ELIP
EAST LANCASHIRE
INCLUSION PARTNERSHIP

TRR 19: The influence of a wellbeing intervention on primary school pupil attendance

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Background/Context

The research project details wellbeing intervention work completed within a mainstream primary school. The research investigates:

- Persistent absent pupils' views of school compared with pupils with 100% attendance
- The impact small group wellbeing interventions have on a child's wellbeing
- The influence daily adult interventions/interactions have on a child's attendance.

Belthorn Academy Primary School (BAPS) is a 'village school' which caters for children between the ages of 3-11 years. Belthorn has steadily grown over the years from the original opening with 31 pupils to the present 182 on roll (not including our pre-school pupils.) Although Belthorn has no 'catchment area' that pupils derive from, it is extremely popular due to its reputation in the community and the semi-rural location of the school.

In the academic year of 2018-19, the overall pupil attendance at Belthorn was 96.3% up from the previous academic year 2017-18 at 95.9%. In 2018-19 the percentage of pupils who met persistent absence threshold was 7.3%- 16 pupils. A school may have a persistent absence rate of no more that 16% in a given year without triggering concerns. Of these absences, only 5 had known underlying health conditions which, due to hospital appointments, operations or illness, permitted their absence from school.

Research questions

The main question is: Can specific and targeted well-being strategies help to improve the individual attendance of persistent non-absentee children aged 7-11? Questions arising from this are:

- Is there a difference in attitudes toward school in persistent absentees and regular attendees?
- Can the wellbeing in persistently absent pupils improve through daily adult intervention/interaction?

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Research interest

I have been interested in 'Wellbeing' and the effects it has on everyday life since my late teenage years. Having never missed a day of school myself and having an impeccable work attendance, my motivation for this research was to understand why others, without known underlying health conditions, often missed school and if, on occasion, this was due to low wellbeing. I wanted to know what could the school do in order to help get pupils back into school.

In my research project I wanted to study how different pupils felt about school and themselves and whether this had a direct correlation with their attendance. This meant that I had to consider other variables that may affect these results and cause anomalies. My expectation was that this research would help school to identify and take into account the importance of wellbeing and its impact on attendance. The aim of the study is to hopefully offer some interesting insights for other leaders within a school based setting.

Existing research

There is an increasingly body of research on the effect wellbeing has on a child's education in terms of their attainment and behaviour. However, there is less work regarding the effect wellbeing has on attendance alone in the primary school setting. A previous study by Lawrence et al (2019) mentions the impact of mental disorders on attendance in all school settings but does not deal specifically with well-being within primary schools. Parry Langdon (cited in Bethune 2008: 238) argues that "conversely low wellbeing is linked with poor academic performance at school, and children with emotional and behavioural difficulties are more likely to be excluded". Another point to consider is that the studies tend to be based on secondary aged pupils but, as new research from Coulsson-Read (2013) suggests, children in the womb can experience emotional distress which in turn effects infant health and development.

Research process

This was a single site study of wellbeing and attendance at Belthorn Academy Primary School. The steps in the research process and data collection methods are outlined below:

STEP 1: All KS2 pupils completed an online questionnaire to explore why, other than illness, children at Belthorn Academy were absent, if they enjoyed school and if they had strong friendship groups.
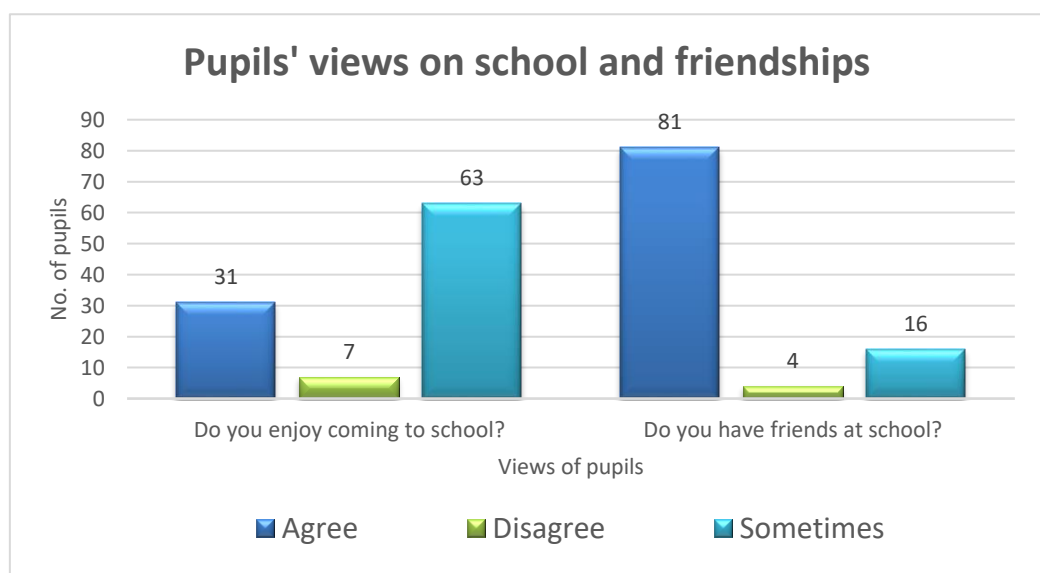
Figure 1: Results of pupil online questionnaire

