

Out of school: a phenomenological exploration of extended non-attendance

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The concept of “extended non-attendance” (“school phobia” or “school refusal”) was distinguished from truancy early in the twentieth century, and refers to children who fear school and avoid attending. Despite much subsequent research, outcomes for those affected remain poor, and their voices remain largely absent from the evidence base. The current study sought to address this by examining the experiences of four secondary-age children with extended attendance difficulties. Data consisted of semi-structured interviews conducted in participants’ homes, subsequently analysed using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis. Although participants differed markedly in their perception of the causes of their non-attendance, their support experiences appear remarkably similar. Emergent themes include being disbelieved, experiencing fragmented support, and feeling blamed and punished. Implications for practitioners include the importance of ensuring early intervention, the need to consider the individual child, and the importance of making sure that local intervention practices are informed by the evidence base.

Keywords: educational psychology; extended non-attendance; school refusal; school phobia; phenomenology; anxiety

Introduction

Extended non-attendance, often termed school refusal (Lyon & Cotler, 2007; Last & Strauss, 1990), was first described in a clinical case study (Jung, 1913/1961), and subsequently differentiated from truancy by Broadwin (1932). The latter described a form of non-attendance usually presenting with anxiety, and developing gradually from reluctance to attend through to refusal. Subsequent commentators note that affected children frequently appear unable to articulate their feelings (Broadwin, 1932; Hersov, 1977), with parents and teachers also finding children’s perspectives hard to understand (Blagg, 1987; Miller, 2008). Those affected usually show little response to the standard forms of encouragement, support or punitive response used by parents and schools (Hersov, 1977; Kearney, 2007). Consequently, extended non-attendance has often been viewed as a medical issue requiring pharmacological intervention (Burke & Silverman, 1987; Fremont, 2003).

Local variations in reporting arrangements mean that accurate national statistics for the prevalence of extended non-attendance are hard to obtain (Kearney, 2008a). Estimates in the UK literature suggest that 1 to 2% of the school-age population is affected, with higher prevalence among secondary school pupils (Elliot, 1999;

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Gregory & Purcell, 2014; Nuttall & Woods, 2013). Extended non-attendance is an issue that crosses geographical boundaries, with similar patterns of difficulty being apparent in Australia, America, and various European countries (Kearney, 2008a; King et al., 1998, 2001; Walter et al., 2010), and estimates of prevalence as high as 28% being reported in some papers (Beidas, Crawley, Mychailyszyn, Corner, & Kendall, 2010). Outcomes for those affected are often poor and include low academic achievement and social isolation in the short-term, alongside increased risk of unemployment, relationship instability, mental health difficulties and offending behaviour in the longer term (Fremont, 2003; Garry, 1996; Hibbert & Fogelman, 1990; King et al., 1998; McShane, Walter, & Rey, 2004).

Terminology: what's in a name?

Jung (1913/1961) referred to “neurotic refusal”, Broadwin (1932) to a “special form of truancy”. Subsequent commentators have used the terms “school phobia” (Johnson, Flastein, Szurek, & Svendsen, 1941), “school refusal” (Hersov, 1977), and “chronic non-attendance” (Lauchlan, 2003). Such descriptors should not be confused with the term “persistent absence”, a designator applied by the UK Department for Education (DfE) to children absent for more than 15% of school sessions, above which threshold, and in the absence of an explanation, enforcement action is recommended (DfE, 2011). Recent commentators have adopted the term “extended non-attendance” (Pellegrini, 2007), as it avoids the within-child focus and potential pathologisation implicit in some earlier terms (Pellegrini, 2007; Gregory & Purcell, 2014).

However, it should be noted that such debate regarding nomenclature results partially from difficulties defining what causes extended non-attendance. Suggested factors include unconscious processes (Jung, 1913/1961), separation anxiety (Johnson et al., 1941), school specific anxiety (Kearney, 2008b; Miller, 2008), generalised social anxiety (Francis, Last, & Strauss, 1992), and the child's affronted sense of omnipotence (Berry, Inejikian, & Tidwell, 1993). Miller (2008) suggests that such heterogeneity means extended non-attendance cannot be viewed as a unitary concept, and echoes previous commentators in suggesting it be approached in terms of a functional analysis aimed at exploring the purpose served by non-attendance for each individual (Kearney & Silverman, 1990). Such recognitions also underpin calls for further exploration of the individual accounts of non-attenders (Gregory & Purcell, 2014).

