance and supported them in a variety of ways. These included setting targets, raising awareness and discouraging schools to authorise absences.

- All LEAs reported links with other agencies, such as EWO, police, social work and community-based organisations. Many of these links were in the early stages of development, and other agencies had their own agendas, which hindered co-operation.

- LEAs promoted work with parents, general awareness raising with the general public and multi-agency working.

- Most schools made 'first-day calls' when pupils were absent. Those with dedicated support staff were most likely to do this for all absences.

- Secondary schools were more likely than primary schools to have dedicated support staff able to make these calls. However, all staff thought they were useful.

- Schools promoted good attendance through reward schemes, improvements to school ethos and facilities, closer links between primary and secondary schools and building good relationships with parents.

- Nearly all schools used electronic registration systems to track and analyse attendance figures. Some undertook truancy sweeps. Despite these systems determined pupils continued to skip classes, especially when being taught by supply teachers.

- Many teachers appreciated the work done by EWOs but satisfaction with the frequency and type of their input varied.

- LEAs and schools adopted a variety of ways of supporting and reintegrating poor attenders. The main ways were EWOs, pastoral systems and one-to-one discussions. A number of schools used learning mentors, social inclusion units, adapted timetables, clubs, group work, one-to-one counselling, befriending and collection schemes. Views on their effectiveness varied.

7: Discussion and Comment

Key points

- 27% of primary school children truant; this is more than is widely believed.

- Children who develop an early habit of truancy are more likely to truant as they grow older. Early intervention would be most valuable.

- White girls in Years 7, 8, and 9 in all-white secondary schools are more likely to truant than white boys at that stage, but less likely to truant than white boys in Years 7 and 8 in schools with a mixed racial intake.

- The causes of absence are multiple, complex and contested. Parents and pupils identify school-related factors as causes of truancy, but LEA representatives and teachers believe that parental attitudes and home environment are more likely causes.

- LEAs and schools employ a variety of strategies to encourage good attendance and deal with poor attendance. These include electronic registration systems, truancy sweeps, and contact with parents and support for pupils with poor attendance.

- LEAs and schools have begun to work with other agencies, such as EWOs, health, police and social work, in order to address the complexity of attendance problems. There are, however, tensions in multi-agency working because each agency has its own priorities.

- Dealing with absence problems is costly and in spite of the many measures introduced to improve attendance levels, the results have, so far been limited. The value for money of these measures needs exploring further.

- Absence causes most harm to the truants themselves, who are a minority of the school population. The effects on other pupils and teachers varied, but to some extent returning truants disrupt the learning of other pupils, divert the teachers' attention and frustrate and demoralise teachers.

- Many persistent poor attenders report that they were bored with school and the curriculum. In addition, they were more easily able to truant when taught by supply teachers.

- A stronger focus on developing appropriate curricula, teaching styles and school ethos is needed. Very persistent truants may benefit from school alternatives.

- Schools apply different criteria in authorising absences; so long as this is the case few safe conclusions about the scale of the problem or the efficacy of various measures can be drawn from the resulting data.

7.1 Introduction

This study, as well as other research (Kinder *et al*, 1995; Malcolm *et al*, 1996) confirms that pupils' absence is a complex and perplexing issue. It has implications not only for education but also for other aspects of society and other Government initiatives to improve employment prospects, social inclusion, urban regeneration, youth crime and safer cities. It is also clear that the causes and effects of absence, which emerge from this current research, are often interconnected but also contested. The overall message is that some pupils appear to be caught in a cycle of poor attendance, which affects their attainment and attitude toward school and leads on to subsequent unauthorised absence. LEAs, teachers and other professionals have devised numerous measures to encourage good attendance and deal with poor attenders. Views on the efficacy of these are mixed. By way of a conclusion, we highlight issues arising from our research which merit further consideration.

7.2 More primary school children truant than was believed

This research set out to examine the views of younger pupils about the causes and effects of truancy. We found that 27% of primary pupils compared to 16% of secondary pupils admitted missing school at some point. Even allowing for the possibility that some children might have exaggerated, this is a high proportion. We also believe that it is conservative as it does not include absences, which were parentally condoned, or the views of long-term truants who were not necessarily in school when the research was conducted.

There is also a mismatch between pupils' truanting behaviour and teachers' perceptions of that behaviour. Over a quarter of the primary school children in the study had missed school at some time without their parents' knowledge but most primary school teachers thought that truancy in primary schools was rare. This suggests a need for LEAs and teachers to re-examine their strategies for dealing with absence amongst younger children. While there can be little doubt that primary school staff are correct in their claims that some parents condone truancy, the current research suggests that younger children can and do 'vote with their feet'. The evidence of the current study, therefore, lends support to the view expressed by other researchers (Learmonth, 1995; Easen, Clark & Wootten, 1997) that strategies to deal with poor attendance should focus on younger children.

7.3 Truancy becomes a habit

The evidence also suggests that the proportions of pupils reporting that they have truanted without their parents' knowledge rises by year group. Within our sample, age nine was a peak age for primary school boys to attempt to truant. Some said they had skipped school much younger than this. There was, however, a dip in pupils' reported truancy in Year 7, but by Year 8 the numbers had risen again. It is interesting, however, that the proportion of all pupils reporting independent truancy was lower in secondary schools than in primary

schools. It may be that during Year 7 pupils who had truanted in the past are buoyed up by the prospect of the 'fresh start', or lack the courage to truant in a new, larger and unfamiliar school. By Year 8 those feelings may have worn off. Several of the secondary school truants revealed that their truanting went back to primary school years, suggesting that pupils establish habits earlier in their school careers which they find difficult to break. Given that many truants thought that secondary school work was harder and the environment more complex than at primary school, the danger is that the habit of poor attendance will only be strengthened at secondary school level. We believe that the consequences for young children of being alienated from school are likely to be far greater than for secondary school pupils. There is, therefore, a stronger argument for targeting support to prevent truancy becoming an early-acquired habit.