Pupils' views on school and friendships

No. of pupils

Do you enjoy coming to school? — Agree 31, Disagree 7, Sometimes 63

Do you have friends at school? — Agree 81, Disagree 4, Sometimes 16

Views of pupils

■ Agree   ■ Disagree   ■ Sometimes

If you have had a day off school, what was the reason?

Just didn't feel like coming to school 5%

Friendship problems 4%

Anxiety 2%

Stress 3%

Transport problems 11%

Bullying 6%

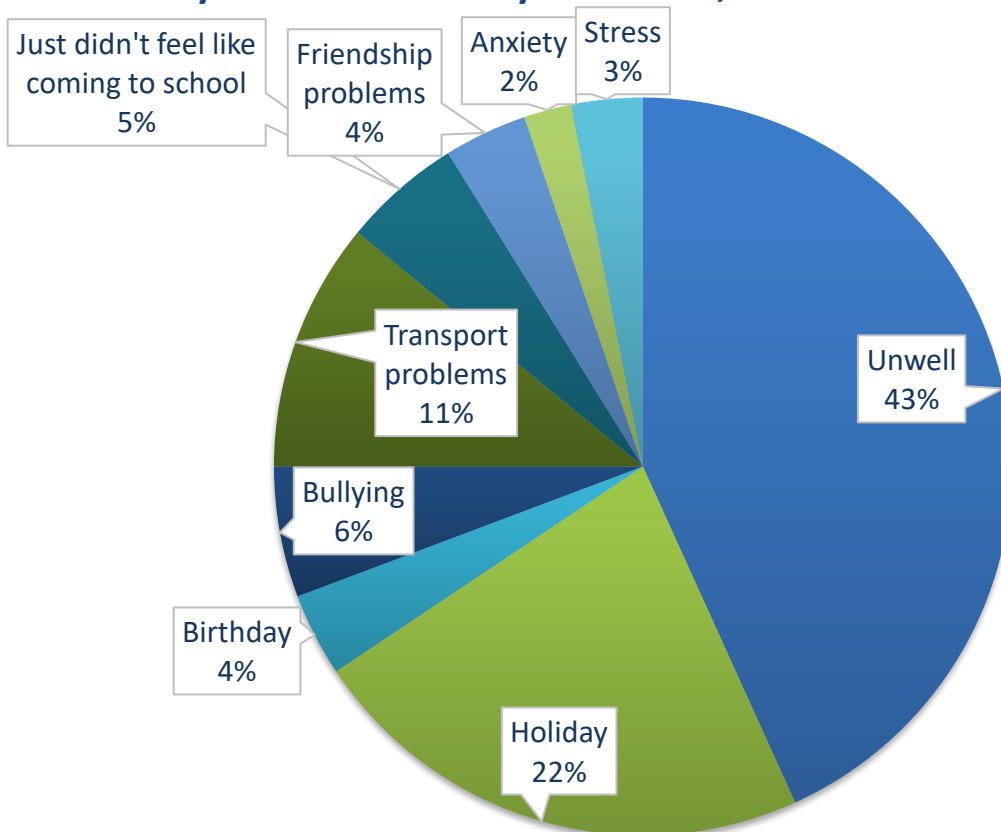Birthday 4%

Holiday 22%

Unwell 43%

Figure 2: Results of pupil online questionnaire

STEP 2: From these results two groups of 6 were established: A persistent absent group who said they had taken time off because of stress and anxiety or didn't enjoy school and a 100% attendance group. The children in the attendee group were matched with children in the absentee group according to their year group. This pairing helped in analysing the findings as it meant that the pairs would have experienced a similar school day (e.g. the same teacher, lessons, and group of peers).