Risk factors and interventions

Research to date suggests an association between points of transition and the onset of extended non-attendance, with incidence rates peaking in line with primary and secondary school start ages (Pellegrini, 2007; Nuttall & Woods, 2013). Onset often occurs after holiday or illness-related absence from school (Berg, 1996; Miller, 2008). Prevalence appears higher among children who have attended multiple schools (Campbell, 2001), and children of parents with mental health difficulties (Hersov, 1977). No associations are apparent between extended non-attendance and socio-economic status, gender or academic ability (Berg, 1996; Pellegrini, 2007). Issues of environment appear important: references to bullying, nervousness about strict teachers, and fear of unmonitored areas of school (for example, toilets,

changing rooms) occur throughout the literature (Kearney & Beasley, 1994; Lauchlan, 2003; Lyon & Cotler, 2007).

Again, such diversity supports the contention that explanations of extended non-attendance are likely to be multi-factorial, interactive and individual (King & Bernstein, 2001; Miller, 2008; Nuttall & Woods, 2013), a position that partially explains the range of interventions trialled to date. Early strategies included conditioning, desensitisation and flooding (Wolpe, 1954; Blagg, 1987; Kennedy, 1965), with later interventions drawing on behavioural, family-therapeutic, and cognitive-behavioural approaches (Galloway & Miller, 1978; King, Heyne, & Ollendick, 2000; Schweizer & Ochs, 2003).

Although most current psychological interventions appear broadly cognitive-behavioural, the format varies and outcomes appear mixed (Beidas et al., 2010; Heyne, Sauter, Van Widenfelt, Vermeiren, & Westenberg, 2011; King et al., 2000; Last, Hanson, & Franco, 1998). This situation suggests a need for a systematic review of evidence surrounding current intervention practice (such as that currently being undertaken by the Campbell Collaboration – Maynard, 2014), and, again, more detailed analysis of individual occurrences, a point noted by several researchers (Gregory & Purcell, 2014; King & Bernstein, 2001; Nuttall & Woods, 2013).

Missing voices

Despite recognition of the need to examine individual experiences, the voice of the child is barely represented in extended non-attendance research. Searches of EBSCO, ScienceDirect and PsychArticles, plus journal specific searches (*Educational Psychology in Practice; Child and Educational Psychology; The British Journal of Educational Psychology*) and a grey literature search returned six relevant papers, considered here in chronological order. Malcolm, Wilson, Davidson, and Kirk (2003) reported on absence from schools for the DfE. The report mentions pupil perspectives but provides little detail, and focuses mainly on truancy. Emergent themes include the academic and social costs of absenteeism; the methodology and number of participants are unclear.

Brand and O'Connor (2004) studied the experiences of three secondary school-age girls, and point to the importance of multi-agency working and good information sharing. However, the transferability of their findings appears limited (the cases are high-achievers in a selective American school), the methodology is not described, and the participants' voices are barely evident.

In an unpublished Doctoral thesis, Brill (2009) sought to explore characteristics and treatment of extended non-attendance "from a child and parent perspective". However, despite its title the perspectives and voices of the children concerned are not apparent, and the study mainly presents quantitative findings based on what the author terms "shelf data".

In another unpublished thesis, Shilvock (2010) sought to explore what she terms emotionally based non-attendance. Her participants comprised three secondary school-age girls, whose voices were elicited using a range of structured techniques (finishing incomplete sentences, etc.). She identifies a number of themes associated with non-attendance, including parental illness. However, although her findings are interesting, all three appear to have been in school at the time, and had attendance of around 80% over the preceding year, a position which questions whether their

experience can be regarded as one of extended non-attendance. All three had caring responsibilities towards a parent, which explained much of their absence.