7.4 Girls do truant

Findings from a survey of 6000 secondary school pupils (Ireson & Hallam, 2001) indicate that although a majority of pupils were happy at school, about a third indicated that they strongly agreed or agreed with the statement 'most of the time I don't want to go to school. Unfortunately, no gender breakdown was provided. There is, however, some evidence (Osler, Street, Lall & Vicent, 2002) to show that the problems experienced by adolescent girls are less visible, some of which may go unnoticed in school and lead to truancy, disaffection and 'self-exclusion'. Our research sheds further light on this problem. We found that a higher per cent of girls than boys truant in all white schools: girls' truanting peaked at 30% in Year 8. The pattern was slightly different in schools which drew pupils from different racial backgrounds, from which it emerged that white girls in Year 7 and 8 were less likely to truant than white boys, but more likely in Year 9. A partial explanation was provided by teachers who believed that girls were more likely to be used by their parents as young cares or to join older boyfriends who had left school.

7.5 Pupils' and parents' views on absence differ from those of education professionals

It emerged that pupils, parents, LEA representatives and teachers held differing views about the causes of absence. Most LEA representatives and teachers, especially those in primary schools, believe that parental attitudes towards education and other home factors are the major causes of non-attendance. In addition, LEA representatives and secondary school teachers pointed out that school factors and the characteristics of individual children are important contributory factors. However, there is a particularly striking discrepancy between the weight that pupils, parents and education professionals give to these causes.

In the main, self-reported primary school truants identified school-based reasons for missing school. Boredom was the most common cause, but other reasons included being bullied, disliking particular teachers, being shouted at by

teachers and wanting to avoid tests. The reasons given by secondary school truants were surprisingly similar, with boredom heading the list and other reasons including problems with teachers and expectations of getting into trouble. However, some of the pupil responses, at both primary and secondary school levels, imply that parents may condone some absences. The number of pupils admitting that they skipped school with parental consent is small and, indeed, it is unlikely that pupils would readily blame their parents for their unauthorised absence from school. In fact, most believed that their parents would be angry to find out they had missed school.

Parents most often identified school-related causes for their children's absences. As with pupils, it is unlikely that parents would readily blame themselves for their children's absences. However, it is interesting to note the similarities between the responses from parents of usually good attenders and parents of poor attenders. Both sets of parents followed the same broad pattern in their attitudes towards school and attendance. Both thought that education and regular school attendance were important. However parents of good attenders believed more strongly in the importance of education and were less likely to keep their children away from school.

7.6   A school focus within a framework of multiple strategies

A major point emerging from this study, which confirms earlier research (Malcolm *et al*, 1996; Easen *et al*, 1997) is that absentees do not form a homogeneous group. There are different types of absence and children give very different reasons for not coming to school. There are also different patterns of absence. Most of the truants taking part in the current study missed school only very occasionally and only a relatively small number of pupils are persistent truants. We, therefore, believe it is appropriate for LEAs and schools to continue with a broad range of strategies to combat the variety of absenteeism. This accords with Hallam and Roaf (1997), who found that although schools can make a difference, there is no single prescriptive way to reduce absenteeism. It may be worthwhile focusing more attention on alternative ways of preventing the problem from occurring. There is some evidence from the large Student-Teacher Achievement Ratio (STAR) programme in Tennessee (Nye *et al*, 1992) that small classes, especially in the early years of education, have lasting benefits. Researchers found that pupils, who had been in small classes from kindergarten to Grade 3 (about 5–9 years of age) scored better on standardised tests than those pupils in regular-sized classes, who had been taught by a teacher or by a teacher plus a teaching aide. By Grade 10 (age 16) more pupils who had been in larger classes had been required to repeat a year. The researchers concluded that being in a small class not only prevents pupils failing in later grades, but also helps to keep them in school. Of particular significance to the current research, STAR researchers found that the average number of days of absence at Grade 10 for pupils who had been in small classes was 15.88 days per annum, compared with 22.55 and 24 for regular classes taught respectively by a teacher and a teacher plus a teaching aide (Wilson, 2001).

7.7   Criteria for recording absences

Previous research highlighted difficulties in the terminology used to describe pupils' absences from school (eg Stoll, 1990; Kinder *et al*, 1996; Atkinson *et al*, 2000). This continues to be problematic. In particular OFSTED (2001) acknowledges that 'truancy is not synonymous with unauthorised absence' as some unauthorised absences result from school's refusal to authorise excessive absence for holidays during term time. In our research several teachers and headteachers doubted the value of distinguishing between 'authorised/ unauthorised'. The evidence of this study is that different schools applied different criteria in categorising absences. Therefore, unless schools apply criteria equally, few safe conclusions can be drawn about the extent of the absence problem or the efficacy of methods adopted to combat it.

7.8   Key Stage 2 and 3 tests in Years 6 and 9

Other researchers suggest that truancy and disaffection impact on pupils' attainment (Learmonth, 1995; Kinder *et al*, 1995; Malcolm *et al*, 1996). Most LEAs and teachers in our sample were convinced that this was the case. They believed that not only did absence adversely affect pupils' future prospects but it also had a more immediate impact on school targets at Key Stages 2 and 3. Some suggested that this gave an unfair picture of attainment standards within the school and that children who were not regular school attenders should not be included in Key Stage tests.

7.9   Multi-agency links need further development

Existing research identifies a plethora of strategies to combat absence currently in use by LEAs and schools. Some have adopted multi-agency approaches (Hustler *et al*, 1998; Solomon & Rogers, 2001; Kinder et al, 1999; Atkinson *et al*, 2000). Although this may be worthwhile, it is far from easy to implement (Wilson & Pirrie, 2001; Clark, 1993). Many schools in our research recognised that truancy is rooted in multiple factors. They had begun to collaborate with other agencies, each of which could contribute to addressing the complex problem of poor attendance. However, we also uncovered some tensions in multi-agency working as each agency pursued its own priorities. This confirms the tension which Kinder *et al* (2000) discovered in their evaluation of multi-agency working in North Lincolnshire. We believe there is a need for further research which would identify the 'drivers' and inhibitors of effective multi-agency working in this context and look for ways of actively encouraging its development.

7.10 Improvement in attendance levels is slight

We found many examples of innovative strategies to deal with absence problems pursued with vigour by committed staff. In some instances these measures seemed to be working well and people had high hopes of them. However, satisfaction levels varied and only a few schools were able to offer

statistical evidence of improved attendance levels. At a national level, provisional attendance figures for 2001/2002 show that the Government's target of cutting truancy by a third by September 2002 has not been met, and that improvements in overall attendance rates are minor (BBC News: Education <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/education>).