STEP 3: Each child in the study completed a 'mood' questionnaire (see below for the statements used, figure X)

STEP 4: The attendees group met to discuss the things they did and didn't like about school and what resources they used when they were struggling with the school day. Individually, the children then simplified this piece of data by listing as many words that came to mind when thinking why they enjoyed school. This data was used to generate ideas for the persistent absentee interventions.

STEP 5: Each pupil was observed once in the classroom setting and once at break time. For the classroom observation, maths was the chosen subject as it is often reported by parents, in my school setting, as the main academic cause of stress and anxiety. Each class observation lasted throughout the 1-hour lesson, the data that was recorded was based on the amount of interactions they had with their class teacher, and whether or not they struggled with their work (i.e. received a yellow in their learning intention). At break time the data collected was based on whether they had played with a friend at playtime and whether they were directly spoken to by a peer, this was based on a 15-minute morning break time.

STEP 6: Daily Interventions for the persistent absence group took place between 3-3:30pm Monday to Friday. These interventions took place over a 3-month period, which started when the children returned to school in January. When planning the interventions, I used the information I had collected in previous steps. As a group, the first thing I wanted to instil in the children was a sense of belonging. For their first task the children had to decide on a tribe animal they would like to be represented by. They chose a dog (not the most traditional tribal animal but their reasoning was fantastic, so 'The Dogs' we became). Next, they decided on an image that would represent them as a group. Whenever a child was absent, we would send home our trademark image on a card to let the group member know they were missed.

Findings

Both groups were asked the questions identified in the results table below at the end of a school day. A clear divide in opinion, particularly on some questions, is evident between the groups. The attendees group scored much higher when it came to: finding it easy to wake up, having a good day overall, wanting to come to school, enjoying the lessons they had that day, and having spoken/interacted with an adult that day. Whereas the persistent absentee group scored much higher when asked: if they had felt sad or unhappy, if they found one or more lessons too hard, if they felt stressed, if they felt scared and if they had worried within the school day.
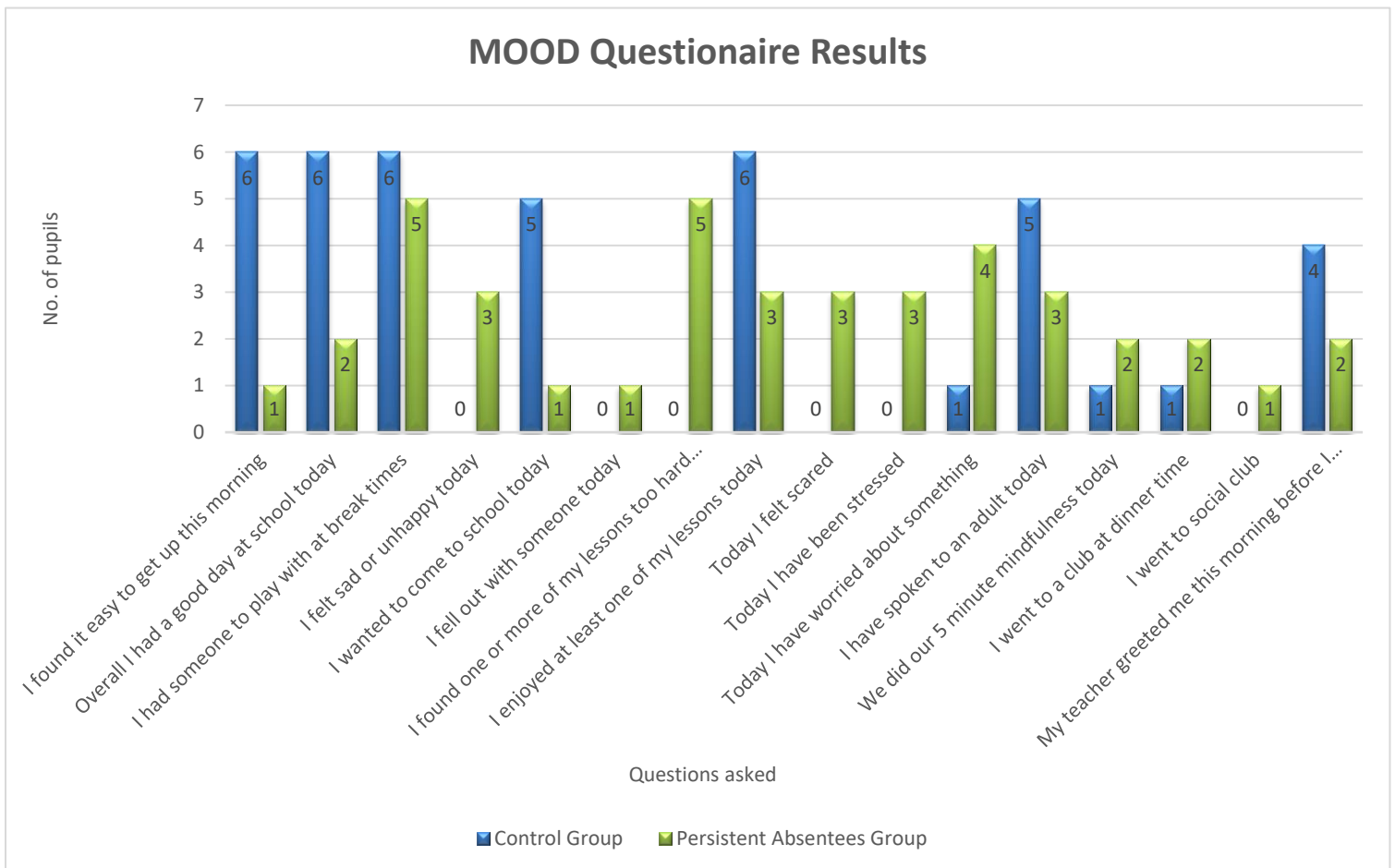