Nuttall and Woods (2013) interviewed two children, their parents, and support staff, analysing transcripts using Braun and Clarke's (2006) articulation of thematic analysis. Their findings suggest that successful intervention results from considering the individual factors that construct each case and aligning expectations between parties. Little is revealed about the children's opinions or experience, although this was not the researchers' primary objective.

Gregory and Purcell (2014) used Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) to elicit the child's voice, concluding that each case is highly individual and needs to be approached in terms of a systemic rather than within-child conceptualisation. This appears to be the only study in which the child's voice is clearly apparent: emergent themes include being bullied, feeling blamed, and being threatened with punitive action. The paper provides a foundation for the current study and demonstrates the possibility of eliciting the child's voice, but has a number of acknowledged limitations. Most notably, as its purpose was to explore whether the child's voice *could* be elicited, little attention was given to exploring how participants made sense of experience, or what they thought might have helped them remain in school.

Hence, the current study sought to extend the evidence base through a detailed examination of the lived experience of extended non-attendance, with a focus on informing the practice of EPs (educational psychologists) and other professionals. Given the emphasis on the child's voice, an interpretative phenomenological approach was chosen in order to gain a sense of the child's experience as lived (Langdrige, 2007), and to allow interpretation and triangulation between accounts (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009). Such an approach allows the researcher to retain phenomenology's idiographic focus, seeking a sense of the world as felt from within the skin and mind of the individual, whilst producing findings that have potential to be transferable and to inform practice (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The research was guided by the following questions: How do children who have been absent long-term from school make sense of their experience? How might this inform the professionals seeking to support them?

Method

Participants

Participants were secondary school-age children living in one Local Education Authority (LEA) area in the South of England; all attended local authority maintained mixed-sex comprehensive schools prior to experiencing attendance difficulties. To be eligible to participate, children had to be aged 11–16, have experienced difficulties lasting at least one term, and either be receiving support from the Home Education service or be registered for elective home education due to non-attendance. Difficulties identified by previous researchers in recruiting members of this vulnerable group (Gregory & Purcell, 2014), meant that recruitment was by word-of-mouth through colleagues in the Home Education and Educational Psychology Services. Potential participants were approached by a professional known to them, and, if willing to participate, were subsequently contacted by the researcher. Seven potential participants were identified, of whom four (two female, two male) agreed to participate. Participants were allotted pseudonyms, which are

used throughout this paper; personal details were removed to protect identities. “Graham” and “Malcolm” would have been in Year 11 were they attending at the time they were interviewed; “Cynthia” and “Amelia” would have been in Year 10. All had been absent from school for in excess of one academic year.

Procedure

In each case, the researcher arranged to meet with parent/guardian and child to explain the research in detail. Written informed consent was obtained from parents/guardians, and informed assent from children. Given the power imbalance when working with vulnerable children (specifically, the danger of children complying with adult requests regardless of their true feelings), the right to withdraw and/or stop at any point was explained to both parties, and reiterated to the child before the interview began. Interviews were audio recorded, lasted 25–50 minutes, and took place in the participants’ homes when the parent/guardian was home but absent from the room.

Design

Interviews were semi-structured and prompted by a topic guide designed to “permit participants to tell their own stories” (Smith et al., 2009, p. 57). Questions were derived based on the literature and the focus of the current study, and were designed to explore early school experience, participants’ perceptions of the causes of non-attendance, the attributions made by others, support received, and anything they felt might have been done differently.

Data analysis

Recordings were transcribed verbatim, anonymised, then analysed using IPA following the six-stage iterative process described by Smith et al. (2009):

- (1) Reading and re-reading/achieving immersion.
- (2) Initial noting.
- (3) Developing emergent themes.
- (4) Searching for connections across emergent themes.
- (5) Moving to the next case.
- (6) Looking for patterns across cases.

Results

Initial school experiences

All four participants report different initial experiences (Table 1). Graham remembers being sick on his first day, but refers to this as “first memory of school” rather than a bad memory. He recalls moving countries and schools, and is uncertain how many he has attended. Remembering his five-year-old self, he comments “I didn’t really feel like I fitted in ... I felt like everyone else was succeeding and I wasn’t”. Cynthia, in contrast, only attended one primary school. She recalls crying “before [she] went in”, but adds “then I used to be okay”, describing school as “one big family, really. I used to love it”.

Table 1. Master themes and sub-ordinate themes.

Master theme	Sub-ordinate themes
Initial school experiences	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Primary school experiences (4) – Transition to secondary school (4) – Multiple schools and relocation (2)
Participants' perceptions of the causes of non-attendance	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Bullying (2) – Nervousness/anxiety (4) – Depression (1) – Chronic fatigue (1) – Fear of teachers (1) – Social isolation in school (1) – Separation from parent (1)
School and other support experiences	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Initial responses and being disbelieved (4) – Pressure to return quickly or remain in school (4) – Slow or inappropriate support experience (4) – Fragmented support experience (4) – Medication and prescribing (3) – Things that might be done differently (4)
Punishment, blame and control	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Being labelled naughty (3) – Being punished and controlled (4) – Recognising (but not excusing) why (3)
Friendship and belonging	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Difficulty accessing a friendship group (1) – Friends as a positive aspect of school (3) – “Belonging” to primary school (2)
The future	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Future plans (3)
Impact on the child's phenomenon	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Anger (4) – Fear (4) – Hiding emotions and keeping secrets (4) – Seeking meaning and making sense (4)

Note: Numbers in brackets refer to the number of accounts in which each sub-ordinate theme was present.

Malcolm's first memory is of meeting a friend at pre-school. He describes primary school in terms of “meeting friends, misbehaving, not really getting lessons done”, a “good” experience. In contrast, Amelia's first memory is of “getting bullied”; she recalls attending eight schools, and moving house and country. She comments that she “didn't like” her first teacher, and describes being “made [to] stand up in class and read out of books which I couldn't read”.

All four recall their feelings about transition to secondary school, which differ despite shared nervousness. That said, Graham comments “I wasn't nervous at all”, but then qualifies this, adding “I was trying not to think about it”. Cynthia reports being “excited” and “scared”; Malcolm also felt “scared”, but remembers looking forward to “a whole new experience ... a really fun thing”. Amelia describes being “quite stressed” for “the first couple of days”, but settling in because “I was with my classmates”.

Participants' perceptions of the causes of non-attendance

Participants' perceptions of the reasons for their non-attendance differ. Graham describes feeling “anxious”, school getting “the better of me”, feeling he “didn't fit

in” and being socially isolated. He refers to a diagnosis of “depression”, and comments that he might still be in school “if the teachers involved took a little more care”. Cynthia mentions being bullied “in the first two weeks” as her initial reason for non-attendance, but comments elsewhere that she “can’t remember why” she stopped attending. She refers to “anxiety” as the cause repeatedly, and mentions being “really scared” and “feeling sick” at the thought of school.

Malcolm, in contrast, describes a pattern of tiredness and disrupted sleep which he attributed to playing sport, and led to his feeling like a “zombie” and falling asleep in class. He recalls being punished repeatedly and labelled “lazy”, alongside growing nervousness of school, before being diagnosed with Chronic Fatigue. Amelia describes her non-attendance as the result of bullying, feeling scared of teachers, “having difficulty learning” and wanting “to be with Mum”. She refers to “stress and anxiety, OCDs [obsessive compulsive disorders]” mentions “crying and crying”, being “scared”, and a diagnosis of Asperger’s syndrome.

School and other support experiences

Compared to their diverse perceptions of the causes of absence, all participants report similar support experiences. “They didn’t see any need for it” comments Graham, reflecting on the school’s response to his absence; “the only thing they really cared about was their figures”; he terms their response “Out of order”. Cynthia recalls “the school just thinks you’re being, like, naughty” and reflects “I didn’t know who I could talk to”. Although stating he does not “blame” anyone, Malcolm refers to the school’s response as “awful”: “they told Mum to just take things away from me”; “they refused to send work home because they thought, again, I was just being lazy”. Amelia’s experiences appear similar: “I just kind of thought they don’t really care, they’ve got too many students to deal with. They didn’t take things seriously”.

Pressure to return to school quickly was evident in all accounts. Graham recalls willingly attempting to, and the placement falling apart due to pressure to resume a full timetable swiftly: “I felt I was progressing ... I was getting more confident [doing three lessons daily] ... then they pulled the plug ... told me I had to be in the whole day”. Cynthia comments “you can’t just expect to do two or three days of help and then it be all okay”, and reiterates “Help for two or three days does not fix anxiety”. Although again emphasising that he understands the school’s position, Malcolm refers to their response as “harassing”, commenting “not everyone’s the same – they try to push the same quick fix on everyone, and it doesn’t work”. Amelia, returning to school after two years, describes how the rules regarding how long she was supposed to be in school “changed” days into her return, regardless of her asking them to “stop pushing her”, leaving her feeling “imprisoned” and “scared to go in”.

Considerable delays between initial non-attendance and receiving support and understanding were evident in all accounts. Graham recalls his school offering a part-time timetable “About six months” after he stopped attending, and mentions a mental health referral around the same time. Cynthia is specific in identifying the onset of her non-attendance as the “tenth day” at secondary school, but does not remember receiving any intervention until several months later.

Malcolm identifies the first “small moment” of understanding as being when he saw a GP (general practitioner) “a long time” after the onset of non-attendance; he

mentions repeatedly that things happened “really slowly”. Amelia reflects that “Mum has believed me the whole time”, but reiterates “teachers haven’t believed me”. In response to a question regarding which organisations she had found helpful, she replied “Home education ... they understood”: her involvement with them began in Year 9; her attendance difficulties began in Year 3.

All four participants mention attending CAMHS (Community Adolescent Mental Health Services): three report receiving anti-depressants; Amelia also received an anti-psychotic. She reports finding this helpful (“more medication would help”) but her doctor frightening; Graham notes having found support from CAMHS useful until the worker he had a relationship with left. Access to other support appears fragmented: two of the four receive (and speak highly of) tuition from the Home Education Service; Cynthia has attended hypnotherapy (“he did help a bit”) and a local counselling service (“I didn’t like it because she made me do the talking”); she was the only participant who had seen an EP. Malcolm receives some form of therapeutic support (“I can’t label it”), has had two tutors, but states he struggles to engage unless they are “flexible”. Amelia attends family counselling, but reports “never find[ing] it useful”.

All identify points at which things could have been done differently. Graham feels the school should have taken “more care” and phased his return: “they could have just put it up an extra hour or two” instead of insisting he went full-time. Cynthia identifies the need for “more understanding” and “someone” to support her “at school”. She suggests there should be “Help straightaway instead of ... months down the line”. Malcolm echoes the same sentiment: “things could have been done quicker ... everything moved really slowly”. Amelia identifies the barrier of being disbelieved (“some teachers haven’t believed me”), and the need for a phased return rather than constant “pushing” to resume full-time attendance quickly.

Punishment, blame and control

Issues of punishment, blame and control were central to all accounts. Graham recalls “they [school] wanted to start charging us for unauthorised absences”; “It felt like [Teacher] was calling all the shots. Like, I didn’t get a say”. Cynthia mentions being called “naughty” repeatedly and terms this her “main point” (“I have anxiety. I’m not naughty”), being given “detentions”, being publicly questioned by a teacher regarding absences, and finding rumours circulating that she was absent due to pregnancy. She mentions teachers not communicating regarding what lessons she could withdraw from (“[he] had a go at me, saying I can’t do that ... [but] miss said I could”), and points to the problem of adults deciding what the reason for her non-attendance was rather than asking her (“he [counsellor] ... changed what it was about ... to something completely different. So I stopped going”).

Malcolm remembers the school’s punitive responses, and their attempts to influence his mother: “it was ... like, take everything like my Xbox, my scooter, whatever, just take everything ... [Mum was] being pressured into doing it”. He remains annoyed at their refusal to send work home: “them refusing to do that and not investigating it more, kind of, slowed everything down”. Amelia repeatedly mentions fear of teachers (“most teachers haven’t been very nice”). She recalls being branded a “drama queen”, being questioned when an anxiety attack left her unable to enter a lesson (“do you feel ill?”), and being left standing outside (“it looked like I’d been naughty”) whilst the teacher decided what to do.

Equally, all the participants show some insight into the factors that structure their experience and their schools' responses. Although angry and branding the school's attitude towards him "wrong", Graham recognises this results from their being busy not bad: "[I'm] just one of their pupils. They've got hundreds more to worry about"; he identifies that they may be concerned because of their need to maintain their "attendance percentage".

Amelia, sitting down to talk to a teacher she was frightened of, recalls realising "he actually wasn't a scary man. He was just trying to keep the class under control", an interesting insight from her perspective into the processes that lead teachers to appear as they do to her. Malcolm's response is even more considered: "I don't blame anyone for thinking I was just being lazy or anything. I think that would be my, if I was in that position, my first thing that I would think". His description of the school as "massive", and the comment "they try to push the same quick fix on everyone" echoes Graham's sentiments, and triangulates with Cynthia's comment that "they've got too many students to deal with", suggesting a cumbersome system which overlooks individual needs and circumstances.

Friendship and belonging

Friendship and belonging appear central, in different ways, to all accounts. Graham identifies the formation of social groups and his exclusion from them as one of the reasons behind his non-attendance: "you kind of know who's with who – and that's probably one of the reasons why I stopped going in"; he further mentions "being isolated" by being made to work alone in school as a barrier to attendance.

The remaining participants all identify friendship as a positive element of school. Cynthia recalls talking to "friends" and sitting by her "best mate" when attendance became difficult, reflecting that one of her drivers to return was loneliness at home – "it's boring on my own". Malcolm, likewise, recalls turning down a scholarship to another school because he wanted "to stay close to my friends", and remains part of a friendship group built around school. Amelia identifies knowing she "was with [her] classmates" as a positive aspect of Year 7, and notes "friends not being in the same class, so I couldn't ask them for help" in Year 8 as a reason for non-attendance.

Two of the participants recall a sense of belonging towards their primary school: "It was like one big family" (Cynthia); "it was fine" and "quite fun" (Malcolm). Amelia clearly has a strong sense of attachment to her mother ("I wanted to be with Mum") and belonging to her family, connections which have informed her decision to try and return to school: "I want it to be easier for them as well".

The future

Three of the participants have a sense of the future. Graham reflects: "I'm starting to [have a plan] ... I want, you know, to be physical, like, sports-related". Academic outcomes matter to him: "hopefully, I'll do well in my exams ... I did science last year ... I'm doing Maths, English, RS [Religious Studies], D&T [Design and Technology], and prep for working life ...". Cynthia regards the purpose of education as "getting a good job", and is planning to start a "full-time course" in "childcare": "I want to do something with people with problems" she comments, mentioning "psychology" and "teaching". Malcolm likewise wants to "carry on

studying” – science and maths are going “fairly well”; his priority is finding “someone who can be flexible enough to teach me English”.

Impact on the child's phenomenon

The impact of these lived experiences on the participants' perceived selves, their behaviours and the way they construe and act upon the world (their consciousness and phenomenon – Husserl & Heidegger, 1927) appears clear in all cases. Graham remains angry, describing his experience as “wrong” and the school as “out of order”. He describes avoiding discussing the issue with school after their initial response: “I didn't really let it get to the point where people could ask me”; “I would, kind of, block it and I wouldn't let it get to the topic”. He describes football as “the only thing that makes him happy”, and clearly has a need to talk (“Just talking to someone, like, with the same interests; someone who understands”) but difficulty believing this will be possible: “It would have to be the right person”.

Cynthia describes hiding emotions, “putting on a smile” and making comments such as “Yeah, I am fine, it's just fine, because I didn't want them to make a fuss over me”, whilst at the same time “[sitting] in the toilets and texting Mum because I used to get that wound up with myself, because I couldn't do it”. Her anger at being branded “naughty” and her refusal to assimilate this into her sense of self (“I have anxiety. I'm not naughty”) is palpable. Equally, it is apparent that her experiences inform her desire to help “people with problems” and her potential choice of career.

Malcolm's experiences and the interpretation placed on them by school seem to have led him to temporarily accept others' explanations. He reflects “I think, at first ... I thought maybe I do actually have a choice ... the reason I'm not sleeping tonight is because I don't want to. But that just made it worse because I had all these conflicting ideas and things”. He refers to feeling “relief” when Chronic Fatigue was diagnosed, and remains angry at the programme of sanctions designed to make him “get myself together” which constituted his initial support experience.

Amelia describes her experience in terms of bullying, not wanting to separate from her mother, unfriendly teachers, pressure from school, and makes sense of it in terms of a series of conditions: “stress and anxiety, OCDs” and “Aspergers”. The value of talking and support seem to have been lost (“I never find it useful”), whereas medication is clearly important (“more medication would help ... I used to be on diazepam ... Fluoxetine is to get rid of the OCDs ... then Aripiprazole is like the Risperidone”). She appears more “scared” than angry, describes hiding her fears when attendance became difficult, and subsequently learning to hide them in other circumstances: “I used to be able to hide quite well and I'm even better now ... I can hide it and people just think I'm fine”.

Discussion

Making sense of experience

This study sought to address two questions: How do children who have been absent long-term from school make sense of their experience? How might this inform the professionals seeking to support them? Given the richness of the accounts, it would be trite to suggest that the first of these questions could be subject to a simple answer. The sense made by each participant of their experience appears highly individual, a point noted by previous commentators (Gregory & Purcell, 2014; Kearney

& Silverman, 1990), although the impact of this experience on the individual phenomenon is universally marked.

Having said that these experiences are individual, it is equally clear that the external influences that structure them are shared between accounts. Adult interpretations, in particular, shape all four understandings, although the form of this shaping varies. Cynthia's angry rejection of herself as "naughty" contrasts with Malcolm's adult-informed assumption that he is choosing behaviours, and appears different again from Amelia's adoption of a medical (and medicated) understanding of her experience. Although the voices of the participants can be heard clearly, the impression given is that they were ignored, or had their meaning reframed by the adults involved, during the period when attendance became difficult. The consequences of this include a still palpable sense of anger, a tendency to suppress emotions and avoid the issue, and a sense of having been lost in a system slow to respond to individual needs. All four understand this last point: they clearly view their experience as having been made worse by their schools' punitive responses, but nonetheless appear slow to blame and nuanced in their understanding of why this occurred.

Corroborating past accounts

Many aspects of these accounts triangulate with previous research findings. In particular, causal factors referenced by participants and seen in the literature include anxiety, depression, fear of teachers, bullying, and separation anxiety (Johnson et al., 1941; Kearney & Beasley, 1994; Lauchlan, 2003; Lyon & Cotler, 2007; Miller, 2008). The theme of social isolation in one account echoes published explanations that reference general social anxiety (Francis et al., 1992). Evidence of other known correlates was also present, with onset of non-attendance occurring for three of the participants shortly after a transition or time out of school, and two reporting attendance at multiple schools (Berg, 1996; Campbell, 2001).

The individuality of the accounts and the extent to which these factors differ from one participant to another triangulates with previous findings that suggest extended non-attendance is multi-factorial in causation (Nuttall & Woods, 2013), cannot be treated as a unitary concept (Miller, 2008), and needs to be considered in terms of a functional analysis (Kearney & Silverman, 1990). What is equally apparent is that previous studies appear *not* to have impacted on the recent school and support experiences of this sample of young people, questioning the extent to which current intervention practice is evidence-based.

Particularisation and generalisation

The criticism that psychology and intervention practice tends to generalise (supplying uniform explanations to apparent problem behaviours that purport to hold good across populations) when it should particularise (by seeking the causes of each individual case) (Billig, 2002), could be applied here. Despite having very individual experiences and citing different causes for their non-attendance, participants' experiences of support appear remarkably similar. The school responses recounted suggest that non-attendance behaviours may be generalised and viewed (at least initially, and in these schools) as refusal behaviour requiring disciplinary action.