It may be that it is too early to detect improvements. Measures need time to bed down before positive results are seen: electronic registration and high-tech security systems, for example, were relatively new and not installed in every school. Measures aimed at changing family attitudes to education are unlikely to show quick results and building effective working relationships with community-based agencies takes time. However, we uncovered little evidence of systematic evaluation, and think that LEAs and schools would find it helpful to have systems in place which monitor the effectiveness of the measures they have adopted.

7.11 Absence is expensive in staff time

One of the strongest themes emerging from this study is that absence is expensive. Although the proportion of persistent truants is low in most schools, and often confined to a limited number of families, many LEA and school-based staff think that they spend a disproportionate amount of their time implementing procedures to encourage good attendance or dealing with the consequences of poor attendance. They scan attendance data to identify those likely to be absent, follow up reasons for absence, help absentees catch up on lost work, monitor the most frequent non-attenders, persuade, support, and encourage them to come to school and work with their families and other agencies in various ways. Several of those interviewed also made it clear that without the help of dedicated support staff they would be unable to invest this level of effort. Questions of value for money and sustainability inevitably arise and need to be addressed in further research.

7.12 Absence has other costs

Teachers in our study believe that the costs of absence cannot simply be accounted for in monetary terms. This confirms earlier research (Learmonth, 1995; Kinder, Harland, Wilkin & Wakefield, 1995) which suggests that the effects of habitual truancy can be far-reaching. Those most likely to suffer are young children whose chances of achieving academic success and good social relationships with their peers are damaged. At best, the result was seen as wasted potential; at worst, some children were vulnerable to crime, either as perpetrators or (most likely) as victims.

The evidence also suggests that other children can be affected because truants, especially in secondary schools, are associated with disruptive behaviour and demand attention when they return to school. Many of the regular attenders interviewed resented this. Other studies have also pointed to this (eg Learmonth, 1995; Kinder, Harland, Wilkin & Wakefield, 1995). We found that

teachers try to help truants catch up, but feel frustrated in their efforts; schools fear the loss of their reputations; and secondary school pupils were able to study better when truants were not in class.

The extent to which these effects were apparent varied among case study Authorities and from school to school. The effects were, as would be expected, most noticeable in schools with large numbers of poor attenders. Here the issues of how to deal with absence and behaviour management become intermingled.

7.13 In Conclusion

In conclusion, the key message to come from this research is simple: a great deal of effort is being put into finding solutions to a problem which affects relatively small numbers of pupils a great deal, and larger numbers of other pupils and teachers to some extent. Although the longer-term effects of truancy are beyond the scope of this study, there is growing evidence of a connection between youth crime and unauthorised absence (Graham & Bowling, 1995; Basic Skills Agency, 1997). Other studies have linked truancy with teenage pregnancies and shown that truants are more likely than non-truants to face unemployment once compulsory school days are over (Casey & Smith, 1995), and are more likely to go to prison (Parker *et al*, 1989). Given that over a quarter of the primary school pupils taking part in this study admitted to independent truancy for school-related reasons, the case for early intervention is very strong.

Bibliography

Atkinson, M, Halsey, K, Wilkin, A & Kinder, K (2000) *Raising attendance.* Slough: NFER.

Atkinson, M & Kinder, K (2000) Starting to join: an evaluation of multi-agency support team activity in schools. Paper presented at BERA, Cardiff 2000. Slough: NFER.

Audit Commission (1999) *Missing out: LEA management of school attendance and exclusion.* (Briefing, October 1999) London: Audit Commission.

Basic Skills Unit (1997) Basic Skills and Young Offenders. London: BSA.

BBC News: Education (2002) No progress on truancy targets. <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/education>

Casey, B & Smith, D (1995) *Truancy and youth transitions.* (Research series, Youth Cohort report; 34) Sheffield: DfEE.

Coles, B, Hutton, S, Bradshaw, J, Craig, G, Godfrey, C, and Johnson, J. (2002) *Literature review of the cost of being 'not in education, employment or training' at age 16-18.* Research Report 347. Nottingham: Department for Education and Skills

Department for Education and Employment (1998a) *Grants for Education Support and Training (GEST) Programme: compendium of reports on truancy and disaffected pupils projects 1996-97.* 3 vols. London: DfEE.

Department for Education and Employment (1998b) Coverage of Behaviour Support Plans. (Circular number 01/98) London: DfEE.

Department for Education & Employment (1999) *Tackling truancy together: a strategy document.* London: DfEE.

Department for Education and Employment (2000) *Social Inclusion: Pupil Support briefing.* Vol. 2, Spring 2000. London: DfEE.

Department for Education & Employment and Home Office (2001) *Together we can tackle it: a checklist for police and schools working together to tackle truancy, crime and dis*order. London: DfEE.

Department for Education and Skills (2001) *Learning mentor manual.* http://www.standards.dfes.gov.uk/excellence

Department for Education and Skills (2002) *Discipline in Schools*: Secretary of State's Speech 12 December 2002 to Social Market Foundation. http://www.dfes.gov.uk/speeches/12_12_02.index

Derrington, C (2000) *The LEA contribution to school improvement – a role worth fighting for.* Slough: NFER. (LGA research report; 9)

Easen, P, Clark, J & Wootten, M (1997) *Focusing on the individual while ignoring the context: an evaluation of an attendance project.* Newcastle: University of Newcastle, Department of Education.

Graham, J. & Bowling, B. (1995) (1995) *Young People and Crime*. Home Office Research Study No.145. London: Home Office Research and Statistics Directorate.

Hallam, S. (1996) *Improving School Attendance*. Oxford: Heinemann.

Hallam, S. & Castle, F. (2001) Exclusion from School: what can help prevent it? *Educational Review*, **53**, 2, 169-179.

Hallam, S. & Roaf, C. (1997) *Truancy – Can schools improve attendance. Viewpoint*. London: University of London Institute of Education.

Hustler, D, Callaghan, J, Cockett, M & McNeill, J (1998) *Choices for life: an evaluation of Rathbone C.I.'s work with disaffected and excluded school pupils.* Manchester: Rathbone C.I.

Ireson, J. & Hallam, S. (2001) *Ability Grouping in Education*. London: Paul Chapman Publishing.

Kinder, K, Harland, J, Wilkin, A & Wakefield A (1995) *Three to remember: strategies for disaffected pupils.* Slough: NFER.