Figure 3: Step 3's Results of Mood questionnaire

The 6 members of the attendee group were asked to write down words associated with school enjoyment. The most popular responses were: friends, playtime, lessons and teachers (see word cloud below for results). Research shows 'Compared to children who lack friends, children with 'good' friends have higher self-esteem, are more social, can cope with life stresses and transitions and are

also less victimised by peers,' (Derhally, 2016). It seems likely therefore that friends and friendships are one of the most appealing aspects for any child during the school day that may improve well-being. With this in mind, a focus was placed on creating those friendships within the absentee group to help improve their well-being in school.

Lessons and teachers are another two responses that are symbiotic in the sense that if a child succeeds during a lesson, via obvious interactions with their teacher, then it could be argued that their enjoyment of the school day would increase.

Figure 4: Word cloud generated from pupil responces of things they enjoy about school.

It follows that one intervention concerns the relationships the absentee group have in school. As Gutman and Feinstein (2008) state: 'Children experience a very different environment, even within the same school, based on their own individual interactions with peers and teachers.'. This suggests that promoting social links and creating support via adult interaction so the school day becomes more enjoyable would have a positive influence on attendance.

Observation found that 4/6 children did not achieve their intended learning intention for that lesson. This may result in less enjoyment and, in turn, contribute to school absenteeism. Indeed, as Willis (2010: page number) suggests, if a child is struggling with the curriculum then 'School seems like a feed lot force feeding them facts.'.

It was further noted that 4/6 avoided teacher interaction despite efforts to provide the opportunity for such interaction. One child even put their head down to avoid eye contact and subsequent interaction.

From the observation it seemed that nearly all children had a moderate to high friendship group but on closer inspection it was found that 3 of the 6 children were not being spoken to directly by friends. The absentee group were speaking but their responses were not validated by their peers. The results of these findings can be seen in Figure 5.
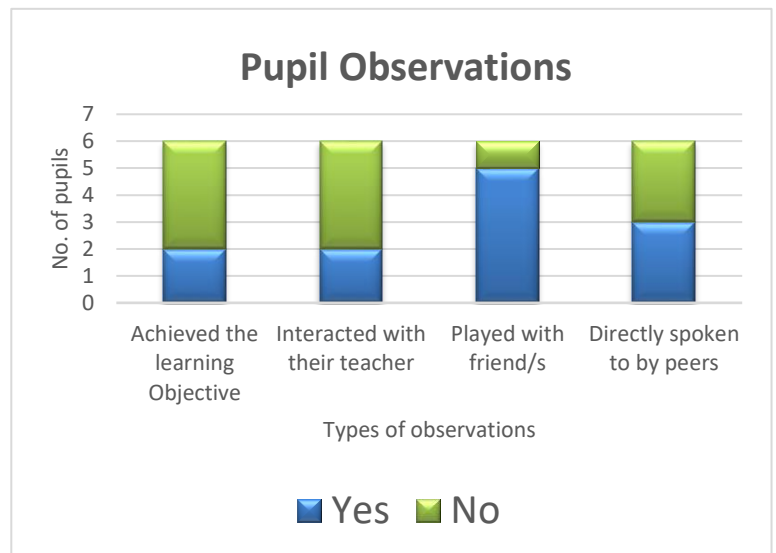