All four participants report finding the process of accessing any other form of support long-winded and, in most cases, of limited use, suggesting a system that is quick to demand a return to normal, but otherwise slow to respond. It is further concerning to note that the most readily available form of support appears to be medication, often including SSRI (selective serotonin reuptake inhibitor) type antidepressants, whose side-effects include aggression and suicide, and which are arguably contra-indicated for this population due to the plasticity of the still developing adolescent brain (Bennett, 2011; Garland, 2004; Wilson, 2011).

Language was important to all participants, particularly terms such as “naughty”, “lazy”, and “refuser”, which all had experienced in some form. Such terminology appears potentially damaging, generalising an individual problem, and inaccurate when applied to children with mental and physical health issues who have genuine difficulty attending. The language of refusal and the label “school refuser” in particular appear problematic, attributing, as they do, a form of within-child responsibility to the individual (Pellegrini, 2007; Gregory & Purcell, 2014). An equivalent usage if such terminology were applied to adults absent from work through anxiety, depression, or chronic fatigue would be “work refuser”, a term unlikely to be deemed acceptable.

Implications for school and educational psychology practice

A number of practical suggestions result from these findings. These include:

- Improving schools’ understandings of extended non-attendance through training or consultation (including understanding the various causes, and the value of functional analysis); encouraging schools to continue working with the child and family to prevent the loss of the home–school relationship which can result from handing the issue over to Educational Welfare or another third party
- Ensuring all staff have some awareness of extended non-attendance, and that schools have a key person (special educational needs coordinator [SENCo] or other) with lead responsibility
- Seeking to improve multi-agency working to ensure intervention is quick, joined up, and appropriate, both by disseminating information regarding extended non-attendance, and providing training in the same, to professionals in associated organisations; this would ideally be done with a particular emphasis on early intervention
- Responding to children’s difficulties swiftly, and with understanding; making sure their voices are heard and understood
- Emphasising the role of the EP, ideally at an early stage (*only one* of the participants in this study had seen an EP despite evident psychological issues in all cases), and seeking to ensure their involvement. This might be through a form of reporting similar to that operated in some areas of the country whereby EPs are informed when exclusions are made; a similar system involving reporting of some types of attendance difficulties might be considered
- If it proves impossible to maintain the placement, providing rapid access to school work, tuition and social opportunities for young people who are out of school

Limitations and future research

Limitations of this study include its small sample size, meaning that generalising in a quantitative sense is clearly inappropriate, and the findings remain very much individual accounts. The choice of methodology is a strength and limitation, allowing detailed exploration of lived experience but precluding more specific exploration of the language and discourses surrounding extended non-attendance that would be afforded by a discursive approach. Recruitment was a particular issue: participants were approached by staff known to them with the result that selection was partially out of the researcher's hands; given the nature of the study this may mean that those who participated were more ready to engage, more articulate, or deemed more suitable by their support worker.

Future research might focus on a number of areas. Firstly, conducting a similar study with more children, ideally from different LEAs, would allow robust triangulation of accounts, and allow similarities and differences in service delivery to be examined. Secondly, the current study indicates differences in the understandings of extended non-attendance held by parents and professionals, and given the impact of these understandings, or indeed misunderstandings, on the children involved they merit further examination. Thirdly, the paucity of data regarding extended non-attendance locally and nationally, and the difficulty of examining differences in outcomes locally, suggest the need for better data gathering and analysis, ideally coordinated at a national level.

Concluding comments

This study adds weight to previous findings that have shown cases of extended non-attendance to be highly individual, and best addressed by a swift but individually tailored response. It extends previous findings by demonstrating that support experiences *as reported by these children* do not appear to be informed by the evidence base, a position which is concerning. Although care should be taken in extrapolating from such a small sample, it would also be dangerous to assume that these are isolated cases, much as this might be hoped; limited in volume as it is, previous research into children's support experiences suggest that this is not the case (Gregory & Purcell, 2014; Malcolm et al., 2003). Given the number of children affected by extended non-attendance, these findings indicate a pressing need for further study of children's support experiences when experiencing school attendance difficulties, and a similarly urgent need to review local understandings and intervention protocols to ensure they draw on the existing evidence base.

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