Kinder, K, Kendall, S, Halsey, C & Atkinson, M (1999) *Disaffection talks: a report for the Merseyside Learning Partnership Inter Agency Development Programme.* Slough: NFER.

Kinder, K, Wakefield, A & Wilkin, A (1996) *Talking back: pupil views on disaffection.* Slough: NFER.

Kinder, K & Wilkin, A (1998) *With all respect: reviewing disaffection strategies.* Slough: NFER.

Learmonth, J (1995) *More willingly to school? An independent evaluation of the DfEE's Truancy and Disaffected Pupils (TDP) GEST Programme.* London: DfEE.

Malcolm, H, Thorpe, G & Lowden, K (1996) *Understanding truancy: links between attendance, truancy and performance.* Edinburgh: Scottish Council for Research in Education.

Nye, B A, Boyd-Zaharias, J, Fulton, D and Wallenhorst, M P, (1992) Smaller classes really are better. *The American School Board Journal,* May, 31-33.

OFSTED (2001a) *Education Action Zones: commentary on the first six zone inspections.* London: The Stationery Office.

OFSTED (2001b) *Improving attendance and behaviour in secondary schools.* London: OFSTED.

Osler, A. (1997) *Exclusions from School and Racial Equality.* Research report. London: Commission for Racial Equality.

Osler, A, Street C, Lall M & Vincent K (2002) *Not a problem? Girls and school exclusion.* Leicester: National Children's Bureau for the Joseph Rowntree Foundation.

Parker, H, Sumner, M, and Jarvis, G (1989) *Unmasking the Magistrates: the 'custody or not' decision in sentencing young offenders.* Milton Keynes: Open University Press.

Social Exclusion Unit (1998) *Truancy and school exclusion report.* London: The Stationery Office.

Solomon, Y & Rogers, C (2001) 'Motivational patterns in disaffected school students: insights from pupil referral unit clients.' *British Educational Research Journal*, **37**, 3, 332-45.

Stoll, P (1990) 'Absent pupils who are officially present', *Education Today*, **40**, 3, 22-5.

Whitney, B (1994) *The truth about truancy.* London: Kogan Page.

Wilson, V. & Pirrie, A. (2000) Multidisciplinary Teamworking – Beyond the Barriers? A Review of the Issues. Edinburgh: SCRE.

Appendix 1: Summary of Data Providers: 143 interviews with education professionals; 5 with police service representatives; 528 with secondary school pupils; 662 questionnaires from primary school pupils; 373 from parents; 18 telephone interviews with parents

	LEA 1	LEA 2	LEA 3	LEA 4	LEA 5	LEA 6	LEA 7	Totals
LEA level	Head of social inclusion District manager, education welfare service Connexions and social programmes manager 2 local project leaders Youth liaison officer (police service) (6 interviews)	Educational welfare and social inclusion manager Education welfare officer Youth issues officer (police service) (3 interviews)	1 principal education welfare officer 1 senior education social worker 1 education social worker Police sergeant (police service) (4 interviews)	Head of social inclusion Manager, education social welfare service Education social welfare officer (patch includes school 2) 2 education social workers Community sergeant (police service) (6 interviews)	Director of education Head of pupil and student services Head of research and statistics (3 interviews)	Head of SEN and social inclusion Senior education welfare officer (education programme leader) Senior youth court officer (police service) (3 interviews)	Senior Education Welfare Officer 2 education welfare officers 1 education welfare assistant (primary schools) (4 interviews)	4 heads of social inclusion 6 senior/ principal education social welfare officers or equivalent 9 education welfare officers/education social workers/assistants 1 head of pupil and student services 1 head of research and statistics 1 Connexions/social programmes manager 5 police service representatives 2 local project leaders (29 interviews)
Primary school level: Staff	1 headteacher 1 deputy headteacher 2 Year 5 teachers 2 Year 6 teachers 1 learning mentor Social inclusion unit manager (8 interviews)	2 headteachers 2 Year 5 teachers 2 Year 6 teachers 1 home-school liaison officer 5 (7 interviews)	1 headteacher 1 Year 5 teacher 1 Year 6 teacher (3 interviews)	2 headteachers 2 Year 5 teachers 2 Year 6 teachers 1 attendance officer 2 1 social integration (families) officer 1 (8 interviews)	1 headteacher 17 2 Y5 teachers 1 Y6 teacher 17 1 administrator, home-school liaison and attendance officer 17 (5 interviews) 104	2 headteachers 1 Year 5 teacher 2 Year 6 teachers (5 interviews)	2 headteachers 2 Year 5 teachers 2 Year 6 teachers (6 interviews)	11 headteachers 1 deputy headteacher 12 Y5 teachers 12 Y6 teachers 1 learning mentor 1 social inclusion unit manager 3 home-school liaison officers 1 attendance officer (42 interviews)
Pupils	94	98	42	123	104	106	95	662
Second-ary school level: Staff	2 headteachers 2 Year 7 teachers 2 Year 8 teachers 2 Year 9 teachers 1 education welfare officer 2 pastoral managers (11 interviews)	2 deputy headteachers (attendance responsibility) 2 Year 7 teachers 2 Year 8 teachers 2 Year 9 teachers 1 attendance officer 2 senior learning mentors (11 interviews)	2 headteachers 2 Year 7 teachers 2 Year 8 teachers 2 Year 9 teachers 1 attendance officer 1 inclusions manager 1 teacher (raising African & Caribbean achievement responsibility) (11 interviews)	2 headteachers 2 Year 7 teachers 2 Year 8 teachers 2 Year 9 teachers 1 teacher (severe attendance issues responsibility) 1 attendance assistant 1 teacher in charge of attendance 1 learning mentor (12 interviews/	2 headteachers 2 Year 7 teachers 2 Year 8 teachers 2 Year 9 teachers 1 assistant headteacher with special responsibility for pupils (pastoral) 1 school-based ESW (10 interviews)	1 headteacher 1 deputy headteacher 2 Year 7 teachers 2 Year 8 teachers 2 Year 9 teachers 1 pastoral headteacher 1 attendance officer (10 interviews)	2 deputy headteachers (attendance responsibility) 2 Year 7 teachers 2 Year 8 teachers 2 Year 9 teachers 2 heads of Y7 (attendance responsibility) 1 head Y9 1 head of Key Stage 3 and Connexions (12 interviews)	9 headteachers 5 deputy headteachers 14 Year 7 teachers 14 Year 8 teachers 14 Year 9 teachers 2 school-based education welfare officers 3 attendance officers 1 attendance assistant 3 learning mentors 1 inclusions manager 3 heads of year in charge of attendance 2 teachers in charge of attendance 4 pastoral managers 1 head of KS 3 and Connexions 1 teacher with responsibility for raising African and Caribbean achievement (77 interviews)
Pupils	73	68	75	71	87	81	73	528
Parent quests (1) (2) 'Phone ints.	56 school-connected 32 EWO-connected 3	54 school-connected 30 EWO-connected 1	13 school-connected 31 EWO-connected 0	9 school-connected 29 EWO-connected 2	4 school-connected 33 EWO-connected 1	81 school-connected 34 EWO-connected 5	59 school-connected 000 EWO-connected 3	296 school-connected 77 EWO-connected 15