Figure 5: Step 5's Results of pupil observations

Intervention and pupil feedback

The initial activities and observations listed above allowed for a better understanding of what these 6 children were 'missing' when it came to a positive school experience and provided direction regarding the interventions.

The following list would be my non-negotiable actions for what came to be called 'my tribe':

1. I would work with the children every day from 3:00pm-3:30pm (if I was otherwise engaged the group would still meet with another teacher.)
2. Each child would have the opportunity to talk and be listened to by their peers.

3. The children would have one continuous place within the school to meet each day, that they agreed on. This would let them know that it was their space to speak freely and feel safe.
4. Each child would be given the opportunity to pick an activity from the pool of wellbeing and mindfulness activities I'd collated. In the first instance, all of the group's activities were based on forming a 'tribal gang'. We created a mascot, a group name and a special handshake. Once we were fully established, the activities that followed were aimed to give the children strategies for dealing with the school day. An idea of some of the activities used are listed below:
   - Two truths and a dare (children needed to listen and look for social ques as well as get to know each other better)
   - Mindful meditation activities (helping the children to find calming strategies when the they are feeling a lack of control)
   - Board games (taking turns, socialising and learning to lose gracefully)

The rationale for the above is detailed further below.

To ensure the interventions were having the intended impact it became important to verbally check in with the children, either during our time together or in passing during the school day, to see how their mental health was and to ensure they had interacted positively with an adult that day. This feedback helped me to plan appropriate activities and strategies, many of which were taken from '*Wellbeing in the Primary Classroom'* by Adrian Bethune.

To address the issue of the absentee group not interacting with their class teacher, different class teachers sometimes spent the intervention time with the group instead of myself. The feedback from this, although generally positive, was that they enjoyed the time with me more. This supports research that suggests change can have a negative impact and the consistent presence of myself was a reassurance to the absentee group.

The interventions took place for 30 minutes at the end of the school day to ensure the children would leave school on a positive note. This idea was inspired Kahneman's (2011, 60) research about the remembering self and how 'our brains tend to colour the entire story with the intensity of the ending of it'. Indeed, all the children felt it was a great way to end their day and gave them something to look forward to, thus making them want to return the following day.

Evaluating Impact

From the beginning of the interventions until their completion, four of the six children in the intervention group, maintained 100% attendance. The mood of the children was set to be measured by the questionnaire that was used at the beginning of the project but due to the unprecedented circumstances of the global pandemic caused by Covid-19 this was not possible.