Main Findings

About the importance of attendance:
- LEA representatives and teachers believed attendance issues were important because they were linked to attainment and a variety of other problems.
- LEA representatives thought that schools authorised absences too readily.
- Headteachers claim to follow LEA guidelines. They felt that parental authorisation could not always be challenged and that it would be difficult to improve on current attendance levels.
- Some headteachers and teachers believed it is pointless to distinguish between authorised and unauthorised absence.

About the effects of poor attendance:
- School staff thought that most unacceptable absence was parentally condoned.
- Most truants would be with their parents, possibly acting as carers, or in each other's houses or entertainment, leisure or shopping centres.
- Teachers thought that a small number of truants might be engaged in petty crime or buying and selling drugs.
- Self-reported truants reported a similar picture, but none mentioned drugs involvement.
- Teachers believed that absence affected truants' learning, confidence and friendships.
- Secondary teachers also believed truants would be subjected to bullying and would get into bad company.
- All LEA representatives and teachers agreed truancy is a self-perpetuating cycle.
- Most regular attenders said they avoided the company of habitual non-attenders.
- Most secondary school truants did not think absence had affected their educational progress.
- Almost all self-reported truants thought their parents would be angry if they knew they had missed school.
- Teachers were frustrated by absence which meant they had to change their lesson plans, re-train returners and help them catch up.
- Regular attenders thought that their education was disrupted when truants returned to school. However, all respondents stressed that the effects were relatively minor.
- Headteachers agreed that truancy lowered school attainment levels and could damage the image that the community had of the school.

About the causes of poor attendance:
- 25% of the 94 primary school pupils taking part reported having skipped school at some time. 18% of the 73 secondary pupils interviewed reported truancy
- Most parents indicated that they thought regular school attendance was important.
- Parents and pupils most often attributed truancy to school-related factors, in particular the curriculum, dislike of teachers and subjects, class disruption, bullying and other problems with peers.
- LEA representatives and secondary school teachers recognised these factors but thought family attitudes of not valuing school and weak parenting were influential in most absences.
- Teachers thought that parents condoned absence and some used their children as carers.
- Primary believed that almost all absences were parentally condoned.

About measures to improve attendance:
- LEA strategies included raising community awareness of attendance, using the media and strengthening multi-agency links, supporting schools through clearer guidelines on authorising absence, encouraging the use of electronic registration and helping schools analyse attendance data. Truancy sweeps were used to raise awareness of the problem. Most multi-agency links were at early stages of development, police links being strongest. The LEA funded various projects exploring school alternatives.
- All the schools analysed registration data electronically for patterns of absence. Both secondary and one of the primary schools had dedicated support staff to help with attendance issues, and all implemented first-day calling. One of the primary schools targeted the parents of habitual absentees. Teachers wanted more feedback from support staff and some found it easier to see absence patterns in old style manual registers.
- School measures to promote good attendance included individual and group award schemes, breakfast clubs, improvements to school ethos and facilities, more extra-curricular activities, raised awareness of attendance through publicised individual and group attendance levels, special learning environments and negotiated timetables for returners. One headteacher had removed long-term absentees' names from the school roll. Primary schools stressed the importance of building good home-school relationships and in all schools the work of the EWS was valued. One secondary school had installed a CCTV system and security guard on the gate. Satisfaction with these measures varied. One primary and one secondary school had raised their attendance levels.
- LEA representatives and teachers raised a number of concerns. These included concerns that: the LEA was reluctant to prosecute, more EWO input was needed, the personal efforts of individual teachers was insufficiently recognised, detailed registration and follow-up systems were expensive in time and only documented the problem, reintegration measures were expensive for little return and group reward schemes made regular attenders lose interest.

Main Findings

About the importance of attendance:
- LEA representatives and teachers believed attendance issues were important.
- LEA representatives thought schools were more concerned to reduce unauthorised absence levels than improve attendance.
- Some interviewees believed the distinction between authorised and unauthorised absence was misleading.

About the effects of poor attendance:
- Teachers thought that most truants, especially at primary school level, would be with their parents. If not, they would be in each other's houses or shopping centres.
- Teachers believed that most truants from secondary school were bored but that engagement in petty crime was rare.
- Self-admitted truants reported a similar picture.
- Teachers believed the effects of absence on truants were slowed learning, loss of security and confidence, and loss of friends.
- LEA representatives and teachers agreed that truancy was a self-perpetuating cycle.
- Most regular attenders said they avoided the company of habitual non-attenders.
- Over half the secondary school truants thought absence had affected their educational progress. The others did not think they had been away enough for it to make a difference.
- Almost all self-reported truants thought their parents would be angry if they knew they had missed school.
- Teachers reported increased workloads and disruption through having to re-integrate absentees.
- Two-thirds of regular attenders said they were not affected by others' truancy but a third objected to the disruption caused to group work and time lost when truants returned
- Primary school headteachers believed truancy could affect the reputation of the school and senior staff in secondary schools worried about the effect on school discipline if truants were seen to go unpunished.

About the causes of poor attendance:
- 36% of the 98 primary school pupils reported having skipped school at some time.
- 26% of the 68 secondary pupils reported truancy.
- Most parents thought regular school attendance was important.
- Parents and pupils most often attributed truancy to school-related factors, in particular boredom, the curriculum, dislike of teachers and subjects, wanting to avoid tests, bullying and other problems with peers.
  - LEA representatives and secondary school staff noted these factors but also thought family attitudes of not valuing school and weak parenting were influential in most absences.
  - Teachers thought that parents condoned absence and some used their children as carers.
  - Primary teachers believed that most absences were parentally condoned.

About measures to improve attendance:
- LEA strategies included statutory register checks in all schools; first-day calling; allocation of at least one EWO to each secondary school; truancy sweeps at various levels.
- All the schools analysed registration data electronically for patterns of absence. Both primary and one secondary schools had dedicated support staff to help with attendance issues. All the schools implemented first-day calling to as many absentees' families as possible. The school, with no dedicated help, could do this only three days per week when the EWO visited. One school-based attendance officer had statistics to show that 60% of pupils contacted on the first day of absence returned to school the next day.
- Schools used a variety of measures to promote good attendance. These included use of the EWO, individual and group award schemes, breakfast clubs, improvements to school ethos and facilities, more extra-curricular activities, raised awareness of attendance through publicised individual and group attendance levels, special learning environments and negotiated timetables, the input of home-school liaison officers, learning mentors and personal advisers, staff truancy patrols and the use of CCTV. Teachers in one secondary school interviewed all poor attenders in Y7. Teachers were generally supportive of these measures but overall satisfaction with them varied.
- Concerns included views that more EWO input was needed, and that award schemes were ineffective because they rewarded those who came to school and generated resentment in consistently good attenders who never won a prize.

Main Findings

About the importance of attendance:
- LEA representatives gave raising attendance had top priority in order to give children educational opportunity and build morale in schools where teacher recruitment and retention levels were low.
- LEAs thought schools authorised absences too readily.
- Primary school teachers thought lateness was a greater problem than absence.
- Secondary schools absence was a major problem, exacerbated by high staff turnover, many transient pupils, lateness and internal truancy.

About the effects of poor attendance:
- Teachers thought that most truants would be at home, the younger ones with their parents. If not, they would be in each other's houses, in parks or at entertainment, leisure or shopping centres.
- Teachers thought that some parents used their children as carers.
- Self-admitted truants reported a similar picture and several said they remained in school post-registration.
- Teachers believed the effects of absence on truants were slowed learning, loss of confidence and loss of friends.
- All teachers agreed truancy was a self-perpetuating cycle.
- Most secondary school truants thought absence had not affected their progress but many worried that teachers saw them as troublemakers.
- Truants knew their absences would be reported to their parents. This was a partial deterrent and some truants had reformed because they did not want their parents to be prosecuted.
- Almost all self-reported truants thought their parents would be angry if they knew they had missed school.
- Teachers felt stressed as a result of their efforts to motivate and help poor attenders.
- They thought the effects of absences on regular attenders were minor, but thought a culture of non-attendance could easily spread.
- Nearly half the regular attenders were irritated at the disruption caused by latecomers and returning truants.
- Senior secondary school staff said that truancy damaged a school's ability to meet its targets and lowered both staff morale and the school's reputation.
- Primary teachers reported that truancy levels were too low to affect the school as a whole.

About the causes of poor attendance:
- 12% of the 42 primary school pupils reported having skipped school.
- 24% of the 75 secondary pupils reported truancy.
- Most parents indicated that regular school attendance was important.
- Parents and pupils most often attributed truancy to school-related factors, in particular boredom, tiredness, the curriculum, problems with teachers (especially supply) and disrupted classes.
- LEA representatives and secondary school staff noted the same school-related factors but thought that peer pressure and primary-secondary transition problems were influential factors.
- Teachers thought that family attitudes of not valuing school and weak parenting were influential causes of absence.
- Some parents condoned absence and some used their children as carers.
- Some teachers thought family illness, domestic violence and poverty also caused non-attendance.
- Primary school teachers seldom thought that most absence was parentally condoned.

About measures to improve attendance:
- Authority-level strategies included annual register checks; awareness-raising; materials aimed at parents; stressing that primary responsibility for dealing with attendance lay with schools; parent pagers (which had not worked well); EWOs teaching PHSE lessons; written contracts between parents and schools; attendance panels; truancy sweeps; multi-agency work, especially with the police service. Prosecution was a last resort but some in the EWS thought schools wanted more. Attendance levels were thought to be improving.
- All the schools analysed registration data electronically for patterns of absence. Both secondary schools implemented targeted first-day-calling with the help of dedicated support staff. Staff thought it had helped a lot, though in one school union complaints over workload had led to more support staff being employed. In the other, the system was thought efficient and effective.
- School measures to promote good attendance included attendance officers; awareness-raising; individual and year group award schemes; more after-school clubs; multi-professional teamwork involving the police and Connexions staff among others for attendance clinics, individual counselling and escorting children to school; letters to parents in their own languages, and letters for pupils to take to GPs and hospitals. Primary teachers thought home-school partnerships were important. EWS involvement was seen as essential, though many teachers put in efforts of their own. Staff believed schemes to motivate children worked well and were effective with those on the borderline.
- Teachers expressed concerns about measures. They thought that school registration systems were labour-intensive; communication between the EWS and families living outside LEA boundaries was poor; absentees left on school rolls throughout legal proceedings distorted attendance figures; and prosecutions could be ineffective.

Main Findings

About the importance of attendance:
- LEA representatives and teachers believed attendance issues were important because they were linked to attainment and a variety of problems.
- Transient populations presented particular difficulties in this LEA.
- Headteachers said they followed LEA guidelines; some thought term-time holidays and persistent lateness were problematic but others stressed the need to authorise term-time leave to meet local needs.
- Some teachers thought it pointless to distinguish between authorised and unauthorised absence.

About the effects of poor attendance:
- Teachers thought that most truants would be with their parents, helping at home or with the family business. If not, they would be in each other's houses, at friends' schools, in parks or shopping centres.
- Teachers believed that only a small number of truants might be engaged in petty crime.
- Self-reported truants reported a similar picture, though none mentioned drugs involvement.
- Teachers believed the effects of absence on truants were slowed learning, loss of confidence and loss of friends.
- LEA representatives and teachers agreed truancy was a self-perpetuating cycle.
- Most regular attenders said they avoided the company of habitual non-attenders.
- Most secondary school truants did not think absence had affected their educational progress.
- Almost all self-reported truants thought their parents would be angry if they knew they had missed school.
- Teachers were frustrated at having to cover old ground to help returned absentees catch up, and had difficulty in keeping track of their progress.
- Regular attenders noted class disruption and lost time when poor attenders returned. Some felt resentful.
- Teachers though that the effects of absence on regular attenders was relatively minor.
- Headteachers agreed that truancy lowered school attainment levels. Some thought it had an unsettling effect on school morale.

About the causes of poor attendance:
- 30% of the 123 primary school pupils reported having skipped school at some time.
- 14% of the 71 secondary pupils reported truancy.
- Most parents thought that regular school attendance was important.
- Parents and pupils most often attributed truancy to school-related factors, in particular the curriculum, dislike of teachers and subjects, class disruption, bullying and other problems with peers.
- LEA representatives and secondary school staff noted school-related factors but also thought family attitudes of not valuing school and weak parenting were influential factors in most absences.
- Teachers also reported that poverty and parents working long, atypical hours contributed to absence problems.
- Some parents condoned absence and some used their children as carers.
- Primary teachers believed that most absence was parentally condoned; some believed bullying was used as an excuse.

About measures to improve attendance:
- Authority-level strategies included ensuring the EWS worked pro-activity with schools; support for reward schemes; screening registers to identify vulnerable youngsters; encouraging schools to take responsibility for attendance issues; investment in all-electronic registration systems; offering a range of good practice templates; strengthened multi-agency links; truancy sweeps; making children's work permits dependent on attendance level.
- Prosecution was only used in intransigent cases. The LEA believed that prosecution was ineffective, and that schools needed co-ordinators to manage contributions from multiple stakeholders.
- All the schools analysed registration data electronically. All had dedicated support staff to help with attendance issues and implemented first-day calling. The secondary schools called all absentees but the primary schools made calls only on the days when the attendance officers were present.
- School measures to promote good attendance included individual and group award schemes, raised awareness of attendance through publicised individual and group attendance levels, group sessions and special classes for poor attenders. Schools stressed the importance of building good home-school relationships and keeping parents informed. Teachers thought the measures had achieved some success.
- School concerns about measures included views that first-day calling was costly and time-consuming and more support staff were needed. Pupils had shifted absences from mornings to afternoons knowing no phone calls were made then. Some teachers wanted more and faster feedback, and found it easier to detect absence patterns in manual registers. Teachers thought reward schemes were less effective as their novelty waned, and that support from health and social services was being reduced as these services lost staff.

Main Findings

About the importance of attendance:
- LEA representatives and teachers believed attendance issues were important because they were linked to attainment and other issues.
- LEA representatives believed levels of concern about unauthorised absence varied among the schools.
- Headteachers said they followed LEA guidelines and teachers expressed concern at high levels of parentally condoned absence. This including Asian families who took extended term-time leave.
- Some headteachers felt it was acceptable to authorise school time leave for ten days of holiday or dental visits; others preferred not to do either.

About the effects of poor attendance:
- Teachers thought that most truants would be with their parents, at home or shopping. If not, they would be in parks, working, or engaged in petty crime.
- Most truants gave a similar picture, several saying they went shoplifting.
- Some secondary school truants said they hid inside the school.
- Teachers believed the effects of absence on truants were slowed learning, loss of confidence, disruptive behaviour and eventual social exclusion. Secondary teachers added that many faced poorly paid or no employment.
- Teachers thought that truancy was a self-perpetuating cycle.
- Most regular attenders distanced themselves from habitual non-attenders.
- Over half the secondary school truants believed that absence had adversely affected their educational progress.
- Over half the self-reported truants thought their parents would be angry or upset if they knew they had missed school.
- Teachers reported lost time in helping truants catch up, frustration at what they saw as its futility and depression as they believed poor KS tests would reflect badly on their teaching.
- Regular attenders were lonely if their friends were absent. They resented the class disruption when some absentees returned and appeared to go unpunished.
- Regular attenders stressed that the effects of absence on them were relatively minor.

About the causes of poor attendance:
- 10% of the 104 primary school pupils reported having skipped school at some time.
- 15% of the 87 secondary pupils reported truancy.
- Most parents thought regular school attendance was important, attributing truancy most often to bullying.
- Most self-reported truants liked school on the whole. They cited school-related reasons for their absences, in particular the curriculum, dislike of teachers and subjects, racial harassment from teachers, bullying and other problems with peers. They also mentioned home factors like interpreting for their parents and celebrating birthdays.
- LEA representatives and secondary teachers noted school factors but also thought family attitudes of not valuing school and weak parenting were influential factors in most absences.
- Teachers thought parents condoned absence and some used their children as carers. Poverty was also thought to play a part. Primary teachers thought most non-attendance was parentally condoned.

About measures to improve attendance:
- Authority-level strategies included raising community awareness of attendance through links with community religious leaders, strengthened multi-agency links and business partnerships, and helping schools buy in extra resources such as school-based EWOs.
- All the schools analysed registration data electronically for patterns of absence. One primary and one secondary school had dedicated support staff to help with attendance issues and these implemented first-day calling for all absences; the schools without dedicated support wanted it.
- School measures to promote good attendance included improvements to school ethos and facilities, more extra-curricular activities including special attendance clubs, individual and group award schemes and breakfast clubs. Satisfaction with these measures varied.
- Support staff were valued, especially if they were local people.
- Teachers thought pupils were motivated by positive encouragement but while a few poor attenders showed huge improvement in one primary school, in one of the secondary schools attendance had not improved.
- Teachers were concerned that registration and first-day calling systems were time-consuming, with delays in attendance printouts reaching them, EWOs did not visit primary schools often enough, the need for more bi-lingual staff, human error in operating electronic systems necessitating manual backup registers, the need for clearer guidelines from the LEA, and the LEA's reluctance to prosecute.

Main Findings

About the importance of attendance:
- LEA representatives and teachers believed attendance issues were important because they were linked to attainment and other issues. However because much work had been done within the LEA to improve attendance, absence had been superseded by other challenges.
- Headteachers said they followed LEA guidelines on authorising absence strictly but primary teachers stressed that parentally condoned absence was the biggest problem.
- Some felt it was pointless to include children with below 80% attendance in reported attainment data.

About the effects of poor attendance:
- Primary teachers thought that most truants would be with their parents, at home or shopping; if not, they were likely to be in the park.
- Some secondary school teachers agreed, and thought that some parents used their children as carers.
- Teachers also thought many parents were unhappy at their children's absence and did not condone it.
- Self-admitted truants reported staying home, swimming, going to parks and visiting relatives.
- Teachers believed the effects of absence on truants included slowed learning, social exclusion and vulnerability to criminal involvement and substance abuse.
- The secondary school truants did not think absence had affected their educational progress.
- Over half the self-reported truants thought their parents would be angry to know they had missed school.
- Teachers thought that absentees created more work for teachers. Although they resented giving up lunchtimes to help truants catch up, they did not feel their teaching was much affected because attendance levels were high.
- Teachers pointed out that recording absentees' achievements could be difficult and some teachers felt truants' poor attainment reflected badly on their teaching.
- Regular attenders thought their own and their teachers' time was wasted while the teacher checked on absent pupils. They felt distanced from absentees and let down if they were their project partners.
- Some headteachers believed that truancy lowered school attainment levels and damaged the image of the school in the community.

About the causes of poor attendance:
- 24% of the 106 primary school pupils reported having skipped school at some time.
- 7% of the 81 secondary pupils reported truancy.
- Most parents thought regular school attendance was important.
- Parents and pupils most often attributed truancy to school-related factors, in particular work being over-difficult, dislike of teachers and subjects, bullying, peer pressure and other problems with peers.
- LEA representatives and secondary school teachers noted these factors but also thought family attitudes of not valuing school and weak parenting were influential in most absences.
- Teachers thought that parents condoned absence; some used their children as carers and others expected them to work in family businesses.
- Primary teachers thought that almost all absence was parentally condoned.

About measures to improve attendance:
- LEA strategies included emphasising that schools and not the EWS bore primary responsibility for attendance; strengthened multi-agency links, especially with the police service; truancy patrols; closer work with parents; a focus on transition when attendance levels between primary and secondary schools showed clear differences; increased numbers of dedicated support staff in schools (including attendance officers and Connexions-funded personal advisers), particularly to support first-day calling; encouraging the use of all-electronic registration systems; the appointment of a social inclusion standards officer to focus on work with alienated children; prosecution in the most intransigent cases.
- All the schools analysed registration data electronically, but entered data manually. One secondary school and one primary school had dedicated support staff to help with attendance issues, and implemented first-day calling for all absentees; the other primary school was planning to introduce it and the other secondary school wanted to.
- School measures to promote good attendance included individual and group award schemes presented at school assemblies and reliance on other professionals and agencies. One school's physical environment was to be improved.
- Measures to deal with poor attendance included continued work with LEA-based EWOs, sending information about their children's attendance levels more frequently to parents and schools conducting their own very local truancy patrols.
- Satisfaction with the measures varied. There was general appreciation of the work done by support staff but in one secondary school attendance was said to be getting worse.
- Various concerns were expressed. These had to do with the temporary nature of support staff funding; personal advisers being too accepting of children's wishes to avoid school; the absence of alternatives for the small numbers of children unable to cope with mainstream education; computer printouts of absences making it hard to look further back than a week; forms not always being completed correctly; and the production of over-pessimistic data because the registration system did not distinguish 'absence' from 'unacceptable absence'.

Main Findings

About the importance of attendance:
- LEA representatives and teachers believed attendance issues were important because they were linked to attainment and a variety of problems.
- LEA representatives felt that schools could be insufficiently challenging of absence.
- The distinction between authorised and unauthorised absence was unhelpful.
- Senior staff in a primary and a secondary school believed that issues surrounding the curriculum and standards were more important than absence, largely because absence levels were low.

About the effects of poor attendance:
- Teachers thought most truants would be with their parents or relatives, at home, on visits or shopping. If not, they would be in each other's houses, in parks or shopping centres.
- Self-admitted truants reported a similar picture.
- Teachers believed the effects of absence on truants were slowed learning, loss of confidence and loss of friends.
- About half the secondary school truants thought absence had affected their educational progress.
- About a third of the self-reported truants thought their parents would be angry if they knew they had missed school.
- Teachers were frustrated at losing time trying to help truants catch up, and some were concerned that truants' poor performance would reflect on them.
- Some teachers were glad when some pupils were away.
- Regular attenders thought the class was disrupted and lost time when poor attenders returned. They also resented truants going unpunished and some missed their absent friends.
- All these interviewees stressed the effects were relatively minor.
- Headteachers noted that truancy lowered school attainment levels and damaged the school's image.
- Primary school headteachers reported that classroom assistants were used to help poor attenders, which limited their effectiveness within the school.

About the causes of poor attendance:
- 21% of the 95 primary school pupils reported having skipped school at some time.
- 15% of the 73 secondary pupils reported truancy.
- Most parents thought regular school attendance was important.
- Parents and pupils most often attributed truancy to school-related factors, in particular boredom, over-difficult work, bullying, dislike of teachers and subjects, pressure from friends and other problems with peers.
- LEA representatives and secondary school staff noted these factors, but added that primary-secondary transition and family attitudes of not valuing school and weak parenting were influential.
- Some parents condoned absence and some used their children as carers.
- Primary school teachers thought almost all absence was parentally condoned.

About measures to improve attendance:
- LEA strategies included encouraging schools rather than the EWS to take responsibility for attendance, with guidance and support from the EWS; making use of social and police services; truancy patrols and the introduction of first-day calling.
- All schools analysed registration data electronically. Two schools, one secondary and one primary, had dedicated support staff to help with attendance and they implemented first-day calling. The primary school did this only on the days when the support staff worked, but the secondary school called for all absences. The second secondary school also undertook 'blanket' first-day calling in spite of having no dedicated staff to help.
- School measures to promote good attendance included individual and group award schemes; praise; more extra-curricular activities; attendance clubs; raised awareness of attendance through publicised attendance levels in Y7; peer mentoring; special learning environments and negotiated timetables for returners; truancy sweeps and patrols; attendance panels and clinics; and individual counselling. Secondary staff noted the importance of good liaison with primary schools.
- Satisfaction with the measures varied. Teachers believed that computer printouts of absences were efficient but some teachers believed that patterns over several weeks were more easily seen in manual registers; award schemes helped to reduce authorised absences but not in classes which were unlikely ever to win. It was believed that the effectiveness of measures to build self-esteem was difficult to evaluate.