However, verbal feedback from the children received during the interventions, alongside the lack of absence during this time, suggests positive change.
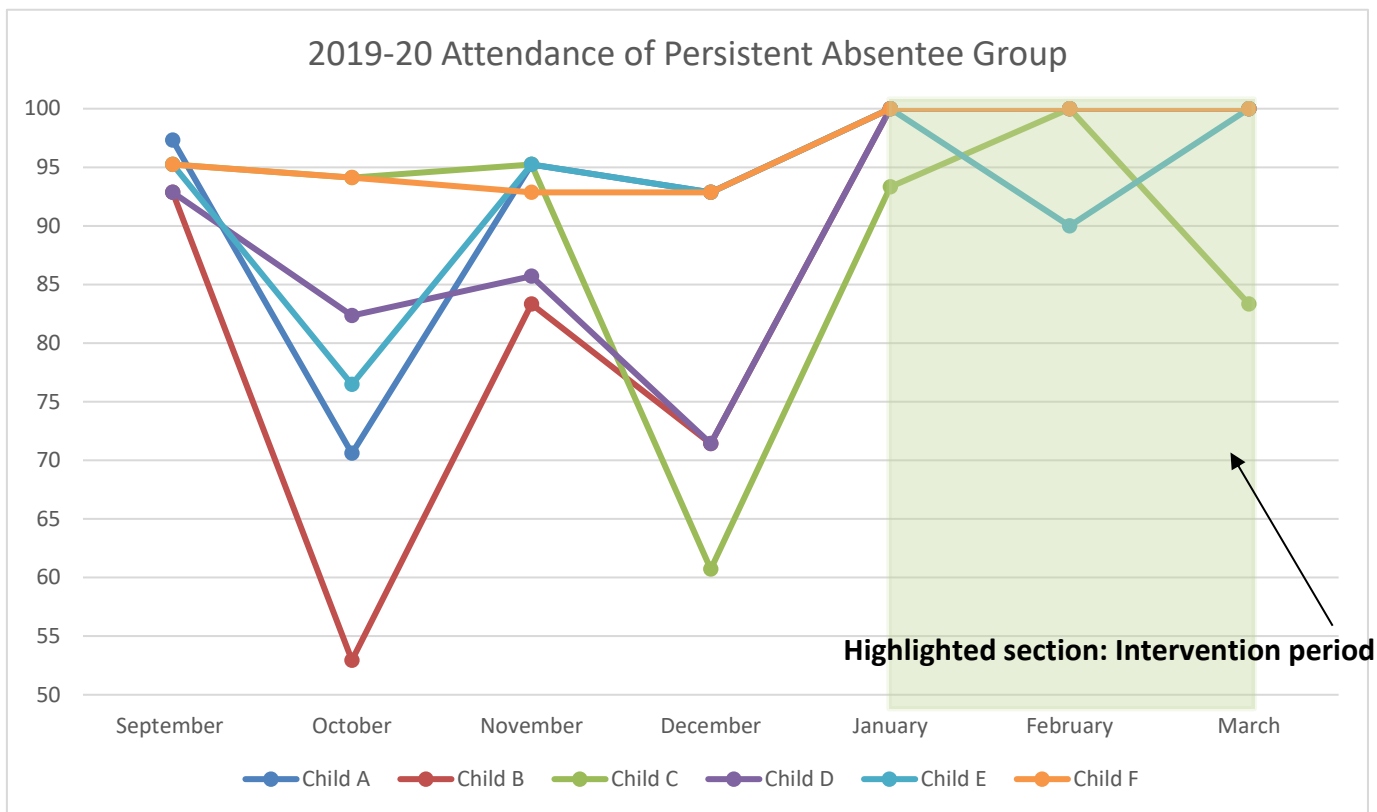

Figure 6: A line graph showing Persistent absentee pupils attendance across the period of Sept 2019- March 2020

This graph shows, in the highlighted section, the improved attendance of the absentee group during the intervention period (Child C had a severe drop in attendance in March due to the Covid-19 pandemic as she fell into the vulnerable category and could not attend). This group historically have had issues with attendance throughout their primary school education. In this project, the intervention period was limited and it may be that a longer period of time would see even greater improvement in attendance.

Further Research

Further research suggested by this project would be to conduct a longer and more sustained period of interventions on a persistent absentee group to then evaluate the impact over a full academic year. Doing this would enable the researcher to see trends as the year progresses and also allow for feedback from the pupils themselves to explore which activities had the most impact. Pupil attainment could also be valuably monitored over a sustained period of time to examine how it varies according to attendance.

Another possibility would be to involve more children; larger groups of absentees and attendees may give further insight into the impact of the interventions. A larger scale project could further study the influence of socio-economic factors.

To gain more understanding of the factors underlying absence, parents/carers of children could be interviewed. Although approaching the subject may prove problematic, if done sensitively it may lead to an insight into the home-life of a child who is persistently absent.

However, time and availability are two key practical considerations that unavoidably influence what is possible to achieve; each school day is different and a lack of time impact on the intervention

timetable. Keeping the same member of staff available, which this project suggested was important, is not always going to be achievable but should be prioritised.

Concluding comments

Although outside influences curtailed the length of the study, the improved attendance of the children appears to strongly suggest the positive influence of the intervention. It will be interesting to monitor over the next academic year if this improvement is sustained.

Recommendations

- Identify the group of persistent absentees
- Be clear whether the absence is due to illness
- Issue anonymous questionnaires for feedback
- If implementing interventions and group work, then set it at the end of the school day so each child leaves with positive feelings about their school day
- Make sure each child gets an opportunity to speak and be heard

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Acknowledgements

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Referencing this article: