

*Exploring the experiences of Education Welfare  
Officers engaging with cases of persistent pupil  
absence from school – a Grounded Theory study*

**Jilly Horne**

Thesis submitted to the University of  
Nottingham for the degree of Doctor of  
Applied Psychology (Educational)  
June 2012

**The impact of Peer Mediation on Playtime Incidents  
in a Primary School**

(Page 199)

Research Project submitted December 2004

**How do teachers experience the use of a Solution  
Circle as an intervention in relation to difficult to  
manage pupil behaviour?**

(Page 239)

Research Project submitted September 2005

**Dissemination and Impact Evaluation**

(Page 306)

Submitted May 2012

# CONTENTS

|   | page      |
|---|-----------|
| <b>Abstract</b>   | <b>6</b>  |
| <b>List of Tables and Figures</b>                                 | <b>9</b>  |
| <b>Chapter 1 Introduction</b>                                     | <b>11</b> |
| <b>Chapter 2 Literature Review: Part 1</b>                        | <b>13</b> |
| 2.1 Pupil non attendance  | 13        |
| 2.2 How wide spread is the problem                                | 14        |
| 2.3 The Law   | 16        |
| 2.4 The terminology of non school attendance                      | 17        |
| 2.5 Persistent Absence  | 18        |
| 2.6 Major theoretical formulations of non school attendance       | 19        |
| 2.7 School phobia and School refusal                              | 21        |
| 2.8 Truancy   | 23        |
| 2.9 The validity of classification                                | 27        |
| 2.10 The Sheffield Survey   | 28        |
| 2.11 Incidence of categories                                      | 31        |
| 2.12 Causes of non attendance                                     | 33        |
| 2.13 The assessment of risk and protective factors                | 40        |
| 2.14 Interventions and Initiatives                                | 44        |
| 2.15 The role of the Education Welfare Service                    | 48        |
| 2.16 The role of the Educational Psychologist                     | 54        |
| 2.17 Summary of Chapter 2   | 55        |
| <b>Chapter 3 Research Methodology</b>                             | <b>56</b> |
| 3.1 Research Paradigms – Positivist and Interpretivist Traditions | 56        |
| 3.2 Qualitative and Quantitative methods                          | 58        |
| 3.3 Validity and Reliability                                      | 59        |
| 3.4 Rationale   | 60        |
| 3.5 Constructing Grounded Theory                                  | 61        |
| 3.6 The origins of Grounded Theory                                | 62        |
| 3.7 The stages of Grounded Theory                                 | 65        |
| 3.8 Initial Open Coding   | 66        |
| 3.9 Level 2 and 3 Coding  | 68        |
| 3.10 Theoretical Memos  | 69        |
| 3.11 Theoretical Sampling   | 69        |
| 3.12 Theoretical Sensitivity                                      | 70        |
| 3.13 Theory Generation  | 71        |
| 3.14 Design / Method  | 75        |

|                  |   |            |
|------------------|---|------------|
| 3.15             | Participants  | 76         |
| 3.16             | Ethical Considerations  | 77         |
| 3.17             | Procedure   | 79         |
| 3.18             | Materials / Instruments   | 82         |
| 3.19             | Summary of Chapter 3  | 85         |
| <b>Chapter 4</b> | <b>Constructing Grounded Theory<br/>– Interpretive Qualitative Analysis</b> | <b>86</b>  |
| 4.1              | Data Gathering  | 86         |
| 4.2              | Open Coding (Level 1 Coding)  | 87         |
| 4.3              | Level 2 and 3 Coding  | 94         |
| 4.4              | Phase 1. Problem Presentation   | 96         |
| 4.5              | Phase 2. Assessment Strategy  | 103        |
| 4.6              | Phase 3. Engagement Strategy (Parents)                                      | 113        |
| 4.7              | Phase 4. PA Case Formulation  | 118        |
| 4.8              | Phase 5. Engagement Strategy (School)                                       | 121        |
| 4.9              | Phase 6. Problem Resolution   | 125        |
| 4.10             | Summary of Chapter 4.   | 130        |
| <b>Chapter 5</b> | <b>Literature Review (Part 2)<br/>– Theoretical Sensitivity</b>             | <b>132</b> |
| 5.1              | Self Efficacy Theory (SET)  | 133        |
| 5.2              | Locus of Control  | 138        |
| 5.3              | Systems Theory  | 139        |
| 5.4              | Role Theory   | 142        |
| 5.5              | Attribution Theory  | 145        |
| 5.6              | Problem Solving   | 147        |
| 5.7              | Summary of Chapter 5  | 149        |
| <b>Chapter 6</b> | <b>The Grounded Theory</b>  | <b>151</b> |
| 6.1              | Level 3 Codes – The Organising Framework                                    | 151        |
| 6.2              | The Grounded Theory   | 152        |
| 6.3              | Self Efficacy Beliefs and Systemic Influences                               | 154        |
| 6.31             | Problem Presentation phase  | 154        |
| 6.32             | Assessment Strategy phase   | 158        |
| 6.33             | Engagement Strategy (parents) phase   | 164        |
| 6.34             | Case Formulation phase  | 165        |
| 6.35             | Engagement Strategy (school) phase  | 167        |
| 6.36             | Problem Resolution phase  | 169        |
| 6.4              | Summary of Chapter 6  | 172        |
| <b>Chapter 7</b> | <b>Conclusions, Implications and Evaluation</b>                             | <b>173</b> |
| 7.1              | Conclusions from the Grounded Theory  | 173        |
| 7.2              | Connections with the literature review                                      | 175        |



|                     |  |            |
|---------------------|--|------------|
| 7.3                 | Implications for practice  | 176        |
| 7.4                 | Evaluative reflections   | 182        |
| 7.5                 | Researcher reflexivity   | 184        |
| 7.6                 | Appropriateness of a Grounded Theory Approach  | 185        |
| 7.7                 | Unique contribution and implications for future research   | 186        |
| <b>References</b>   |  | <b>189</b> |
| <b>Appendices</b>   |  |            |
| <b>Appendix A</b>   | <b>Extract of raw interview data together with Level 1 codes which emerged from this data</b>  |            |
| <b>Appendix B</b>   | <b>Example of Level 1 codes from data related to The Level 2 code of Hypothesis Formulation</b>  |            |
| <b>Appendix C</b>   | <b>Persistent Absence Procedure (EWS Guidelines for EWO's)</b>   |            |
| <b>Year 2 Study</b> | <b>Assignment 4 - Peer Mediation and Playtime incidents in a Primary School</b>  | <b>199</b> |
| <b>Year 2 Study</b> | <b>Assignment 5 - How do teachers experience the use of a Solution Circle as an intervention in relation to difficult to manage pupil behaviour?</b> | <b>239</b> |
|                     | <b>Dissemination and Impact Evaluation</b>   | <b>306</b> |

## **Abstract**

Using a grounded theory approach within a social constructivist epistemology, the research study explores the experiences of Education Welfare Officers (EWOs) engaging in assessment and intervention with cases of persistent absence from school. Whilst much of the discussion related to non attendance has focused on risk and causation factors, categorisation and the effectiveness of specific interventions, there is limited research which has specifically focused on the practice of the EWO as the initial and often only agency to try to engage with this vulnerable group of children, young people and their families.

The research design involved interviewing 14 members of an Education Welfare Service (EWS) and engaging in a qualitative interpretive analysis of the interview data, in line with the suggested grounded theory phases of analysis. Utilising the theoretical perspectives of Social Cognitive Theory, specifically focusing on self efficacy beliefs, together with Systems and Attribution theories, the Grounded Theory offers an insight into the significance and effects of EWO self efficacy beliefs on their own practice and how systemic influences, such as those offered by the school, family and other agencies, including the EWS, can either support or hinder EWO assessment and intervention processes.

Findings are indicative of systemic influences acting as potential barriers in achieving useful and objectively grounded assessments and interventions for persistent absentees, by specifically serving to influence self efficacy beliefs and ultimately restrict the range of potentially useful assessments and interventions for this vulnerable group. The study

highlights the implications of this for future EWO and Educational Psychologist practice.

## **Acknowledgements**

I gratefully acknowledge the time and contributions made by members of the Nottingham City Education Welfare Service, for their cooperation and willingness to take part in the research study.

I would also like to thank Professor Andy Miller as supervisor on the Doctoral course for his patience, guidance and encouragement.

Thanks also to my family members and friends for their ongoing support and encouragement over the long period of study and for giving me the time and space to complete the programme of study. I specifically want to say thank you to my husband Jonathan and to Jerry, JJ and Lauren for their technical support. Thanks also to my mum and dad for always believing in me.

| <b>List of Tables and Figures</b> |  | <b>Page</b> |
|-----------------------------------|--|-------------|
| <b>Fig 3.1</b>                    | <b>EWO Interview Schedule 1</b>  | <b>83</b>   |
| <b>Fig 3.2</b>                    | <b>EWO Interview Schedule 2<br/>(Revised Interview Questions)</b>  | <b>84</b>   |
| <b>Fig 4.1</b>                    | <b>Diagram showing the representation of Level 2 and 3 codes, together with examples of Level 1 codes for the Problem Presentation phase of EWO engagement with cases of persistent absence from school</b>            | <b>97</b>   |
| <b>Fig 4.2</b>                    | <b>Diagram showing the representation of Level 2 and 3 Codes, together with examples of Level 1 Codes, for the Assessment Strategy phase of EWO engagement with cases of persistent absence from school</b>            | <b>104</b>  |
| <b>Fig 4.21</b>                   | <b>List indicating frequently occurring areas as related to Level 2 Codes</b>  | <b>88</b>   |
| <b>Fig 4.22</b>                   | <b>Showing the central sequential narrative as phases which emerged through the EWOs involvement with PA cases</b>   | <b>95</b>   |
| <b>Fig 4.3</b>                    | <b>Diagram showing the representation of Level 2 and 3 Codes, together with examples of Level 1 Codes, for the Engagement Strategy (parents) phase of EWO engagement with cases of persistent absence from school.</b> | <b>115</b>  |
| <b>Fig 4.4</b>                    | <b>Diagram showing the representation of Level 2 and 3 Codes, together with examples of Level 1 Codes, for the Case Formulation phase of EWO engagement with cases of persistent absence from school</b>               | <b>119</b>  |
| <b>Fig 4.5</b>                    | <b>Diagram showing the representation of Level 2 and 3 Codes, together with examples of Level 1 Codes, for the Engagement Strategy (school) phase of EWO engagement with cases of persistent absence from school</b>   | <b>123</b>  |
| <b>Fig 4.6</b>                    | <b>Diagram showing the representation of Level 2 and 3 Codes, together with examples of Level 1 Codes, for The Problem Resolution phase of EWO engagement with cases of persistent absence from school</b>             | <b>129</b>  |
| <b>Fig 4.61</b>                   | <b>Theoretical memo defining the category of EWO Efficacy Judgements in relation to the Problem</b>  | <b>126</b>  |

## **Resolution phase of engagement with PA cases**

|                |   |            |
|----------------|---|------------|
| <b>Fig 6</b>   | <b>Diagram representing the Grounded Theory of self Efficacy beliefs and systemic influences on the practice of Education Welfare Officers in relation to cases of persistent absence from school.</b>  | <b>155</b> |
| <b>Fig 6.1</b> | <b>Showing variation in the core variable of self efficacy beliefs in relation to EWO assessment and intervention processes, together with the perceived hierarchy of causal attributions, related to the family, pupil and school in cases of persistent absence from school</b> | <b>171</b> |

# **Chapter 1. Introduction**

## **The Research Focus**

The research interest arose out of the Nottingham City Local Authority Early Intervention Project, which began in 2008. Part of this project involved the Education Welfare Service (EWS) in aiming to reduce the number of pupils classified as 'Persistent Absentees' (PA's) across Nottingham City Schools, in both primary and secondary phases of education. The target group consisted of school age pupils identified by the Government as Persistent Absentees in targeted city schools, these being pupils who are absent for 20% or more of their possible school sessions. The project aimed to reduce PA to meet the target of a 5% reduction by October 2011.

More specifically the project aimed to provide more intensive support to the families of children classified as persistent absentees by 'creating capacity for professionals to act as budget holding family welfare professionals'. This gave individual Education Welfare Officers (EWOs) the capacity to use allocated funding in order to address issues relating to family need or crisis. It also aimed to couple this support with the 'robust use of legal intervention, in order to promote parental responsibility and create the capacity for change' (Nottingham City Project Initiation document 2008).

Interestingly the project highlighted the need to focus on 'unpicking the multiple problems of families in crisis and plan a way forward by quality assessments, with an achievable action plan by a lead professional (EWO) with a budget to enable a more solution focused intervention'.

The project was keen to emphasise that if the underlying cause of the persistent non attendance was to remain, then any subsequent improvements in attendance would be unlikely to be sustained. It also envisaged that EWO practitioners would need to have access to 'quality assessment tools, employ a variety of engagement skills and have up to date knowledge of support networks.'

The EWS, consisting of 23 EWOs, in addition to 3 Senior Practitioner EWOs and 4 area managers, were to receive further training in the use of a city based assessment resource called Ngage. This resource was to be used to support the EWOs engagement with children and young people in eliciting their views and identifying issues of relevance to their everyday life, including any potential safeguarding and school based issues. It was also anticipated that EWOs would become the 'Lead Professional' and initiator of the Common Assessment Framework (CAF), when unmet family need was identified, and that the CAF process would become embedded in EWO practice in order to 'ensure consistency and promote partner involvement'.

The assessment and intervention process employed by the EWOs in respect of cases of PA was therefore highlighted as a significantly important part of the process of improving attendance rates across the city, and as such became the focus of the research study.



## **Chapter 2. LITERATURE REVIEW: Part 1**

### **Introduction**

This chapter takes a broad view of the literature related to Non School Attendance, including the use of differing terminology related to major theoretical formulations, before considering more specifically suggested causes and interventions associated with persistent absentees. It also considers the potential role of the Education Welfare Officer and Educational Psychologist in the assessment and intervention of cases of Persistent Absence. The literature review is purposefully broad owing to the nature of the research methodology and the exploratory nature of the research process.

#### **2.1 Pupil Non Attendance**

Pupil 'non attendance' or absence from school can occur for a variety of reasons, ranging from those which may be officially induced by the school, reflecting pupil exclusions or time timetables, to those who are classified as 'truants', who choose to absent themselves from school for varying periods of time.

Non attendance may also reflect pupils whose absence is supported by their parents or carers, including children who are encouraged to remain at home as carers or helpers, or to engage in paid work. Some non attendance may be attributable to family circumstances and may reflect children who have experienced illness or bereavement, cultural religious observance or family holidays. There are also pupils who choose to

engage in internal absence from lessons in school or to truant for part of the school day. Non attendance can also occur where parents and other professionals do not support a pupils' absence from school but can fail to impact on enforcing their attendance.

A further implied dimension to school absence therefore includes the notion of whether the non attendance is officially approved or condoned. Hallam and Rogers (2008) distinguish this notion further, using the terms authorised and unauthorised absence, whilst recognising that there may be differences across schools in the way that they are willing to categorise and record pupil absence. They point out that not all schools make the distinction between legitimate absence, for example illness, and illegitimate absence such as truancy, or do not apply such distinctions consistently, particularly when this is likely to reflect badly on the school itself. This also calls into question the accuracy of school attendance rates as well as the extent of the problem.

## **2.2 How widespread is the problem?**

Home Office Research (2004) has suggested that as many as 10,000 pupils, on any given day, may be missing from school in the UK, whilst NACRO (2003) statistics in were suggesting that this may actually be nearer a staggering 100,000 pupils, with a significant proportion of these engaging in criminal or antisocial activities. By law schools are required to keep an attendance register and to monitor and identify pupil absence, including unauthorised absence, under the Education (Pupil Registration) Regulations 1955. There is a duty on the school to determine whether a

pupils' absence should be authorised or unauthorised, however, there is nothing suggested in the regulations to indicate what should happen in the event of the absence being unauthorised. Pupil illness is deemed to be the responsibility of the parent to inform the school. However it appears that the school are required to judge the validity of the reasons given by the parent, and are therefore responsible for legally sanctioning pupil attendance or not.

A significant trend impacting on pupil non attendance rates relates to the number of pupils who have been permanently excluded from school.

These pupils can often be out of education with little or no educational provision for considerable periods of time and can be very difficult to place back into the education system. However, once pupils are no longer on the roll of a school, they no longer form part of the schools attendance records, and are not therefore highlighted in school non attendance statistics. Research has also indicated that where pupils are disruptive in class their non attendance is often condoned by teachers (Carlen et al 1992). The attendance of these pupils is also not therefore likely to be accurately reflected in school statistics.

The first tables indicating unauthorised absence rates in schools were published by the DFE in November 1993, being based on information supplied by the schools themselves, and they have continued to publish Local Authority data giving an insight into authorised and unauthorised attendance rates across authorities as a whole. The accuracy of such data is however questioned (O'Keeffe 1995), owing to the inconsistencies

in school recording and differentiation. Establishing accurate levels of attendance in UK schools has therefore remained problematic.

## **2.3 The Law**

The Education of children and young people reflects the right to an education as recognised by the human rights convention (1998). Whilst this right has given children access to education all around the world, it is also clear that this right is not always exercised and that factors mitigate to undermine the principle. Education is seen as the route, not only to economic development but also to the development of an individuals' social and personal welfare, and is legally guaranteed in the UK.

The law relating to school attendance is reflected in the Education Act 1944, giving Local Authorities (LA's) the ability to prosecute parents under Section 39, for failing to ensure their child's attendance at school, and also under Section 37, if they fail to comply with an Attendance Order. The Act emphasises the duty of parents to ensure that a child of compulsory school age (a person who has attained the age of 5 years but has not reached the age of 16 years), 'receives efficient, full time education suitable to his or her age, ability and aptitude, either by attendance at school or otherwise'.

The 'otherwise' relates to children who in the current terminology, 'are educated otherwise than at school' often reflecting the choice to Home Educate, whilst the 'parent(s) of a child who is registered at a school, yet fails to attend regularly, is guilty of an offence (Section 39)'.

A number of stated cases in law have helped clarify ambiguities relating to 'parental duty', for example *Crump V Gilmore* (1970), where parental duty was not deemed to be relieved by the notion of the parents having no knowledge of the absence from school itself, with evidence of 'failure to attend only', being sufficient evidence for conviction.

There is also legislation in the Children and Young Persons' Act 1969, which relates to a decision about whether children, whose parents have been prosecuted for the non attendance of their children, should also appear in the juvenile courts with a possible view to the instigation of a care order. This route may be sought if for example, the child is deemed to be in need of care and control.

## **2.4 The terminology of non school attendance**

The literature review indicates that pupil non attendance can be categorised and conceptualised in a number of different ways and with reference to differing terminology representing broad categories.

Current terminology around pupils not attending school includes;

- School refusers
- School phobic or anxious school refusers
- Truants
- Non school or poor attenders
- Persistent Absentees

Such terminology is often used interchangeably and can therefore be unhelpful when considering how best to intervene with non school attendance. In addition, whilst some terminology appears to give us an

insight into the causes and potential treatment of the non attendance, it can be argued that it may indeed mask a more accurate and potentially useful insight, whilst other terminology such as poor or non attender can fail to give any insight into the reason(s) behind the non attendance at all. Such terminology can also be seen to be limiting in terms of the strategies and interventions deemed to be appropriate. Kearney (2008) has suggested that 'the traditional notion of dividing youths with school refusal behaviour into those with anxiety based school refusal and truancy' is flawed and that the descriptors of school refusal and truancy are not clearly linked to effective or useful assessment or intervention strategies for this population' (p457).

Reid (1985) has suggested that 'In some circles, notably teachers and the lay public, the term 'truant' is used to designate anyone from the occasional absentee to the child who refuses to attend school. This is very dangerous' (p7). The implied danger here is one that relates to the subsequent 'treatment' of the 'truant', often along correctional or punishment lines.

## **2.5 Persistent Absence**

The term Persistent Absence (PA) is defined by the DCFS (Department for Children, Schools and Families) as relating to pupils who have missed 20% or more of their education, (or approximately one half term out of the five for which the data is collected), or for whom attendance falls below 80%. The term in itself does not imply a causative factor. It can therefore be viewed as an umbrella term which could encompass all of the above terminology relating to school non attendance.

Whilst the scope of the research here is focused on this statistical definition of non school attendance, with PA representing a broad category of pupils who consistently or persistently fail to attend school, the literature review around the terminology of non attendance also alerts us to the fact that, within this overarching categorisation, there are a number of children whose attendance can be sub-categorised in ways which imply greater insight into the reasons and causes of non school attendance. It is the severity or frequency of their non attendance within each of these categorisations that would lead to these children being termed persistent absentees.

Reid's (1999) research into the reasons why persistent absentees miss and continue to miss school indicated that they are more likely to have lower levels of self esteem and academic self concepts, experience greater alienation from school, including not being liked by their peers, together with higher levels of neuroticism. These characteristics, nevertheless, cover a broad range of individual, psychological and social factors which can be associated with a complex interaction between home – school - and individual influences, which can either work together to support or decrease pupil attendance.

The term is nevertheless one which has been widely adopted and often seen to reflect the most difficult pupils to intervene with, as their non attendance is quite often firmly entrenched within an established pattern of non school attendance.

## **2.6 Major theoretical formulations of non school attendance**

Theoretical formulations related to issues of school non attendance provide a useful and important insight into the way it is conceptualised, categorised, and ultimately intervened with. Terminology used to describe children who do not attend school, can also therefore be seen to reflect theory and notions about the cause or causes of non attendance, through their subsequent categorisation. These categories are now examined in more detail since, categorisation implies that there are differing groups of pupils who share distinct and describable features to their non attendance, but which may nevertheless come under the umbrella of being a persistent absentee.

Berg (1969), for example, has proposed that there are a number of definable features or characteristics related to the category of school phobia. This includes notions of an emotional component, such as fearfulness around attending school accompanied by distress, or pupils complaining of feeling unwell. It is accompanied in all cases by pupils remaining at home with the knowledge of their parents. Definition is also characterised by the absence of so called anti-social behaviours.

Non school or poor attendance is often classified using a number of different terms and as Galloway (1985, p.20) indicates, can be seen to reflect attempts to distinguish between 'groups of poor attenders and describing the personal, family and social characteristics of each group'. This becomes significant as a number of these terms reflect different theoretical formulations which themselves imply a causative factor, as well as implications for intervention. It also reflects the fact that a child's non attendance at school is influenced and linked to a variety of reasons



and factors and that distinguishing between these reasons or causative factors may also point the way to the most effective interventions, treatments or strategies. As indicated earlier it also has the potential to limit the range of intervention deemed to be appropriate if the 'classification' is too narrowly focused.

Miller (2008) has highlighted the debates around these formulations and how they have differed across the psychiatric and psychological domains. He also poses the question of whether these formulations do in fact represent a single or 'unitary' phenomena?

## **2.7 School Phobia and School refusal**

Whilst as indicated, school phobia and refusal are often terms that are used interchangeably; they nevertheless tend to reflect a more clinical interpretation, with the concept of a 'neurotic' disorder being a major component of classification. Anxiety is often seen as a significant feature of this classification, with the level of anxiety experienced by the child often being seen to reflect a distinction between the two terms. Both are characterised by children and young people being reluctant or refusing to attend school and often to leave the family home. The term 'school phobia' also implies a more psychoanalytical formulation and appears to be the term more widely adopted or used by, for example, child mental health services.

This formulation is suggestive of some kind of medical condition for absence, and often implied to reflect some kind of disturbance in family relationships or attachments, often linked to the notion of anxiety or

mental health issues. School phobia can therefore be considered as a subset of School Refusal Behaviour, with this term, as highlighted, often being divided between the school phobic and the truant.

Hallam and Rogers (2008), point out that bullying in school can be anxiety provoking in young people, particularly if reported and not managed effectively by the school. Primary to Secondary transfer has also been suggested to be potentially traumatic, with some pupils who have to negotiate different locations and lessons finding this stressful and anxiety provoking. It is suggested that although these experiences can appear trivial to adults, the resultant high levels of anxiety may lead to features associated with school phobia or refusal.

Reid (1985, p. 43) also points out that some children may be labelled as a 'school refusers', perhaps as a consequence of experiencing bullying in school but not wanting to disclose this for fear of the consequences. They may ultimately be categorised by their fearfulness or anxiety about school in terms of a psychological condition, whilst the source of this remains undiscovered. The root cause or trigger may not therefore be necessarily related to the pathology of the child, and is again indicative of a potential to intervene with the non attendance at an inappropriate or less effective level.

Blagg and Yule (1987) have also attempted to distinguish between school phobics, school refusers and other non attenders, using differential criteria. They have adopted Berg's (1969) criteria, highlighted earlier, in defining school phobia as reflecting features of severe emotional upset, parental knowledge and an absence of anti social behaviour. Attempts to

distinguish further between the truant and other poor attenders, conclude that both sets of criteria reflect features of 'frequency', in being absent from school without good reason on a least five occasions in one term. Pupils in both categories were considered to show no evidence of marked emotional upset, but with the definable characteristic of the 'truant' reflecting absence without the parents' permission or approval. Whilst this may reflect features of widespread truancy, it does not give us any insight in to the reasons for the act of truancy itself.

Other 'non attenders' are felt to reflect absence with the knowledge and permission of the parents, with the added suggested possibility of this being a deliberate act in order to fulfil a family need or deficit. Whilst there is therefore some attempt here to imply a causative factor or motivational intent, there are clearly parents who have knowledge of their child's non attendance and who, despite not condoning the non attendance, are unable to effect change or improve attendance, often even with the support of other agencies. These children would not therefore fall neatly into either categorisation.

## **2.8 Truancy**

Reid (1985) suggests that Persistent Absentee's can be meaningfully identified in four different categories of 'truant' and that this differentiation can be helpful in determining successful treatment strategies as well as differential re-integration strategies. This categorisation therefore moves away from the statistical definition reflected in government legislation and begins to suggest definable categories reflecting the reason for non

attendance. Reid suggests that the assumption that children are absent from school for the same reasons is unhelpful and misleading and that teachers should not attempt to apply the same 'common causal traits' to individual pupils who are absent from school. (p50).

Reid proposes that 'truants' can be categorised as being the Traditional or Typical truant, the Institutional Absentee, the Psychological Absentee or Generic Absentee, but that in each case this reflects socio-educational problems.

*The Traditional or Typical Absentee* – defined as isolates from unsupportive backgrounds, tendency to be shy, with low self concept, introversion, victim of social circumstances, and aware of their own social and educational limitations

*The Institutional Absentee* – they miss school for purely educational reasons, are extraverted, engage in confrontation, have higher self concept, selectively miss lessons/days, have large numbers of friends, and a disregard of authority, unconcerned about consequences of non attendance, from deprived/unsupportive backgrounds.

*The Psychological Absentee* – miss school for mainly psychological or related factors, illness and psychosomatic complaints, have a fear of attending school which is justified or irrational.

*The Generic Absentee* – misses school for two or three of the above reasons, either simultaneously or over a longer period

(Taken and abbreviated from Reid (1985) ).

This differentiation of the term 'truant' therefore attempts to encompass the school refuser and phobic, as well as those with implicated causative factors within the family and school.

Coldman (1995), highlights a further stereotypical definition of the 'truant' and suggests that 'the popular image of the truant as a social deviant and young offender, is firmly fixed in the public consciousness', and a consequence of this is the widespread image of truancy being linked to crime. Coldman suggests that this narrow focus on truancy and crime hinders our understanding and explanation of it as a social phenomenon. He also suggests that a further model of truancy, often highlighted in educational theory and practice, is represented by the 'disaffected' pupil who is acting irrationally in absenting him/herself from school. Both models he suggests, whilst not denying the incidence of both models of truant, 'ignore both the scope and the pattern of truancy as a social phenomenon' (p66). He suggests that a third model, that proposed by O'Keeffe and Stoll (1994), is more useful in capturing the size and scope of the problem and allows us to rethink the image of the truant.

O'Keeffe and Stoll's model, whilst not ignoring an association between the truant and crime, or the deficit pupil model of disaffection (owing to emotional or intellectual deficits), highlights the truant as engaging in a 'rational' act. It is suggested that 'truants miss lessons for rational reasons, usually to avoid parts of the curriculum which are perceived to be of little benefit' (p75). Coldman goes on to suggest that the majority of truants would fall into this category, those that 'typically miss parts of the curriculum for well-defined, rational reasons'. An implication of this is that

we might more productively look at the curriculum, and the pupils rejection of it, to gain a more complete understanding of truancy and how best to intervene with it.

O’Keeffe (1995) has also made a distinction between types of teenage truant, in suggesting that there are ‘Blanket truants’ – those whose non attendance is deliberate and without justification and ‘Post Registration Truants’ – which involves pupils in the deliberate cutting of lessons once they have registered at school (p79). O’Keeffe’s study demonstrated that there were far greater numbers of Post Registration Truants than Blanket truants, which again alerts us to the school as being an implied factor in non school and poor attendance, including persistent absence. It also alerts us to the use of the term ‘truant’ as reflecting different behaviours and intentions, which are not understandable with reference only to the terminology of non attendance, truancy or persistence absence.

### ***Incidence of truancy***

Incidents of truancy are reported to vary in relation to both age and gender, with more boys than girls at both primary and secondary age reported to be engaging in acts of truancy (Reid 1985).

Truancy has been defined by Tyerman (1968) as a child who is absent on his own initiative without his parent’s permission, and is seen as distinguishable from other forms of non attendance such as illness and other absence condoned by parents. Truancy is also often seen as being sharply in contrast with the defining characteristics of school phobia and refusal.

Truancy has however, also come to represent absence which is either with or without parental consent but which is 'illegal' in that there is no adequate or justifiable reason. The Scottish Education Department (1977), has defined truancy as: 'unauthorised absence from school, for any period, as a result of premeditated or spontaneous action on the part of the pupil, parent or both'.

The term has however, also been avoided by some researchers as it can be seen to imply an emphasis on pupil characteristics rather than capturing a more holistic interpretation as being related to the home, school and wider cultural influences. Other researchers have adopted the term 'school absenteeism' as it is felt to reflect a more neutral interpretation.

As the literature has indicated terminology and definitions around non attendance also reflect beliefs about the nature, causes and remediation of non school attendance. Attempts to further define the characteristics of these categories are evident, whilst also raising the question of the potential validity of these categorisations and how accurately and usefully they can be operationalised in understanding and intervening with pupil non attendance.

## **2.9 The validity of classification**

The validity of such distinctions and categorisation has been questioned and it has been argued that they could in fact represent the extreme points of a continuum of poor attendance. This also raises questions about how children and young people are actually assessed and ultimately classified or categorised, as well as the potential limitations or

usefulness of this process. It is worthy of note that it has been estimated that as many as 10,000 children in the UK are classified as 'missing from education' in that they either never make it on to the roll of a school or, as Broadhurst et al (2005) highlighted in their study, have been missing from school registers for between one and four years. Whilst this was found to reflect mainly family issues relating to domestic violence, for a number of children it also reflected their parents withdrawing from social life and school becoming irrelevant.

It is often not clear from Local Authority statistics how many children fall into each category or classification and few studies have sought this information from Education Welfare Services. It is also apparent that there may be considerable overlap in the categories outlined suggesting that to imply that these are discreet categories, which lend themselves to differential forms of intervention, can be misleading.

## **2.10 The Sheffield Survey**

The Sheffield Surveys (Galloway 1985) were carried out between 1975 - 1977 and partly focused on ascertaining from Educational Welfare Officers the degree to which children who were persistently absent from school, fell within eight categories with pre-defined characteristics. These reflected Education Welfare Service (EWS) assessments highlighting the 'most frequent reason for absence' (p.29). It is important to note that there is no detail given as to how these assessments were carried out by the EWS or individual Education Welfare Officers. It is also worth noting that Galloway found that 'an EWO might often suspect strongly that



some absences were due to other factors (other than illness) but did not feel sufficiently confident to state which other category applied' (p.29).

Another problem related to the categorisation involving an overlap in some categories. This included use of the concept of 'school phobia' overlapping with 'school refusal', and the overlap of 'absence with parental knowledge' with those parents who were unwilling to go against their child's view of not wanting to return to school. Education Welfare Officer categories indicating the recorded reasons for Persistent Absence from school, taken from Galloway's study of Persistent Absence is highlighted below;

Category 1 – Absent with parent's knowledge, consent and approval

Category 2 – Socio Medical reasons

Category 3 – School Phobia or psychosomatic illness

Category 4 – Parents unable or unwilling to insist on return

Category 5 – Truancy: Absence without parents' knowledge or consent

Category 6 – Mixed, but including some illness

Category 7 – Excluded or suspended from school

Category 8 – Absence mainly due to illness

It is also worth noting that The Sheffield Survey categories share a common theme, in that the variables are all being related to the child and his/her family, whilst at the same time implying that these variables may underlie the reason for the Persistent Absenteeism. There is a noticeable absence of factors or variables which are school based or related, apart from those reflecting a pupil's exclusion.

Galloway (1985) suggests that it is important to establish the reliability

and validity of such categories, suggesting that one way is to look at the notion of reliability, in relation to the extent to which these categories are adopted by members of the Educational Welfare Service, when accounting for pupil absence. It is implied that owing to considerable overlap between categories this would mean that EWOs would not be able to reliably distinguish between categories in order to establish a best fit. Although Galloway also suggests that this is not surprising, he also raises the question of 'does it matter'?

Laughlin (2003), in his examination of the distinction between school refusal and truancy, highlighted the narrowness of these definitions in that it is possible for young people to exhibit characteristics of both and for 'some young people to demonstrate features of a truant, but actually have a phobia about attending school. Alternatively, some pupils may be able to attend school but choose not to, and stay at home with the full knowledge of their parents under the 'screen' of school refusal' (p135).

Classification has tended to focus intervention and strategies more towards individual children and their families, with Galloway (1985) pointing out, a concentration 'mainly on abnormal characteristics, seeing a problem in terms of individual or family psychopathology' (p20). He also suggests that as a result, research has neglected the areas of pupil school experiences as being potentially stressful for the student and also, the pupil and parental perceptions of non attendance as being a potentially rational and necessary response, as opposed to deviant and abnormal. School phobia would exemplify this in its implied direct correlation between the manifestation of a phobia with non attendance,

also implying a very straight forward cause and intervention along phobia treatment lines.

What does emerge however, is a picture of non school attendance as reflecting a likely spectrum of non attendance behaviour, represented by a range of features which can co-exist across, and within, the existing categorisations of non attendance, rather than representing distinct categories. Research would therefore tend to suggest that the broad categories defined, may be unreliable in their ability to reflect the accurate nature of persistent absence.

### **2.11 Incidence of categories – Who might be absent?**

The Sheffield Survey pointed to the incidence of 'truancy' as only accounting for 2% of primary aged pupils and 11% of secondary age. The majority of Persistent Absentees, over 40% of both primary and secondary age pupils in the survey, were categorised as being absent with their parent's knowledge.

O'Keefe (1995) has noted a significant increase in truancy rates between Years 10 and 11, and suggests that a reason for this again relates to the curriculum as representing a massive increase in curriculum rejection around this time. These studies also highlight differential incidences relating to the primary and secondary phases of education.

Morris and Rutt (2005) found that higher levels of PA appear to correlate with children in receipt of free school meals, with the ethnicity of the pupil also being significant, with higher levels of unauthorised absence being

reported for Black African, Chinese, Indian, Black Caribbean, Pakistani and Bangladeshi children.

Morris and Rutt (2004) indicated that white pupils, from so called deprived areas, are amongst the highest group of non attenders, but that the highest rates of non attendance occurred amongst pupils attending our special schools, reflecting pupils with significant special educational needs. Hallam and Roger's (2008) have identified that 'schools with the greatest problems tended to have high levels of deprivation, a significant proportion of pupils with Special Educational Needs (SEN) or high proportions from minority ethnic groups' (p6). Ofsted (2004), highlighted that a number of secondary school pupils' not attending school in Years 7, 8 and 9, had established patterns of truanting behaviour which started whilst they were attending primary school. This also fits with an identifiable trend in the increase in pupil absenteeism reported as pupils make the transition from the primary to secondary phase of their education.

Secondary school figures are also indicative of higher levels of absenteeism as pupils' progress through year groups, with Year 11 reflecting the highest level of unauthorised absence (DfES 2006). The following trends are also reflected in research findings;

- In all phases of education, girls are consistently more absent than boys but that 'unauthorised' absence rates by gender are similar. Girls are however, more likely to have their absence parentally condoned

- Any break in routine can lead to increases in absenteeism, for example following holidays, school breaks and INSET days
- Absenteeism is greater in inner-city and deprived areas, however research also indicates that those within the same catchment area can have different levels of attendance
- Children with SEN and those with Looked After status have higher than average absence rates

*(Taken from Improving Behaviour and Attendance at School, Hallam and Rogers (2008) ).*

Collins (1998) summarised the patterns of non attendance as being 'highest amongst working-class children and among those with average to low ability. Among these pupils, rates of attendance will fall towards the end of the week and the end of the term, and will decrease dramatically in the final year of schooling. More girls than boys will be absent' (p27).

What begins to emerge are a number of risk factors which may predispose children to poorer attendance.

## **2.12 Causes of Non Attendance – Why are pupils absent from school?**

Galloway (1985) has suggested that there are three theories relating to school absence. The first reflects non or poor attendance 'as a symptom of stress in the family or in the child'. The second as an indicator of 'child neglect, lack of parental control, or general anti-authority attitudes on the part of the parents, child or both'. The third he suggests reflects the

'logical outcome of the school system's inability to cater for working class pupils' (p42-3).

Whilst these theories appear to encompass a range of potential causative factors associated with non school and poor attendance, these theories also clearly implicate the role of the family together with the implied inflexibility of the school system in accounting for non school and poor attendance. These areas will now be examined in more detail.

### ***Individual, Family and Community Factors***

Whilst the incidence of non and poor attendance has been correlated with social and financial disadvantage in families, Galloway (1985) has pointed out that 'only a minority of children from disadvantaged backgrounds become persistent absentees citing that, 'only one child in fifty from socially disadvantaged families missed more than three months of schooling (p41)'.

O' Keefe (1994) has suggested that a number of children will not and do not truant as a consequence of the fear of their parents finding out.

Malcolm et al (2003), have examined parental beliefs about attitudes towards school attendance and concluded that most parents believe that poor attendance leads to poor school work, and that good attendance is necessary in order to achieve qualifications. The majority of parents also felt that children could be 'at risk of harm' if they are not in school. Whilst it was also reported that most parents believed that missing school 'occasionally' does not harm a child's education, there was nevertheless a strong implication that the majority of parents in this study were supportive of their children's attendance at school. The study also

indicated that where there were issues with school attendance, these parents tended to believe that school attendance was less important, that it was unrelated to attainment and they did not value qualifications as highly as the parents of attending pupils. They were also more likely to keep their children away from school for illness, family holidays and medical appointments. Family beliefs and attitudes are implied therefore, to play a pivotal role in either supporting attendance, or in condoning non school or poor attendance.

Pupil illness is often cited as a legitimate reason for non or poor attendance (Hallam and Rogers 2008). It can however, be difficult for both parents and General Practitioners to be certain that children are in fact presenting with a genuine illness. In addition, it cannot be ruled out that there may be contextual factors which also serve to be pivotal in the use of 'illness' to remain 'off' school, including factors both within the home and school.

'Parental Withholding' is also cited as a reason for non or poor attendance. This category is often used when attendance is linked to children who remain at home with the knowledge of their parents in order, for example, to look after siblings, support parents themselves or parents who may be ill. It may also reflect non attendance to support parents suffering the effects of addiction, including alcohol or drug dependency as well as domestic violence, or to support with housework or shopping. As Galloway (1985) suggests, these children may also be at home because 'their parents have simply given up trying to persuade them to attend school. (p.28).

Reid (1985) however, is open in his theoretical bias indicating that 'a pupil's home background and social circumstances are not the only, or indeed the main, reason why many children 'mitch' (truant) school (p8). He suggests that although there are factors which appear to correlate with non attendance, such as being from a working class background, experiencing large families, familial distress and poor housing, there are a majority of pupils from similar backgrounds who do not miss school. The suggestion is therefore that home background and social circumstances alone are insufficient explanation for non or poor attendance. Reid's research indicated that a high percentage of pupils are reported missing school for the following reasons:

- Boredom in lessons as a result of inactivity
- Falling behind in school work and not being assisted to catch up  
(this could also be argued, is a result of non attendance)
- An unsuitable curriculum
- Perceived bullying, extortion, or internal classroom strife
- Alleged teacher-pupil conflicts
- Inadequate pastoral care/counselling
- Feeling that school was a less rewarding place for them than their more able peers
- Being unable to comply with school rules and regulations  
(including games kit, uniform, books and materials)

*Taken from Truancy and Absenteeism, Reid (1985)*

Whilst this list also indicates that reasons for non school attendance can be both broad and complex, it also alerts us to the fact that individual



pupils are likely to experience wide variations in the circumstances surrounding their non school attendance, and do not necessarily see the cause of their non attendance as rooted within the family. Reid also highlights the importance of understanding the issues related to non attendance, in suggesting that 'before any remedial processes can be successfully implemented with the individual truant, it is important to have a clear understanding of his or her problems' (p9).

This also points us to the notion of the 'assessment' of non school attendance, including PA, as being an important part of any process which seeks to intervene and impact effectively on attendance.

In contrast, Hallam and Rogers (2008) suggest that 'for some children the demands and trauma of family life are so great that the impact on their attendance and behaviour at school is profound' (p 30). They also go on to point out that as children spend relatively little time at school it would be 'unrealistic' to ignore the influence of the family on school attendance.

Reid (1985) has highlighted the need to consider factors relating to ethnicity and family roles in looking at the causes on non attendance amongst some Asian pupils. He suggests that 'the roles of both boys and girls in such families can be different from those of white children and occasionally when ethical beliefs and customs become confused with the regulations governing compulsory attendance at school, tension results' (p39). Reid found that some Asian girls for example, who's views reflect beliefs about their place and role being in the home, did not see the point in educating themselves to a high standard and therefore often chose not to attend school.

Children who have become young carers within a family, often as a result of their parents becoming dependent upon drugs or alcohol, are also often at risk of becoming poor or non attenders, whilst for 'Looked After' children, statistically one in four are reported to fail to attend school.

### **School Factors**

Malcolm et al (2002), found that teachers will, generally, attribute non attendance to family factors or neighbourhood and community issues, whilst, particularly in secondary schools, they do not consider schools to play a contributory role in non attendance. In contrast O'Keefe (1994) found that dislike of a teacher or lesson accounted for 67% of all truants, whilst those that considered the teacher to be helpful or interested, failed to cite this as the cause of missing lessons. Whilst this does not exclude the 'curriculum' as a contributory factor, there is an implication that teacher-pupil relationships can be perceived to either be a supportive or a negative influence on pupil school attendance.

Reid (1999) in a further study of non attenders, also examined pupil reasons for missing school, and found that school factors were again cited as the main cause of their non attendance. Whilst distinguishing between social, psychological and institutional factors, the number of students citing 'Institutional' reasons, including school transfers, bullying and the curriculum, accounted for 56% of pupil reasons for non attendance. It is also worth noting that domestic, social relationships and peer group influences were also cited by larger numbers of pupils. Croll and Attwood (2006), in their study of 17 persistent absentees, add another dimension in identifying that the lack of an orderly environment in

school, together with a tense and disruptive atmosphere, (in addition to a poor relationship with the teacher), were found to be contributory factors in a pupils' persistent absence from school.

Galloway (1985) has argued that 'a practical reason for investigating school influences is the predictable inability of child guidance, psychological and child psychiatric services to make any real impact on the problem of poor attendance (p39). Whilst Galloway is keen to assert that 'individual, family and community factors' should not be considered unimportant, he believes that 'poor attendance can only be understood in terms of an interaction between these factors and the school. This is also reinforced by Rutter (1978), who advocates that single isolated 'stressors' are unimportant in understanding absenteeism and that 'The damage comes from multiple stress and disadvantage, with different adversities interacting and potentiating each others influence' (p45).

Lauchlan (2003) suggests that 'the onset of chronic non attendance may be explained by a number of school based factors' (p137). These include;

- an environment where bullying, truancy and disruption are common place
- where teacher-pupil relationships are excessively formal, impersonal and generally hostile
- Where toilets, corridors and playground areas are not monitored carefully by staff, resulting in a lack of awareness of problematic incidents for pupils

Lauchlan goes on to suggest that the contributory potential of school based factors to non attendance are often minimised by schools who tend

to focus on clinical theories, such as those which emphasise parent-child dependency, including attachment difficulties.

The research indicates that an emphasis on child and family variables and theoretical formulations which emphasise abnormal and deviant manifestations of behaviour, are unlikely to represent a complete picture of pupil non attendance, and that the need to take into account other factors including those within the school, together with an interactional perspective is needed. It is also indicative of a wide range of circumstances underlying pupil non attendance and, although it is difficult to obtain an accurate picture of non attendance in the UK, there appear to be some identifiable trends and groups which appear to reflect greater incidence and risk of non attendance for some young people.

### **2.13 The Assessment of Risk and Protective Factors**

In order to be able to define or classify non attendance as highlighted in this review, it would appear necessary to be able to identify the features or definable characteristics of each case through some process of assessment. In terms of anxiety related non attendance or school refusal, it is likely that this may have followed a period of 'assessment' by a paediatrician or clinician, and is usually linked to the notion of separation anxiety. Features of the truant are often identified as being related to a conduct disorder, although as the literature has indicated, there can also be considerable overlap between these categories. It is also likely as indicated that there are features of the non attendance which could assign children to multiple categories. Assessment by a clinician is likely

however, to emphasise clinical and pathological features in its assessment process, and therefore be evidentially predisposed to assign children to a clinical or pathological categorisations. In turn this is likely to imply a single cause, whilst not necessarily seeking to identify other existing and potentially contributable features. What appears to be most important in understanding the Persistent Absence, and non attendance in general, is not whether it is possible to assign young people to a particular category of non attendance, but to be able to understand the potentially unique features of each case and how they interact with one another. This raises the question of the 'assessment' of non attendance and how this process is undertaken. This becomes even more important when we begin to consider how best to intervene effectively with such cases. We have already identified that the term 'truant' can very quickly label children's non attendance as a wilful act, whilst the implied rational responses of these pupils highlighted in research studies, often as a response to the curriculum, are not reflected in the need to consider the educational environment when attempting to intervene. The notion of non attendance as reflecting a functional component has been further explored by Kearney (2007), who advocates the use of a School Refusal Assessment Scale, in order to more accurately determine the function of non school attendance in young people.

Kearney has indicated that 'the descriptors of school refusal and truancy are not clearly linked to effective or useful assessment and intervention strategies for this population' (p457), and as a consequence has suggested it would be more useful to look at the reasons why young

people experience difficulty attending school. It therefore alerts us to the potential unhelpfulness of determining a category with reference to limited or narrowly focused assessments, and reference to broad rather than accurate classification, and suggests categorisation which takes into account a potential range of contextual factors.

This attempt to achieve a more accurate assessment of School Refusal behaviour was originally highlighted by Kearney (2002), who, whilst recognising that non attendance may have its roots in a 'primary problem' or an 'array' of problems, nevertheless advocated that 'accurate classification, assessment and treatment is of importance to clinicians' (p235). Kearney has suggested that it is necessary to identify the function(s) that the 'school refusal' may be serving for the young person, which may be linked to specific reinforcements which perpetuate the non attendance. Use of the School Refusal Assessment Scale (SRAS-R) by clinicians and practitioners is advocated in order to, not only identify the primary function of a child's school refusal, but to also identify secondary functions, which together allow for the 'reasons' to be understood in terms of contextual variables and risk factors. Kearney (2007) further developed the notion of school refusal behaviour reflecting four primary functions which, in brief, consist of;

1. Avoidance of school related stimuli that provoke negative affectivity, or general anxiety or depression
2. Escape from aversive social and/or evaluative situations in school
3. Pursuit of attention from significant others
4. Pursuit of tangible reinforcers outside the school setting

These potential functions reflect 'specific proximal variables' which allow the behaviour to be classified with reference to the function it is serving for the young person. The scale also allows for contextual risk factors to be highlighted which may be present but which have more of an indirect or less immediate effect on the school refusal behaviour, but which may nevertheless be important features in the overall cause.

Barrett (2003) alerts us to a number of 'risk factors' which are also suggested to be associated with disaffection from school. These include within child factors such as being a male, having attention and concentration problems, a lack of self control together with being involved in excessive risk taking and violent/aggressive behaviour. Home factors include chronic poverty in the family, a mother with little education, developmental delay and parental criminality. It is also suggested that community factors such as high crime rates with opportunities to offend, together with a lack of parental supervision, inconsistent discipline and a delinquent peer group, all operate as risk factors which increase the possibility of pupil disaffection and ultimately non school attendance.

Place et al (2000) have also highlighted the need to identify and address dysfunctional factors in the child's environment, including that of the school and neighbourhood. Non school attendance was associated for number of pupils with persistent bullying and social isolation both at school and in their own communities.

## **2.14 Interventions and Initiatives**

Whilst attempts to define and label pupil non attendance have been problematic in their assumptions, it is also apparent that children do not fall neatly into these distinct categories and that the labelling process is not necessarily helpful in identifying the most appropriate intervention, particularly when it fails to identify other significant features.

Elliott and Place (1998) have suggested that much of the research focusing on intervening with non attenders has tended to fail to implicate the role of the school in supporting children who are reluctant to attend.

Blagg (1987) has suggested that in the case of the chronic non attender the school can consider a number of factors which may support a pupils' reintegration and attendance, including a consideration of whether the pupil requires help to recover their academic potential, the implementation of anti-bullying strategies, the pupil's relationship with particular staff members and key staff to support pupil vulnerability.

Kearney and Albano (2000), have suggested that involving pupils returning to school in contract making, reflecting the use of privileges following the pupil agreeing to carrying out specific responsibilities, has the potential to support increased attendance.

Lauchlan (2008), has suggested that 'there still needs to be further research in evaluating the various approaches to intervention, since at present, there are little systematic evaluations of the interventions available for tackling chronic non attendance' (p144). He further suggests that currently the most effective intervention might usefully employ the use of individualised programmes tailored to each pupil's particular



needs, which involves a multi-systems approach between the school, parents and educational psychologists.

Pellegrini (2007), in a review of interventions for non school attenders, highlights the relative success of approaches using Cognitive Behavioural Therapy techniques, whilst also advocating for further studies in order to confirm its effectiveness. He also makes the point that 'the use of CBT alone without addressing aversive stimuli in the child's environment may result in failure' (p73).

### ***Government Initiatives***

There have been a number of legislative and government based initiatives in the UK which have aimed to support and promote full time attendance and improve behaviour in our schools. The 2004 Children Act aims to develop greater professional coordination and support for children and families, together with early intervention for children at risk of harm or neglect. The 'Every Child Matters' agenda (HM Government 2003), specifies five outcomes for children, forming the basis of aims and objectives for professionals working with children and young people. The introduction of the SEAL (Social and Emotional Aspects of Learning 2010) curriculum, also highlights schools potential contribution to the emotional well being of pupils. The primary Behaviour and Attendance Strategy Pilot (2003 -2005) and the Behaviour Improvement Programme (BIP 2002), part of the governments strategy aimed at improving behaviour and attendance at school, reflects the belief of the potential influence of schools on pupil attendance and behaviour. The initial phase of the BIP, in 2002, involved around 700 schools who were selected on

the basis of their truancy figures, together with local crime statistics. This intervention saw the development of whole school initiatives, such as developing whole school behaviour policies, more innovative approaches to teaching and learning, extending the use of the school to include the wider community and the development of measures to identify pupils who were not attending school regularly. It also included the development of BESTs (Behaviour and Educations Support Teams), which aimed to coordinate specialist services for vulnerable young people and families. Evaluations of the BIP (DfES 2002) have suggested that where there had been an overall improvement in behaviour and attendance these schools specifically reflected; support being given at the individual, school and community level, the development of more preventative approaches and the adoption of a multi-agency approach. The Behaviour and Attendance pilot saw no significant reduction in the number of unauthorised absences, but there was however a reduction in the number of pupils with authorised absences.

More specific interventions, aimed at subsets of non attendance, such as those labelled as school phobic were evident in some schools where staff are considered to be more aware and sensitive to the needs of these pupils. The Times Educational Supplement (March 2004), highlighted a number of strategies which can be employed by schools to support children who exhibit high levels of anxiety. These include support from a designated adult in school; support from other pupils through peer mentoring; a change of class or tutor group; time in a less threatening environment such as an LSU; allowing children to come into school

through a quieter entrance or at a less busy time; gradual re-integration through the use of part-time timetables together with the use of an alternative curriculum. Whilst the use of these strategies in schools are likely to reflect flexibility and willingness on the side of the school, they are not necessarily seen to be the most appropriate form of intervention. Blagg (1987), for example has suggested that a rapid if not enforced return to full time schooling, linked to a desensitisation programme is most effective and more likely to lead to a rapid reduction in anxiety.

Pina et al (2009) reviewed eight studies which employed the use of psychosocial interventions for school refusal behaviour in children and adolescents. The studies trialled interventions ranging from 3 weeks to 27 weeks in duration, using single case designs and involving a variety of approaches. These approaches ranged from the use of reinforcements for increased time in the school, classrooms and school areas, (as well as separation time away from the mother), role play situations with a therapist modelling behaviour, reduced attention to crying and anxiety at home, to clinic and school based CBT. Evaluative conclusions indicated that 1). Strategies, particularly CBT, were able to produce significant improvements in symptom levels i.e. fear and anxiety and 2). Positive change can be achieved when the child and/or the parents and teachers are trained to manage the behaviour. However, individual treatments were found to be no more effective than those which focused on parent and teacher training. It was also noted that research evidence, in respect of school refusal behaviour, is mainly based on sample groups who meet the diagnostic criteria for mental health problems and as such fail to

represent pupils who fail to attend school in order to pursue tangible reinforcers outside the school. Pina et al conclude that this group of pupils may require different interventions and that further empirical research is required.

## **2.15 The Role of the Education Welfare Service (EWS)**

Within Nottingham City there are approximately 60,000 school aged children, 2,200 of which are classified as having additional needs. The Nottingham City Council Child Care Sufficiency Assessment (2008), highlighted Nottingham City as having a larger number of children living in poverty compared to the national average and with a higher BME (Black and Minority Ethnic) population, 19% compared to 8% nationally. The school population is served by 15 Secondary, 89 Primary and 5 Special Schools, excluding Independent Schools.

The Education Welfare Service is part of the Nottingham City Local Authority Children and Families department. National statistics relating to children who are persistently absent from school indicated that in 2006/7, Nottingham City was identified as having one of the highest pupil PA rates, ranking 145 out of 148 Local Authorities nationally. By 2010, PA in the secondary education phase had fallen from 11.2% in 2006/7 to 8.1%, indicating an improvement in secondary school persistent absence rates across the City. However, the primary phase was following national trends and had declined further from 6.6% to 7.15% of primary pupils being persistently absent from school, resulting in Nottingham City LA

being ranked as 152 out of 152 local authorities nationally (Nottingham City Partnership School Attendance Report, January 2010).

Nottingham City Education Welfare Service views the fundamental purpose of EWOs as being to 'maximise the attendance rates for individual pupils, individual schools and for Nottingham City as a whole'.

The EWO role is also highlighted as assisting in removing barriers which may prevent a child receiving an education, more specifically through three main strategies. These strategies relate to EWOs acting as authorised representatives of the City Council in monitoring attendance with school staff, undertaking individual casework with non attending pupils and their parents and in offering strategic advice, support and challenge to enable schools to develop improved systems and practices for managing attendance. (Nottingham City Common Attendance Policy, June 2010).

Hallam and Rogers (2008) have suggested that generally the Education Welfare Service will normally be involved in developing an action plan in order to support a PA pupil's return to school, following an 'assessment'. They state that this assessment 'will include an assessment of the school life of the individual and the factors at home or in the community that may be contributing' (p254). They go on to suggest that 'typically, the cause of the absence will be established'.

Whilst it may be possible to identify a number of these factors during an 'assessment,' it is possible that the cause(s) of a pupils' non attendance could be associated with a wide range of factors in or outside the school,

or indeed reflect cumulative or multiple causes, and may not therefore be as easy to discern by the EWS as Hallam and Rogers imply.

Hallam and Rogers do however point out that the causes are complex and that factors operate at the level of society, community, school, family and individual, with interventions needing to 'address each of these while focusing on the particular aspects that may be relevant in individual cases' (p45).

This nevertheless represents a tall order and one which is unlikely to be within the efficacy of a single individual or agency or within short time scales. The assessment process employed by the EWS is therefore worthy of further scrutiny, since this is likely to form the basis of further intervention or action aimed at increasing attendance.

Carlen et al (1992) state that 'at the point when school based measures are no longer seen to be effective, the Education Welfare Service is usually called in. This service is intended to provide support to the child and family and thus to encourage the resumption of regular school attendance' (p.53).

It is implied here that a referral to the Education Welfare Service, or more specifically Education Welfare Officer, follows some kind of intervention by the school itself and that the point at which this occurs may also be variable.

The authors also suggest that a consequence of this involvement also initiates the negative labelling of families as deviant. Legal processes are likely to be initiated in the event of continued PA and the polarised/contrasting nature of EWS work with families becomes

apparent. Carlen goes on to suggest that the process is initiated with the aim of getting parents to accept parental responsibility for their children's attendance and to put pressure on parents to ensure regular school attendance. It is this categorisation, that Carlen feels, contributes to the negative labelling process.

Halford (1991), identified through EWO questionnaires, that the most commonly used interventions employed by EWOs were home visits to interview parents and children. 100% of the EWO sample said that this was the activity that they carried out most frequently, followed by offering counselling to children in school and organising case conferences and meetings in order to discuss school attendance problems. Collins (1998) has pointed out that EWO working can require high levels of skill, but that in the majority of Education Welfare Services, 'the skill levels are variable and that many EWOs may not have been trained to sufficient levels to provide complex interventions' (p83).

EWS interventions tend to focus on 'Welfare' or 'Punishment' options, with the latter reflecting the use of the courts and legal process in order to ensure pupil attendance. However, O' Keeffe (1995), whilst recognising the EWOs historical interest in children with troubled home backgrounds, also proposes that EWOs need to develop a greater understanding of the influence and impact of the teaching and learning experiences of pupils. O'Keeffe highlights the issue of 'mainstream' truancy, in the form of both post-registration truancy and blanket truancy, as both having their roots in pupil dissatisfaction with lessons and their rejection of them. The consequences of this are children either deliberately missing lessons, and

therefore being lesson 'sensitive', or staying away completely for prolonged periods or days. O'Keefe suggests that the role of the EWO would be more effective if 'familiarity with problems of curriculum, lessons and teaching' (p.79) was developed as part of their expertise, and they become increasingly aware of these as influences on attendance, arising 'from the interior life of the school, rather than from psychological deficits in schoolchildren themselves' (p.79). His study further highlighted that when asked about their reasons for truanting only a minority of pupils cited 'home difficulties'.

Whilst implying therefore that the focus on the contributing factors associated with non attendance, including PA and truancy, could usefully encompass those associated with the curriculum, O'Keefe also points out that a 'concentration on home difficulties has constituted a main element in the work of the EWO to date' (p81), and remains an area EWOs feel they must know about. He suggests that EWOs have been encouraged to relate problems of truancy in particular, to a child's home background, regardless of 'research findings which should largely dissuade them from this view' (p81). O'Keefe suggests that EWOs need to develop a 'three pronged strategy' for reducing truancy:

1. Improving the quality of lessons
2. Improving the level of vigilance (within the school)
3. Improving the welcoming aspects of the school

Whilst O'Keefe's proposed strategy may appear to offer a distinct shift in emphasis, he also adds a caveat in suggesting that although the EWOs concentration on home factors 'may have been wrong, but not the idea



itself' (p81). The implication being that although there may be larger and more pertinent influences on truancy, the home situation is still likely to offer an alternative and meaningful explanation for children's non attendance. O'Keeffe does however remain clear that 'if there is a pathology in relation to truancy it may more readily be sought in the curriculum than in the personalities of children' (p82).

Reid (1985), also points out the often 'soul destroying' nature of the EWO role as being undermined by the decisions of teachers, social workers and the courts. Reid suggests that EWOs are often the first to visit homes in non attendance cases, and this is often the point at which a decision has to be made about the action that needs to be taken. It is this decision point that Reid suggests can often lead to EWOs experiencing 'conflict with the wishes of social services, schools and parents' (p40).

Persistent Absentees are a high priority group for many Educational Welfare Services. The process of dealing with PA cases in Nottingham City is explicit and focuses on a 12 week process, reflecting the potential to 'fast track' cases to court if parents do not ensure their children attend school regularly, often resulting in fines. Non engagement by families with the EWO and LA will often lead to parents being prosecuted. Whilst some EWOs and Head Teachers would favour such a response and intervention, Zhang (2004) in a study looking at attendance data from 43 Local Authorities, found no support for the impact of prosecution on attendance rates.

## **2.16 The Role of the Educational Psychologist (EP)**

Collins (1998) concluded that Educational Psychologists (EPs) 'would only become involved in unauthorised absence if it was associated with other behavioural difficulties'. He points out that all schools in his research reported that the EPs time was almost wholly taken up with children with special educational needs, leaving no time for anything else. Galloway (1985), has however indicated that EPs do get involved with unauthorised absence, but that this is restricted to pupils who present with anxiety related non attendance, reflecting the 'neurotic group of non attenders'. Although EP involvement in respect of 'successful treatment' was considered to be highly effective, provided that the children involved were pre-adolescent, referred very quickly after the onset of the problem and there were no identified complex relationship problems within the family, it is further suggested by Galloway that these pupils are only likely to represent less than 1% of unauthorised absences. This suggests that the role of the EP in supporting issues of non attendance is likely to be at best limited and focused very specifically on those pupils with anxiety related non attendance.

Pellegrini (2007) highlights the ability of EPs to work with school non attenders at many different levels, ranging from systemic interventions and training for school staff, acting as mediators between families and schools to providers of parental training and good practice in child management. He also suggests that EPs could engage in direct intervention work with persistent non attenders, and could usefully provide support in challenging common perceptions about school non

attenders, in order to enable others to develop alternative discourses about this population' (p75).

## **2.17 Summary of Chapter 2.**

The literature review has highlighted that the area of pupil non attendance is complex and represents a broad spectrum of potential causes and risk factors. It is suggested that categories of non attendance can be limiting both in their consideration of the causes and interventions related to non attendance, but also in their ability to accurately reflect the features of individual cases. Whilst research continues to associate the Persistent Absentee with a disadvantaged home life, it has also alerted us to the need to consider the school environment and the psychological motivations and intentions of young people in any assessment process. Education Welfare Officers are front line staff, with regard to persistent absentees, and how they intervene would appear to be an important consideration in any attempts to improve the attendance of young people. How the EWO engages with persistent absence, their theorising in relation to the process of assessment and intervention, would therefore appear to be an area worthy of further exploration. The aim of the study is to generate a more theoretical and deeper understanding of the social and psychological processes surrounding PA as a complex phenomena and to examine the implications for both Education Welfare Officers and Educational Psychologists.

## **Chapter 3. Research Methodology**

### **Introduction**

This chapter examines broad methodological issues pertinent to research questions in the social sciences. It considers the philosophical debates which underpin the use of quantitative and qualitative methods, as well as notions of reliability and validity in the research process. The rationale for the choice of a Grounded Theory methodology is justified and the research study's method and design, together with practical and ethical considerations is discussed.

### **3.1 Research Paradigms – Positivist and Interpretivist traditions**

Different research paradigms represent different schools of thought about how to access the truth, reality and consequentially, about how research should be conducted to this end. Philosophical notions about the nature of knowledge are inter-related with the theories we hold and play a major role in determining the kind of problem we explore and the types of explanation that are possible.

Theories themselves represent constructions of reality and as such cannot be regarded as absolute descriptions of the way things are, since all understanding is open to alternative conceptualisations. Different theories are underpinned by a set of assumptions which guide the researcher in approaching and looking at the subject matter. These assumptions can be contrasting and lead to very different kinds of research and generate very different questions.

Positivist paradigms, for example, hold that research in the Social Sciences should be explored with reference to scientific principles and methods. They assume that there is an objective reality which exists and is separate from our human knowledge of it, which can be used in order to compare hypothetical claims in order to get at the truth. Thomas (1984) summarises positivist approaches as 'seeking general laws, often cause and effect, using methods and concepts which are objective, clearly operationalised, replicable, usually empirical, and free from value judgements or any other bias that cannot be quantified.' Precise observation and measurement are essential to such scientific methods. The assumption here is that all human behaviour and experience is definitive and causally determined, reflecting universal laws of human nature that are fixed and waiting to be discovered. Cryer (2000) points out that this research paradigm has the potential to 'answer questions about what is happening and the statistical chance of it happening in the future, but it cannot directly answer questions about why something is happening or may happen' (p78 para 2). Positivist research often employs quantitative methods, and mainly focuses on refining or extending extant theories, whilst having little capacity to lead to new theory construction. In contrast, Interpretivist paradigms have developed in response to the dominance of positivism in the social sciences, reflecting a debate about the centrality of scientific methods to the study of social phenomena. Whilst positive methods may be considered to be appropriate to the physical and natural world, they have not been considered to be the most appropriate when the object of study is people and subjective experience.

The underlying assumption in interpretivist approaches is that there are multiple realities of social phenomena which can differ across time and place, reflecting reality which is constructed inter-subjectively through the development of meaning and understanding. The need to understand to the experiences and meanings which people attribute to themselves is considered to be psychology's core subject-matter. The question is therefore how to study these effectively?

Such assumptions have given rise to qualitative research methods as a form of social inquiry, emphasising the discovery of meaning through an exploration of the richness, depth and complexity of social phenomena. Such assumptions have not however, been without 'positivist' criticism in relation to the validity of other such possible ways of knowing.

### **3.2 Qualitative and Quantitative Methods**

These differing approaches to explanation have given rise to the terms qualitative and quantitative research as reflecting separate paradigms within psychological research. As reflected in the Interpretivist paradigm, qualitative designs attempt to capture insight and meaning associated with human behaviour and are often much more detailed in terms of the descriptions they are able to generate. This capacity to encompass the richness of human behaviour marks a methodological distinction between qualitative and quantitative approaches. This can be seen to reflect a continuum of description ranging from the simple cause and effect explanation associated with quantitative research, to the more complex and in depth understanding generated by qualitative approaches.

### **3.3 Validity and Reliability**

This distinction however, also provides us with the problem of assessing the validity of qualitative approaches. More meaningful and complex explanations are, by their nature, less likely to be testable in more rigorous ways, as reflected in those of the experimental sciences. If we demand more reliable measures we may have to lose the richness of description, or alternatively risk a less valid explanation. Qualitative approaches may lead to theory with a greater power of differentiation, but questions are often asked about the accuracy of such differentiated descriptions and their ultimate validity.

It is often assumed that the more testable a theory the more valuable it is, regardless of the level of description it is able to provide. Qualitative and quantitative methodologies are therefore often viewed in terms of testability versus differentiation. However, the evaluation of a particular theory and the methodology chosen, would also seem to need to reflect the kind of explanation we are aiming to achieve. It may also reflect the need for alternative criteria in order to evaluate the usefulness of qualitative methods. This is highlighted by Willig (2001) in considering the need for quality in qualitative research. Willig identifies six qualitative research methods which are discussed in terms of their epistemological positions. Willig argues that in order to evaluate qualitative research methods we need to understand their epistemological position so that appropriate evaluation criteria can be identified. (p147).

There is a recognition therefore that whilst the ultimate choice of methodology will provide an insight into the phenomena in question,

different insights may be found using alternative methodologies and starting points.

Silverman (2000) also recognises that our decision to use qualitative/quantitative methods should not reflect our methodological preference but rather should reflect the robustness and credibility of our research design.

The issue of reliability and validity however, remain central to any research study and are the products of the appropriateness of a research methodology to be fit for purpose. The issue remains one of maintaining the robustness of quantitative designs in qualitative methodologies. Each approach must be seen to have its own strengths and weaknesses and the methodology adopted should be more of a reflection of the nature of the enquiry and the type of information that is sought, rather than a reflection of a methodological stance. The distinction between Positivist and Interpretist approaches may not however be as clear cut as it would seem, since whilst interpretist approaches may reflect what is true for an individual, they may also have the potential to contribute towards more general statements that can be applied to other situations.

### **3.4 Rationale for the use of a Grounded Theory methodology**

The choice of the use of a Grounded Theory methodology, reflects the exploratory nature of the research study and the openness of the research question. Grounded Theory employs an essentially qualitative methodology which is appropriate to the study's assumption that the meanings and experiences of Education Welfare Officers in the



assessment and intervention of cases of Persistent Absence (PA), are worthy of exploration in order to gain a more theoretical understanding of persistent absence as a social phenomena.

Willig (2001) indicates that Grounded Theory allows us to 'facilitate the process of discovery' (p32). It therefore fits with the study's aim of not wanting to represent an extension of an existing theory, or to make prior assumptions about it but to develop an explanatory framework which supports our understanding of assessment and intervention with persistent absentees. The use of a Grounded Theory methodology is also considered to be appropriate when there is little or no previous research in the area of study, as in the case of this area of study. It is therefore also appropriate to the aim of wanting to develop a broader and deeper theoretical knowledge which has the potential to provide a psychologically dense account of some local event, namely persistent absence, as a socially complex phenomena.

### **3.5 Constructing Grounded Theory**

Grounded Theory is a systematic methodology employed in the social sciences, which emphasises the generation of theory from data in the process of conducting research. The research adopted a Grounded Theory methodology which guided the collection and analysis of data, through to the development of a Basic Social Psychological Process (BSPP), representing the goal of the approach, characterised by the generation of theory (Glaser, 1978). The following sections highlight the process of carrying out the grounded theory approach, as well as the

assumptions and procedures which underpin the use of grounded theory, together with a critique of the methodology itself.

### **3.6 The origins of Grounded Theory**

Grounded Theory was first adopted and developed by Glaser and Strauss (1967), who during their studies of the patients dying in hospital were able to develop systematic qualitative strategies, which as Charmaz (2006) explains, involved giving their data 'explicit analytic treatment and producing theoretical analyses of the social organisation and the temporal order of dying ' (p4). This methodology developed the use of the constant comparative method, later termed Grounded Theory, which was subsequently able to be applied to a wide range of topics. Grounded Theory represented the notion that it was valid to be able to explain specific areas of empirical enquiry using procedures which generated more "substantive" theories. Although these theories are likely to be at a more local level, Glaser and Strauss consider that the power of these theories lies in their ability to encapsulate the complexity of the data and to develop greater understanding of the phenomena in question. A main premise of their approach is therefore the emergence of theory from the data itself, together with the ability of this theory to represent the construction of abstract theoretical explanations of social processes, as opposed to theory verification through hypothesis testing. Glaser and Strauss (1967) ultimately challenged the view that qualitative methods were unsystematic and less valid, and prescribed that 'Grounded Theory' was a credible qualitative methodological approach.

Strauss and Corbin (1990), have developed a further version of Grounded Theory, which provides the steps of the research process. Whilst this version has been criticised by Glaser (1992), in relation to the categorisation of data, it has been suggested by Charmaz (2006), that the guidelines remain a useful process that we can use with twenty-first century methodological assumptions and approaches.

Kelle (2005) has indicated that the divergence of views between Glaser and Strauss, focus on whether the researcher should use a well defined 'coding paradigm' looking systematically for causal conditions, intervening conditions, action strategies and consequences in the data or, whether codes should be employed as they emerge, drawing on 'coding families'. Glaser has suggested that the latter forces the data into preconceived categories and as such may contradict one of the basic tenets of Grounded Theory.

Charmaz (2006) advocates in her book, 'Constructing Grounded Theory' that Grounded Theory methods should be viewed as a set of principles, not practices. The books' emphasis on examining processes, making the study of action central and creating abstract interpretive understandings of the data, are true to the principles of earlier Grounded Theory emphases, but can be used flexibly enough in order to 'take into account the theoretical and methodological developments of the past four decades' (p9). In doing so Charmaz draws on a symbolic interactionist perspective, which acknowledges the researchers' own role in being part of the world we study and the data we collect. She emphasises that whilst Glaser and Strauss have purported that the discovery of theory emerging

from the data is viewed as separate to the observer, we must take into account that 'we construct our grounded theories through our past and present involvements and interactions with people, perspectives, and research practices' (p10), thus emphasising the need to take into account the role of our interpretive analysis in the construction of reality.

Layder (1993) has suggested that a limitation of a Grounded Theory approach relates to the development of theory, in that theory should be guided by the data rather than being limited by it. He also suggests that the approach also lends itself to highlighting the immediately apparent and observable, perhaps at the expense of the interweaving of the structural features of social situations with activities. Haig (1995) has also criticised the reliance on inductive reasoning or inference in Grounded Theory, which is at best seen as a form of everyday reasoning, representing a naïve form of scientific induction.

Turner (1981) has suggested that an advantage of using a grounded theory approach relates to its ability to promote 'the development of theoretical accounts and explanations which conform closely to the situations being observed' (p227). He also recognises, as indicated by Charmaz (2006), that social inquiry is represented by an interaction between the researcher and the world and that 'any understanding which emerges from such research must thus be considered the product of an interaction between the researcher and the phenomena under study'. The need therefore for the researcher to be sensitive to this process of perceiving and understanding is also dependent upon 'a willingness and an ability to bring them out into the open for discussion' (p228).

### **3.7 The stages of Grounded Theory**

The construction of Grounded Theory reflects a series of phases of analysis which are highlighted by Henwood and Pigeon (2003) as involving the following stages;

*Open Coding* – capturing the detail, variation and complexity of the data

*Constant Comparative Analysis* – constantly comparing the data for conceptual similarities and differences

*Theoretical Sampling* – sampling new data to extend the emergent theory

*Theoretical memo's* – writing memoranda in order to explore emerging concepts and linked to existing theory

*More Focused Coding* – of selected core categories (including focused, axial and theoretical coding)

*Theoretical Sampling* – continuing to make comparisons and sample theoretically until no new insights emerge (theoretical saturation)

*Theory Generation* – moving from descriptive to more theoretical levels involving writing definitions of core categories, building conceptual models and data displays, linking to the existing literature; writing extended memo's and more formal theory.

Adapted and abbreviated from Henwood and Pidgeon (2003).

Whilst these stages may appear to represent a linear process involving discrete stages, Henwood and Pidgeon point out that the process reflects both 'linear and iterative qualities, reflecting both the ongoing flip-flop between data and conceptualisation' (p137).

### **3.8 Initial Open Coding (Level 1 Codes)**

Strauss and Corbin (1990) define the process of Open Coding as 'breaking down, examining, comparing, conceptualising and categorising data'. It involves capturing the detail, variation and complexity of the data, and is the process during which categories are identified. During this phase of initial coding Charmaz (2006), suggests that attempts should be made to code words as actions rather than apply pre-existing categories to the data. This is achieved through asking more specific questions of the data namely;

- What is this data a study of? (Glaser, 1978, Glaser and Strauss 1967)
- What does the data suggest or pronounce?
- From what point of view?
- What theoretical category does this specific datum indicate?  
(Glaser 1978)

(Taken from Charmaz (2006), p 47).

Written data, field notes or transcripts are conceptualised line by line and in the first stages, this first level of abstraction is applied to all of the data. This has also been referred to as Substantive Coding and as First Order Coding by Dey (2004).

Willig (2001) asserts that this process should not employ existing theoretical formulations in order to develop category labels, but should be grounded in the data. The use of in vivo codes, those words and phrases used by the participants themselves, should also be utilised as these

'help the researcher avoid importing existing theory into the analysis' (p34).

'Constant comparative analysis' involves moving back and forth between the data, as new data emerges, in order to conceptualise all incidents in the data, merging these into new concepts through modification and renaming.

Turner (1981) sees this process as involving 'tentative labelling of the phenomena which the researcher has perceived, and which he considers to be of potential relevance to the inquiry in hand' (p232). He also suggests that the labels used in this form of categorisation should fit the phenomena described in the data exactly and that this 'goodness of fit' provides the foundations of subsequent analysis. Willig (2001) summarises the aim of this form of analysis as being, 'to link and integrate categories in such a way that all instances of variation are captured by the emerging theory' (p34).

Level 1 coding is carried out with theoretical sensitivity which sensitises the researcher to the data. This term developed by Glaser and Strauss (1967), refers to the ability of the researcher to become aware and sensitised to the meaning of data. This ability is viewed as dependent upon the researchers existing knowledge of the general literature and experience relevant to the area of study and is applied throughout the Grounded Theory process. Strauss and Corbin (1990) would see this as pivotal in 'allowing one to develop a theory that is grounded, conceptually dense, and well integrated – and to do this more quickly than if the sensitivity were lacking'.

### **3.9 Level 2 and 3 Coding**

The second phase of coding is more focused, directive and selective. It involves 'using the most significant and/or frequent earlier codes to sift through large amounts of data. It requires decisions about which initial codes make the most analytic sense to categorize your data incisively and completely (Charmaz 2006, p57). It involves the condensing of Level 1 codes into categories, again by asking questions of the data and comparing this to other existing categories and with each emerging category. Level 3 coding involves using theoretical sensitivity in order to import theoretical constructs which link Level 1 and 2 codes together and which 'weaves the fractured data together again' (Glaser, 1978). It is this weaving back together which gives relevance and meaning to the data and which grounds any emerging theory.

Miller (1995), views this emerging 'comprehensive pattern between codes' as 'the substantive grounded theory, the theoretical constructs having been grounded in categorical codes, rather than being the product of abstract theorising'. This form of coding is also referred to axial coding (Strauss and Corbin, 1990), which again reflects the relationship between categories and subcategories and 'specifies the properties and dimensions of a category, and reassembles the data you have fractured during initial coding to give coherence to the emerging analysis' (Charmaz, 2006).



### **3.10 Theoretical Memos**

Henwood and Pidgeon (1992), suggest that, with reference to good practice in qualitative research, it is important for the researcher to be able to 'write explicit, clear and comprehensive accounts of why phenomena have been labelled and categorised in particular ways' (p97-112). The use of memo writing in Grounded Theory forms an integral part of the research process and of the explicit categorisation of data.

Charmaz (2006) also highlights the functional importance of memo writing in the construction of Grounded Theory, suggesting that 'memo's catch your thoughts, capture the comparisons and connections you make, and crystallize questions and directions for you to pursue' (p 72). It also forms an important stage further along the GT process in helping raise focused codes to conceptual categories, through the clarification of what the category consists of, and through specifying the relationship between codes.

### **3.11 Theoretical Sampling**

Theoretical sampling involves the researcher in 'seeking pertinent data to develop your emerging theory. The main purpose of theoretical sampling is to elaborate and refine the categories constituting your theory', Charmaz (2006, p96). This is carried out until no further properties of the categories emerge and theoretical saturation is achieved, meaning that 'no new categories can be identified, and until new instances of variation for existing categories have ceased to emerge', Willig (2001), p35. Willig also points out that theoretical sampling also means checking theory

against reality, through the sampling of incidents that challenge as well as elaborate the categories properties.

Theoretical sampling is dependent upon having already defined categories, which can be refined and develop to form theoretical categories through the process of theoretical sampling. Charmaz (2006) proposes that theoretical sampling, 'not only helps you fill out the properties of your major categories, you can learn more about how a basic process develops and changes'. (p103), and as such can advance your analysis. Hood (1983) identifies the use of theoretical sampling as supporting the data analysis in moving towards;

- Delineating the properties of a category
- Checking hunches about categories
- Saturating the properties of a category
- Distinguishing between categories
- Clarifying the relationship between emerging categories
- Identifying variation in a process.

Charmaz concludes that it is this moving back and forth between the data which supports the development of theoretical categories, and which highlights those categories which lend themselves to becoming treated as substantive categories and concepts in the data analysis.

### **3.12 Theoretical Sensitivity**

Theoretical sensitivity involves the researcher in moving from an essentially descriptive to a more analytical level of abstraction. This involves asking questions of the data, making comparisons across the

data and in looking for exceptions. It may involve revisiting data sources in order to collect further data or seek clarification on which to further develop any emerging theory or ideas.

A schematic list of the stages in the development of Grounded Theory proposed by Glaser and Strauss (1968,) includes the stage of 'Making connections, where relevant, to existing theory'. Turner (1981) highlights this as being a considerable difference between GT studies and those following more conventional routes which begin with examining a body of theory and then try to fit data to an existing theory. GT in contrast involves the generation of data which emerges and is coded with reference to theoretical sensitivity, consisting of previous reading, knowledge and experience, which sensitises the researcher to the meaning of the data. Miller (1995) states that the prior coding of data under conditions of theoretical sensitivity, supports the emergence of theory, and it is at this point at which the research literature is turned to in order to find support for the emerging theory.

Strauss and Corbin (1990), also highlight the importance of theoretical sensitivity in the process of analysis; 'It is theoretical sensitivity that allows one to develop a theory that is grounded, conceptually dense, and well integrated – and to do this more quickly than if the sensitivity were lacking' (p 214).

### **3.13 Theory Generation**

Glaser (1978) sees the aim and cumulative process of analysis as being able to discover a 'core variable'. A core variable is described as having

the characteristics of occurring frequently in the data, is able to link the data together and is able to explain much of the variation in the data. A goal of GT is therefore to formulate a hypothesis based on the conceptual ideas which have emerged, and as reflected in the categories and concepts which have been constructed through the data analysis process. Glaser and Strauss (1967), also see GT as also involving discovering the participants' 'main concern' and how they attempt to resolve it. It is the core variable which should be able to explain and capture how the participants do this and with as much variation as possible. A core variable uses the most powerful properties to picture and explain what is happening, but uses as fewer properties as possible in order to do so. Core variables can be theoretically modelled as a Basic Social Process, or Basic Social Psychological Process (BSPP), (Miller 1994), which illustrates social processes as they are repeated over time. Turner (1991) has suggested that the term Grounded Theory is misleading in the sense that it is more likely to yield the development of a more localised theory, of more broadly based sociological or psychological theory, rather than a substantive classical theory in its own right. The notion of what constitutes valid 'theory' therefore appears to be open to some debate.

Charmaz (2006) also raises the question of 'What is theory?' in highlighting disagreement about what a completed theory in GT should look like.

Charmaz takes a broader look at definitions of theory, which reflect the distinction between positivist and interpretivist paradigms discussed

earlier, suggesting that interpretive theory 'calls for the imaginative understanding of the studied phenomenon. This type of theory assumes emergent, multiple realities; indeterminacy; facts and values as linked; truth as provisional; and social life as processual'. (p126).

In contrast Positivist theory seeks causes, deterministic explanation and emphasises generality and universality. What becomes important however is that in Grounded Theory the notion of validity will have different meanings as a reflection of the use and extent of these different research paradigms being apparent in the GT study itself. Grounded Theory does not seek to validate existing theory but to create theory which is grounded in the data and existing theoretical formulations. Whilst such theory may not be generalisable outside the context in which it is created, it nevertheless results in a deeper understanding of the social phenomena at the centre of the study.

This study represents a 'social constructivist grounded theory as part of the interpretivist tradition and as such, 'Places priority on the phenomena of study and sees both data and analysis as created from shared experiences and relationships with the participants' Charmaz (2006) (p130). However, the study also acknowledges that the formulation of theory is also an interpretation and represents a form of researcher construction. Whilst this may be viewed critically as reflecting a lack of neutrality, since categories and codes reflect the language of the researcher, Charmaz would argue that this potential limitation provides the opportunity to 'inspire us to examine the hidden assumptions in the language we use' (p46). The interactive and constructivist nature of the

process encourages researcher reflexivity in terms of asking questions about our own interpretations. Charmaz believes that in engaging in reflexivity the 'researcher may elevate their own tacit assumptions and interpretations to 'objective' status.'(p132). The 'constant comparative method' (Glaser and Strauss, 1967) in Grounded Theory, described earlier, can be seen as one way in which our own interpretations can be reduced. Charmaz goes on to suggest that looking at how respondents understand their own situations before attempting to judge their actions and attitudes through the researchers' assumptions, can bring a fresh logic to participants experiences and as such can lead to the application of more conscious rather than automatic terminology.

A further methodological criticism of Grounded Theory research relates to the notion of not engaging in the literature review before conducting the Grounded Theory process. Glaser (1967) considered this to be a way of providing the researcher with a potential freedom to generate new concepts, without the influence of existing theories as a source of potential researcher bias. This is viewed as a naïve proposal in respect of the researcher needing to know whether the area is one which is worthy of research and in not wanting to re-discover theories which already exist. In an attempt to be transparent about any potential researcher bias the researcher made explicit any pre-existing assumptions/ preconceptions related to the area of study. These are specified as;

- That pupil assessments would form an integral part of the EWO assessment process
- That the range of welfare support offered would be family focused

- That court intervention was aimed at hard to reach families
- That Educational Psychology and other agency involvement, in cases of persistent absence were limited or non existent, regardless of the issues involved
- That EWOs acted independently from schools

### **3.14 Design / Method**

The full version of a grounded theory approach was adopted as the research methodology, in line with that outlined by Strauss and Corbin (1998), Henwood and Pidgeon (2003) and Charmaz (2006). This followed the collection and exploration of data from audio taped semi-structured interviews with Education Welfare Officers, regarding their involvement with cases of pupil persistent absence from school. The analysis employed Open Coding (Level 1 Codes) using Constant Comparative Analysis, using a line by line approach, which aimed to identify and name ideas, events, processes and action at a higher conceptual level than the text itself. Memo writing formed an integral part of defining these Level 1 codes.

Level 2 coding involved categorisation of the data, together with sub categorisation, allowing categories to become integrated and able to account for the variations emerging in the data. Level 3, or axial coding, reflected the development of theoretical constructs based on the application of academic reading and professional knowledge (theoretical sensitivity), which defined the categories relationship and connectivity with Level 1 and 2 codes, allowing for the development of core

conceptual categories. The use of a coding paradigm, suggested by Strauss and Corbin (1998), which involved questioning the data in line with theoretical constructs emerging from the data, was employed. Strauss and Corbin suggest that these theoretical/mini frameworks represent concepts and their relationships, and allow us to revisit the data and to move backwards and forwards, in developing categories which can later emerge as major concepts or core categories in the analysis. Level 3 codes, representing substantive major theoretical categories were developed and the properties, features and dimensions of these categories defined. This further extended and supported the development of theory.

A second literature review was conducted in order to extend researcher sensitivity in the areas of psychology and sociology which had emerged in the data, and in order to attempt to integrate and ground theory.

### **3.15 Participants**

Participants were all Education Welfare Officers working as part of the Nottingham City Education Welfare Service, with 10 being female and 2 male. All were experienced EWOs with between four and twelve years' experience.

Six of the EWOs were school based, 4 in secondary school contexts and two in primary school contexts. The remaining EWOs were based in one of three Multi-Agency Locality Teams (MALT's) based across the City.



### **3.16 Ethical Considerations**

At this time the EWOs had received training on the use of the Ngage tool, described in the introduction. This reflected the Education Welfare Service wanting to move towards all EWOs being able to utilise this framework in involving young people, who were persistent absentees, in the assessment process. It was apparent from talking to service managers that this expectation was being 'variably' implemented across the service. The researcher was therefore sensitive to the fact that for some EWOs the Ngage assessment tool may not have constituted part of their own assessment process. It was subsequently felt important to explain that the purpose of the research was for the researcher to gain a greater understanding of the EWOs own engagement with cases and how they chose individually to approach a case of PA. It was necessary to develop a good rapport with each EWO as their own practices were being explored. Whilst this could potentially lead them to feel vulnerable and open to criticism, respect was demonstrated through the researcher wanting to learn about the EWOs views and actions and to understand their practices and perspectives. A number of EWOs were interviewed again on a separate occasion. Their willingness to be involved in further interviews, and to continue to allow the researcher continued access, is also indicative of a good rapport and mutual respect being established with the participants. This is echoed by Blumer (1969) who recommends that researchers 'respect their subjects' even when questioning their perspectives and practices.

It was also apparent during the interview process that a number of EWOs were 'stuck' with cases, often reflecting a sense of experiencing disempowerment or dissonance, and wanted to use the researcher, in the role of Educational Psychologist, to engage in a consultative process. At these times the researcher offered to engage in providing consultation at the end of the interview process as a separate activity, and was therefore able to remain within the research interview process. These requested consultations were often based around the EWO grappling with school based issues which had emerged during the interviews, and as such these represented main areas of concern for the participants. As these issues were also explored during the interview process they were not 'lost' as data emerging from the interaction of the researcher and participant during the interview process itself.

The research was carried out with reference to the British Psychological Society ethical code of conduct (2006). Issues of consent were addressed prior to meeting with the EWOs during initial telephone conversations. A further briefing prior to the start of the interview, revisited the issue of informed consent, ensuring that the EWO was fully aware of the purpose of the interview, ensuring them of confidentiality, and emphasising that no EWO or school would be named in the reporting of the study. The issue of how the data would be recorded, analysed and reported was also discussed with each participant.

### **3.17 Procedure**

14 members of the Education Welfare Service (EWS) in Nottingham City were interviewed, including one EWS area manager. 8 of these EWOs were interviewed on a second separate occasion. This allowed for further exploration of emergent codes, through revised questions and for the researcher to 'track' cases as the EWO's engagement with a case progressed. For example, where possible, EWOs were interviewed in the initial early stages of a PA case being referred to them. Arrangements were then made to see the EWO again following their planned response and intervention. The rationale here was to capture the EWO's thinking at the time in order to try and limit the impact of any future action or outcomes as being influential in any retrospective accounts. In some cases this was not possible owing to the EWO having progressed their involvement and engagement with PA cases quickly.

Participants were self selecting in that following an initial request by the researcher to the EWS Service Manager, gaining consent to interview EWOs in respect of their assessment and intervention with cases of PA, EWOs volunteered themselves to be interviewed. A list of all EWS members was made available to the researcher and EWOs were contacted individually. Volunteer participants became those who were subsequently interviewed. No EWO declined to be interviewed, but some stated that they did not have a current PA case with which they were currently engaging in order to talk about this during an interview. This followed all participants being asked if they had a case of persistent absence from school that they would be happy to talk about and be

interviewed about. The EWOs were told that the focus of the interviews would be related to how cases of PA were engaged with in terms of their own assessment and intervention with individual cases.

The 8 initial semi-structured interviews with the EWOs focused on a recent case of PA with which the EWO had recently engaged. These individual cases formed the basis of the EWOs interview with the researcher and reflected the questions asked in the interview schedule at 3.1 below.

Coding of the raw interview data was started following the first interview and coding proceeded after each subsequent interview and prior to any further interviews being carried out. This allowed for greater flexibility within the interview process and for emerging codes to form the basis of extended questioning and new forms of enquiry. The researcher transcribed and coded each transcript individually. The initial 8 interviews were all carried out within a six week period. As indicated earlier, a number of the EWO participants were interviewed on a second occasion in order to follow each step of their engagement with an individual case. The gap between these same participant interviews varied owing to dates when both researcher and participant were available, but on average these interviews managed to maintain a close fit with the EWOs own engagement and timescales for intervention which focused around the 12 week PA protocol established by the Education Welfare Service.

A further interview schedule was developed based on these initial interviews as indicated in Figure 3.2, representing a revised interview schedule based on the frequency and presence of codes arising from the

ongoing analysis of the raw interview data. Further and subsequent interviews with participants included questions related to individual casework but also more general questioning in line with the revised schedule at 3.2.

Semi-structured interviews were carried out in the school where the EWO was based or in Locality bases. Interviews lasted, on average, one to one and a half hours in length, and were all conducted in rooms which were 'private' in not being accessible during the interview period to other people.

Semi-structured interviews offered the flexibility of allowing the researcher to add additional questions in line with the participants' responses, and to modify the order and wording of questions as appropriate to the context. The research study is based on these EWO interviews. The researcher was fully aware of the role of the researcher, as interviewer, in influencing what was being observed and in the creation of the participants' accounts. As Hayes (1997) points out, with respect to the GT analysis, 'analysis can only report on what is co-created between the people involved.'... 'Interpretation then involves deciding what conclusions can be drawn from the presence or frequency of various aspects of what is produced' (p117).

Interviews are not therefore without their limitations, and as Robson (1993) points out 'biases are difficult to rule out' (p229, par 4). However, Robson also points out that face to face interviews have the potential to provide rich and highly illuminating material. Intensive interviewing as highlighted by Charmaz (2006) serves the purpose of learning about the

participant's experiences and reflections, whilst allowing the researcher to explore beyond the level of ordinary conversation. It also allows for the thought and feelings of the participants to be made explicit, to be able to reflect back in order to check for accuracy, request more detail or explanation and to come back to an earlier point (p26).

Such intensive interviewing, using semi-structured focused questions, therefore allowed the researcher a degree of flexibility which was supportive of 'achieving a balance between making the interview open-ended and focusing on significant statements' (Charmaz, p2), and also allowed for unanticipated data to emerge.

### **3.18 Materials/Instruments**

The initial interview schedule was developed as indicated in Figure 3.1 and revised in line with the emergence of data and coding, as indicated in Figure 3.2. A voice recorder was used in order to record the interviews for transcription and coding. A coding paradigm was employed as previously described, with reference to the procedure outlined by Strauss and Corbin (1998), Henwood and Pidgeon (2003) and Charmaz (2006).

### **Figure 3.1 Interview Schedules 1**

#### **Initial Interview Questions for Education Welfare Officers re cases of Persistent Absence**

**Context;**

**I understand that this is a case of PA in which you are planning to work more intensively in order to try to assess the current situation and intervene with the PA issue;**

#### **General to all PA cases**

**In general how would you approach a case of PA?**

**What would you normally/ordinarily do in every case? (Explore general principles of assessment)**

**What kinds of information do you normally look for? Why?**

**What do you think it is important to find out in all cases? Why?**

**What would you have expected others to have done? School / other professionals? (Other key players in the assessment process)**

#### **Specific to current case**

**Can you give me a brief outline of the case?**

**Have you already informed any opinion about what the reasons for the PA might be?**

**How did you arrive at this?**

**What is likely to be your next step?**

**How will you gather further information around this case?**

**Are there any specific assessment tools/processes/techniques that you will use? (Explore decisions/choices)**

**How/why would you use these?**

**What kinds of information do you hope to get from it? (Explore kinds of understanding)**

**In what way do you think that will be helpful?**

**How will you interpret/make sense of it?**

**To what extent do you think it might help the PA?**

**Figure 3.2 - Interview Schedule 2 (Revised EWO Interview Questions)**

- 1. Some EWOs seem to use information from different sources, for instance many seem to consider information gained from parents on a home visit? Do you think this is the most important source of information generally and if so why?**
- 2. Some EWOs don't seem to interview the pupil. Do you think important information might be missed? If so what? Why do you think practice varies on this?**
- 3. Usually school information is seen as limited. Ideally, what information would you want from school?**
- 4. Some EWOs say they get a lot of useful information on the 'grapevine'. In what ways do you find this useful/better than other sources? Why? Are there any downsides to this information? If so, how might you guard against these?**
- 5. How do you think colleagues start to make sense of all the information? (See the wood for the trees ?). Do you have any general rules for what's most important? How do you feel they deal with bits of conflicting information?**
- 6. Do you think different people, professionals or parents, give more useful or reliable information? Can you give an example?  
Do you think most of your colleagues would see this the same as you?**
- 7. Most people seem to think family issues are the root cause of PA. Do you agree with this? Have you come across exceptions? What do you think explains how children with similar problems do nevertheless attend school regularly?**
- 8. Most people seem to favour a court or welfare role, rather than working with schools or other agencies. Why do you think this might be?**
- 9. How useful do you find the various categorisations of PA**



### **Summary of Chapter 3**

This chapter has looked at research paradigms, relevant to the issue of social enquiry, together with the methodological issues which are linked to the choice of a Grounded Theory methodology. The GT approach and processes are made explicit through to the generation of theory. The chapter then outlines the participant sample, ethical considerations and procedures pertinent to the research study. This leads to the interpretive qualitative analysis and the researcher's journey towards theory, as highlighted in the next chapter.

## **Chapter 4. Constructing Grounded Theory – Interpretive Qualitative Analysis**

### **Introduction**

This chapter outlines the initial interpretive analysis of data using a coding paradigm, reflecting the phases of analysis proposed by Henwood and Pigeon (2003), highlighted in Chapter 3. This paradigm employed the use of an initial coding stage, reflecting the emergence of Level 1 codes, through to the construction of Level 2 and 3 codes, representing an increased level of abstraction and refinement of codes and categories, together with theoretically based concepts and constructs. These successive levels of analyses also led to the development of axial coding, which specified the properties and dimensions of categories, together with the use of theoretical sampling in order to narrow the focus of emerging categories and to attempt to theorise its significance. These categories and codes, and the relationship between them, are specified in the following sections.

#### **4.1 Data Gathering**

The process of gathering 'rich' data on which to build the Grounded Theory analysis, was initiated through adopting semi-structured interviews as the main data collection technique. A total of 22 interviews were carried out. The initial phase, consisting of eight interviews, involved transcribing and coding the interviews sequentially. Coding began after the first interview and the process applied continuously, as interviews were completed and prior to the next interview being carried out. This

followed the development of a set of broad, non-judgemental, open ended questions, as indicated in Figure 3.1 (Chapter 3). These questions were intended to support participants from limiting their responses to fit narrow categories of focus, yet allowing them to present as full a picture of the events around the area of persistent absence as possible. These questions, whilst reflecting the researchers' own 'guiding interests' and concepts, for example using terminology such as 'assessment' and 'intervention', were nevertheless to act as a springboard for eliciting the participants own ideas, experiences, views and feelings. This allowed the participants to emphasize other unanticipated influences and events which were consistently identified as being important to them. The questions were designed therefore to serve the function of developing rather than limiting the scope of the inquiry.

Such intense interviewing, as highlighted by Charmaz (2006), 'permits an in depth exploration of a particular topic or experience and thus, is a useful method for interpretive inquiry' (p25, para 3). Interviews were transcribed and subjected to open coding in the first phase of the analysis.

#### **4.2 Open Coding (Level 1 Coding)**

Open, or Level 1 coding, involved the coding of interviews by defining what was happening in the data and the meaning attached to it. On average this phase of initial coding generated between 81 and 116 codes per interview and employed a mixture of line by line, phrase, word or sentence, as the unit of meaning, according to whichever unit made the

most sense. This interactive process involved the creation and construction of codes by actively naming the data in order to capture the actions, meanings and events of the participants, achieved by closely sticking to the data itself and by representing this data at a higher level of abstraction than itself.

Line by line analysis, as identified by Charmaz (2006), also provides a corrective process which mitigates against imposing preconceived ideas on to the data. It is suggested that this forces a close look at the data 'anew' which leads to the 'discovery' of new ideas and information. It also facilitated the generation of new insights which were used to modify interview questions in subsequent interviews, as a direct response to a number of themes emerging from the data which were unanticipated. Coding was started after the first interview and carried on continuously; using the constant comparative method described earlier, allowing Level 2 codes and the patterns between codes to emerge. For example, codes related to the areas below occurred frequently in the first eight interviews;

- The use of a range of sources of information, together with a differential view of the importance attached to these sources in gathering information around PA cases
- Variations in assessment practices
- Differential Access to School referral information
- Making sense of information, including conflicting information
- The cause and categorisation of persistent absence
- Interventions that emphasise either welfare or court routes

**Figure 4.21 – Indicating frequently occurring areas as related to Level 2 codes**

The emergence of Level 2 codes led to the use of theoretical sampling in order to begin to develop the content of and relationship between codes of a similar nature.

Interview schedules were subsequently refocused by adding additional questions specifically probing these categories and further empirical data was gathered in the form of 8 further EWO interviews. These revised interview questions are indicated in Figure 3.2 (Chapter 3).

These interviews were also subjected to Level 1, open coding, in line with the description above. Examples of open codes, given in bold italics, are given in the following interview excerpts;

#### **Interview 5**

“Even when I’ve been given information from school about what they understand the problem to be (***formed collective view***), I give the family time to tell their story, (***family perspective***) hear what’s going on for them and gather further information (***additional sources of information***). You can’t rush in and say this must be the cause of the persistent absence based just on school information, (***reserving judgement***), you need to make a clear objective assessment of what the situation is” (***aiming for objective view of problem***) (Line 105).

#### **Interview 4**

“CAMHs did an assessment and now there’s a bit of conflict (***conflicting perspectives***) because they are saying it’s an attachment issue. (***labelling of PA***) I really have my doubts about whether it’s an

attachment issue (***Competing hypotheses***) but it's hard to overcome that now its been said".(***challenge - professional view***) ( Line 72).

In vivo codes were also adopted in order to preserve the meanings and views of the participants, most appropriately where they appeared to lend themselves to shared meaning and understanding. This is exemplified in the excerpt below, which captures the in vivo code 'Piggy in the Middle'. This term appeared in three separate interviews and reflected the tension experienced by Education Welfare Officers which arose from the management of relationships between parents and the school, in respect of cases of persistent absence.

### **Interview 3**

"You can feel like 'piggy in the middle', (***in vivo code***) there's a tension, because school just want to focus on attendance figures, you've got to be able to step outside this (***distancing from school agenda***).

Sometimes the school say things that just alienate the parents (***negative interactions***) and I'm piggy in the middle (***in vivo code***). School can present options to the parents that appear punitive (***punitive v supportive response to PA***) and I'm left trying to explain and help parents understand the benefits of it by talking their own language (***communication skills***), its how you sell it to them (***positive reframing***). We do a lot that's unrecognised by the school (***unacknowledged EWO role***), they only focus on the attendance figures." (***attendance figures most important***) (Line 103).

Open codes were compared to each other across interviews and separated into groups. These groups reflected the thematic categorisation of actions, events and processes which occurred in the data and made the relationship between them more explicit. This re coding and organisation process identified a number of specific areas of data which were grouped under specific code names, representing Level 2 codes, for example;

- Balancing the need for support and challenge (parents)
- Synthesising other sources of information
- Self Efficacy beliefs (parental engagement)
- Interventions –system reliant

Charmaz (2006), suggests that this process fulfils two criteria in grounded theory analysis, that of the codes providing a 'fit' between the empirical world of the participants and secondly 'relevance', in being able to provide a 'framework that interprets what is happening and makes the relationships between implicit processes and structures visible (p 54, par 4). Where data appeared to fit the same code, these were split into two codes and memos written in order to define each code in relation to the context or conditions under which it relates. This is highlighted in the use of the in vivo code 'piggy in the middle', exemplified in Interview 3A above, where it occurred in the context of the schools agenda in wanting to continue to authorise a pupil's absence in order to maintain acceptable levels of attendance but also in the context of managing the interactions between parents and school staff. This is exemplified in the two following memos;

**Memo 3, Code T, (Line 17), Interview 4.**

**'Piggy in the middle' (in vivo code) Context; EWO- Parent- School meeting, following home visit.**

This occurs when Information disclosed by the parent as confidential and not known to the school results in the EWO attempting to manage the relationship between the parents and school staff whilst being unable to disclose confidential information disclosed by the parent as relevant to the PA. The EWO experiences this as uncomfortable and feels caught in the middle.

Is this an inevitable outcome of working 'independently' from the school? In what other circumstances does this arise and how is it resolved? Does this also occur when the EWO is school based and may not therefore be perceived as 'independent'?

**Memo 17, Code L3, (Line 101), Interview 3**

**'Piggy in the middle' (in vivo code) Context ; EWO - Parent - School meeting.**

'Piggy in the middle' in this context relates to the EWO feeling that the school do not want to fully understand the issues and circumstances surrounding the pupils PA but just want the pupil to attend school again as attendance figures are being effected. The parent feels that further support is needed. The punitive threat of court proposed by the school is felt by the EWO to alienate the parent and to fail to address the real



issues underlying the pupil's non attendance. The EWO feels caught in the middle of this perceptual dilemma but feels unable to challenge the school.

The first memo led to this in vivo code being related to the Level 2 code 'managing parent – school relationship', whilst the context of the second memo related this data to the Level 2 code 'Managing competing perspectives'.

Memo writing was carried out in conjunction with, and as a response to, the open coding process. It served the purpose of, as Willig (2001) identifies,

providing a written record of theory development, tracing the emergent relationship of categories with one another, and highlighting emerging perspectives (p36, para 1).

The process of comparing open codes identified the following conceptual themes and allowed, as Willig (2001) suggests, the 'systematic integration' of these lower Level 1 categories into more meaningful units, including ;

- Those related to the initial referral of the case of persistent absence by the school (Problem Presentation)
- Those which related to the gathering and of sources of information, giving rise to hypothesis formulation in PA cases (Assessment process)
- The process of engaging parents in the problem solving process (Engagement Strategy – Parents)

- Constructing an understanding of the persistent absence (PA Case Formulation)
- The process of engaging schools in the problem solving process (Engagement Strategy – Schools)
- Outcomes and Interventions for PA cases (Problem Resolution).

These conceptual areas or themes were further refined and condensed through the process of synthesising the data in order to form Level 2 and 3 codes.

### **4.3 Level 2 and 3 Coding**

The themes above represent a central sequential narrative which was present, in varying degrees, in all interviews carried out in relation to cases of persistent absence. This is highlighted in Figure 4 below, which represents identified phases in the process of the EWO's engagement with cases of persistent absence. In turn these phases reflect the events, activities, feelings and perceptions, associated with each phase, as experienced by EWOs. This narrative formed the basis for the subsequent development of higher order Level 2 and 3 codes (axial codes) pertinent to each phase of the EWO's involvement and action. Whilst Level 2 codes offered a more refined abstraction at the categorisation level, Level 3 codes transported academic and professional knowledge to these categorisations in order to form more theoretically based constructs.

The codes relating to these events and activities at Levels 2 and 3, highlighted specific influences which occurred at different points in the

EWO's engagement with each case, often varying along specific dimensions. For example, the Level 2 Code 'Hypothesis Formulation', which was linked to activities, events and feelings associated with the EWO 'determining the assessment process', varied in terms of whether the EWO's initial formulations, in respect of any hypothesis accounting for the cause of the PA, represented a 'fixed' or 'fluid' hypothesis at that point in their engagement with the case.

|                         |                               |                                     |                        |                                     |                       |
|-------------------------|-------------------------------|-------------------------------------|------------------------|-------------------------------------|-----------------------|
| 1                       | 2.                            | 3.                                  | 4.                     | 5.                                  | 6.                    |
| Problem<br>Presentation | EWO<br>Assessment<br>Strategy | Engagement<br>Strategy<br>(parents) | PA Case<br>Formulation | Engagement<br>Strategy<br>(Schools) | Problem<br>Resolution |

**Figure 4.22 Showing the central sequential narrative as phases which emerged through the EWOs involvement with PA cases.**

Level 2 codes were arrived at by asking further questions of the data and by identifying similarities which joined and held the data together, building it into categories. As Willig (2001) suggests, this process also involved using lower Level 1 codes, which occurred frequently in the data, to be subsumed by context specific category labels, whilst also 're-focusing on the differences within a category in order to be able to identify any emerging subcategories' (p34, para 3).

The following section highlights the interpretive analysis which encapsulates the broader sequence of categories above, together with the core Level 3 categories and Level 2 subcategories, which weave this data together and link it back to the interview data of the participants.

#### **4.4 Phase 1. Problem Presentation**

Figure 4.1. provides an overview of the generation of codes relating to the Problem Presentation phase in cases of PA. These categories and codes are now described below and supported by examples from interview transcripts.

##### ***Systemic Influences (Accessing referral information) (Level 3 code)***

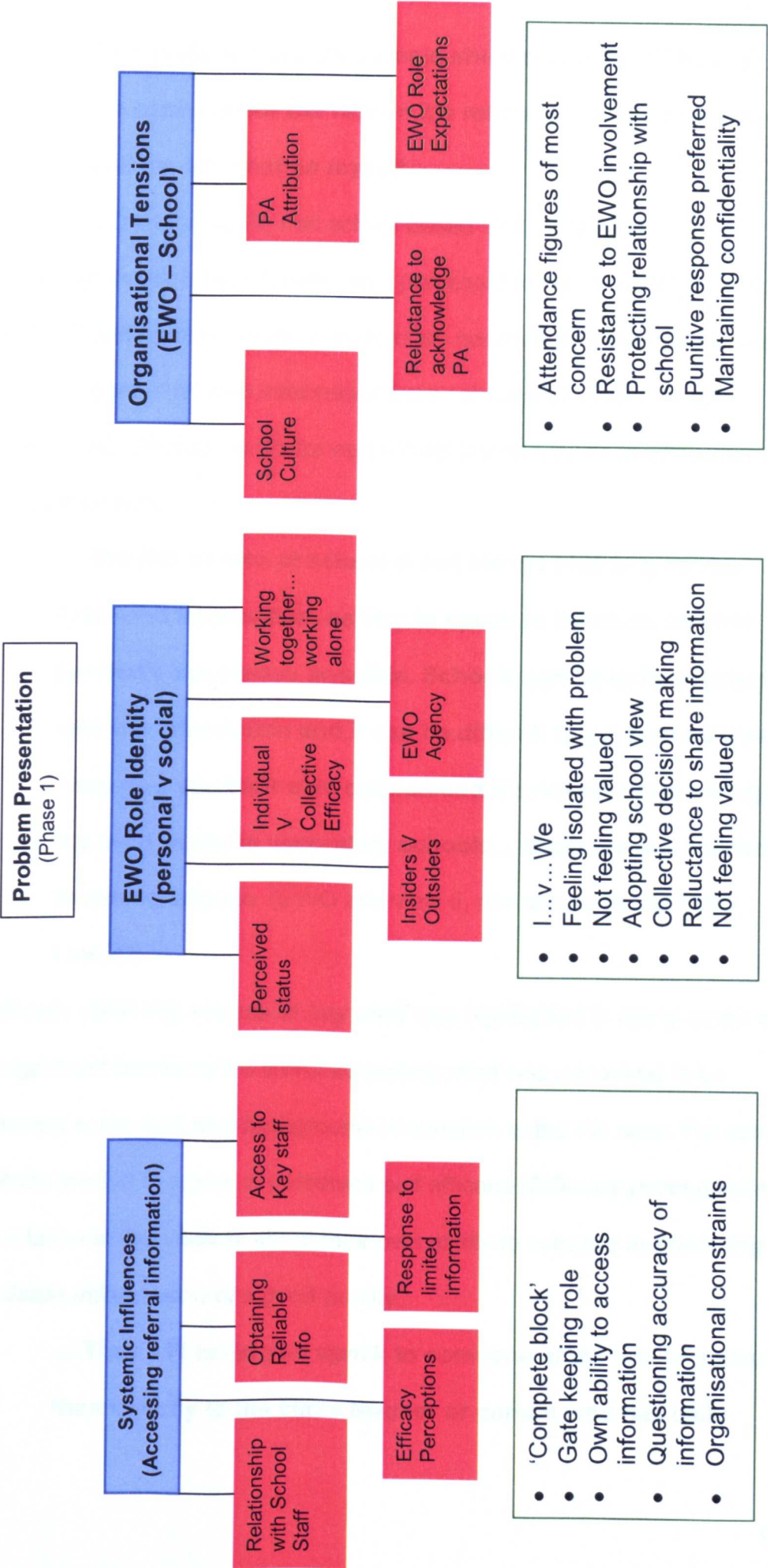
The 'problem presentation' stage of the EWO's involvement with PA cases represents the initial phase of receiving referral information from schools in respect of a case of persistent absence.

A total of 87 open codes were constructed as related to this stage in the EWO's engagement with a PA case. These codes were integrated into higher order Level 2 codes which synthesised the data more incisively and completely, for example;

- Relationship with school staff
- Access to key staff
- Response to limited information
- Obtaining reliable information
- Efficacy perceptions

These codes were subsumed by the Level 3 code ***Systemic Influences (Accessing referral information)***. This conceptual category reflected the differential experiences of EWO's, in respect of perceived reliability and quality of referral information from schools, as well as the EWO's perceived ability to 'access' this;

Figure 4.1: Showing the diagrammatic representation of Level 2 and 3 codes, together with examples of level 1 codes for the Problem Presentation phase of EWO engagement with case of persistent absence from school.



**.... Most referrals are on a single sheet and will say PA and just a sentence for the reason it's referred. I then have to find out all the information myself.**

(EWO interview 19, non school based EWO, Line 38).

Limited information from schools was perceived to be an initial barrier to the EWO getting started with a case, often necessitating the need to gain further and more reliable information from school staff. This in itself represented a further hurdle for non school based EWO's in particular, as exemplified here;

**....The link person at school is not always able to give you first hand information, so I try to speak to the class teacher but that's not always possible. Schools can be quite precious with the information and it can be difficult to get beyond that. They give you their own opinion and it's not accurate enough. It's even worse in secondary schools... there are real barriers to seeing anyone. (EWO interview 5, non school based EWO, Line 20)**

Difficulty obtaining **access to key staff** was highlighted in many cases as a significant barrier to the EWO accessing what was perceived to be relevant contextual and background information to the PA case. For some EWOs this led to a lack of perceived self efficacy (**Efficacy perceptions**) in relation to their beliefs about their own ability to succeed in **obtaining reliable information** of a good quality.;

**....They will insist you speak to someone in the 'chain' rather than directly to the class teacher or person who has daily**

**contact with the pupil. I often can't get past them, it stops me doing my job properly.**

(EWO interview 12, non school based EWO, Line 23).

In contrast, it was also evident that EWOs, who were school based, felt that their perceived ***relationship with school staff*** supported greater access to information. For example;

**....I've got a good relationship with school, they come to me straight away and share information with me...**

( EWO interview 3, school based, Line 25).

Being school based and having developed a relationship with school staff also gave some EWOs a sense that they were able to address any school based issues more easily;

**.....Here, it's based on my relationship I've built over the past 10 years and through sharing information. They don't block me from anything. It makes any school based issues easy for me to sort out.**

(EWO interview 1, school based EWO, Line 152).

The excerpts above also indicate differential perceptions according to whether the EWO was school or non-school based.

Codes reflecting ***organisational tensions*** arising through the interaction of the EWO with the school around PA cases, in this initial stage of engagement were also evident, together with those which reflected differential constructions of ***role identity***. These Level 3 codes are further described below.

### ***Role Identity (Personal V Social) (Level 3 code)***

Further Level 3 codes, also related to the Problem Presentation phase, reflected the EWO's own perceived role identity and ***status***, as well as their own perceptions of being an '***insider***' or '***outsider***' in relation to the school, as also impacting on their sense of ***agency*** in dealing with PA cases.

These categories related to the EWO's negotiated role with schools, was developed and further refined to include the notion of human 'agency' as being influenced by a ***personal versus social sense of identity*** which impacted on the EWO's self efficacy beliefs. This provided the category with more coherence and started to move it in a more theoretical direction. This substantive code varied along specific dimensions. These emerged as;

***Being an insider.....Being an outsider***

***Working together.....Working alone***

***A collective view of the PA problem.....versus..... an individual view***

EWOs who were based outside the school often felt isolated and alone with the problem of resolving the PA following the initial referral and often perceived their own status within the school as being low.

.... The head teacher wouldn't talk to me, he asked me to link with the admin person. I challenged this and said it was not appropriate. I just felt that he wanted me to go away and



**resolve it without taking any responsibility or collaboration**

(EWO interview 9, non school based, Line 34).

EWOs who were school based were identified as being more likely to adopt the collective view of the school with regard to PA issues, including the potential cause of the PA, even at this early stage, and noticeably used the term 'We' as opposed to the 'I' when talking about their response to PA referrals. For example in the case of a Yr 10 PA referral,

**...We think he's an extremely bright boy. We know he smokes cannabis and he's confused about his sexuality. So we decided to have a parent meeting with mum. We dragged him in as well. He didn't want to come, said he hated school, had no friends and that people were cruel to him. We can't really pinpoint that, we don't think it's actually true.**

(EWO Interview 7, school based, Line 8)

Whilst this also reflects a greater sense of the school and EWO working together, it also raised the question of the school's influence and the extent to which EWO agency is determined by external systemic or group influences, as opposed to individual determinants.

### ***Organisational Tensions*** (Level 3 Code)

Codes reflecting ***organisation tensions*** which occurred between school staff and the EWO, were evident in the early stages of the referral and often involved a more punitive stance being adopted by the school;

**....school just said 'she needs to be in school' – there was no offer of support or wanting to understand or generate ideas**

**about tackling the PA, it was ‘we just want her in or we’ll go down the court route’ (Interview 4, Line 34)**

**.... They just want to focus on attendance figures, they’re not interested in the reasons for the PA or doing anything about it - they just want them back in school.**

**(Interview 15, Line 53).**

Some EWOs also drew attention to the difficulties they faced in sometimes getting schools to acknowledge the existence of the PA in the first place and thus allow the EWO to pick up the case. This *reluctance to acknowledge PA* is highlighted in the excerpt below;

**...School had been authorising the PA. I contacted the HT and said he needed to stop authorising it. I’d been working with a sibling from another school so I knew it was not an authorised absence. After a lot of resistance from the HT, purely about figures and wanting to keep things in house because of their attendance figures, they let me pick it up.**

**(Interview 11, Line 3).**

Recurring codes reflecting the *School Culture* (Level 2 code) was suggestive of the EWO’s consideration of the culture of the school as being an important factor in the school’s attitude towards persistent absentees, consequentially influencing their willingness and flexibility in responding to the PA problem;

**.....I think the school culture is very important. Some schools are very supportive of getting PAs back into school. Since I’ve been here (secondary school based EWO), staff have**

**appeared very punitive and they expect us to back them up.**

**(EWO interview 14, Line 58).**

**..... they often expect my involvement without doing anything themselves. I usually agree because I don't want to upset them. (Interview 6, Line 41).**

#### **4.5 Phase 2 – Assessment Strategy**

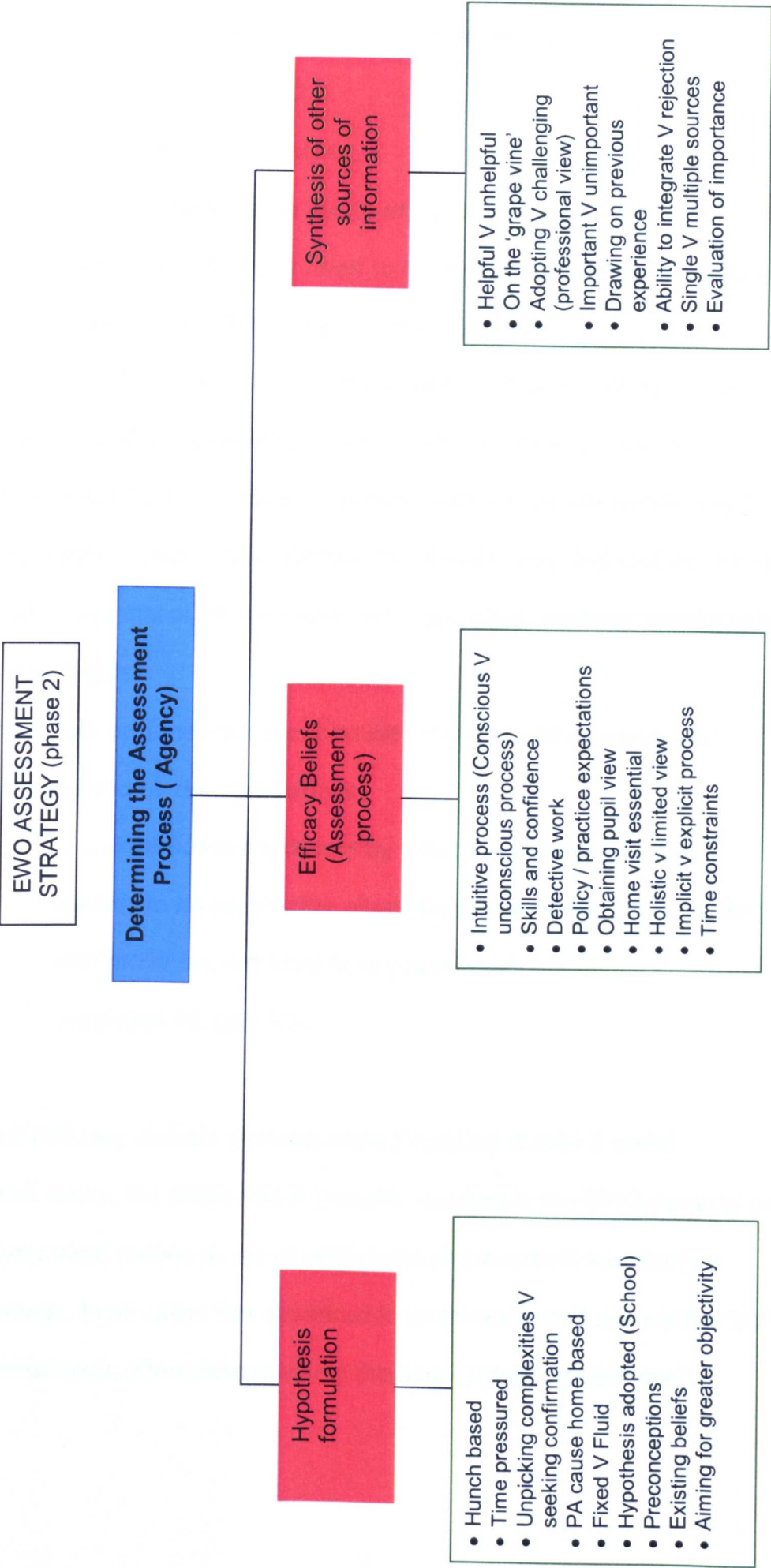
The next phase in the EWO's involvement with PA cases, emerged as being related to the EWO's own assessment strategy. Figure 4.2 highlights the Level 2 and 3 codes which were constructed from the data, together with selected Level 1 codes. The Level 3 code, '***Determining the assessment process***' was constructed as a reflection of the emergence of Level 2 codes which highlighted the process of ***hypothesis formulation***, both implicit and explicit assessment processes, together with the ***synthesis of other sources of information***, as pertaining to events, actions and consequences which were more or less influential, at this point in the EWO's engagement with the case. This relationship is further explained.

##### ***Hypothesis Formulation (Level 2 code).***

A total of 110 open codes were generated in relation to ***hypothesis formulation***. As mentioned earlier, hypothesis formulation at this stage, was categorised as reflecting a variable dimension of a fixed .....or more.....fluid view of the problem.

**....most EWO's take the schools information on face value and just look to confirm this, you know that it's something**

Figure 4.2: Diagram showing level 2 and 3 codes, together with examples of level 1 (open codes) for the assessment strategy phase of EWO involvement with cases of persistent absence from school.



Blue = Level 3    Red = level 2    Green = Level 1

**happening in the home. It's the easier option to do that'.**

(Interview 21, Line 123).

This varied in terms of its fluidity;

**...School info helps me to start to think about what is happening, but you need to be willing to change the ideas as new information comes in' (Interview 13)**

This also reflected a distinction between EWOs who perceived the ***unpicking of complexities*** (Level 1 code) as underpinning the generation of any hypotheses, as opposed to those who worked with limited information, often reflecting the school view, and who were quick to form an initial or working hypothesis and were ***seeking confirmation*** (Level 1 code).

There was evidence that the formulation of a hypothesis was also accompanied by ***time pressures***;

**.....I think we are drawn by what the school say and in having to know quickly what the cause of the PA is so that we can move on, it's very time pressured'.**

(Interview 16, Line 92).

### ***Self Efficacy Beliefs (Assessment Process) (Level 2 code)***

In all cases, the assessment process, resulted in the EWO carrying out a ***home visit***, viewed as an essential part of the overall assessment strategy. In all cases this appeared to be the expected and central form of assessment, often characterising the assessment process itself;

**....I always do a home visit. There's a reason why the children are off and mums not engaging. That's the process, there's no framework, I just take it as it comes, nice and slow. The first visit is crucial in forming a good relationship with mum – you want a good relationship'.**

**(Interview 15, Line 17).**

**..... a home visit is about trying to see things as they are and see what the home conditions are like and probe a little bit more. There does seem to be a link between home conditions and attendance but we've not got hard evidence about that. I think we do make judgements about the family and think that if we do tackle some of these issues it will reduce the PA'.**

**(Interview 6, Line 39).**

**...We need to do a home visit to get an overview of what's happening in the child's life. We are experienced home visitors. I can 'suss' out what's going on, I'm good at that, start to generate some ideas or confirm what the school are saying. It's detective work.**

**(Interview 9, Line 104).**

These excerpts are also indicative of EWO *efficacy beliefs* (Level 2 code), in respect of their own skills as experienced 'home visitors', and in using those skills and capabilities in order to obtain information which may support or generate an insight or reason for the cause of the

persistent absence from school. It is also suggestive of home based issues being considered to be influential factors in the cause and maintenance of the PA.

Some EWO's indicated that they employed a ***conscious process*** (Level 1 code) in respect of the need for parents to have their say and in ***aiming for greater objectivity*** in the process of forming a hypothesis;

.....It's hard to give the family time, with the pressure of the PA process but I try and give them time to talk without constantly leading the conversation but I don't always manage this. When you lead it, it feels like you want to confirm what you've been told. The conversation subconsciously guides you to get information which fits your hypothesis, but I'm conscious of trying to be objective about it'

(Interview 8, Line 133).

In contrast more '***unconscious processes***' were evident in the assessment process of some EWOs. Experienced EWOs frequently reflected recurring themes related to the use of ***intuitive***, or ***hunch based*** approaches, as well as the already highlighted references to ***detective work*** (level 1 codes);

....I don't know why the children aren't coming to school, but something isn't right. I know I shouldn't be prejudiced, but I've been doing this job a long time and you just get an inkling'.

(Interview 10, Line ).

**..... I often know instinctively if there's something wrong. I've often told social workers there's something wrong but I don't know what'.**

**(Interview 3, Line 55).**

It was also evident that EWOs had no *explicit* procedural EWS frameworks or questions for home visits but that all EWOs employed the use of their own '*implicit*' frameworks, which guided and determined the home visit assessment. These implicit frameworks were also indicative of what EWOs felt it was important to know or find out in cases of PA;

**....I know what I would want to ask in my mind, I've got a mental note. I would want to know about the mental health of the young person, how tidy is the house, the family dynamics and composition, other agency involvement. (Interview 5, Line 68).**

**....assess the home conditions generally – see if it's clean, try and see if there are any underlying causes. What care are the children getting?, What is the house like? How do the family interact?**

**(Interview 18, Line 50).**

**.... All sorts. Sibling rivalry, middle child syndrome, that's a great one, a baby, a teenager and one in the middle. New man in the house. I'm always suspicious when they say there's no man in the house and I've just walked past a pair of trainers.**

**(Interview 16, Line 109).**



The extent to which EWOs considered these factors in themselves a contributory factor or cause of the PA was less evident, but it was evident that EWOs considered this sort of information to provide a useful picture of the child. Parental attitude was however felt to be a significant and contributory factor;

**.. .... Do the parents aspire to make their lives better and their children to have a career? What do they feel about the benefits of education? Are they happy to remain on a council estate for the rest of their lives? These factors are hugely significant.**

(Interview 19, Line 115).

The assessment process sometimes involved but in a minority of cases, the EWO talking to the individual pupil who was the subject of the PA. Codes indicating the reasons for including the pupil in the assessment process or not, are highlighted in the following transcript excerpts;

**.....I don't think everyone has the confidence or skills to talk to and engage the young person, it's not something we are used to doing. We are much more skilled at talking to parents and doing home visits.'**

(Interview 7, Line 93).

**....I'm not a fan of the Ngage (pupil assessment tool). I feel it would get in the way and I didn't think much of the training.**

(Interview 18, Line 187).

Other EWOs saw this as an essential part of their assessment process, in order to gain a *holistic view* of the problem;

**....It's important to speak to the child, they are the focus. You need to try and find out what's going on in their mind. It's important to understand the problem from the child's perspective. Parents only want to believe what they want to believe, so if you've only got their view it's not the full picture'. (Interview 5, Line 49).**

However, the school and time constraints were often cited as a barrier to seeing the pupil;

**...'We don't always have the time and there are practicalities involved in getting to speak to the young person. It can be difficult to arrange in some schools'. (Interview 12, Line 54).**

As suggested, codes are indicative of variations in skills, confidence and efficacy beliefs, as well as EWO practices. They also represent influences operating at the school and Education Welfare Service level, such as the existence of operational guidance and EWS and School role expectations in respect of the EWOs practice.

**....The Service (EWS) needs EWOs to have more confidence in talking to young people, it's not something we have ordinarily done in all cases. We now expect them to talk to the pupil. Some people will use the Ngage tool and have found it really useful. Others won't use it all, there is a concern that it may highlight issues they don't feel skilled to deal with. (Interview 2, EWS Manager, Line 150).**

**Synthesis of other sources of information (Level 2 code)**

The 'assessment process' also conceptualised codes related to the potential ***synthesis of other sources of information*** available to the EWO, and the perceived relevance of these to the EWO's own assessment process. The dimension along which this varied was related to ***helpful v unhelpful*** information and the 'importance' the EWO attached to different sources of information. This extended to information from the '***grapevine***' (in vivo code) which captured the EWO's use of community based knowledge;

.... I've heard on the grapevine that he's accessing a flat in Carrington. I know so many families round here, someone will always tell me.

(Interview 3, Line 12).

This was often accompanied by recognition of the need to consider an ***evaluation of importance*** (Level 1 code) regarding the information received through these different sources;

....Sometimes it's true but not necessarily. I usually need to verify it in some way and be clear to others about the source of information.

(Interview 14, Line 79).

In some cases this evaluation also extended to information received from other professionals;

...Instinctively I would say that information from professionals is more reliable, but I don't think we can make that assumption... Health professionals can take you down the wrong route and you might not give as much weight to all the

**information that might be just as reliable...then you won't be thinking about the full range of interventions.**

(Interview 4, Line 90).

**... Professionals can be quick to categorise, say it's ADHD or anxious school refuser, it's too easy to believe professionals have got it right, it's challenging this that's difficult'.**

(Interview 20, Line 203).

In contrast, some EWO's were more likely to accept 'professional information' more readily, as this led more quickly to a perceived potential solution;

**....it can be really helpful when someone says she's an 'anxious school refuser', because then I can sort it out and get home tuition.**

(Interview 8, Line 117).

These two contrasting excerpts highlight variations in the perceived usefulness of some professional information. It is also suggestive of other sources of information, as being influential, in respect of EWO self efficacy beliefs, concerning the EWO's own ability to accurately convey and resolve the causes underpinning the persistent absence. There were recurring codes related to the ability of the EWO to challenge, what were perceived to be, more dominant professional discourses, including those of the school and of health professionals. The dimension **'adopting.....v.....challenging'** the professional view captured this variation (Level 2 code).

#### **4.6 Phase 3 – Engagement Strategy (Parents)**

This phase reflected EWO differential levels of engagement with parents of persistent absentees. This strategy, to engage the parents during a home visit, was evident in all cases of PA, and ranged from subsequent non and limited parental engagement to parental engagement which was founded on multiple home visits. Parents who failed to engage with the EWO at any level, for example who failed to respond to letters, phone calls or to attend meetings, ultimately became subject of 'fast tracking' to court, if the attendance did not improve.

The ability to engage parents successfully emerged as a pivotal action in the EWO ***determining the range of intervention*** perceived to be appropriate for the parent. Codes were indicative of a belief that to ***persist in engaging*** the parent and to offer a supportive/welfare role would be the most effective course of action in attempting to resolve the PA. For other EWOs, the adherence to the explicit PA procedure for the EWS (see Appendix C), ultimately leading to the legal route was emphasised, giving rise to the level 1 code ***Court versus Welfare work***. This range of potential interventions emerged as being related to the EWO's ***attributional beliefs*** in respect of the cause of the PA, as well as what was felt to be within their own ***role (capabilities)*** (Level 1 codes), in terms of ***responding to the parental perspective*** (level 2 Code) and in offering support. Figure 4.3 highlights the relationship between these codes.

***Responding to the parental perspective (Level 3 code)***

Figure 4 shows the relationship between this level 3 code which captured variations in the EWO's success in engage parents in a ***collaborative process***.

The ability of EWO's to engage parents also emerged as being influenced by the EWO's own efficacy beliefs in respect of their interpersonal skills and abilities;

**.....I've always been good at engaging parents, building a relationship with them, it's really important if they are going to work with you. As I get to know them they will open up to me. Building trust is really important but you have to remind yourself you can only go so far.**

(Interview 4, Line 85).

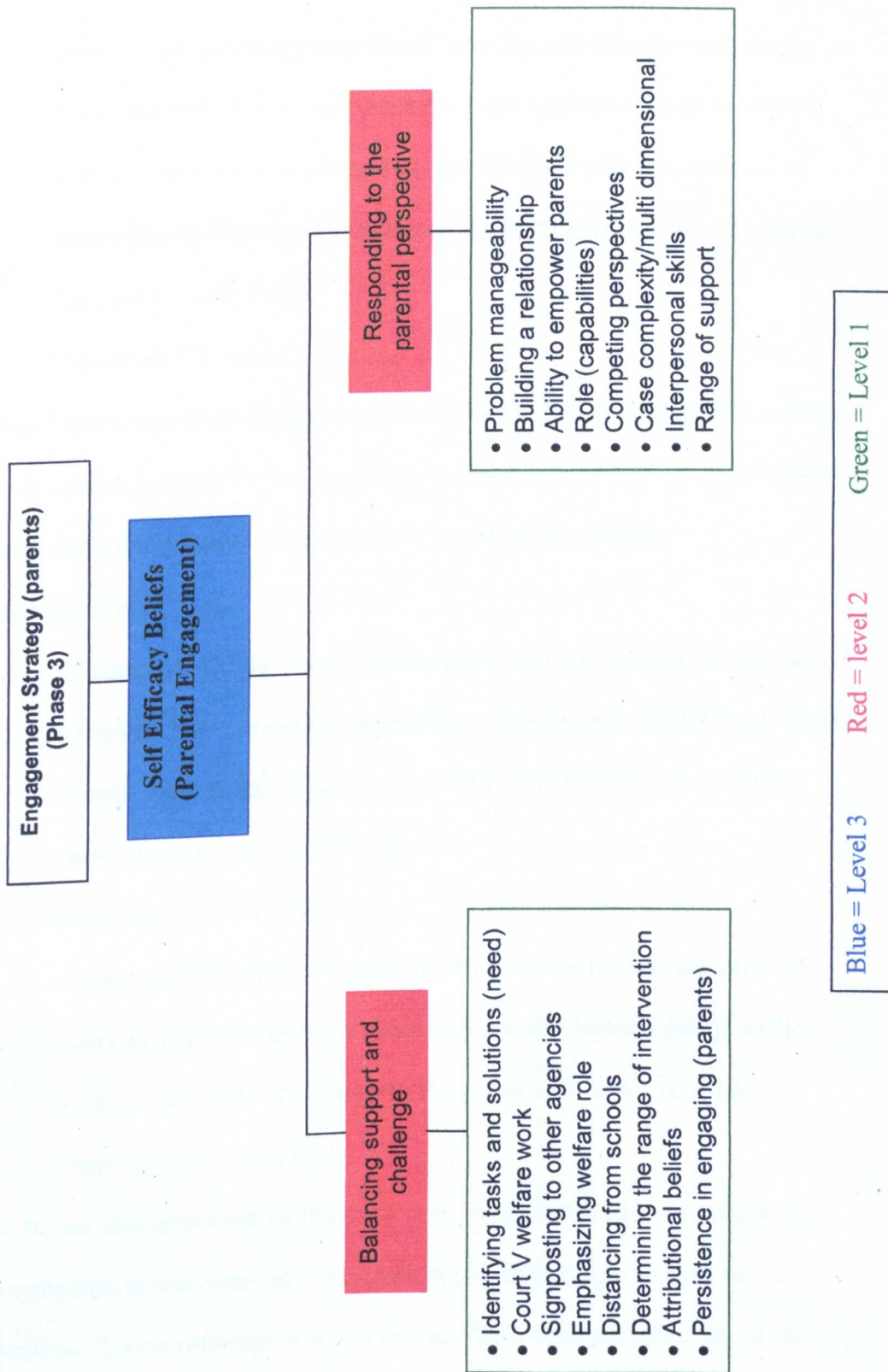
Some EWOs felt that it was necessary to consider ***distancing themselves from schools***, using this as a tactical strategy, in order to engage some parents, whilst recognising that this tactic was harder to achieve for some colleagues;

**....I don't feel associated with the school and I have to sell that. It's harder for the EWOs who are based in school to do that and then parents find it hard to disassociate you. They don't trust you as much and I don't think they're so open about their problems.**

(Interview 5, Line 201).

EWOs who were successful in engaging parents often then found themselves bombarded by problems encountered by the family which

Figure 4.3: Diagram showing level 2 and 3 codes, together with examples of level 1 codes for the Engagement Strategy (parents) phase of EWO involvement with cases of persistent absence from school



they felt expected to resolve, but which were not always felt to be within their remit or skills base;

**...Some of their problems are off my radar. I have to say I'll bear it in mind but I don't feel I can do anything about that. They start to throw everything at you, even when you can't solve it. It makes me feel a bit of a failure when you've managed to develop a relationship and they are then looking for you to sort it out.**

(Interview 19, Line 111).

Other EWOs saw their engagement with parents as involving their *ability to empower parents* to find their own solutions to problems, whilst also recognising a disparity in expectations in terms of *problem manageability*,

**..Sometimes their range of support and our range are totally different. We can offer parenting courses but sometimes their issues are things they can put right themselves, they just need support and guidance.**

(Interview 20, Line 197).

**...I feel part of what I'm able to do is to empower parents to make some changes for themselves. We have a lot of skills that we use with the parents that schools don't realise.**

(Interview 22, Line 76).

The home visit emerged as the time some EWOs felt able to unpick the complexities of the case with the parent(s) and to begin to look for solutions. Codes reflected the use of the EWO *sign posting' to other*



**agencies** in order to gain support for families who had been identified as having family based issues, for example;

**...I've referred to the NSPCC Home and Away Project and I'm going to make another referral for mum because she's indicated to me she's got an alcohol problem. I might start a CAF but I think it will be hard to get school to come to this because they're not very sympathetic towards her'.**

(Interview 1, Line 77).

Codes relating to 'signposting' for parents indicated a substantial EWO Knowledge of community and agency support networks and how referrals to these agencies could be made.

The EWOs perceived **range of support** varied but mainly emerged as being able to offer, parenting courses, parental advice on behaviour management, multi-agency working together with signposting and empowering parents themselves and the initiation of the Common Assessment Framework (CAF). These options varied in relation to the EWO's own knowledge and perceived skills and abilities, with cases often perceived to be very complex (**case complexity**) and multi faceted (**multi dimensional**).

This phase also identified codes which highlighted the presence of school based issues which were a potential cause of the PA. This arose in the main, from the EWO seeking the parents and sometimes the pupil's perspective. This often led the EWO to be faced with conflicting or **competing perspectives** for the cause of the pupils' absence from school;

.... K (pupil name) said she was finding the school work really hard and that she used to have support in school but doesn't have it anymore, and that's why she doesn't want to go. The school told me she could cope with the work and didn't need support and just dismissed it. I did help mum establish a better bedtime routine and talked to her about spending quality time with K (pupil name).

(Interview 8, Line 26).

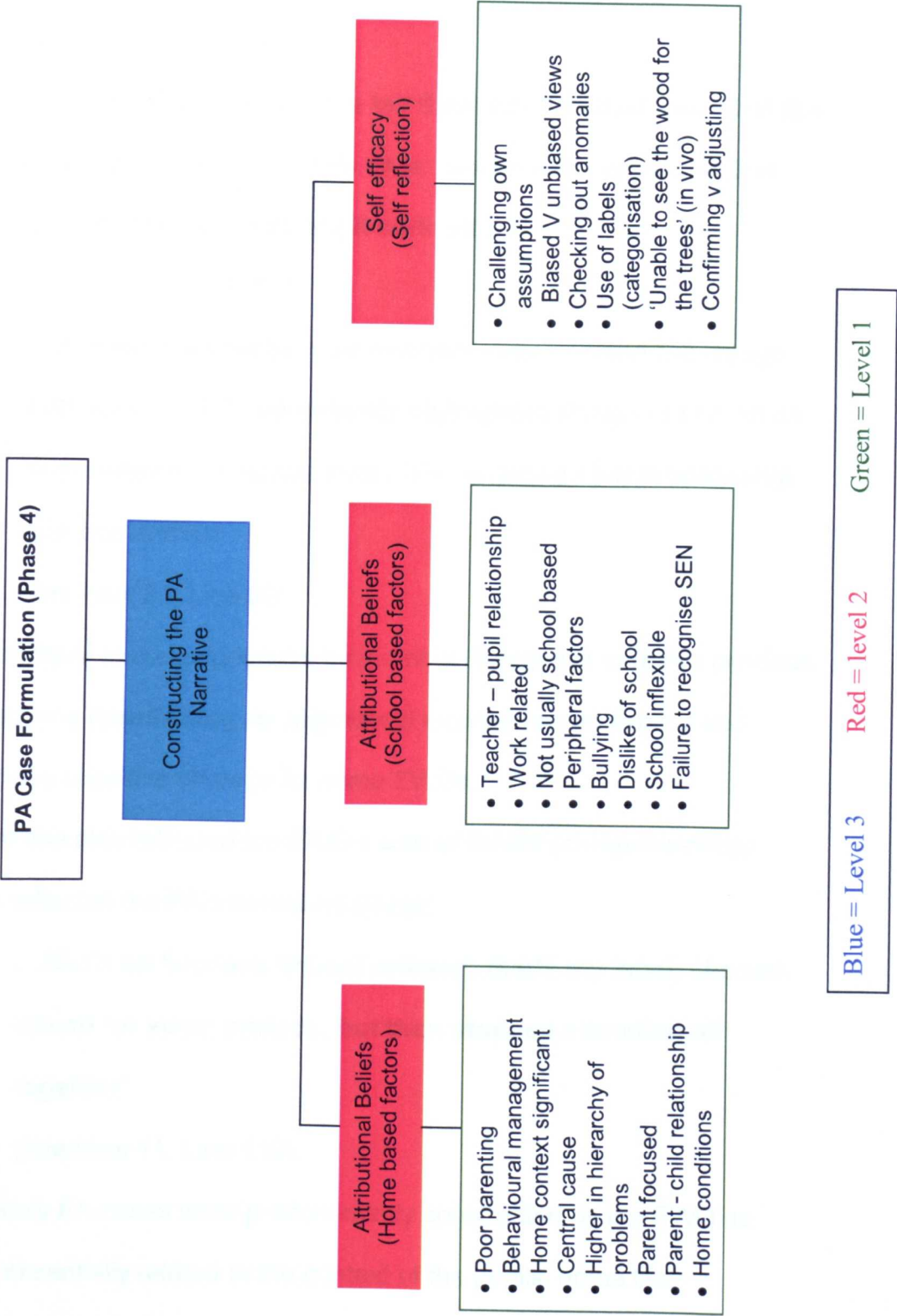
This led to the next phase of the EWOs involvement, which reflected data highlighting how the EWO made sense of this conflicting information, how they confirmed or tightened up a working hypothesis and ultimately constructed a narrative around the PA case, reflecting why the pupil was failing to attend school on a regular basis.

#### **4.7 Phase 4. – PA Case Formulation**

Figure 4.4 shows the diagrammatic representation of codes related to the substantive Level 3 code ***Constructing the PA narrative***.

This story 'construction' was reflected in codes which highlighted the EWOs perceptions of the cause of the PA. It was evident that for some EWOs this involved challenging their own initial assumptions (***challenging own assumptions***) about the reasons for the PA being home based, resulting in decisions being made about the relevance of school based concerns, raised by the parent or pupil, to the non attendance.

Figure 4.4: Diagram showing the representation of level 2 and 3 codes, together with selected level 1 codes, for the PA Case Formulation phase of EWO engagement with cases of PA from school.



**.....I went back to the school to go over things again, I thought it could be a misunderstanding. It can be hard sometimes to see the wood for the trees.**

(Interview 5, Line 85).

**....I went back to school to tell them and to check out what the parent had said but in this case I was never convinced that they (school) were taking it seriously.**

(Interview 15, Line 110)

**....It made me question the schools view – I used the Ngage with her and she consistently highlighted things in school as being important issues in her life, as well as her relationship with her mother.**

(Interview 21, Line 90).

This ability to make judgements based on a willingness to revise previous conceptions (***confirming re- adjusting***) emerged as an explicit and conscious cognitive strategy for some EWOs.

This phase also reflected the EWO's ***use of labels (categorisation)*** which reflected the PA's perceived cause;

**...She's an 'anxious school refuser', that's my label, she did attend for some periods, but then stopped attending all together'**

(Interview 11, Line 119).

Ultimately PA cases were predominantly constructed by the EWO as being essentially related to the context of the pupils' home life (***Attributional Beliefs (home based factors)***);

**‘ Mum couldn’t manage her behaviour – she said she’d got ADHD, but she wasn’t even putting the most basic parenting strategies in place’.**

(Interview 10, Line 36).

School based issues were recognised as being contributory factors in PA cases, whilst not necessarily being viewed as the **‘central’** cause. School based issues were often considered to be ***peripheral factors*** which needed to be addressed, whilst the root causes were viewed as being home based and much ***higher in the hierarchy*** of potential problems as pertaining to the PA.

These constructional understandings of PA cases, were reflected back in the next phase which involved the EWO in arranging a meeting between the parent(s), EWO and the school.

#### **4.8 Phase 5 – Engagement Strategy (School)**

The purpose of the meeting highlighted the need for the parent and school to ‘communicate’ in an attempt to gain a shared understanding of the issues surrounding the pupils’ absence and to ultimately try to resolve the PA issue. As the interview excerpts already highlighted suggest, this frequently reflected a meeting of conflicting or competing perspectives regarding the perceived reasons for the pupils non attendance. EWOs indicated that they anticipated the potentially difficult nature of such meetings, with codes being evident which highlighted the EWO’s role in attempting to bridge the home and school relationships and resolve and manage any conflict (***managing competing perspectives***). The Level 3

code ***Self Efficacy Beliefs (Ability to affect change)***, as shown in Figure 4.5, subsumed codes reflecting the use of EWO ***interpersonal skills and processes*** (Level 2 code) utilised in the parent – school meeting. For example, mediation (***acting as mediator***) and facilitation (***facilitating communication***) processes were evident in the data, as were those which emerged as related to the EWOs attempts to raise issues which the parent or pupil had indicated were school based, and which were felt to be associated with the PA (***sharing perspectives***). This was also accompanied by codes which reflected variations in ***perceived self efficacy beliefs*** (Level 3 code) in relation to this role.

.....I raised the fact that he said he was being picked on but the school didn't see this as being significant but I had to raise it and try and get the parent view across, even though they dismissed it.

(Interview 6, Line 84).

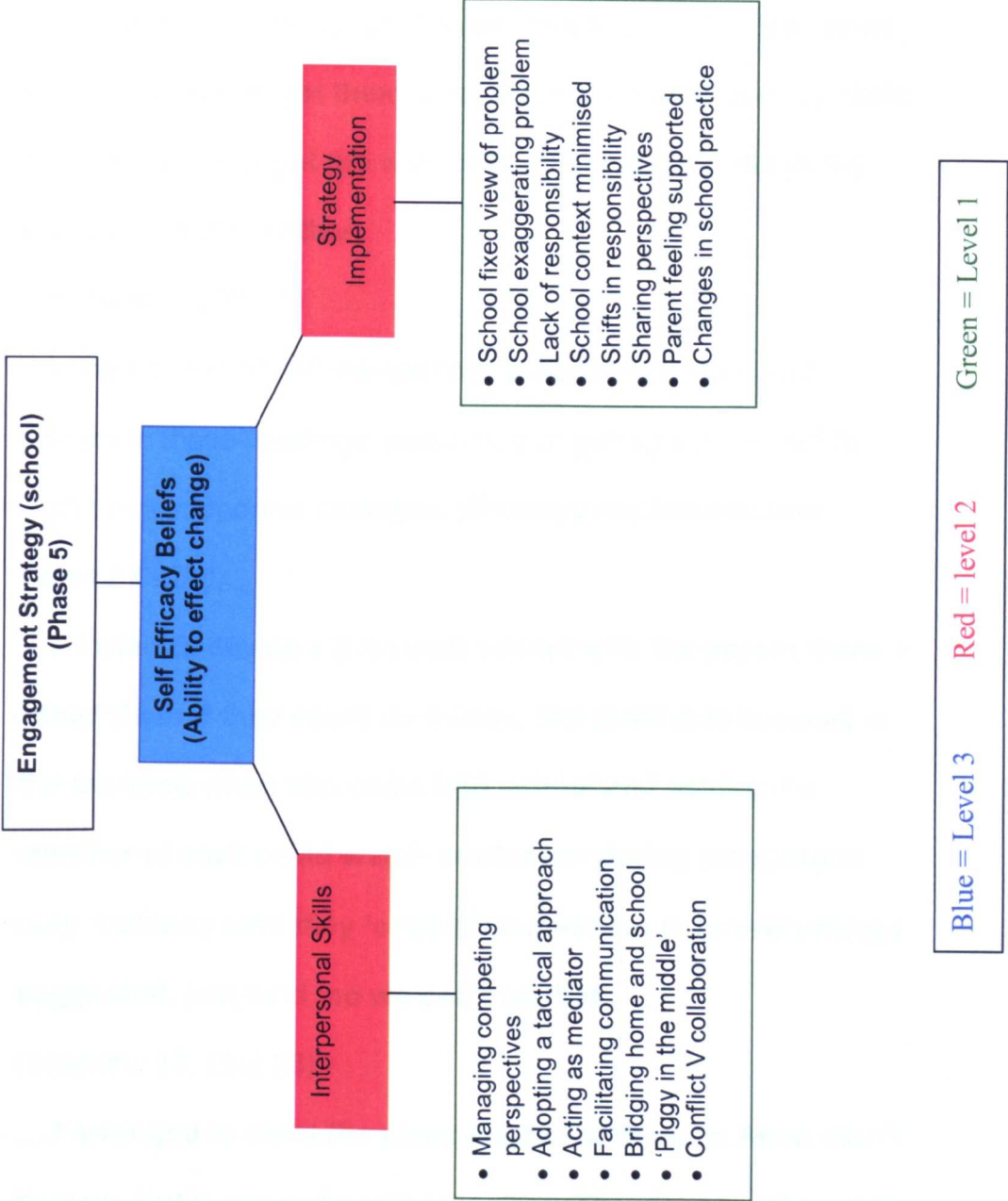
...There is a tension but you have to use your skills to deal with this, it isn't always easy.

(Interview 8, Line 103).

It also highlighted the impact of difficult school staff and the EWOs attempts to overcome school negativity;

....She wasn't very nice to C (pupil), she (Head of Year) verbally attacked him. He said something about being bullied and she went straight at him, then she alienated the mother to the extent she won't speak to her now. I tried to resolve this

Figure 4.5: Diagram showing level 2 and 3 codes, together with examples of level 1 codes for the Engagement Strategy (school) phase of EWO engagement with cases of persistent absence from school.



during the meeting but the head of year was so uncompromising.

(Interview 4, Line 62).

.....You have to train some staff into a different way of thinking. I now feel that school are acknowledging that he needs some kind of support to get him back in but it's taken me a long time to get them to that point. I had to use my skills in the meeting to get the school to acknowledge this in the presence of the mother.

(Interview 1, Line 56)

In contrast, some EWOs evidenced a lack of perceived self efficacy in these meetings, particularly in getting school staff to implement supportive strategies (*Strategy Implementation , Level 2 Code*);

.....I tried to devise a plan with school with the parent there. I asked them if they could do things, like putting in support in the morning when she came into school and asking if a member of staff could watch out for her during playground duty, but they said they 'couldn't implement it' to everything I suggested, just said 'no we can't do that'.

(Interview 17, Line 63).

....I arranged to meet the class teacher with mum. Mum didn't turn up, but it was a dreadful meeting. The class teacher said she had to leave early when I got there. So I asked her if she



could arrange to do a home visit with me. She said 'I don't do home visits', she was just so negative. I was so frustrated.

(Interview 20, Line 60)

Codes reflecting a ***lack of responsibility*** for the PA problem, as a school response, occurred frequently in the data;

....Schools definitely don't consider themselves to be part of the problem, they just blame the students or minimise any school based issues.

(Interview 14, Line 135).

This lack of shared responsibility appeared to have a significant impact on how, or if, problems associated with the PA were acted on within school.

#### **4.9 Phase 6 - Problem Resolution**

Figure 4.6 provides an overview of the codes reflecting the resolution phase in the EWO involvement with cases of persistent absence. This phase was characterised by codes which reflected the outcomes which were perceived to be possible and achievable in respect of the EWOs involvement with PA cases.

The substantive code in this phase was conceptualised as being related to EWO ***Efficacy Judgements*** (Level 3 code). The properties, features and dimensions of this code are defined in the theoretical memo below.

## **Theoretical Memo defining the Category of EWO Efficacy**

### **Judgements in relation to the Problem Resolution phase of engagement with PA cases.**

Efficacy judgements occur, following the EWO having engaged the parents and school in a meeting in order to try to resolve the issues perceived to be maintaining the pupils' persistent absence from school. It reflects the EWO's perceptions of their own role and efficacy beliefs in the problem solving process. Perceptions of self efficacy vary in relation to whether interventions are associated with actions over which the EWO has direct control such as working directly with the family, as opposed to those interventions which require the EWO to act as an agent of change via the school or other agencies. This distinction between strategies which are 'system' focused as opposed to 'self focused,' also represent a perceived external or internal locus of control for the EWO. Schools are perceived to be a barrier to effective communication with parents, collaborative working and the implementation of strategies. A consequence of this is that EWOs experience a lower sense of self efficacy in relation to their ability to impact on school practice and will focus mainly on family based interventions and strategies. Variations also occur in 'self focused' interventions in relation to the perceived skills and abilities of individual EWOs in responding the range of problems identified within families. School based EWOs can experience higher levels of efficacy in relation to their ability to manage school staff and parent relationships but can fail to challenge school practice. Some EWOs will adopt the 'path of least resistance' when faced with school based

challenges in order to protect their relationship with the school staff, and in order to reduce feelings of dissonance, through achieving greater consensus in relation to the way forward. This can be justified in terms of school factors being viewed as 'peripheral' as opposed to 'central causes'. The EWOs' ability to adopt a multi-agency approach to problem resolution also reflects variations in perceived levels of confidence and ability, specifically in relation to acting in the role of Lead Professional.

Codes reflecting the process of the EWO making efficacy judgements in relation to their perceived role in resolving the PA problem, emerged as being influenced by 1) Interventions which were reliant upon other 'systems' to make them work, such as the school and other agencies, (***Interventions system reliant***) and 2) Interventions which were reliant on the actions of the individual EWOs, (***Interventions EWO reliant***). This relationship is represented in Figure 4.6.

Those efficacy judgements which were ***systems focused*** reflected data indicating that EWOs felt they had little control over these systems, even when based in the school, if the proposed strategy was contrary to the school's own beliefs. It also included the EWS as a system of influence in relation specifically, to the PA protocol, as already highlighted in Appendix C, which determined the timescales and action to be taken in PA cases. As such these systemic influences represented a perceived ***external locus of control*** for the EWO;

**...We are going down the legal route now. I feel under pressure from school to do that now.. it's not the best**

**outcome but the attendance hasn't improved at all and the school are adamant we should prosecute.**

(Interview 6, Line 203).

**...She just wouldn't engage what so ever, wouldn't even answer the door, so it's going down the court route now, I don't have any choice, so that's the intervention in this case.**

(Interview 11, Line 241).

**.....You get quite a few members of staff who say he's got to conform and don't take account of his individual life experiences and how this hinders him in dealing with and coping with school. You just can't change that kind of mentality.**

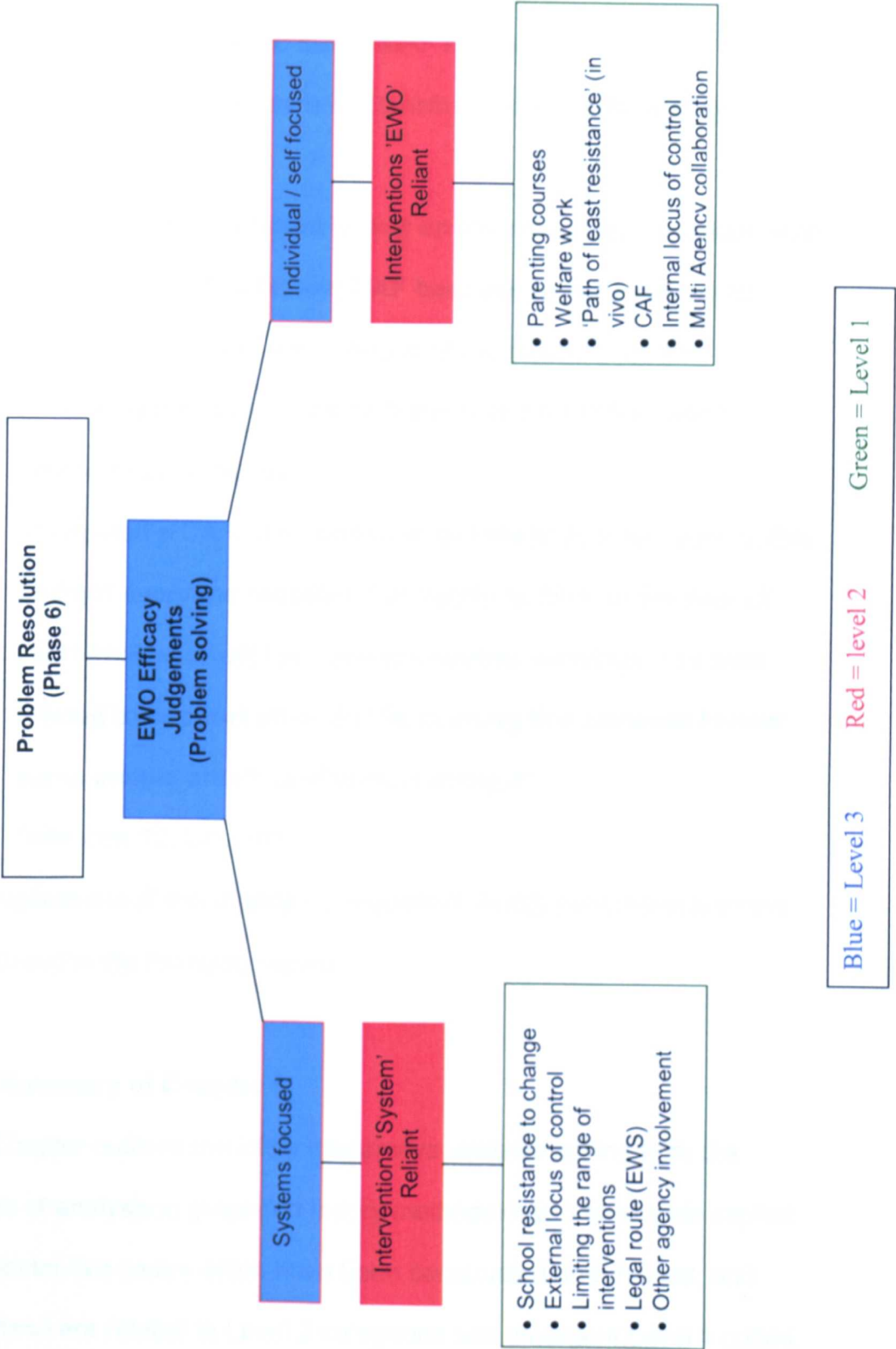
(Interview 9, Line 140).

Efficacy judgements which were individually or ***self focused***, emerged as representing an ***internal locus of control*** for the EWO, reflecting intrinsic factors, including differential levels of motivation, which were associated with a range of potential interventions, for example;

**...What made the difference in this case is me getting all the agencies together to share information so we could understand the young person and see how best to help. You have to have developed a good relationship with other agencies in order to do that, which is what I've been able to do.**

(Interview 13, Line 70)

Figure 4.6: Diagram showing level 2 and 3 codes, together with examples of level 1 codes for the Problem Resolution phase of EWO engagement with cases of persistent absence from school.



This was also evident in relation to the EWO's role in the initiation of the Common Assessment Framework (**CAF**) as an intervention with PA cases. The Education Welfare Service (EWS) expect that EWOs would act as lead professionals and initiate CAF's in respect of families identified as having unmet need and which required **multi agency collaboration**;

**... I'm not that confident taking on the role of lead professional and anyway, I'm a bit anti CAF because nothing seems to happen between one meeting and the next and in the meantime you have to carry these really complex cases.**

(Interview 22, Line 162).

**..I initiated a CAF...I managed to get the parent to agree to this and got everyone together. I'm happy to take on the role of Lead Professional; I'm used to chairing meetings. I've also offered to support other EWOs in doing this because I know some people aren't confident in doing it'**

(Interview 12, Line 141).

The implications of this analysis in respect of theory generation are now considered in the following section.

#### **4.10 Summary of Chapter 4**

This Chapter outlines the initial interpretive analysis arising from the phases of analysis in grounded theory methodology. It has made explicit the substantive codes which have been constructed and defined, and how these are related to Level 2 categories and emergent Level 1 codes,

across the six phases of EWO engagement with cases of persistent absence. This process of analysis has also highlighted theoretical areas of psychology and sociology, reflected in the codes and transcripts, which need to be explored in order to extend researcher theoretical sensitivity and attempt to integrate and ground theory. These theoretical areas form the basis of the next chapter representing the second literature review.

## **Chapter 5**

### **5. Review of the Literature (Part 2) – Theoretical Sensitivity**

#### **Introduction**

The review of literature in Part 1 details a wide range of publications which reflect the issues surrounding non school attendance, including persistent absence. The literature highlighted the limitations of categorisation, the potential causes and risk factors associated with non attendance and persistent absence, together with research which has focused more specifically on assessment and intervention. It also looked at the role and potential role of Education Welfare Officers and Educational Psychologists in intervening with cases of non attendance and persistent absence from school. This review served the purpose of making explicit the researcher's prior sensitivities to existing theory and research in this area, and to provide the basis of forming theoretical links with emerging data from the researcher's own study. It also served the purpose of highlighting gaps in current research which was reflected in the study's emergent Grounded Theory.

This review was further extended as a result of the emerging codes and conceptual categories arising from the interpretive analysis which consistently occurred in the data as;

- Those which related to Education Welfare Officer perceived self efficacy beliefs and efficacy judgements, including perceived problem solving ability



- The role of systemic influences, as related to the school, home, Education Welfare Service and other agencies, on EWO practice, including the systemic conceptualisation of social rules
- Role identity and its influence on expectations, perceptions of causality and social actions

These areas can be related to theories in social psychological research which were subsequently reviewed, in order to import theoretical knowledge to the data and in order to develop more theoretically dense codes.

These areas are now briefly reviewed and will be discussed more fully in terms of their relationship with the construction of the study's grounded theory in Chapter 6.

### **5.1 Self Efficacy Theory (SET)**

Self efficacy theory was developed from the concept of *perceived behavioural control* (Bandura 1977), and is considered the most important precondition for behavioural change, as it determines the initiation of individual coping behaviours. Self efficacy refers to the concept of individuals having the belief that they have the capabilities to execute courses of action which are required in order to manage prospective situations, in other words it represents a perception of perceived competence.

Bandura's (1986) Social Cognitive Theory emphasises the role of cognition in human functioning, highlighting that people are self organising, proactive, self reflecting and self regulating, rather than a reactive product of environmental forces and inner impulses. It explains psychosocial functioning in terms of reciprocal causation and determinism, involving 1) Cognitive, biological and other personal factors, 2) behaviour, 3) environmental events, which all operate to influence each other.

Parjares (2002) suggests that 'social cognitive theory is rooted in a view of human agency in which individuals are agents proactively engaged in their own development and can make things happen by their actions' (p2).

Bandura (1986) suggests that what is central to social cognitive theory are self efficacy beliefs, which he defines as 'people's judgements on their capabilities to organize and execute courses of action required to attain designated types of performances' (p 391). These self efficacy beliefs, Bandura suggests, ultimately provide the basis for human motivation, well being and personal accomplishment, and are also considered to be a determinant of self regulation.

Bandura (1986) views self regulation as reflecting the degree to which individuals are able to regulate their own behaviour, involve themselves in self observation regarding the accuracy and consistency of their actions, choices and attributions, as well as in evaluating their reactions to their own behaviour. Self efficacy beliefs are considered to be a significant determinant of self regulatory behaviour.

An important aspect of these beliefs is that actions are based more on what an individual believes, than is objectively true. As a consequence, self efficacy beliefs can help to determine the outcomes that are expected by the individual. It follows, as Pajares (2002) points out, that self efficacy beliefs also help determine how much effort people will spend on an activity, how long they will persevere when confronting obstacles and how resilient they will be in adverse situations (p5). He also suggests that this can act as a kind of self-fulfilling prophecy in that what is accomplished is what you believe can be accomplished.

The implication here is that an individual's thought patterns and emotional responses are also determined by their sense of, or beliefs of, self efficacy.

Another significant dimension to 'self efficacy' is that of self efficacy being both a personal and social construct. Pajares (2002) highlights this in terms of collective systems, such as schools, developing a sense of collective efficacy, for example, in a group of staffs' ability to have a shared belief in their capability to meet targets and attain goals, in respect of their students learning outcomes.

This sense of collective efficacy, it is suggested, can be applied to any organisation, with Pajares concluding that 'organisations with a strong sense of collective efficacy exercise empowering and vitalising influences on their constituents (p5).

Bandura (1997) suggests that self efficacy beliefs are created in one of four ways. One of these being through an individuals previous performances or *mastery experience*, which involves them in interpreting

the results of their actions and consequentially, developing beliefs about their capability to engage in subsequent similar tasks or activities. It is also suggested that self efficacy beliefs can be created as a result of the *social persuasions* received from others, with positive persuasions working to empower and negative persuasions working to defeat or weaken self efficacy beliefs. Encouragements or discouragements are considered to have a strong influence on the ability to alter confidence; with Bandura pointing out that it is much easier to decrease someone's self efficacy, than it is to increase it.

Another interesting dimension is that of emotional states being an indicator of efficacy beliefs. Anxiety and stress are purported to be associated with lower self efficacy perceptions, in response to a contemplated action, and may also be an indicator of the anticipated outcome. Bandura (1997) would however also assert that human beings have the capacity to alter their own beliefs states and thus influence their own psychological responses.

Self efficacy can also be seen to be a determinant of task behaviour, including task choice. Bandura (1986) has highlighted the fact that individuals are more likely to engage in a task in which they believe they can succeed, and will tend to avoid tasks where their self efficacy is low. Bandura (1992) has also demonstrated that higher levels of self efficacy are accompanied by higher performance attainment. Whilst some individuals were found to perform badly owing to a lack of ability or skill, others who had the ability, performed badly because they 'lacked the self efficacy to make optimal use of their skills' (p4).

Bandura (1992) examined the exercise of personal agency through the self efficacy mechanism, analysing the influential role of perceived self efficacy in agent causality. He suggests that there is diverse evidence to suggest that self beliefs of efficacy 'function as important proximal determinants of human motivation, affect, thought and action' (p3).

Cervone (1989) in a study of self efficacy appraisal found that when individuals dwelled on the formidable aspects of prospective work tasks it weakened their belief in their efficacy, whilst those who focused on the 'doable' aspects displayed higher self judgement capabilities.

Bandura (1986, 1988) has also found that the most powerful means of creating a strong and resilient sense of efficacy is through mastery experiences, which increase personal empowerment. He states that this is achieved through 'equipping people with knowledge, sub skills and a strong self belief' (p9). He also suggests that the visualisation of success can enhance subsequent performance.

Bandura and Wood (1989) have also highlighted the role of a belief in the ability to influence or control the environment, as being a determinant of efficacy beliefs. This includes the organisational environment where perceived controllability was associated with self regulation, including decision making ability. This was evident where organisational system constraints were perceived to be either providing opportunities to access helpful organisational structures, or acting as a barrier and impeding performance.

McCarthy and Newcomb (1992) make an interesting distinction between perceived self efficacy in relation to 1) Cognitive control coping ability and

2) Behavioural coping ability, in efficacy, in respect of an individual's ability to handle environmental challenges. These are viewed as separate component parts of self efficacy.

The first of these identifies an individual's use of 'intrapysic' coping (how this is thought about, and which is emotion focused) employed in some contexts, whilst behavioural coping (action based, problem focused) appears in other contexts. Whilst human functioning is rarely seen as exclusively related to one of these coping behaviours, McCarthy and Newcomb did find that the importance of each varied in relation to contextual challenges and influences, as well as the characteristics of the individual.

## **5.2 Locus of Control**

Linked to theories of self efficacy is that of the individual identifying different attributions for their own behaviours which reflect their perceived Locus of Control. Locus of control is related to the extent to which people perceive outcomes as internally controllable by their own efforts or as externally controlled by chance or outside forces (Lefcourt 1976). How much control we feel is often reflected in the way we explain set backs. Theories of learned helplessness (Seligman 1975), also indicate that when attempts to improve a situation have failed, a sense of helplessness can prevail. The data analysis has indicated a consistent and prevailing theme which links the notion of EWO self efficacy to their actions, thought, feelings and experiences of assessment and intervention with PA

cases. This was also reflected in their perceptions of some engagement processes as having an internal or external locus of control.

### **5.3 Systems Theory**

The Educational Welfare Officer functions not only within the context of their own organisational system, the EWS, but also through interactions with other 'systems' such as the PA pupil's home, school and with other agencies.

Organisations represent complex social systems. Systems in this context can be defined as 'a family of relationships among the members acting as a whole' (Banathy 1992, p22), or 'an entity made up of a set of interacting parts which mutually communicate with and influence each other'

(Bateson 1972). Both definitions reflect an important concept in systems theory, the idea that systems represent interconnected and interdependent individuals, none of whom can be understood in isolation from, or without reference to, the broader system in which they operate.

The research study has indicated that EWOs, particularly when school based, are part of the EWS system, with its policies and procedures and role identity, but actually operate within the school systems, as in the case of school based EWOs, or as an outside agency interacting with the school system. In systems psychology (Plas 1986), groups and individuals within a system are considered as systems in 'homeostasis', reflecting a desired state of equilibrium. As Dowling (1994) suggests, systems, including the family system, are working towards the aim of achieving 'homeostasis', through self regulation, and in order to maintain

this state they can become more resistant to change. This was highlighted in Miller's (2003) study which explored the influence of the school culture in managing pupil behaviour. This study developed the theory of 'System Boundary Maintenance' in relation to the school, parents and educational psychologists (EPs) working together in order to address pupil behaviour. He highlights teacher perceptions of the creation of a temporary and overlapping system, which allowed the teacher and other school staff to engage with the EP and parents, whilst preserving the culture of the school, including its policies and procedures. This 'new' system, which originated and ended with the EP's formal involvement, allowed the major boundary of the school to remain intact, along with the existing norms and rules of the school system, thus allowing this system to maintain homeostasis, as suggested by Dowling. Miller suggests that any 'transgression' of these rules and norms would lead to increased internal strain on the school system itself.

Systems theory therefore reflects an interactionist perspective as being central to understanding the behaviour of individuals in relation to their context. Hurford (1983) recognised that a dilemma for educational psychologists, working from an interactionist perspective within school systems, is in challenging school staff regarding changing their perspective when problems are viewed as solely child focused. It is suggested that 'families and schools need to work together in order to produce interrelated change in both systems' (p 251).

Fox (2009) suggests that a critical shift in systemic thinking has been the move from seeing the family system as being described objectively, as a



system functioning to maintain homeostasis through its patterns of interaction, to one which can be described by the patterns of meaning that the family hold. As a consequence the role of the educational psychologist (EP) should no longer be viewed as involving diagnosis of what is wrong with a family's patterns of interaction but a co-explorer of the meanings that the family hold. Fox also suggests, that when engaging in 'systems' work and systems thinking, the notion of 'narrative' is important in challenging dominant discourses which can result in problems being pathologised and groups marginalised. He suggests that 'creating a new narrative that helps explain what has happened or is happening, is a central technique to help people move forward'. He points out that the EP role has involved helping teachers construct alternative narratives about difficulties in schools.

A phase in the EWO's engagement with cases of persistent absence from school, specifically emerged as related to the construction of narrative which accounted for pupil absence. This often reflected codes indicating the existence of dominant discourses, in respect of pupil PA, which originated in the school or through other agency involvement.

Systems are also organised and regulated by socially produced and reproduced systems of rules. Theories of 'social rules systems', would see these rule systems as playing an important role in cognitive processes, for example in enabling actors to organise and to frame perceptions within an organisation. Social rules within systems are also highlighted as being important in normative and moral communications about social action and interaction, with participants in the system using

these rules in order to give accounts in justifying or criticising what is being done (or not done), and in their social attribution for performance failures or successes (Burns 1997).

As such, social rules can be seen to reflect the culture or ethos of an organisation or system. Compliance to social rules is also associated with an actor's role or status, together with the desire to represent one's self as being committed to a particular set of rules. As such it can also account for the roles adopted by particular individuals, including group membership.

#### **5.4 Role Theory**

Biddle (1986) suggests that a role is seen as a set of connected behaviours, rights and obligations as conceptualised by actors, who adopt roles, in a social situation. Role theory is concerned with understanding what causes individuals to develop the resultant expectations for themselves and others.

Biddle (1986) outlines a number of major models of role theory. One of these relates to a symbolic interactionist model which sees role development as being the outcome of an individual interpretation of responses to behaviour.

Symbolic interactionism is concerned with how people create meaning during social interaction, together with how they present and construct the self or their identity. Central to this idea is that people act as they do because of how they define situations. Role in this sense is not fixed but is constantly negotiated between individuals in a tentative way.

Biddle highlights that role development in organisations also focuses on the extent to which individuals accept and enact roles within their existing organisational hierarchy, also reflecting the degree of 'consensus' which is underpinned by the norms of the organisations culture.

It is also suggested by Smith (2007), that role conflict, a form of social conflict, may lead to cognitive dissonance in individuals, arising from being forced to take on two different and incompatible roles at the same time, with role 'confusion' also occurring when an individual has trouble determining which role they should adopt. How individuals respond to this dissonance, defined as a state of uncomfortable psychological arousal (Festinger 1957), is highlighted in theories such as Balance Theory (Heider 1958) and Cognitive Dissonance Theory (Festinger 1957).

The data analysis has indicated that EWO role perception is influenced by whether they are based in or outside the school system, as well as by the responses and expectations of school staff, parents and the EWS.

Codes also highlighted a relationship between role perception and self efficacy beliefs, whilst also reflecting feelings of psychological discomfort in some phases of engagement related to perceived 'role incompatibility' in terms of court versus welfare roles.

Balance theory would indicate, (Heider 1958), that consistency and harmony are sought by individuals in their interactions with others but when our cognitive system is out of balance and we find ourselves disagreeing with others, we will experience an uncomfortable tension which reflects the need to change something in the system. The 'consistency principle' accounts for one way in which this tension or

dissonance can be reduced (Allgeier et al 1979). This principle asserts that people will change their attitudes, beliefs, perceptions and actions to make them consistent with each other, particularly when there are existing positive relationships between individuals. The motivation to reduce inconsistency is, according to Festinger (1957), dependent upon how important the issue is to the individual. High importance to the self results in greater dissonance, and it is suggested, more motivation to reduce the inconsistency and may account for EWOs who change their behaviour in order to comply with the expectations of some teachers. Research relating to group processes, in the construction of social identity, may also provide a theoretical framework for understanding EWO variations in perceived social identity and role.

Reicher et al (1995), suggests that group processes, whilst influencing social identity, can lead to 'deindividuation' reflecting a move from a personal to a social identity. He suggests that whether deindividuation affects people for better or worse, they appear to begin to reflect the characteristics and norms of the group immediately surrounding them and conformity to the group increases. The impact of personal loss through this process is dependent on how the group defines itself and its responses towards other groups.

Janis (1982) has also suggested that group processes can influence information processing. The notion of cohesive groups being susceptible to 'groupthink' is put forward as a way of explaining the poor decisions of some groups. This reflects a tendency for some groups to see the need for agreement as taking priority over the need to obtain accurate

information and make appropriate decisions. The symptoms of groupthink, it is suggested, include close-mindedness, self censorship and pressure on dissenters. The consequences, according to Janis, are that there is a high probability of bad decisions, poor information search, selective bias in respect of existing information and a failure to consider alternative courses of action. This may provide a theoretical framework to further understand the responses and decisions of the school in respect of their response to the 'PA problem'.

### **5.5 Attribution Theory**

Theories of causal attributions are linked to codes reflecting variations in causal perceptions. Attribution theory (Gordon 2006), would view explanations of the causes of other people's behaviour as being attributable to either internal dispositions (enduring traits, motives and attitudes) or to external situations, in other words attributions are either personal or situational. Gilbert (1989) suggests that causal attributions represent a two stage model involving 1) an identification stage, which begins with initial information about an event, and which involves spontaneous identification and categorisation, followed by 2) a subsequent interpretation or adjustment stage. This 'deliberative' stage, involves a further deliberate form of in depth analysis which can either result in adjustment or altering of the initial conclusion or impression, or the confirmation of the initial impression. Importantly, it is suggested that attributions will 'end' with the spontaneous identification and

categorisation stage unless the perceiver is both willing and able to enter the deliberative stage.

The notion of spontaneous attribution is also related to the use of cognitive heuristics or mental shortcuts. Kahneman and Trevsky (1982) suggest that attributions and social judgements often reflect the use of cognitive heuristics, a form of expedient information processing, but that this can often lead to attributional errors being made. 'Fundamental attribution errors', according to Ross (1977), occur when the focus is on the role of personal causation and there is an under estimation of the impact of the situation or context on peoples behaviour. Both kinds of heuristic are seen to be associated with attributional bias with evidence also suggesting they are even more likely to be employed when individuals are under time pressures (Bechtold et al 1986).

Attributions therefore become an important consideration when considering the generation of hypotheses which account for behaviour. The notion of 'confirmation bias' is also relevant here as this refers to the tendency to seek, create and interpret information that verifies existing beliefs. Swann (1978) has suggested that confirmatory hypothesis testing, a form of confirmation bias, reflects the tendency for people to be influenced by their pre existing beliefs. This can lead to a one sided search for information to confirm their own existing hypotheses or to confirm their suspicions, rather than seeking objective information. In contrast, Kruglanski and Maysless (1988) have highlighted that when people are not certain in their beliefs and are concerned about 'accuracy', such biases are less evident.

EWO formulation of hypotheses in respect of the causes of persistent absence also emerged as a fluid or fixed phenomena. This variation also reflected differential forms of information processing related to beliefs. Codes also emerged which pointed to EWO information processing as involving intuitive judgements. The literature review highlights a distinction between the controlled and automatic information processing. Controlled processing, described as explicit, deliberate, reflective and conscious is contrasted with that which is automatic and corresponding to 'intuition'. This type of processing is described as being implicit, effortless, habitual and without awareness (Bargh 1996). It is suggested that individuals can increase the accuracy of their judgments by working hard to understand the causes of another persons' behaviour, and that 'when motivated to be accurate people move more into the role of an impartial detective', considering carefully both internal and external causes.

## **5.6 Problem Solving**

Mahon (1990) outlined a problem solving model consisting of 5 stages as;

1. Description of problem(s) and data collection
2. Problem assessment
3. Intervention planning
4. Intervention
5. Evaluation and follow up.

Whilst this some of the stages would appear to broadly correspond to the phases of EWO engagement, it is suggested by Harker (2001) that an adoption of this model reflecting 'first determining of the nature of the

problem and then intervening, influences much of the interaction and discussion at multi-agency meetings.' (p31, para 3), whilst not necessarily reflecting equal balance being given to all stages. Harker suggests that a consequence of this problem solving 'discussion framework' is a focus on the problem(s) for the majority of the meeting and very little time for the intervention planning stage. This disproportionate allocation in needing to know why and understand the situation, is considered by Harker to be unnecessary in that 'very rarely is a cause of a problem identified and generally agreed; nor does the identification of the cause generally lead to a practical solution to the presenting problem' (p32, para 3). He suggests that meetings frequently act to confirm the professional 'problem focused view' of families and their situations and serve to 'ratify decisions' that have already been formulated. This bleak interpretation of more general problem solving approaches can often lead to other professionals involved, as well as families themselves, left feeling de-skilled and powerless to effect change. This view appears relevant to the phase of engagement represented by a meeting between the EWO, schools and parents. Codes reflected family and problem focused thinking regurgitated by school staff and other agencies during multi-agency meetings, which appeared to significantly influence the self efficacy beliefs of individual EWOs in achieving consensus in relation the causes and perceived effective solutions of pupil absence.

Solution focused thinking, which has its roots in Solution Focused Brief Therapy (De Shazer 1985), is offered as an antidote to problem oriented meetings. Solution focused thinking aims to look at what works and



moves people forward in difficult situations. Ajmal (2001) has suggested that the role of the 'worker' in meetings which aim to be solution focused is to guide the conversation towards creating a context of competence, activating existing knowledge and skills, seeking out cooperation and retaining a non judgemental stance. The achievement of these aims is recognised by Harker (2001) as representing a powerful vehicle for change, with the meeting's chairperson having maximum opportunity to create a solution focused context and thus increase the potential to effect positive change. The ability of the chairperson in achieving these aims is therefore an important consideration.

### **5.7 Summary of Chapter 5.**

This Chapter has turned towards social and psychological theories which have been implicated in and linked to the data analysis, with the aim of increasing researcher theoretical sensitivity. Theories have focused on self efficacy beliefs and the influences of the construction of personal, social and role identity as being important determinants of thought, beliefs and actions. Links are made with systems theory in terms of difficulties in changing perspectives in school systems and in challenging dominant discourses.

Attribution theories have highlighted a distinction between confirming and adjusting original impressions which is linked to data which has emerged as related to EWO hypothesis generation and the potential use of heuristics or mental shortcuts in giving rise to attributional errors.

Literature relating to problem solving approaches has highlighted a distinction between problem and solution focused meetings and the implications of this for solution finding and affecting change.

The relevance of these areas in supporting the study's emerging grounded theory is discussed in Chapter 6.

# Chapter 6. The Grounded Theory

## Introduction

This chapter presents the study's emergent grounded theory, which links the interpretive qualitative analysis and theoretical formulations, described in Chapter 4, with the theoretically sensitised literature review in Chapter 5. The Grounded Theory is discussed in relation to the Level 3 theoretical codes developed and with reference to the emergent core category of **Self Efficacy** beliefs and the related category of **Systemic Influences** on the practice of Education Welfare Officers. These core conceptual categories emerged as being at the centre of the phenomena under investigation, namely how cases of persistent absence are assessed and intervened with by Education Welfare officers.

The theory offers an explanatory framework for understanding variations in assessment and intervention practices in cases of persistent absence, together with an insight into the way in which systemic influences interact with EWO self efficacy beliefs to either support or hinder this engagement process. The theory suggests that self efficacy beliefs represent a Basic Social Psychological Process (BSPP) that is able to provide greater understanding of the actions and experiences of EWOs as related to persistent absentees.

## 6.1 The Organising Framework

Chapter 4 highlighted the development of Level 3 codes which reflected increased theoretical sensitivity and which linked the emergence of Level 1 codes and the development of Level 2 categories together. These Level 3 codes are further outlined below (also see Figures 4.1 to 4.6);

- Systemic Influences (accessing referral information)
- EWO Role Identity (personal versus social)
- Organisational Tensions
- Determining the Assessment Process
- Self Efficacy Beliefs (parental engagement)
- Constructing the PA Narrative
- Self Efficacy Beliefs (ability to affect change)
- EWO Efficacy Judgements

These major substantive theoretical codes are related to the phases of engagement in cases of persistent absence outlined in the analysis. What emerged as linking these codes together and connected with all other categories, was the central category of self efficacy beliefs.

## 6.2 The Grounded Theory

**Self Efficacy** beliefs emerged as being influential on assessment and intervention practices and were able to account for variations, as well as more stable features and consistencies, in EWO practice. Self Efficacy beliefs emerged frequently in the data, with actions, events and experiences in all phase of engagement pointing to this concept. As well as being able to explain variations in the data, this concept could also account for contradictory and alternative cases, and as such was chosen as the central category.

It also emerged that **Systemic Influences**, operating at the level of the School, Family, Education Welfare Service and other agencies, were also pivotal influences that needed to be taken into account in order to fully understand the responses and self efficacy beliefs of EWOs. Systemic

influences as related to the central idea of self efficacy beliefs and the interaction of these influences together, are more able to explain and account for assessment and intervention practices. Systemic Influences were therefore also incorporated into the theoretical scheme, as representing an influential determinant of EWO self efficacy beliefs. Figure 6 demonstrates the relationship between the central category of Self Efficacy and Systemic Influences on the EWO assessment and intervention phases. The notion of proximal and distal causes or determinants is useful in explaining this interaction. Bandura (1992) suggests that self efficacy beliefs function as proximal determinants of motivation, emotion, thought and action. A proximal cause reflects an event or action which is closest to or immediately responsible for causing an observed result, whilst a distal cause is one which, although not directly observable as causing the event nevertheless, represents the reason why it occurred. Self efficacy is considered to be a proximal determinant of the EWO's action or response, with distal determinants being rooted in the 'systems' with which the EWO interacts during the course of their work with persistent absentees. This would also link with Bandura's (1986) Social Cognitive Theory proposal, outlined in the second literature review, suggesting that psychosocial functioning, in terms of reciprocal causation and determinism, also needs to take into account environmental events.

The relationship between, and the influences of, self efficacy beliefs and systemic influences are now outlined. The impact of these two core

variables, at different points in the EWO's engagement with cases, is discussed and diagrammatically represented in Figure 6.

### **6.3 Self Efficacy Beliefs and Systemic Influences**

#### **6.31 Problem Presentation Phase**

##### **School Influences**

The EWO's perceived ability to access good quality and relevant information from key staff in school, at the point of referral, is indicative of variations in self efficacy beliefs in respect of the EWO's own capabilities in achieving this. These beliefs occurred as an interplay between the EWO and the School who were perceived to be responsible for the existence of significant barriers to the EWO accessing information, for example through restricting access to key staff and in providing limited and sometimes unreliable information.

Variations in efficacy beliefs also occurred as being related to whether the EWO experienced an individual as opposed to collective sense of efficacy. This varied in relation to the EWO being an 'insider or outsider.'

This was specifically linked to whether the EWO was school or non school based, and was related to the theoretical concept of role identity (Level 3 code).

The study is indicative of EWOs being able to experience a sense of collective efficacy as a direct consequence of being school based and adopting the social rules and norms of the school. A further consequence

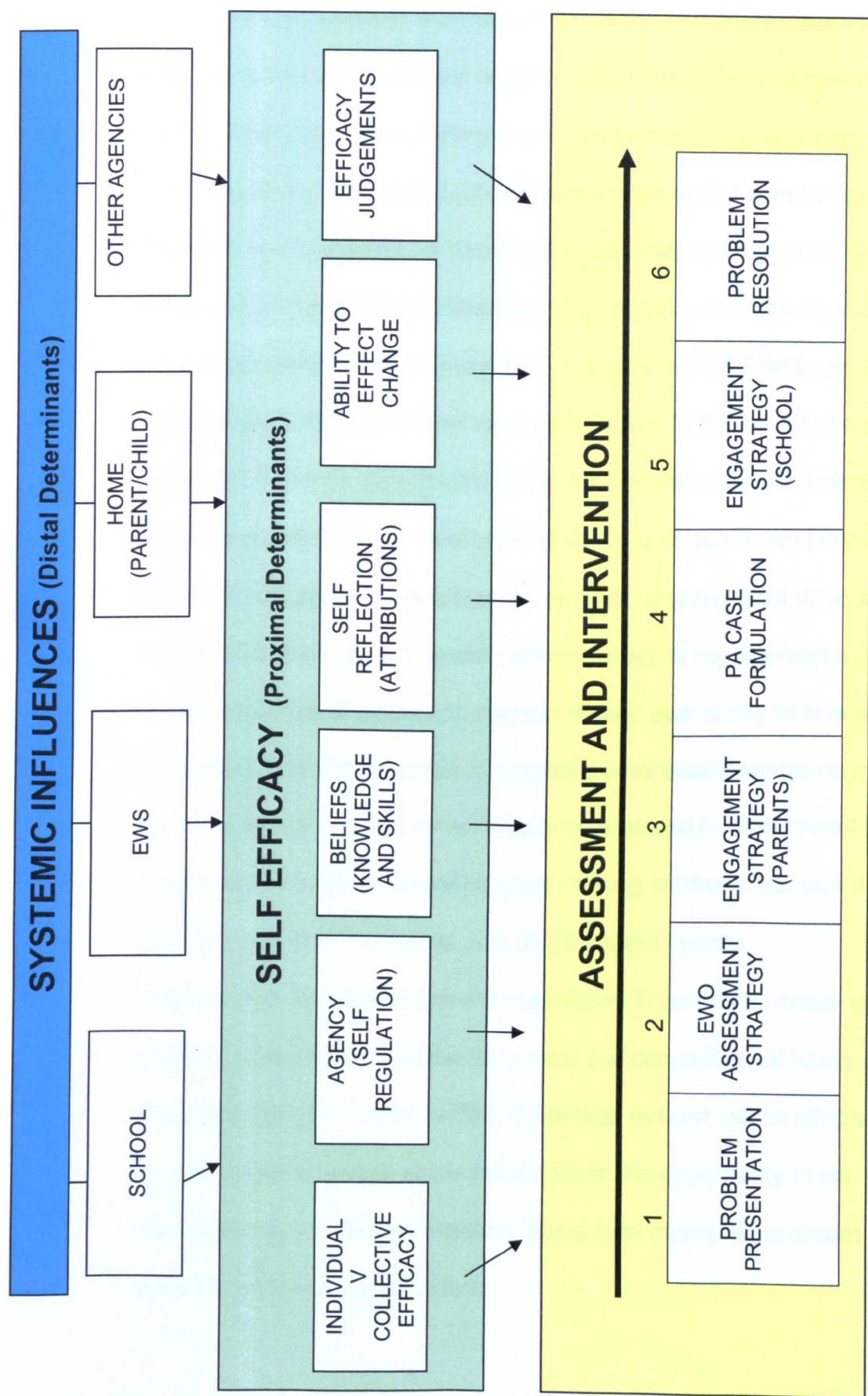


Figure 6. Representing the Grounded Theory of the effects of Self Efficacy Beliefs and the role of Systemic Influences on the practice of Education Welfare Officers in relation to cases of persistent absence from school

of this reflects the notion of possible 'deindividuation' effects on individual EWOs, as highlighted by Reicher (1995) in the second literature review, suggesting that as individuals begin to take on the characteristics and norms of the group surrounding them, group conformity and consensus increases and a shift from a personal to a more social identity can result. This shift also represents a decrease in personal agency, another dimension of self efficacy, influencing the capacity to make choices and act independently. This is evident when school based EWOs adopt and maintain the collective school view, with regard to the cause of a pupils persistent absence, as adopted in the initial stages of involvement, and remain consistent in this view often in the face of conflicting information. EWOs do not appear conscious of this 'shift', and highlight their continued perceived autonomy and agency within school as represented by an increased sense of efficacy in respect of their own ability to access information and in being able to resolve school based issues more easily than non school based EWOs. This is also related to EWO beliefs that they have been able to develop good working relationships with school staff and are often viewed as part of the school system. This concept can also account for variations in perceived social status, and why some EWOs believe they have the capabilities of being able to execute a course of action within the school system, whilst others believe that the social structure of the school limits the opportunity to act autonomously in making decisions about how cases of persistent absence should be approached.



Pajares (2002) notion of self efficacy being both a personal and social construct is also of relevance here. The influence of the school on a social construction of self efficacy is also apparent in the context of organisational tensions experienced by some EWOs. These tensions often reflected different expectations and perceived low status, together with some EWOs being subjected to social persuasions from school staff. In line with research findings (Bandura 1997) it is suggested that the schools' 'negative persuasions', those which are in contrary belief to what the EWO believes should happen, serve to weaken and decrease EWO self efficacy beliefs in relation to the most appropriate next step and perceptions of being able to work collaboratively with schools, whilst also serving to increase feelings of cognitive dissonance.

It is also evident that uncomfortable tensions which arise from a disparity in expectations between the EWO and the school can be understood with reference to the 'consistency principle' (Allgeier et al 1979), which supports the reduction of such tensions through the EWO adopting more consistent beliefs and perceptions in line with the school. This specifically occurs where the EWO has formed a positive relationship with the school and seeks to maintain this, and is less likely to occur when this relationship is lacking.

The school represented the most influential systemic influence at this phase of engagement, with Education Welfare Service expectations around referral information from school, together with the action schools should take prior to any referral, being largely disregarded by schools. EWO efficacy beliefs in respect of being able to get schools to comply

with these referral requirements were low, with EWOs often going along with whatever the school provided. This was sometimes a reflection of not wanting to upset the school and to maintain an existing relationship or simply believing that schools were not going to comply. In line with Bandura and Wood's (1989) research, which focused on self regulation in organisations, EWO ability to influence or control the environment of the school can be seen to be a distal determinant of their self efficacy beliefs, specifically impacting on their ability to self regulate and meet their own operational standards. Self regulation, as a component of self efficacy, involves individuals in comparing how well they are able to measure up to the standards set by themselves and others.

Whilst EWOs recognised the organisational constraints of the school as either, providing them with opportunities to access helpful organisational structures, or acting as a barrier to impede their own performance, this ultimately impacted on their self efficacy beliefs.

## **6.32 Assessment Strategy Phase**

### **School Influences**

School influences were evident during the EWO's phase of *determining the assessment process* (Level 3 code). The process of hypothesis formulation highlighted a distinction between EWOs who either adopted existing school generated hypotheses and then sought confirmation of these, or those who adopted a fluid hypothesis and more flexible approach. This distinction is highlighted in attribution theories discussed earlier, suggesting that causal attributions represent a two staged model

involving spontaneous categorisation followed by an adjustment phase (Gilbert 1989). Variations in EWO practice reflect whether the EWO was willing and able to enter this second 'deliberative' adjustment stage. This can again be related to the notion of human agency in self efficacy beliefs, reflecting whether the EWO feels able to determine the process for themselves. It has been suggested that school based EWOs are likely to experience reduced levels of human agency as a consequence of being school based and having to operate within the school system. As Systems Theory suggests, any threats to system equilibrium increases resistance to change and any 'transgression' of the rules and norms of the system increases internal strain (Miller 2003).

Being school based makes it more difficult for the EWO to challenge existing beliefs without influencing other parts of the system and risking repercussions for themselves. Where EWOs do hold existing beliefs about the cause of the PA from the outset, attributional errors can occur, as EWOs are less likely to engage in the adjustment stage and alter their original hypothesis reflecting attributions for the cause of the pupil absence. As the literature review and codes indicate this can lead to a one sided search for information in order to confirm an existing hypothesis or confirmation bias in order to verify existing beliefs. Whilst these may reflect forms of attributional bias they are in direct contrast to EWOs who are able to engage in a conscious and reflective assessment process, aiming for objectivity and being willing and able to be flexible in their causal perceptions. This was characterised by a willingness and ability to unpick the complexities of each case and to perceive the

assessment process in more embracing holistic terms. This contrast is indicative of higher self efficacy beliefs related to human agency and motivation. These EWOs display more capacity to make choices independently and are influenced less by the structures of the school.

### **EWS Influences**

The systemic influence of the EWS at this point can be related to the time constraints represented by the EWS PA procedure for cases, together with EWO workload, resulting in perceived time pressures. This influenced EWO self efficacy in the assessment process through determining the assessment process by influencing what was perceived to be 'doable' within specified timescales. As a consequence of this, some EWOs saw individual pupil assessments as difficult to carry out owing to the time available. This was also coupled with the perception that when the pupil was intermittently attending school, schools made this difficult for the EWO to arrange and implement.

The influence of time constraints can also be related to the notion and use of heuristics, or cognitive short cuts, in the EWO's assessment process, as highlighted in the second literature review (Kahneman and Trevsky 1982). EWOs are more likely to reflect causal attributions and social judgements which reflect the use of heuristics when they are perceived to be under time pressures, despite holding the belief that the assessment process should reflect a more in depth and time consuming approach. Codes reflecting perceived limited capacity to make choices in the context of these perceived time constraints were evident.

## **The Family**

Home visits formed an integral part of the EWO assessment process and reflected high levels of perceived efficacy in engaging parents and in undertaking the role of 'detective'. There is an expectation by the EWS that home visits will be undertaken. This expectation is most likely historically linked to research which highlights home factors as being the perceived source of non attendance, and the persistent belief that the root cause of non attendance, including PA, is to be found in the pupil's home environment, as indicated in the first literature review. Variations in EWO skills and abilities, in relation to engaging the individual pupil as subject of the PA, again accounted for some variation in assessment practices. This was again related to individual self efficacy beliefs in line with historical working practices which suggested that pupil assessments have not ordinarily formed part of EWO assessments. This was also coupled with some EWOs experiencing a lack of confidence in engaging young people. A consequence of obtaining the pupil view was the need to integrate this perspective into any existing hypothesis and to feed this back to the school. For some EWOs this reflected their perceived ability to act in the role of 'impartial detective' as suggested by Bargh (1996), in increasing the accuracy of their judgements, and in being able to consider a range of internal and external factors. However, a frequent outcome of this process was the schools' rejection of any information which implicated the school in the pupils' absence. As a consequence EWOs experienced lower self efficacy beliefs in the potential outcomes arising from engaging with this process.

## **EWS**

The absence of explicit EWS home visit assessment frameworks, whilst not in itself resulting in low efficacy perceptions for the EWOs, in respect of being able to gather home based information, nevertheless led to individual EWOs developing their own 'implicit' frameworks, which appeared to encompass a range of perceived potential causes for the PA. Whilst some EWO perceptions reflected skills and abilities to support this information gathering process, their efficacy beliefs in relation to engaging in this process varied in that some EWOs saw the explicit PA EWS protocol framework as providing a more predictable and workable structure, in the absence of anything else, and more readily adopted this process. As a consequence, this process prescriptively leads to EWS referral of cases to court and ultimately prosecution for families. There is some indication therefore that a lack of EWS explicit frameworks for working and engagement may also influence EWO practice and may ultimately favour a more punitive as opposed to welfare approach, linked to self efficacy beliefs about parental engagement.

Whilst the EWS were seeking to develop further consistency in practice through including individual pupil assessments, variations in practice can also be related to change theories suggesting that employee resistance to change, reflects the uncertainty of a new process, together with changes in routine and habits and fear of 'the difference', as all serving to increase resistance to changes in working practices (Schiemann 1995). This also highlights the potential influence of organisational systems, in

terms of the EWS, on self efficacy beliefs in relation to changes in EWO working practices.

EWOs who embraced change and were engaging in both individual pupil assessments and during the later phases, in CAF meetings, acting in the role of lead professional, evidenced their beliefs of high levels of personal efficacy, including the belief that they possessed the necessary skills and abilities to carry out these tasks. Self efficacy as a determinant of task behaviour is again evident as an influential psychosocial process experienced by EWOs, as highlighted in the second literature review.

### **Other Agency Influences**

EWOs who sought multiple and alternative sources of information as part of the assessment process, also reflected varying degrees of efficacy in their ability to integrate and challenge new or conflicting information.

Other professionals emerged as the source of some of this variation, often reflecting the categorisation of PA pupil difficulties which did not always readily fit with the EWO's own causal perceptions. EWO self efficacy beliefs in relation to their ability to challenge 'the professional view' emerged as being low. A consequence of this being the EWO then having to synthesise the professional view into their hypothesis formulation. A further consequence of this was that professional view often became the dominant discourse in accounting for the pupil persistent absence. Such discourses invariably reflected pathological factors, particularly following health professional involvement, and again influenced EWO efficacy beliefs in respect of their own ability to make

judgements which accurately reflected their own assessments, in light of other professional judgements being made.

### **6.33 Engagement Strategy (parents) Phase**

#### **Home Influences**

EWO Efficacy beliefs related to this phase of engagement reflected the EWOs beliefs about their own knowledge, skills and abilities in being able to engage parents, form a working relationship and to begin to offer solutions to problems and issues identified during the home visit.

Variations in the EWOs ability to engage parents reflected beliefs about their own ability to form a collaborative and supportive relationship with parents, to develop trust and to persist in trying to engage parents often in difficult circumstances. The literature review has indicated that self efficacy beliefs can determine how much effort people will spend on an activity and how long they will persevere when confronting obstacles, becoming a form of self fulfilling prophecy. This can account for variations in the ability of EWOs to engage parents and why some EWOs can fail to persevere, adopting a preference for the court rather than welfare route. The impact of the school in influencing EWO ability to engage parents is also evident in the tactical strategy of some EWOs feeling they had to 'distance' themselves from the school in order to increase the potential to engage parents.

Self Efficacy beliefs were also influential in determining how parental problems were managed and perceived. EWO ability to 'manage' parental issues involved the use of 'sign posting' to other support



agencies. This was evident where EWOs perceived themselves to have a good working knowledge and relationship with other locality based support services, together with knowledge of referral procedures and criteria. Self Efficacy beliefs were also influential in EWO perceptions of their own capabilities to support the parent. Whilst some EWOs believed they possessed the skills and abilities to work with parents in order to empower them in dealing with their own problems, and in offering a range of support which was within their remit and capabilities, others indicated that they felt overwhelmed by the range of problems experienced by some families and sometimes felt powerless to intervene. Whilst the family 'system' could be empowered by some EWOs the influence of this system on some EWOs actually worked to decrease their own sense of efficacy and to disempower.

#### **6.34 Case Formulation Phase**

EWO Attributional beliefs for pupil PA were either considered to reflect home based factors as representing central causation, or school based factors as representing more peripheral causes. Variations in the construction of this narrative in accounting for pupil non attendance, also reflected the difference between attributional beliefs which were formed and maintained early in the process of EWO engagement with PA cases, or those which were subsequently modified and shaped as a consequence of engaging with a more holistic assessment process. This also represents a form of self efficacy which recognises the ability to 'self reflect.' Bandura (1986) saw this ability as a prominent feature of social

cognitive theory, representing the way in which we make sense of our experiences, explore our own cognitions and self beliefs and are able to alter our thinking and behaviour accordingly. Whilst an assessment of the 'school life' of the pupil was limited to pupil perceptions, where sought, the school environment itself was not a conscious part of the assessment process. School based factors which did emerge reflected information gathered from the pupil or during the home visit. EWO beliefs about the relevance of this information, determined whether this information was shared with school. EWOs indicated that their beliefs about the ultimate causes of the PA having his roots in the home were persistent and often related to previous experience of PA cases.

The influence of the home visit on the construction of the PA narrative, led to some EWOs feeling the need to check out anomalies and inconsistencies in information with the school. The response of the school to this process was often to minimise or dismiss their own role in the pupils' absence. Whilst some EWOs would support the schools response in some cases, other EWOs were left feeling that relevant factors to the PA were consistently being discounted. Self efficacy beliefs, whilst being able to enhance a sense of accomplishment, can also serve to affect levels of motivation and, as highlighted in the second literature review, can play a critical role in what people choose or choose not to do. Having little or no impact on the school response is unlikely to lend itself to the experience of *mastery*, as suggested by Bandura (1997), as being one determinant of high self efficacy. As a consequence the schools'

response is likely to be an influential determinant of whether the EWO will attempt to employ this 'checking out' process again in the future.

### **6.35 Engagement Strategy (school) Phase**

This phase reflected wide variations in perceived efficacy in relation to two specific areas of EWO engagement. These related to Self Efficacy Beliefs in relation to the EWO's ability to;

- Use their interpersonal skills in order to bridge home and school relationships and communication
- To achieve consensus in order to implement strategies which were school focused

Codes were indicative of EWOs possessing a number of high order interpersonal skills including facilitation, mediation and conflict resolution skills. Whilst these skills will also vary across individual EWOs, variations in the use of these skills varied more as a result of the EWO's belief in being able to achieve positive outcomes, as opposed to an absence of these skills themselves. This is also in line with theories of self efficacy which see action and outcomes as being determined by what the individual expects, rather than objectively believes to be true.

EWOs who reported the use of tactical strategies in order to manage negative school responses and to reduce conflict between the parent and school staff, also indicated a strong belief in their perceived ability to achieve consensus. Variations occurred in the ability of some EWOs to manage competing perspectives, representing school and home influences on problem perception, perceiving themselves to be caught in

the middle. Polarised school and parental perspectives often hindered the EWO in the belief that they could optimise the use of their skills and effect changes in problem perception, particularly where school responses were inflexible and dismissive.

The implementation of strategies which were school based represented an area in which the majority of EWOs felt unable to impact. Codes reflecting the schools fixed view and lack of responsibility for the pupil absence were strikingly common, as were those which reflected an unwillingness of the school to change their existing practice in respect of individual PA pupils.

Efficacy beliefs in relation to the EWO's ability to effect change in this area were low, with EWOs often being able to anticipate this as a school response.

This is supported by theories of self efficacy which would suggest that these variations in efficacy beliefs are as a consequence of contextual challenges and influences, and not solely the characteristics and skills of the individual (McCarthy and Newcomb 1992). Self efficacy theory would also predict that individuals are more likely to engage in tasks in which they think they can succeed and to avoid those where their self efficacy is low (Bandura 1986).

The implication here would be that some EWOs will ultimately fail to challenge school practice.

School resistance to being implicated in the cause of pupil PA represents a significant barrier to gaining an accurate assessment and understanding of PA cases. It could also account for the importance of

the home visit in the EWO assessment process, as representing an area where the majority of EWOs in this study, believed they were able to engage parents, carry out assessment work and to provide a level of support to families and young people, reflecting high self efficacy perceptions. However, it is the extent to which the focus on these identified features of the pupils home environment are able to account for the pupils persistent absence from school, that appears to be the significant question.

### **6.36 Problem Resolution Phase**

This final phase of EWO engagement reflects the use of EWO efficacy judgements (Level 3 code) in respect of their own perceived role in resolving the PA problem. This phase highlighted two areas reflecting self efficacy beliefs which represented the EWO's perceived ability to direct interventions aimed at increasing pupil attendance;

- Systems focused interventions, including school and EWS (court) interventions which were reliant other systems interacting with the EWO to bring affect change and;
- EWO self focused interventions, which were reliant on the EWO's own actions to affect changes in attendance

High self efficacy beliefs were associated with interventions which were EWO reliant and which were focused on the family or to a lesser extent on the individual pupil. Low self efficacy beliefs were characterised, as indicated in the previous sections, by interventions which required the EWO to act as an agent of change through their interactions with other agencies and systems, particularly the school. Codes representing the

involvement of other agencies and in getting other agencies to carry out agreed actions were highlighted in the analysis and were representative of low self efficacy beliefs.

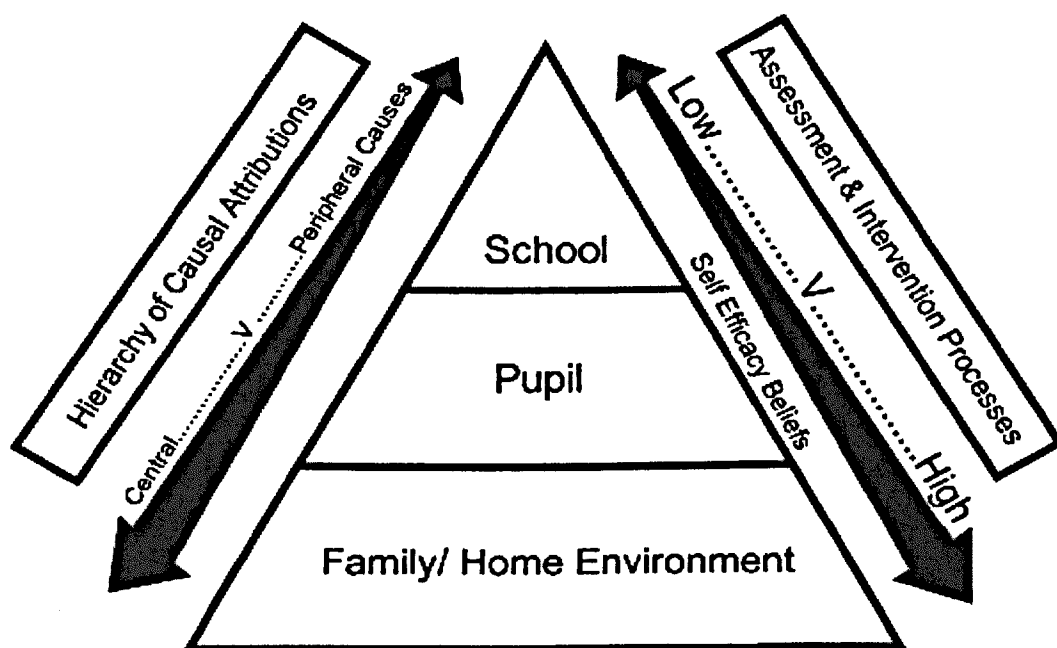
EWOs also perceived decisions about taking the 'court route', to be influenced by the expectations of schools, and by parental non engagement, resulting in the perception of having little control over the process or decision. A consequence of this is that EWOs see these interventions in terms of representing an external locus of control.

Self efficacy beliefs in relation to interventions which were perceived to be EWO reliant, representing an internal locus of control, also varied in relation to the EWO's perceived skills and confidence in working with parents in a welfare role, including implementing behaviour management programmes and strategies. They also impacted on their perceived ability to act as Lead Professional in the CAF process, with some EWOs either engaging and initiating this process or not engaging with the CAF process, as a form of intervening.

Codes indicating variations in perceived skills and confidence could account for some variation in EWO efficacy judgements in relation to resolving the PA problem, but efficacy beliefs which were EWO reliant did reflect higher perceptions of self efficacy for most EWOs. This is most likely to reflect interventions aimed at parents, involving more supportive welfare focused work.

Figure 6.1 represents the relationship between the core variable of self efficacy beliefs and EWO assessment and intervention processes. These beliefs represented a continuum, ranging from high to low, which

correlated with EWO causal attributions. Whilst schools were seen to reflect peripheral causation, this correlated with low self efficacy beliefs in terms of assessing and intervening at this level. EWO practice was correlated with higher self efficacy beliefs in intervening at the family level and causal attributions which reflected the family as the central cause of pupil persistent absence.



- Figure 6.1 Showing variations in the core variable of Self Efficacy beliefs, in relation to EWO assessment and intervention processes, together with the perceived hierarchy of causal attributions, related to the family, pupil and school in cases of persistent absence from school.

## **6.4 Summary of Chapter 6**

This chapter has presented the study's Grounded Theory which has emerged as representing the analytic story of Education Welfare Officer assessment and intervention with cases of persistent absence from school. The theory is represented by self efficacy beliefs and the influence of systemic influences on the practice of Education Welfare Officers in cases of persistent absence.

The theory proposes that the interaction of these influences, acting as core variables in the process, are evident in each phase of the EWO's engagement with cases of persistent absence, and are able to describe the relationship between codes and categories described in the interpretive analysis. Theoretical sensitivity from related areas of research and the relationship between existing theory with the Grounded Theory is made explicit and is supportive of the study's theory generation.

Implications of the Grounded Theory for future practice, together with an evaluation of the Grounded Theory itself, are discussed in the final chapter.



## **Chapter 7. Conclusions, Implications and Evaluation**

### **Introduction**

This chapter considers the conclusions of the study's grounded theory in relation to its theoretical and practical implications. It also refers to evaluative criteria which highlight the validity, reliability and generalisability of grounded theory studies and the relationship of these criteria to the research study.

### **7.1 Conclusions from the Grounded Theory**

The Grounded Theory has presented the influence of self efficacy beliefs on the practice of EWOs in cases of persistent absence from school. It also proposes that systemic influences can account for variations in self efficacy beliefs, as apart from being a reflection of individual differential skills. The theory is indicative of systemic influences having a significant impact on self efficacy beliefs, reflecting the actions, motivation, decision making and judgements of Education Welfare Officers, during their engagement with PA cases.

Self efficacy beliefs represent a Basic Social Psychological Process (BSPP) occurring in different contexts and under different conditions, across the range of phases of EWO engagement with cases of persistent absence.

The theory proposes that systemic influences play a significant role in either supporting or hindering the PA assessment and intervention process, through the extent to which they are able to determine the assessment and intervention process itself. Systemic influences can act

as negative influential determinants of self efficacy beliefs, in limiting the accuracy of the assessment processes, directing attributional causation and by limiting the potential range of intervention. Whilst EWOs have demonstrated a range of skills and high self efficacy beliefs in some areas of engagement, these beliefs are often restricted to working with families and, more limitedly other agencies, rather than with schools. Systemically produced discourses and categorisations, in accounting for persistent absenteeism, such as those offered by the school and other professionals can also serve to restrict assessment and interventions which may otherwise lead to more effective solutions and greater insight into the reasons for non attendance.

The literature highlighted how adopted terminology representing the cause of non attendance, may not only mask more accurate and potentially useful insights but may fail to give us any insight at all into the underlying causes. Whilst some EWOs recognised the limitations of categorisation and pre-existing attributions, others found this increased their beliefs in their own ability to find a solution by serving to narrow the focus of understanding, of often very complex cases, to more simplistic or reductionist explanations or accounts.

Interventions which were family focused reflected higher self efficacy beliefs but do not necessarily correlate with any improvements in pupil attendance.

## **7.2 Connections with the Literature Review**

The literature Review in part 1 indicated that categorisation of pupil non attendance, with reference to child and family variables alone, is unlikely to represent a complete picture of pupil non attendance. Pellegrini (2007) has suggested that it is important to challenge common perceptions about school non attenders in order to develop alternative discourses. However, as highlighted, EWOs experienced low self efficacy beliefs in their perceived ability to challenge the professional view.

O'keefe (1995) has also pointed out that a concentration on home difficulties represents the main element of EWO working practices, whilst also recommending that examination of the school curriculum may provide a more useful picture of pupil non attendance issues. The school curriculum has not emerged in this study as an area of direct focus in EWO assessment or intervention processes, with school based factors emerging during the assessment process often being viewed as peripheral factors and lower in the hierarchy of perceived correlation with persistent absence. However, as Reid (1999) has proposed there are a broad range of individual, psychological and social factors associated with persistent absence which can either work together to support or decrease pupil attendance. The implication here is that whilst research may support home factors as representing more central causes, the complex interaction between these and identified peripheral factors should not be ignored. The notion of a hierarchy of potential causes does not appear to take into account the potential impact of a 'cumulative

effect' or interaction of factors, in accounting for pupil absence, and it may not therefore be useful to make a distinction between them.

Systemic influences are also highlighted by Reid (1985) as often representing a 'soul destroying' impact on the EWO in terms of the decisions of teachers and the courts in undermining the EWO role. EWO decision making is also highlighted as often conflicting with the wishes of schools and parents. This was reflected in this study in the organisational tensions experienced by some EWOs, and through parental expectations around problem management. Self efficacy beliefs varied in relation to the EWO's ability to overcome these differential expectations, whilst also reflecting the contradictory nature of the EWO's dual role in terms of welfare versus court work.

Variations in EWO skills and abilities are highlighted by Collins (1998) as undermining the ability of some EWOs to engage in more complex interventions, citing a lack of training as the cause of these deficits.

However the study has indicated that whilst skills and abilities will vary across individual EWOs, the perceived ability to intervene, other than at the family level, is more likely to reflect the influential responses of schools and other agencies in not being supportive of, and reducing the opportunity to, exercise existing skills than a lack of EWO skills.

### **7.3 Implications for Practice**

The study has highlighted some clear implications for practice. The Education Welfare Officers in this study have demonstrated a wide range of skills and abilities which are nevertheless affected by the wider

systemic influences in which they operate. EWOs are front line staff working with one of the most vulnerable groups of children and families who present with complex and often multi-dimensional problems. Whilst the study has highlighted that the assessment process in all cases may not always be representative of a holistic interpretation and understanding of persistent absence, a large proportion of time is currently spent in attempting to engage often hard to reach parents and offering supportive Welfare work, which ultimately may or may not impact on increasing attendance. Whilst family problems cannot be ignored, to attempt to intervene at this level alone, as the literature review has suggested, may not represent the most effective strategy and the importance of other factors on pupil attendance needs to have a higher profile for the EWS.

Pupil assessments, including pupil attributions for the cause of their own non attendance are also important features of any assessment process. Whilst practice is variable in this area, engagement with pupils has been highlighted as being related to the perceived skills and confidence of the EWO, the schools' expectations and response to this, together with time constraints imposed by EWS protocols and procedures. Whilst this may imply further training needs, it is also suggestive of the EWS needing to redefine and make explicit their assessment processes to include the pupil view, as well as highlighting the role of schools in supporting this process and readjusting their expectations.

Consideration also needs to be given to the fact that where pupil and parental assessments do point to school based issues as being relevant

features of persistent absence, EWOs currently have limited as well as variable success in impacting on or influencing school practice. The current status and perceived role of EWOs by schools is unlikely to alter this situation, with the challenge of the EWO working more systemically with schools implicated as an area reflecting low self efficacy beliefs. Solution focused approaches, particularly aimed at building more positive and solution focused discourse during the EWO, parent and school meetings are likely to offer a more useful way of reducing problem focused talk, increasing more solution oriented thinking and constructing alternative PA narratives. However the self efficacy beliefs currently held by a number of EWOs in this study would not be supportive of being able to achieve this aim. In addition, school based EWOs could also fail to recognise the need to change their own practice in view of their higher perceptions of efficacy in adopting the collective school view. Therefore, the potentially restricting impact of systemically generated discourses, in accounting for pupil absence, needs to be understood and challenged in order to increase the likelihood of improved school attendance.

In terms of collaboration, the study has also highlighted that in contrast to Miller's (2003) research, highlighting construction of a temporary overlapping boundary allowing the Educational Psychologist (EP) to work collaboratively with schools and parents, the majority of EWOs in this study experienced 'boundary maintenance' by school staff who adopted an inflexible and immovable stance which negatively influenced the collaborative potential of meetings. The schools resistance to engage with parents and the EWO in problem solving, even within a perceived

temporary system, appears to be more resistant than found in Miller's study. This could reflect EWOs being school based and providing greater consensus in relation to the school view, thus strengthening the schools beliefs and stance, or the fact that EWOs tended to meet with Heads of Year, perhaps as stronger representatives of the schools norms and rules, who subsequently proved harder to 'move'. The structure and processes within these meetings would also be an area worthy of further scrutiny in relation to developing improved collaboration and the potential for more positive outcomes.

The literature review has indicated that at best EP involvement with cases of persistent absence is limited or focused on those children presenting with school anxiety related issues. PA children need to become high profile children for Educational Psychology involvement. These children have limited and inconsistent educational experiences and poor academic outcomes.

EPs have the skills, ability and status within schools to engage in holistic assessments which incorporate the school life of the pupil and the learning environment. Whilst O'Keefe (1995) has suggested that EWOs need to develop a greater understanding of the influence and impact of the teaching and learning experiences on pupil attendance, this study would suggest that they do possess an understanding of the influence of school based factors but the problem appears to be how school responses and perceptions of the EWO role can influence practice and result in them feeling powerless to effect changes in the school system. It

also raises the question of whether EWOs are best placed or able to fulfil this role.

EPs have an understanding of the curriculum, school systems and working collaboratively with other agencies. They are able to work at a variety of levels in order to effect change. EPs have the capacity to challenge dominant and less useful discourses around pupils who are persistent absentees and to reframe and co-construct more holistic narratives and positive solution focused dialogues. They generally have a high status in schools and work with school systems and environments as an accepted and negotiated part of EP working.

This is not to deny the skills of the EWO, but EPs are well placed to support the process of assessment and intervention at a number of levels including the individual, family and schools. This view is supported by Pelligrini (2007) in terms of intervention. In order to achieve more holistic assessments in cases of persistent absence, the EP is likely to at least be able to contribute to a broader assessment process, including a possible functional analysis, provide greater insight and support colleagues from the EWS in agreeing appropriate interventions with schools and other agencies.

Laughlin (2003) has suggested that interventions aimed at non attendance should be tailored to each pupil's individual needs, involving a multi systems approach between the school, parents and educational psychologists. In light of this study, a prior question might usefully be, 'has the assessment process contributed to an accurate understanding of the persistent absence and how accurately is it able to identify the



features of each case so that the most appropriate interventions can be agreed and implemented?’

A further implication for practice relates to the pros and cons of the EWO being school or non school based in relation to the highlighted influences on practice. The EWS would benefit from a greater understanding of the influence of self efficacy beliefs on their own practice and how this is influenced by the systems with which they interact, for better or worse. Schools would benefit from understanding how their own actions are able to support or hinder the role of the EWO in cases of persistent absence, together with knowing which and how strategies can provide supportive structures and networks for children returning to school after a period of persistent absence.

The dual role of the EWS in offering Welfare work which contrasts with the more punitive court route is also implicated as reflecting a potential source of tension for the EWO in terms of role expectations, with the contradictory nature of this intervention role being implicated in achieving less favourable outcomes for families. This therefore represents a further area of practice which could usefully be evaluated.

Kearney’s (2007) functional analysis, representing the identification of proximal variables and risk factors for pupils who are not attending school, may also provide a useful framework for EPs to understand the functionality of non attendance for some children. It is also important however, to consider in line with Rutter’s (1978) research, that non attendance is unlikely to reflect a ‘single stressor’ but multiple stress and disadvantage. This again highlights the possible cumulative effect of

factors influencing non attendance, together with the need for a multi-agency and multi-levelled response, which aims to look at creative solutions.

The study and research are supportive of the EWS move towards multi agency CAF working and engaging pupils in the assessment process. It has also highlighted a gap in terms of the school's own responsibility for persistent absentees which clearly needs to be addressed. It has importantly highlighted influences on EWO practice which can hinder or have the potential to support more effective working practices for pupils who are persistently absent from school.

#### **7.4 Evaluative Reflections**

This section focuses on the extent to which the Grounded Theory study represents a valid and grounded theory. Strauss and Corbin (1998) have developed a number of criteria in an attempt to address the 'adequacy of the research process and the grounding of its findings' (p 270). Several of these criterion examine the generation of concepts, conceptual categories and their relationship.

The interpretive analysis makes explicit the 'building blocks' of the theory and the codes which were grounded in the interview data as Level 1 codes. Strauss and Corbin ask the question of whether these concepts are systematically related?

Links were made between concepts and categories developed, representing Level 2 codes as presented in Figure 4.21. Further development of Level 3 codes and the relationship between Level 1, 2

and more theoretical Level 3 codes, were made explicit in the analysis as represented in Figures 4.1 to 4.6. Constant comparison of incidents to concepts ensured that there was a close fit with the incidents and events they were representing.

Level 3 codes were defined in terms of their properties and dimension. An example is given in the Interpretive Analysis (see Figure 4.61).

Strauss and Corbin also ask the question, 'Is variation built into the theory'?

The previous chapter which presents the Grounded Theory is indicative of the core variable of self efficacy beliefs and systemic influences as occurring under a variety of conditions and across different contexts and phases. Self efficacy beliefs represent a phenomenon which was specified under different conditions, was characterised by a range of consequences, with considerable variation being built into the theory, in line with Strauss and Corbin's suggested criteria.

'Process identification' is also highlighted as representing important criterion.

The study makes explicit the EWO's phases of engagement together with the EWO's interaction and response to the conditions of each phase.

Phases are identified in order to explain the process of engagement which was used to form the structure of the interpretive analysis, making the process explicit.

A further question relates to whether the theoretical findings seem significant and to what extent?

The research presents new information and identifies implications for the practice of Education Welfare Officers and EWS as well as Educational Psychologists. Charmaz (2006) suggests that grounded theory credibility, originality, resonance and usefulness should be considered as useful evaluative criteria. The research has demonstrated a familiarity with the topic and there is sufficient data to merit the claims of the study. The data analysis reflects a systematic comparison between categories which cover a wide range of contexts and consequences, with the reader being able to follow the journey of analysis through to the grounded theory.

### **7.5 Researcher Reflexivity**

Qualitative research methodologies vary in the extent to which they emphasise researcher reflexivity and the importance of the role of language. Reflexivity requires an awareness and acknowledgement of the researcher's own contribution to the construction of meanings and how the researcher informs and influences the research process and its findings. This acknowledgement also reflects an understanding that the researcher is not able to stay objectively outside the subject matter and is an active participant rather than passive observer.

In this study the categories and labels used in the interpretive analysis to code the data, reflect language as having a constructive dimension which has shaped the findings and construction of reality. This reality reflects a form of understanding that has been constructed and negotiated between the researcher and the EWO participants and as such is a representation of this interpretation rather than the only truth about the data. The

researcher acknowledges that this reality represents a social construction rather than a capturing of reality, which in turn has influenced the kind of understanding of the phenomenon that is possible.

The detailed phases of analysis outlined in the study, as Henwood and Pidgeon (1997) suggest, supports and increases researcher reflexivity in acknowledging the active role of the researcher. Whilst as indicated, the researchers social constructivist perspective recognises the role of language in the construction of meaning and categories, the study has stuck closely to the data, visited and revisit categories in order to ensure that they have remained representative of the participants own data and asked questions about the language used and about any assumptions being made. In vivo codes were also helpful in tackling the issue of researcher reflexivity in restricting the importing of existing theory into the analysis. Documenting each phase of the research process, questioning assumptions, sampling decisions and interpretations also served to increase researcher reflexivity.

## **7.6 The Appropriateness of a Grounded Theory Approach**

A grounded theory approach has driven an analysis which has allowed for an interpretation of experiences and events which can be transferred to the everyday working practices of EWOs and EPs. The analytic categories of self efficacy beliefs and systemic influences reflect the identification of more generic psychosocial processes present at an operational level which have implications for future practice and research for both EPs and EWOs. The process of engaging with an interpretive

analysis of the data has given the EWO participants in this study a voice which has been utilised, as Charmaz (2006) suggests, in allowing us to 'construct an interpretive rendering of the worlds we study rather than an external reporting of events and statements (p184). In doing so the approach has alerted us to the practice of EWOs and EPs and how this could lead to more potentially effective assessments and interventions with cases of persistent absence. The approach has usefully identified areas, events and experiences that would most likely not have been identified through alternative qualitative approaches, hypothesis testing or other methodological starting points, since although this reality is acknowledged to be co-constructed it has used the often unexpected codes emerging from the data on which to develop this construction and interpretation.

Whilst the GT approach could be seen to be less successful in generating a theory which can be generalised and applied to perhaps other EWO practices in other local authorities, it is representative of localised theory with some wider implications outside the EWS for practicing Educational Psychologists. It is acknowledged that the product of this grounded theory approach is founded on a relative small research sample in terms of participants and as suggested is more representative of a localised theory.

## **7.7 Unique Contribution and Implications for Future Research**

The theory provides a new insight into the influences operating in respect of EWO involvement with cases of PA and why these need to be taken in

to account when considering the assessment and intervention process. It highlights the potential limitations resulting from this interaction and gaps in the assessment and intervention process. Existing research has highlighted the importance of pupil perceptions and school based factors on non attendance. Whilst this study has also suggested that the pupil voice is lacking in the assessment process and that the school life of the pupil is an important determinant of attendance, it has also challenged the perception that EWOs are unaware of these factors and in contrast has highlighted the potential difficulties of overcoming the systemic barriers in achieving holistic and accurate assessments and interventions in PA cases and that the basis of effective assessment and intervention is founded on this being achieved. In doing so the study has also raised the question of whether the EWO is best placed to fulfil this role and has highlighted a greater and more potentially effective role for the educational psychologist.

Whilst Kearney (2007) has also recognised the importance of identifying the functionality of non attendance behaviour in young people, in terms of a functional analysis, there is little evidential research to account for the contextualised social processes influencing EWO involvement with PA cases and how these are able to influence the assessment and intervention process with regard to the engagement of young people. The research has extended our knowledge of these EWO experiences and provided a more dense theoretical account, albeit at a local level, on which to develop more effective practice around persistent absentees.

Future research could usefully explore the perceptions of both parents and pupils in accounting for pupil absence and how these narratives can be usefully incorporated into achieving a more balanced narrative and holistic assessment around pupil absence.

The role of the EP engaging in this more holistic assessment processes around PA pupils and in challenging school narratives, supporting schools to implement school based strategies and action, whilst complimenting the role of the EWO, would also be an area worthy of further exploration and evaluation.



## References – Thesis

Allgeier, A.R., Byrne, D., Brooks, B., and Reeves, D. (1979). The Waffle Phenomenon. *Journal of Applied Social Psychology*, 9, 170-172.

Amjal, Y., and Rees, I. (2001). *Solutions in School, Creative Applications of Solution Focused Brief Thinking with Young People and Adults*. London: BT Press.

Banathy, B. (1992). *A Systems View of Education*. Englewood Cliffs: Education Technology Publications.

Bandura, A. (1986). *Social Foundations of thought and action. A social cognitive theory*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall

Bandura, A. (1988). *Perceived Self Efficacy. Exercise of control through self belief*. *European Research in Behaviour Therapy*, Vol 2, 27-59.

Bandura, A., and Wood, R.E. (1989). Effect of perceived controllability and performance standards on self regulation of complex decision making. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 56, 805-814.

Bandura, A. (1992). Exercise of Personal Agency through the Self Efficacy Mechanism. In Schwarzer, R. (1992) (Ed) *Self Efficacy, Thought Control of Action*. Bristol, PA: Taylor and Francis Publishers.

Bandura, A. (1997). *Self Efficacy: The exercise of control*. New York: Freeman

Bargh, J. A. (1996), Automaticity and Social Behaviour. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 43, 437 - 449.

Bargh, J. A., and Ferguson, M. J. (2000). Beyond Behaviourism: On the automaticity of higher mental processes. *Psychological Bulletin*, 126, 925-945

Barrett, H. (2003). *Parenting Programmes for Families at Risk: A Source Book*. London: National Family and Parenting Institute.

Bateson, G. (1972). *Steps to an ecology of mind: Mind and Nature*. New York: Ballantine.

Bechtold, A., Naccarato, M.E., and Zanna, M.P. (1986). *Need for structure and the prejudice discrimination link*. Toronto: Canadian Psychological Association.

Biddle, B.J. (1986). *Recent Developments in Role Theory*. Annual Review of Sociology 12:67, 92.

Blagg, N., and Yule, W. (1987). *School Phobia and its Intervention*. London: Croom Helm

Blyth, E. and Milner, J. (1999). *Improving School Attendance*. London: Routledge.

Broadhurst, K., Paton, H., and May-Chahal, C. (2005) Children missing from school systems: exploring divergent patterns of disengagement in the narrative accounts of parents, carers, children and young people. *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, 26(1): 105 -19

Burns, T.R, and Flam, H. (1987). *The Shaping of Social Organisation: Social Rule System Theory with Applications*. London: Sage Publications

Burns, J.M. (1997). *Leadership*. New York: Harper and Row.

Carlen, P., Gleeson, D. and Wardhaugh, J. (1992). *Truancy, The politics of compulsory schooling*. Buckingham, England: Open University Press.

Cervone, D. (1989). Effects of envisioning future activities on self efficacy judgements and motivation. *Cognitive Therapy and Research*, 13, 247-286)

Charmaz, K. (2006). *Constructing Grounded Theory. A Practical Guide through Qualitative Analysis*. London: Sage.

Coldman, C. (1995). Rethinking the image of the truant. In O'Keeffe, D and Stoll, P (eds). *Issues in School Attendance and Truancy*: London: Pitman Publishing

Collins, D. (1998). *Managing Truancy in Schools*. London: Cassell.

Croll, P and Attwood, G. (2006) *Truancy in Secondary School Pupils; Prevalence, trajectories and pupil perspectives*. Research Papers in Education 21, 4, 457-484.

Cryer, P. (2000) *The Research Students Guide To Success*, (2<sup>nd</sup> Edition). Buckingham: Open University Press.

Department for Education and Skills (DfES) (2002) *Research and Evaluation of the Behaviour Improvement Programme (BIP) – Brief*. DfES: ref RB702.

Department for Education and Skills (DfES) (2006). *Pupil Absence in Schools in England 2004/5*. London: DfES.

Department for Education (2010). *Social and Emotional Aspects of Learning (SEAL) programme in secondary schools*: National evaluation DfE; ref RB049.

De Shazer, S. (1985). *Keys to Solution in Brief Therapy*. New York: Norton.

Dey, I. (1999). *Grounding Grounded Theory – Guidelines for Qualitative Inquiry*. London: Academic Press.

Dey, I. (2004). Grounded Theory. In Seale, D.C., Gobo, G., Gubrium, J.F. and Silverman, D. (Eds). *Qualitative Research Practice*, 80 – 93. London: Sage.

Dowling, E. and Osbourne, E. (1994). *The Family and the School. A joint systems approach to problems with children*, 2nd edition. London: Routledge.

Elliott, J and Place, M. (1998). *Children in Difficulty: a guide to understanding and helping*. London: Routledge.

- Festinger, L. (1957). *A theory of cognitive dissonance*. Stanford: Stanford University press.
- Forsyth, D.R. (1990). *Group Dynamics*. (3<sup>rd</sup> ed). Belmont, CA: Wadsworth
- Fox, M. (2009). Working with systems and thinking systemically – disentangling the crossed wires. *Educational Psychology in Practice*, 25, 3, 245 -258.
- Galloway, D. (1985). *Schools and persistent absentees*. Oxford: Pergamon Press.
- Gilbert, D.T. (1989). *Thinking lightly about others: Automatic components of social inference process*. New York: Guilford Press.
- Glaser, B. and Strauss, A. (1968). *Time for dying*. Chicago: Aldine.
- Glaser, B. (1978). *Theoretical Sensitivity*. Mill Valley, CA: Sociology Press.
- Glaser, B. (1992). *Emergence versus forcing: Basics of grounded theory analysis*. Mill Valley, CA: Sociology Press.
- Glaser, B and Strauss, A. (1967). *The Discovery of Grounded Theory*. New York: Aldine.
- Gordon, L.M., & Graham, S. (2006). Attribution Theory. *The encyclopaedia of human development*. Thousand Oaks. Sage Publications.
- Haig, B. (1995). Grounded Theory as Scientific Method. *Philosophy of Education, Sociology* 19(2) p244-259.
- Halford, P. (1991). National Survey of the Education Welfare Service in England and Wales. Thesis, University of Southampton, cited in Collins, D (1998). *Managing Truancy in Schools*. London: Cassell
- Hallam, S and Rogers, L. (2008). *Improving behaviour and attendance at school*. Maidenhead: Open University Press.

Harker, M (2001). How to build solutions at meetings. In Ajmal, Y and Rees, I (Eds). *Solutions in Schools. Creative Applications of Solution Focused Brief Thinking with Young People and Adults*.

London: BT Press.

Hayes, N. (1997). *Doing Qualitative Analysis in Psychology*. East Sussex, UK: Psychology press.

Henwood, K., Pidgeon, N., and Hayes, N. (1997). *Doing qualitative analysis in psychology*. Hove, England: Psychology press.

Henwood, K and Pidgeon, N. (2003). Grounded Theory in Psychological Research. In: P.M Camic, J.E Rhodes and L Yardley. (Eds.), *Qualitative Research in Psychology: Expanding Perspectives in Methodology and Design*. Washington: American Psychological Association.

Henwood, K and Pidgeon, N. (1992). Qualitative research and psychological theorizing. *British Journal of Psychology*, 83, 97 - 111.

Heider, F. (1958). *The psychology of interpersonal relations*. New York: Wiley.

Hood, J. (1983). *Becoming a two-job family*. New York: Praeger.

Human Rights Act (1998). UK Parliamentary Act October 2000.

Hurford, A. (1983). School and family guidance: A communication systems approach to casework. *AEP Journal*, 6(2), 35-37

Janis, I.L. (1982). *Groupthink* (2<sup>nd</sup> Edition). Boston: Houghton Mifflin.

Kahnman, D. and Tversky, A (1982). In *Social Psychology*. Brehm, S., Kasson, S.M., Fein, S (2002) (Eds). New York: Houghton Mifflin

Kearney, C.A and Albano, A. (2000). *When Children Refuse School. A cognitive Behavioural Therapy Approach*. Boulder, Colorado, USA: Graywind Publications.

Kearney, C.A. (2002). *Identifying the Function of School Refusal Behaviour: A Revision of the School Refusal Assessment Scale*. Journal of Psychopathology and Behavioural Assessment, Vol. 24, No.4, (235 – 245).

Kearney, C.A. (2007). *School absenteeism and school refusal behaviour in youth: A contemporary review*. Clinical Psychology Review 28 (2008) 451-471

Kelle, U. (2005). *A Crucial Problem of 'Grounded Theory' Reconsidered*. Qualitative Social Research (Online Journal), 6(2), Article 27, para 49.

Kelley, H.H. (1973). The process of causal attribution. *American Psychologist*, 28, 107-128

Kruglanski, A.W., and Maysless, D. (1988). Contextual effects in hypothesis testing. *Social Cognition*, 6, 1-20

Laughlan, F. (2003). Responding to chronic non attendance: a review of intervention approaches. *Educational Psychology in Practice*, 19, 132-146.

Layder, D. (1993). *New Strategies in Social Research: an Introduction and Guide*. Cambridge: Polity Press.

Lefcourt, Herbert M. (1982). *Locus of control: Current trends in theory and research*. NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.

Major, B. (2003). It's not my fault: When and why attributions to prejudice protect self esteem. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 29, 772 -781.

Malcolm, H., Wilson, V. and Davidson, J (2002) *Out of School Care*. Glasgow: Scottish Research in Education Centre, University of Glasgow

Malcom, H., Wilson, V., Davidson, J. and Kirk, S. (2003). *Absence from school: A Study of Its causes and Effects in Seven LEAs. Report 424*. London: DfES.

McCarthy, W.J. and Newcomb, M. D. (1992). Two Dimensions of Perceived Efficacy: Cognitive Control and Behavioural Coping Ability. In: Schwarzer, R. (1992) (Ed) *Self Efficacy, Thought Control of Action*. Bristol, PA: Taylor and Francis Publishers.

McMahon, M.O (1990). *The general method of social work practice. A problem solving approach* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed). Englewood Cliff, NJ: Prentice Hall.

Miller, A. (2005). Building Grounded Theory within educational psychology practice. *Educational and Child Psychology*, 12, 2, 5 – 14.

Miller, A. (2003). *Teachers, Parents and Classroom Behaviour. A Psychosocial Approach*. Berkshire, England: Open University Press.

Miller, A. (2008). Educational Psychology. *Topics in Applied Psychology*. London: Hodder Education.

Morris, M. and Rutt, S (2005). *Analysis of Pupil Attendance Data in Excellence in Cities Areas: Interim Report*. London: DfES

NACRO (2003). *Missing Out*. London: NACRO.

Nottingham City Children's Partnership School Attendance Report (2010).

Nottingham City Council Child Care Sufficiency Assessment (2010).

Nottingham City Common Attendance Policy (June 2010)

O'Keeffe, D and Stoll, P. (1995). *Issues in School Attendance and Truancy*. London: Pitman Publishing.

- Pajares, F. (2002). Overview of Social Cognitive theory and of self efficacy. Retrieved 26.2.11, from <http://www.emory.edu/EDUCATION/mfp/eff.html>
- Pellegrini, D.W. (2007). School Non-attendance: Definitions, meanings, responses, interventions. *Educational Psychology in Practice*, 23, 63-77.
- Pina, A. Zerr, A. Gonzales, N and Oritz, C (2009). *Psychosocial Interventions for School Refusal Behaviour in Children and Adolescents*. Child Development Perspectives, Volume 3, Issue 1, 11-20. Published Online:23 Mar 2009
- Place, M., Hulsmeier, J., Davis, S., and Taylor, E. (2000). School refusal: A changing problem which requires a change of approach? *Clinical Child Psychology and Psychiatry*, 5(3), 345 – 355.
- Plas, J.M. (1986). *Systems Psychology in the schools*. London: Pergamon Press.
- Reicher, S., Spears, R. and Postmes, T. (1995). *A Social Identity model of deindividuating phenomena*. European review of Social Psychology, Vol 6 , 161-198. Chichester, England: Wiley
- Reid, K. (1985). *Truancy and School Absenteeism*. London: Hodder and Stoughton.
- Reid, K. (1987). *Combating School Absenteeism*. London: Hodder and Stoughton.
- Reid, K. (1999). *Truancy and Schools*. London: Routledge.
- Reid, K (2000). *Tackling Truancy in Schools*. A practical Manual for Primary and Secondary Schools. London: Routledge.
- Robson, C. (2002). *Real World Research. A Resource for Social Scientists and Practitioner- Researchers*. (Second Edition). Oxford: Blackwell.
- Ross, L., Green, B., and House, P. (1977). The false consensus phenomenon: An attribution bias in self-perception and social-



perception processes. *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, 13, 279-301.

Rutter, M. (1978). *Aggression and Antisocial Behaviour in Childhood and Adolescence*. Oxford: Pergamon.

Seligman, M.E.P. (1975). Generality of learned helplessness in man. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 31, 311-327.

Schiemann, W. (1995). In N. Russell Jones (Ed.), *The Managing Change Pocketbook*. Hants, UK: Management Pocketbooks Ltd.

Scottish Education Department (1977). *Truancy and Discipline in Schools in Scotland* (The Pack Report). London: HMSO

Silverman, D. (2000). *Doing Qualitative Research, A Practical Handbook*. London: Sage.

Smith, E. (2007). *Social Psychology. Third Edition*. New York: Psychology Press

Strauss, A., and Corbin, J. (1998). *Basics of Qualitative Research* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.). London: Sage.

Strauss, A. and Corbin, J. (1990). *Basics of Qualitative Research* (1<sup>st</sup> ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Swann, W.B. (1987). Identity negotiation. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 53, 1038-1051

Thomas, K. (1984). *Social Psychology: Development, Experience and Behaviour in a Social World*. Milton Keynes, UK: Open University Press.

Turner, B.A. (1981). Some Practical Aspects of Qualitative Data Analysis: One Way of Organising the Cognitive Process Associated with the Generation of Grounded Theory. *Quality and Quantity*, 15 (1981) 225-247. The Netherlands: Elsevier Scientific Publishing Company.

Tyerman, M. J (1968). *Truancy*. London: University of London Press Ltd.

Whitney, B. (1994). *The Truth about Truancy*. London: Kogan Page.

Willig, C. (2001). *Introducing Qualitative Research in Psychology, Adventures in theory and method*. Maidenhead, England: Open University Press.

Zhang, M. (2004) Time to change the Truancy Laws? Compulsory Education: Its origin and modern dilemma. *Pastoral Care in Education*, 22(2): 27-33.

## **Appendix A – Extract of raw interview data together with Level 1 codes which emerged from this data**

**Appendix A. – Extract of raw interview data together with the Level 1 Codes which emerged from this data.**

*Q Some EWOs seem to use information from different sources, for instance, may seem to set most state by information gained from parents on a home visit. Do you think this is the most important source of information? Why?*

Yes, it is important – you need to find out the history to the issue and put them in some historical perspective (A) and to understand the reasons behind (B) the presenting behaviour. For me it helps me to understand the family dynamics which is key (C) to a child's behaviour and the non attendance.

I don't know if it's the 'most' important (D) – when I put the info together I wouldn't say that one piece of info is more important (E) than the other – but it is the key to understanding the family dynamics. (F) I know that young people behave differently in different social settings (G) and the situation in school is just as important (H) to find out, i.e. their relationship with their peers, that's a valuable piece of info (I) to get from the school.

*Q Would you always go back to the school to gather further information?*

I would always get a view from the person I normally link (J) with at school, but the link person at school is not always able to give you first hand information, (K) so I try to speak to the class teacher but that's not always possible.(L) There are some real barriers (M)

*Q What do you feel are the barriers to getting information from school?*

It feels to me that for some teachers it's about the power of holding the information, (N) but also the attendance officers. Schools can be quite precious with the information (O) and it can be difficult to go beyond that.(P) They give you their own opinion and it's not accurate enough. (Q) It's even worse in secondary (R) schools..... there are real barriers to seeing anyone.(S) I would want to go to the teacher but they feel that's their remit( T), they don't always let you see the person you would like to see, (U) particularly in secondary schools. I think there's a real fear (V) of what you might do with any info you find out. They will insist you speak to someone else 'in the chain' (W); there are definite barriers to being on the outside (X). It stops me doing my job properly (Y).

#### **Level 1 Codes emerging from this data**

- **A - Historical perspective (home)**
- **B - EWO perceptions of PA**
- **C - Family dynamics important**
- **D - Hierarchy of sources of information**
- **E - Sources of information equally valuable**
- **F - Family interactions important**
- **G - Pupil behaviour Contextual**
- **H- School context equally important**
- **I – Peer relationships significant to PA**

## **Appendix A (Continued)**

- **J - Link persons view sought by EWO**
- **K - Second and information**
- **L- Access to teacher limited**
- **M- Perceived barriers to accessing information**
- **N - Control of flow of information (schools)**
- **O - Limiting Information to EWO**
- **P - 'Gate Keeping role' (Attendance Officer)**
- **Q - Questioning the reliability of information (EWO)**
- **R - Perceptual barriers to accessing school staff  
(secondary)**
- **S - Limited access to school staff**
- **T - Roles and responsibilities (EWO-School)**
- **U - Preferred source of information restricted**
- **V- Perceived negative consequences of sharing  
information**
- **W - School hierarchy 'The Chain'**
- **X - Outsiders v Insiders**
- **Y – Restricting EWO role**

## **Appendix B – Example of Level 1 codes from data related to The Level 2 code of Hypothesis Formulation**

## **Appendix B    - Example of Level 1 codes emerging from data related to the Level 2 code of Hypothesis Formulation**

### **Hypothesis Formulation (Level 2 Code)**

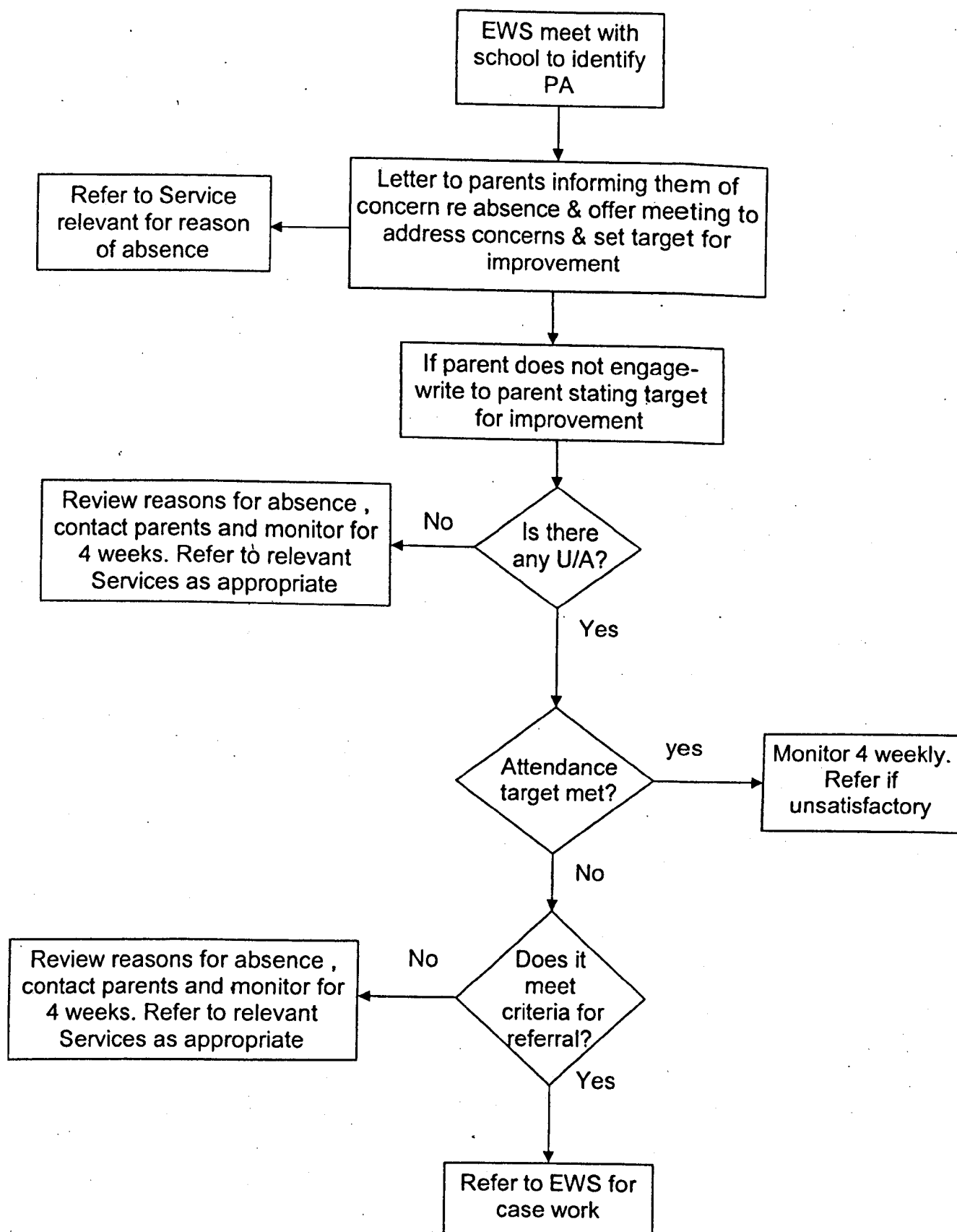
The Level 2 code of 'Hypothesis Formulation' was categorised in relation to the occurrence of the Level 1 codes listed below

### **Level 1 Codes**

- Drawing on previous experience
- Recognition of limited information
- 'Detective Approach' (in vivo)
- Lack of hypothesis
- 'Hunch based' (in vivo)
- Time pressured
- Unpicking complexities v seeking confirmation
- PA cause home based
- Fixed v fluid
- Hypothesis adopted (School)
- Process of elimination
- Preconceptions
- Existing beliefs
- Aiming for greater objectivity
- Root of PA home based
- Testing out hypotheses
- Range of potential hypotheses
- Seeking to confirm hypothesis
- Conflicting perspectives
- Not consciously grounded
- Multi-dimensional problems
- Competing hypotheses
- Consistent information to confirm



## **Appendix C – Persistent Absence Procedure (EWS Guidelines for EWOs)**



***Assignment 4 – Peer Mediation and Playtime  
Incidents in a Primary School***

# **Peer Mediation and Playtime Incidents in a Primary School**

| <b><u>Contents</u></b>      | <b><u>page</u></b> |
|-----------------------------|--------------------|
| <b>1. Introduction</b>      | <b>201</b>         |
| <b>2. Literature Review</b> | <b>201</b>         |
| <b>3. Methodology</b>       | <b>209</b>         |
| <b>4. Design</b>            | <b>214</b>         |
| <b>5. Results</b>           | <b>219</b>         |
| <b>6. Discussion</b>        | <b>229</b>         |
| <b>References</b>           | <b>236</b>         |

## **Appendices**

**Appendix 1 – Incidents Recording Schedule**

**Appendix 2 – Categorisation Descriptors**

## **Peer Mediation and Playtime Incidents in a Primary School**

### **1. Introduction**

The study forms part of a wider initiative involving the introduction of anti-bullying interventions in Nottingham City schools. The development of peer mediation schemes, which operate at playtimes and lunchtimes in primary school settings, are not only felt to have the potential to reduce incidents of bullying behaviour, but to also empower pupils to resolve their own problems. The study aims to provide evaluative data to support the notion of beneficial impacts and effectiveness, but also explores wider issues raised by the literature review, in respect of impact on differential categories of behaviour and gender differences.

### **2. Literature Review**

The study is based around the introduction of a Peer Mediation Scheme in a primary school, aimed at reducing and resolving issues related to pupil bullying behaviour. Playgrounds are not only areas for play and socialisation but may also, for some pupils, represent unsafe and hostile environments. Bullying behaviour can be subtle or extremely overt but is consistently a 'form of aggressive behaviour which is usually hurtful and deliberate' (Sharp 1994, p1,para 2).

Sharp and Smith (1994), have also suggested that not only does bullying occur around the school, the playground is the most common location. The study's intervention was targeted at playtimes and lunchtimes in a primary school, where there is the potential for most bullying behaviour to

occur. Sharpe and Smith go on to indicate that 'in primary schools, three quarters of pupils who are bullied are bullied during the breaks or lunchtimes. In secondary schools, bullying is more evenly spread across school grounds, corridors and classrooms' (p3,para 3).

The use of peer support in schools is based on the notion that pupils themselves have the capacity to solve their own problems and to offer social and emotional support to their peers, in addition to that offered by adults. Indeed, there are also implications that for some pupils the opportunity to share their concerns and problems with a peer can be preferable to adult involvement.

The Thomas Coram Research Unit (2003), on behalf of the Dfes, highlighted the concerns of a number of pupils who perceived telling teachers about bullying problems as 'associated with a wide range of risks' particularly in relation to; possible breaches of confidentiality, failure to act on reported incidents of bullying and an inability to protect pupils from retaliatory action on the part of the perpetrators. However, in addition to peers having the potential to fulfil this individual role, there are much wider reported potential benefits associated with the use of peer support schemes in schools.

Mummery (1995), for example in describing outcomes from peer ducation programmes in New Zealand, highlights peer supporters themselves as developing greater confidence and maturity together with reduced school bullying and vandalism. Cremin (2003), has also indicated that teachers who supported the development of peer mediation schemes in

their schools, believed that such schemes were genuinely pupil-led and reflected pupils' having feelings of ownership and empowerment. The Mental Health Foundation (2002), has also suggested that peer supporters themselves, can develop increased confidence, communication skills and a sense of responsibility. Likewise, schools were reported as benefiting through a reduction in bullying incidents and better teacher-pupil communication.

There are further indications therefore, that the use of peer support schemes can result, not only in benefits for the peer supporters themselves but more generally in a reduction in incidents of school bullying. The notion that a reduction in such incidents can be related to changes in pupil behaviour and subsequently a decreased need for adult intervention as a result of the introduction of such schemes, is therefore a link worthy of investigation.

Salmivalli (1999), believes that the peer group can be harnessed to end bullying and social exclusion. Peer Support is seen as a way of 'restructuring' the networks of aggressive young people and changing interpersonal relationships for the better. However, such attempts are not always supported by all adults involved with young people in schools. As Cowie (1998) has suggested, 'adults who try to mobilize the strength of young people can experience hostility and sabotage themselves', and in doing so fail to recognise that the solution may lie with the young people themselves (page 7, para 4).

Gilhooley & Scheuch (2000), clearly see the rationale for the use of, more specifically peer mediation, as a consequence of the inability of adults to solve all the problems that students face, concluding that, 'we must empower them with the ability to solve their own problems' (p5, para 1). Implicit within this rationale is the notion that social learning plays a significant role in the shaping of the behaviour, attitudes and values of young people, and as Fry & Fry (1997) argue, that both aggressive and pro-social behaviours are strongly influenced by the social contexts in young people find themselves, including the school system. Similarly, Bandura's (1977), Social Learning Theory would also reinforce the view that peer socialisation can contribute to the acquisition of new behaviours. Perceptions of self-efficacy, in terms of a pupil's perceived capability of coping with particular problems in specific situations, in turn influences pupil thinking, feelings, motivations and actions. The Crick Report (1998), also supported the view that peer support interventions can foster co-operation and pro-social behaviour, through stressing the importance of managing the learning environment in order to increase co-operative relationships, based on trust among peers, as well as between teachers and pupils (p.25).

There are indications therefore that the use of specific peer support schemes can impact at both the individual level in developing individual skills and increasing pupil ability to problem solve, but also at a much broader level within the school in terms of impacting on incidents of bullying and the wider school culture.



The initial rationale for this study was therefore to evaluate the impact of a peer mediation scheme in a primary setting. More specifically, to find evidence of a reduction in playground behaviours which can be categorised as bullying incidents, as an outcome of the introduction of a peer mediation scheme and in line with the research findings and implications cited.

Mediation schemes are intended to provide a way for trained pupils to deal with low level disputes between other pupils, including reported incidents of perceived bullying, and to offer a friendly, supportive and listening service to pupils who are experiencing problems in school.

Mediation is thus seen as one way for pupils to find mutually acceptable solutions to their problems and to manage conflict more positively in a task orientated way. Mediation refers to a 'structured process in which a neutral third party assists voluntary participants in their disputes' (Stacey & Robinson 1997). The use of peer mediation has often been, as Stacey (2001) points out, associated with a reduction in the number of pupils reporting being a victim of bullying, an increased ability to resolve conflict amongst peers together with increased ability to listen, co-operate and communicate. However, as Cowie (2000) points out research into the effectiveness of peer mediation 'tends to be descriptive and informal' (p32).

One aspect of this study specifically attempts to look at the impact of a peer mediation scheme in relation to quantifiable incidents of behaviour. As discuss earlier, there are indications that peer support schemes can lead to benefits for schools in terms of decreased incidents of bullying

behaviour. Miller (1993) in the USA, for example, also reports that following the introduction of a school peer mediation scheme, introduced as a result of increased fighting at playtime, findings pointed to a decrease in pupil arguments and teacher suspensions (exclusions), as well as improvement in the school climate and pupil relationships.

Stuart (1991), has also carried out research into peer mediation, using interviews and questionnaires, and has indicated through quantitative analysis, reductions in pupil tension and increased teaching time.

The notion of increased teaching time also implies a likely reduction in the number of incidents that teaching staff are involved in having to deal with.

This study also attempts to confirm research findings which indicate that peer mediation will have a direct impact on the number of behavioural incidents that are dealt with by teachers, and in this case lunch-time supervisors, at break times in a primary school. Another aspect of this study is to look at the impact of peer mediation on differential categories of behaviour.

The implication here is that the use of peer mediation may impact on some types of behaviour more than others. Stacey & Robinson et al (1997), for example report that Peer Mediation as a method of resolving conflict, leads to a 'substantial decrease in incidents of aggressive behaviour'. Cowie's (2000), PhD. research, also supports the view that peer mediation can lead to reductions in reports of bullying, concluding that 'the types of bullying that appeared to reduce were physical bullying,

teasing and psychological bullying' (p34). She also goes on to suggest that more research is needed, but it appears that mediation can have a positive effect on levels of bullying, self esteem and locus of control.

The study seeks to confirm that there will be a decrease in the number of recorded incidents categorised as physical bullying, following the introduction of a peer mediation scheme, in the experimental school.

Osterman et al (1997), also suggest that there may be gender differences relating to pupils who are most likely to use peer mediation, in the form of third party interventions and constructive conflict resolution, with girls being more likely to solve interpersonal difficulties in this way.

Kochenderfer and Ladd (1997), also highlight that there may be gender differences in the 'strategies children use in responding to peer aggression', with boys being less likely to report incidents to teachers and to fight back or turn to a friend for help. Girls on the other hand are more likely to resort to 'socialized tactics'.

These findings tend to support the view that girls are more likely to use peer mediation services in schools in order to resolve interpersonal conflict than boys. The study is predicting that this will be reflected in a decrease in the number of recorded incidents involving girls in the experimental school. The notion of peer mediation having a differential impact on specific categories of pupil behaviour displayed during playtimes and lunchtimes will also be explored.

Cremin (2000), for example, has noted that the most common types of disputes to come to mediation, using peer mediators, are 'the most subtle, indirect and psychological forms of conflict and bullying', she

goes on to point out that these forms of conflict and bullying involve language, and suggests that pupils who access peer mediation services may therefore see language as both a means of generating harm and of bringing about redemption. There is also an implication here that because girls are more likely to involve themselves in these less overt forms of bullying behaviour, then a peer mediation services could be more effective in dealing with the kinds of behaviours more frequently exhibited by girls.

Gender differences in children's playground behaviour have also been highlighted by Stephenson & Smith (1989), who suggest that bullies and their victims tend to be boys and more specifically that 'bullying tends to be different for boys and girls; that seen among girls more often involves verbal bullying, while that involving boys is more often physical, or a combination of physical and verbal bullying' (p26,para 2).

The literature review has indicated that peer mediation schemes when introduced in schools may have potential benefits not only for trained peer mediators/supporters but also in relation to improvements in the school culture, interpersonal relationships between pupils and teachers, increased teacher time as well as having the potential to reduce incidents of bullying behaviour.

Findings have also led to further areas of interest for the present study which seeks to (1) support the experimental hypothesis predicting that the introduction of a peer mediation scheme in a primary school can significantly reduce the number of playground incidents dealt with by

teachers and lunchtime supervisors. (2) That there will be a decrease in the number of recorded incidents in the experimental school which are categorised as physical bullying reflecting a decrease in aggressive behaviours and (3) there will be a differential impact following the introduction of peer mediators, in respect of gender, with an expected decrease in the number of girls being involved in recorded incidents. Again, the implications are from previous research findings indicating that girls are more likely to use peer mediators to resolve conflict.

### **3. Methodology**

The problems of trying to answer research questions in the social sciences, is reflected in the philosophical debates which underlie enquiry within this discipline. Whilst different approaches to research can be understood in terms of the ability and suitability of different methods to tackle a particular research problem or question, in other words it should be dependent upon what you are trying to find out, there are traditionally also less pragmatic ideas. These ideas reflect more philosophical notions about the nature of knowledge and how to get at it, as well as our ideas about the nature of the world and the theories we hold. The significance of this is that theories play an important role in determining the kind of problem we explore, the research strategy adopted, how the results are interpreted, as well as the types of explanation that are possible. In turn the methods used play a substantial part in determining the nature of theory. Theories and research findings 'are not intrinsically objective as

they are rooted in and influenced by the personal and cultural background of the theorist or researcher' (Stevens 1984).

In these terms theories themselves must be seen as constructions of reality, and as such cannot be regarded as absolute descriptions of the way things are, since all understanding is open to alternative conceptualisations. Different research paradigms therefore, represent different schools of thought about how to get at the truth, reality, and ultimately how research should be conducted to this end.

Nomethetic and idiographic approaches to psychological research reflect theory from Realist (Positivist) and Idealist perspectives, and highlight the differential 'models of the person' and their theories and assumptions about the nature of human behaviour and experience. Nomethetic approaches for example, follow those of the physical sciences in seeking general laws, often cause and effect. This is reflected in methods and concepts 'which are to be objective, clearly operationalised, replicable, usually empirical, and free from any value judgements or any other bias that cannot be quantified' (Thomas 1984).

The assumption here is that all human behaviour is definitive and causally determined, reflecting universal laws of human nature that are fixed and waiting to be discovered by psychologists.

An idiographic approach on the other hand, aims for a more holistic understanding in using the idea that reality and truth are not stable or fixed phenomena, as starting point. The idea that complex human behaviour can be understood in cause and effect terms and open to

reductionist explanations is contested. Gergen (1985), for example highlights the notion that psychological processes and categories differ and vary across cultures, arguing that a social constructionist approach to psychology, which reflects the cultural bases of world constructions, is also required in psychological enquiry.

These differing approaches to explanation and understanding are encompassed in the terms qualitative and quantitative research, as representing separate paradigms within psychological research.

Qualitative designs attempt to capture insight and meaning associated with human behaviour and are often much more detailed in terms of the descriptions they are able to generate, often involving inferences which go beyond given or generated facts or information. This capacity of theories to also encompass the richness of behaviour highlights another difference between qualitative and quantitative approaches, in terms of reflecting a continuum of description, from the simple cause and effect explanation associated with quantitative research, to the more complex understanding offered by more qualitative methods. However, rich description also leaves us with the problem of being able to assess its validity. More meaningful and complex explanations, by their nature, are less likely to be testable in rigorous ways, such as those adopted by the experimental sciences.

The dilemma represented here is that if we demand more reliable measures, we may have to lose the richness of description or alternatively risk a less valid explanation. It is often assumed that the more testable a theory is the more valuable it is, regardless of the

level of description it is able to provide. Evaluation of a particular theory and the methods chosen are therefore also a reflection of the explanation we are aiming to achieve, and as such, qualitative methods may also call for other criteria on which to base the value and usefulness of explanation.

Educational psychologists work in the real life settings of schools and the interactional nature of many of the problems and solutions encountered, reflect the complexity of human behaviour operating within overlapping and dynamic systems. The notion that one general approach to research can answer research questions relevant to these settings is unrealistic, and educational psychologists will need to be eclectic in adopting research methodologies which are fit for the purpose and the type of questions we are asking, as well as the types of explanation that we are aiming to offer. Quantitative and qualitative approaches should not therefore be seen as being mutually exclusive.

Rosenthal and Rosnow (1989) for example, have used the notion of 'methodological pluralism' in emphasising the need to bring together converging evidence in relation to existing phenomena, using a variety of methodological paradigms, in order to fully understand and explain.

As Silverman (2000) points out, our decision to use qualitative/quantitative methods should not reflect our methodological preferences, rather it should reflect the robustness and credibility of our research design. The issues of reliability and validity however, remain central to any research study if we are to answer research questions with any confidence.



One focus of this study is to measure the number of playground incidents 'dealt with' by teachers and mid-day supervisors following the introduction of a peer mediation scheme. The focus here is on generating numerical and quantifiable measures of behaviour, rather than seeking to generate meanings. A nominal measurement which relates to categories and types of behaviour encountered is also sought. Therefore, a quantitative rather than qualitative methodology has been chosen as an appropriate method of enquiry. Within this research paradigm the study seeks to employ an experimental approach. The study lends itself to this kind of approach owing to the decision to obtain pre and post test measures following the intervention (the peer mediation scheme), and also the hypothesising that there will be a reduction in the number of incidents that teachers and mid-day supervisors deal with and record. The study is therefore predicting a relationship between the independent variable, the peer mediation scheme, and the dependent variable the number of incidents, in terms of cause and effect. This relationship could occur or not occur, which supports the use of an experimental approach as appropriate in being able to support or refute the study's hypothesis. Since we also know what kind of explanation we are looking for, the use of more exploratory methods are less appropriate to the questions being asked, as are more qualitative methods. A quasi-experimental design has been adopted since the participant schools were not chosen at random, but rather reflect natural experimental groups. Although this design excludes the notion of the 'true' experiment, it nevertheless allows for the application of the logic of experimental design.

#### **4. Design**

The study employed a quasi-experimental design involving pre and post tests. Two primary schools were involved, one acting as the experimental school and the other as the control. Neither school was chosen at random as both had requested peer mediation schemes be introduced by the LEA's Anti-Bullying Team. In the case of the control school it was negotiated that data collection by school staff would be undertaken during two specified time periods, but that the introduction and training of peer mediators would be delayed until the second data collection period was complete. The control school felt that such data would be useful in it's own right and would form the basis of good baseline data prior to the peer mediation scheme being introduced. The issue of external validity is relevant here since random allocation has not occurred and the generalisability of the findings may be in question. It could be suggested that as both schools had registered an interest in the adoption of a peer mediation scheme, they may also already have or be developing a more peer supportive culture and ethos. It could be argued that this reflects a potential confounding variable for any subsequent explanation relating to a reduction in playtime incidents. However, if there were no significant changes for the control school then clearly the notion of generalisability may be strengthened.

Efforts were made to match the experimental and control school as far as possible. Whilst a number of schools had opted for Peer Mediation training, schools for the study were chosen on the basis of them both being roughly comparable in terms of pupil size; 245 pupils in the

experimental school and 265 in the control. Both were primary schools, with pupils in Years 1 to 6. They varied in that the experimental school had one mixed Year class in Yr 5/6, whilst, in the control school, this occurred in Y3/4.

Both schools were matched in terms of having separate playtimes for KS1 and KS2 pupils. Whilst this occurred in separate playgrounds in the experimental school, it reflected staggered play times in the control school. This was felt to be important in terms of any threats to internal validity since age and size differentials amongst pupils have been associated with bully – victim relationships, in terms of power imbalance. The ‘matching’ separate playtimes for individual key stages was therefore felt to be a factor which strengthened the study’s design.

### Procedure

The schools involved collected playground incidents data over two separate time periods. The control school collected data over two separate weeks and this was repeated after a half term. The experimental school collected similar data pre intervention (i.e prior to the setting up of the peer mediation scheme) over two separate weeks and repeated this following the intervention. The rationale behind the two separate data collection weeks pre and post, was to allow for an average number of incidents to be obtained for each school. A single week risked not be a reflection of ‘a typical week’ in school. The experimental schools pre intervention data was to act as a baseline measure against which post intervention data would be compared and analysed.

All teachers and mid-day supervisors in each school who were 'on duty' over the break time periods in school were involved in recording data using the Incidents Recording schedule (Appendix 1). This involved recording incidents which occurred on the playground which staff became involved in. The word bullying was excluded from the recording form. It is clearly an emotive word and can be defined in different ways by both adults and children. Bullying can take many forms and the categories of behaviour identified and included on the recording forms were intended to encompass a range of bullying behaviours, from the more overt physical, to more subtle forms such as spreading rumours and social exclusion. The categories of potential bullying behaviour were based on the 'Life In School' checklist developed by Arora, Sharp, Smith and Whitney (1993). Life In School is a checklist for gaining an insight into levels of bullying occurring in schools, through pupil completion of a two part pupil questionnaire. It enables pupils to identify with incidents which have occurred, whilst avoiding the question 'are you being bullied'? It highlights potential incidents which encompass the fact that children can define bullying in a number of ways.

The study's Incidents Log uses this notion of capturing the range of potential behaviour that may be perceived by pupil's to be bullying behaviour. Incidents which occur at playtimes may or may not be perceived as bullying by adults or other children, but all schools have bullying. The study, whilst introducing a peer mediation scheme with a general anti-bullying focus, also recognises that playground incidents will

not always reflect those that fall within the concept of bullying. The term 'incidents' therefore whilst reflecting behaviours which potentially reflect bullying behaviour, will also reflect the daily problems faced by pupils in the social arena of the playground which are less discrete than a bullying label would imply.

The decision to involve staff in the recording of such data, rather than the researcher, reflected potential problems associated with observational methods. It was felt that the presence of the researcher at playtimes could not only influence the behaviour of pupils, but also the behaviour of the teachers and supervisors on playground duty. It would also have been very difficult for an outside observer to be able to reliably interpret and record the behaviour of pupils, without being able to hear the explanations and self reports of pupils, who sought the involvement and support of the adults on duty. The involvement of staff themselves in the recording process, whilst also open to issues of reliability and validity, also meant that they acted as their own controls over repeated measures. For example, such recording is likely to be the subject of individual interpretation, vigilance, the personality involved in terms of an adults approachability for pupils, personal efficiency, or indeed whether the activity is perceived as being of benefit or worthwhile. Such individual characteristics are likely to prevail over the two separate data collection periods and therefore represent a more consistent variable.

Attempts to strengthen reliability around the process of recording incident data involved prior meetings with all staff involved. Standardised

instructions were given and guidance on completing the recording sheets using the categorisation descriptors (Appendix 2), were discussed with staff and reinforced by attaching a copy of the descriptors to the Incidents Log. The recording process involved staff recording the category of incident 'dealt with', together with the gender of the pupil involved as perpetrator. Recordings were based on both the observable behaviour of pupils together with self reports from pupils speaking to the adults on playground duty about pupil incidents.

An initial pilot study highlighted the need to include a further descriptor, relating to the number of incidents staff had intervened with. This reflected the fact that staff on duty are not passive in waiting for pupils to approach them with regard to incidents which had occurred. Staff often observed incidents taking place, particularly those involving physical acts, and would personally intervene in such incidents. This was also incorporated into the data collection process.

There were also ethical considerations to be taken into account. There was the potential for mid-day supervisors in school to perceive the data collection process as possibly having an ulterior motive, for example as a 'time and motion' study of the number of incidents being a reflection of the need, or not, of their presence at lunchtime. The purpose of the exercise was made explicit at the meeting in terms of its contribution towards an evaluation of the impact of a peer mediation service at play and lunchtimes. It was also decided that recording forms would remain anonymous in respect of the individual teacher or mid-day supervisor completing them. It was

negotiated with each school that data would be shared with them at the end of the study as opposed to after each data collection period, so as not to influence the recording process.

Following the first data collection period in the experimental school, a group of 15 Yr 5/6 pupils were trained to act as peer mediators at playtimes. 10 girls and 5 boys were selected for training. Training consisted of 3 X 2 hour sessions in school. The mediation service was then introduced to pupils during assembly and operated for a full half term before the second data collection period was completed.

## **5. Results**

The experimental hypothesis predicted that there would be a significant decrease in the number of recorded incidents, in the experimental school, following the introduction of a peer mediation scheme at playtimes and lunchtimes, but that no expected significant difference in pre and post measures would be found in the control school. Figure 1 illustrates the numbers of incidents recorded over two separate weeks, pre and post intervention, together with the total number and mean of incidents, for both the experimental and control school.

The mean number of incidents post intervention for the experimental school shows a considerable reduction in recorded incidents. The difficulty associated with statistical analysis, in respect of the study, relates to the notion of 'subjects'. Both the teachers and mid-day

supervisors involved in the recording of data pre and post intervention could be taken to represent subjects whose recorded measures can be analysed under the two conditions of 1) no peer mediation scheme 2) peer mediation scheme. The difficulty with this experimental design is that it precluded the identification of individual school staff for intended increased reliability, but subsequently at the expense of not being able to match pre and post measures with individual subjects. This could have been avoided if the teachers and mid-day supervisors involved had been assigned a letter, number or other similar non personal way of being able to compare individual subject recordings.

Consequently, the study has used the term 'subjects' to be represented as groups of pupils involved in different types and categories of behaviour which make up the incident measures of the study. In this way a limited statistical analysis could be undertaken. The use of perhaps a more robust parametric test, for example the T Test, was also considered but although the data meets the requirements of parametric statistics in being able to carry out numerical calculations, it fails to meet the requirement of having the ability for the scores obtained to be 'normally' distributed. It is clearly not the case that the number of playtime incidents would be 'normally' distributed across schools ie. with the potential to show a symmetrical distribution around a more frequent middle range score. There are likely to be far more irregular patterns of distribution across school populations.



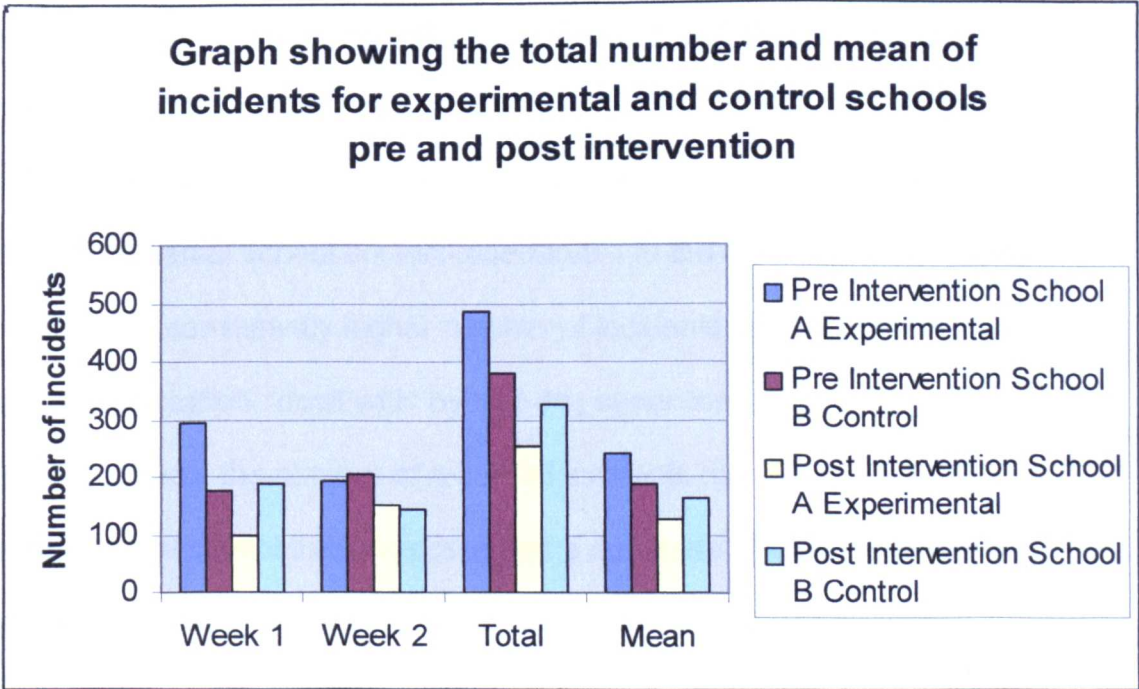
### Incidents Data

The results were analysed using the Wilcoxon Signed Ranks Test, for a two condition related design. The aim was to see if there were significant differences between the number of pupils involved in incidents under the two conditions. The analysis indicated an observed value of  $W=0, N=5$ , which was found to be significant at the  $P<.05$  significance level for a one-tailed test, for the experimental school. The control schools results, (observed value of  $W=4, N=5$ ), were not found to be significant at the various levels of probability for critical values of  $W$ .

This is also reflected in Figure 1. which illustrates that pre intervention, there were approximately 25% more recorded incidents in the experimental school, compared with the control school, whilst post intervention this had reversed, with the experimental school recording almost 25% fewer. Mean scores are also indicative of a significant decrease in recorded incidents for the experimental school compared to the control, and although there was a decrease in the mean number of incidents for the control school, as discussed, this was not statistically significant (see Figure 2).

Figure 1. Table showing the total number and means of recorded incidents for both experimental and control schools pre and post intervention

|                                | Pre intervention         |                     | Post intervention        |                    |
|--------------------------------|--------------------------|---------------------|--------------------------|--------------------|
|                                | School A<br>Experimental | School B<br>Control | School A<br>Experimental | SchoolB<br>Control |
| Week 1                         | 292                      | 175                 | 99                       | 186                |
| Week 2                         | 193                      | 204                 | 153                      | 141                |
| Total number<br>of incidents   | 485                      | 379                 | 252                      | 327                |
| Mean<br>number of<br>incidents | <b>242.5</b>             | <b>189.5</b>        | <b>126</b>               | <b>163.5</b>       |



Pre Intervention

Post Intervention

|  |      |        |
|--|------|--------|
| Teachers<br>Experimental School            | 46.5 | 24     |
| Teachers<br>Control School                 | 37   | 22     |
| Mid-day Supervisors<br>Experimental School | 196  | 102    |
| Mid-day Supervisors<br>Control School      | 152  | 141.50 |

Fig 3. Table showing the weekly average number of incidents recorded by both teachers and mid-day supervisors for the experimental and control schools

Figure 3 shows a breakdown of the weekly mean recorded incidents recorded by teachers and mid-day supervisors. This illustrates that there were considerable differences between the average number of incidents recorded by teachers and mid-day supervisors. In the experimental school, pre intervention, mid-day supervisors recorded over four times as many incidents as teachers and this was also the case for the control school. Post the introduction of peer mediation, the 4:1 ratio remained for the experimental school but increased to 6:1 in the control, in both cases indicating a consistently higher number of incidents were recorded, and by implication, 'dealt with' by mid-day supervisors.

In both schools the number of recorded incidents had decreased. In the experimental school this is represented a decrease of 48% for teachers and 47% for mid-day supervisors. In the control school the percentage decreases were higher for teachers, 40%, but only 6% for mid-day

supervisors. The percentage decrease for teachers in the control school appears to be significantly higher than would be expected, however, it should also be noted that this is only representative of a decrease of 15 incidents, an average of 7 incidents per week for teachers. Whilst the number of incidents recorded by teachers is also smaller for the experimental school, with the 48% post intervention only representing an average decrease of 11.25 incidents per week, the significant decreases recorded by mid day supervisors in the control school, post intervention (representing an average weekly decrease of 47 incidents), is clearly in sharp contrast to the 6% experienced by the control school. These findings, together with the previous analysis, are indicative of support for the experimental hypothesis in relation to a significant decrease in recorded incidents in the experimental school, and will be discussed further.

#### Physical Bullying Data

(2) A further aim of the study was to indicate support for the hypothesis that there will be a decrease in the number of recorded incidents, in the experimental school, which are categorised and recorded as incidents of physical bullying. Figure 4 shows the numbers of pupils, both male and female involved in differential categories of bullying behaviour, for both the experimental and control schools. Pre-intervention both the experimental and control schools recorded the highest levels of incidents for verbal and physical behaviour. More specifically 'verbal' would encompass name calling, teasing and threatening other pupils,

whilst the 'physical' category would reflect incidents involving physical contact such as pushing, kicking, pulling, hitting or using or throwing objects to make contact.

The 'physical' category has been taken to reflect more physically aggressive behaviours. Statistical analysis has already indicated that differences across the two experimental conditions showed a significant level of probability for the experimental school, more specifically indicating that the probability of the results occurring by chance were less than 5%. This reflects differences in the total number of recorded incidents across all categories of behaviour.

Within the individual categories themselves, the experimental school showed consistent decreases across all categories, post intervention.

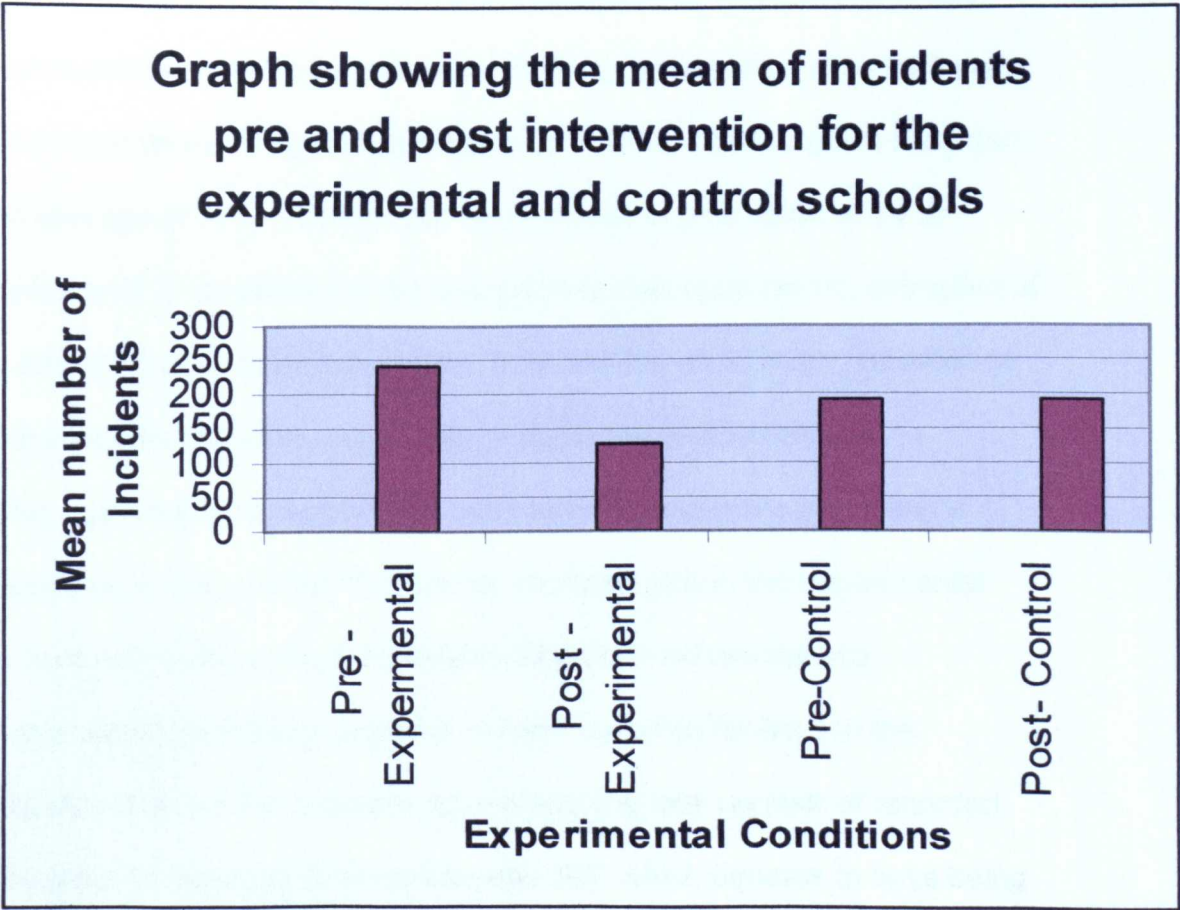
Noticeably, the 'physical' category had decreased by almost 50%.

The control school whilst also indicating decreases across the 'verbal' and 'possessions' related categories, also displayed increases across the 'physical' and 'individual differences' categories, whilst the social category remained unchanged. This again tends to indicate support for the studies predicted outcomes, in respect of decreases in the physical category, linked to research findings which suggest that peer mediation leads to decreases in aggressive behaviour.



Figure 4. Table showing the total number of incidents recorded by both experimental and control schools, by category of bullying behaviour, for both males and females, pre and post the introduction of peer mediation

|                        | Pre          |         | Post         |         |
|------------------------|--------------|---------|--------------|---------|
| Category of Behaviour  | Experimental | Control | Experimental | Control |
| Verbal                 | 170          | 127     | 108          | 96      |
| Physical               | 202          | 199     | 109          | 201     |
| Social                 | 43           | 21      | 13           | 13      |
| Possessions            | 42           | 27      | 13           | 10      |
| Individual Differences | 28           | 5       | 9            | 7       |



### Gender Data

(3) A further aspect of the study was in relation to the predicted impact of a peer mediation scheme on the number of incidents involving girls. It was predicted that girls were more likely to use peer mediation to resolve their conflicts, and that as a consequence of this, there would be a decrease in the number of recorded incidents involving girls. Figures 6 and 6a. show the total numbers of recorded incidents by gender for both the experimental and control schools, together with a break down of the numbers of boys and girls recorded as being involved in different categories of bullying behaviour.

The total number of incidents for girls, pre and post intervention in the experimental school, is indicative of a decrease of 70 incidents in total, representing an average reduction of 35 incidents per week, over 5 play and lunch times. This is in contrast to the control school, which recorded an average of 77.5 incidents per week involving girls followed by an average of 71 incidents for the second data collection period, indicative of a decrease of 13 incidents in total, representing an average reduction of 6.5 incidents per week, again over 5 playtimes and lunchtimes.

This again tends to support the experimental hypothesis predicting a decrease in the number of incidents involving girls in the experimental school. However, a more noticeable difference across the two experimental conditions appears to have occurred for boys in the experimental school. Figure 6. shows that the total number of recorded incidents for boys pre intervention was 306, which equates to boys being

involved in an average of 153 incidents per week. The highest involvement occurred in the categories of verbal and physical behaviour and this was consistently the case for both boys and girls in the experimental and control schools. Pre intervention, the number of boys recorded as involved in ‘verbal’ incidents in the experimental school represented an average of 49.5 incidents per week, and in ‘physical’ incidents an average of 68.5 per week.

Post intervention this had decreased to averages of 28.5 (verbal) and 34.5 (physical) respectively. This represents significant decreases, nearing 50% in both cases. The implication of this and those suggested by earlier findings will be discussed.

Figure 6. Experimental School

| Category of Behaviour  | Boys Pre | Boys Post | Girls Pre | Girls Post |
|------------------------|----------|-----------|-----------|------------|
| Verbal                 | 99       | 57        | 71        | 51         |
| Physical               | 137      | 69        | 65        | 40         |
| Social                 | 23       | 5         | 20        | 8          |
| Possessions            | 36       | 10        | 6         | 3          |
| Individual Differences | 11       | 2         | 17        | 7          |
| Total                  | 306      | 143       | 179       | 109        |



Figure 6a. Control School

| Category of Behaviour  | Boys Pre | Boys Post | Girls Pre | Girls Post |
|------------------------|----------|-----------|-----------|------------|
| Verbal                 | 49       | 30        | 78        | 82         |
| Physical               | 145      | 138       | 54        | 45         |
| Social                 | 7        | 4         | 14        | 9          |
| Possessions            | 22       | 12        | 5         | 5          |
| Individual Differences | 1        | 1         | 4         | 1          |
| Total                  | 224      | 185       | 155       | 142        |

Tables showing the number of recorded incidents by category and gender for the experimental and control schools

**6. Discussion**

The results and analysis indicate support for the experimental hypothesis predicting a decrease in recorded incidents in the experimental school, following the introduction of peer mediation. This is in line with research findings and assertions discussed earlier Stacy (2001), Miller (1993), Cowie (2000).

Results also indicated that the greatest impact occurred in the ‘physical’ and ‘verbal’ categories. The limitations of the study’s experimental design clearly lies with its inability to provide evidence to tell us why? There are however, a number of researchers who attempt to offer further explanations with regards to such interventions. Duncan (1993) for

example, highlights a quote from a teacher in a New Zealand school following the introduction of peer mediators, which offers a consistent explanation with the studies findings, 'I don't have so many children rushing up to me on duty, I often hear the children say " Let's find the mediators, they'll help"; incidents have lessened in the playground, children are much more responsible; mediators take their job seriously and excellent training has helped them solve many types of problems. I am impressed how they handle situations. I have not yet had to step in' (pg 33, para 2).

Johnson and Johnson (1996), also found that trained pupils themselves engaged in less antisocial and more pro-social behaviour, whilst violence and other serious discipline problems decreased (pg33, para 1).

The results point not only to a decrease in the total number of incidents but also to significant decreases for 'verbal' and 'physical' categories of behaviour for boys and girls in the experimental school.

The study's predicted decrease in incidents involving girls was supported, but this was not as noticeable as the decrease involving boys. Research has indicated that the predicted decrease for girls is based on findings suggesting that girls are more likely to use mediation to resolve conflict.

Osterman (1997), pointed to the notion of gender differences in respect of girls being most likely to use peer mediation. Although the results do indicate that girls were recorded as being more involved in 'verbal' incidents, the 'physical' category for girls was comparable and both had decreased consistently. However, if peer mediation is the cause of

the reduction in girls it is unlikely to be the reason for the significant reduction highlighted for boys.

Further data which looked at the gender of pupils using the peer mediation service would have been useful here, but it is also likely that we need to consider broader explanations in respect of the findings in relation to the decrease in physical incidents for boys. An increase in the use of a peer mediation service by pupils does not however imply a reduction in playtime incidents, rather it may be a reflection of a preference to tell a peer rather than an adult.

Fewer incidents recorded by teachers and mid-day supervisors in terms of adult involvement is not therefore a justification for the assertion that bullying incidents have reduced, since they may have just have shifted to the peer mediators. Research regarding the wider impact of peer mediation does however point to a decrease in incidents as, in part, being a reflection in changes in pupil behaviour.

Research relating to the importance of 'friendship', may be of relevance here. Boulton (1999) for example, has found that reciprocated friendship is likely to act as a barrier to aggressive acts and social exclusion by peers (p8, para 1) and that young people can be protected by appropriate befriending interventions. Since part of the role of being a peer mediator in this study also included acting as a befriender to pupils, it is likely that such 'barriers' could have been established and as a consequence opportunities to exercise bullying behaviours were also reduced.

Similarly, Evans (1989), has also reported that 'rejected' pupils on the playground demonstrate more aggressive and aversive behaviour and

are more likely to be involved in fights' (p27).

It could also be suggested that again befriending by peer mediators could also lead to the breaking of negative cycles of aggressive behaviour by rejected pupils, which in turn resulted in fewer incidents of aggressive, 'physical' behaviours being recorded. The study's results are implying a cause and effect relationship between the introduction of peer mediation and improvements in playtime behaviour, this being reflected in a decrease in bullying behaviours and more specifically, a decrease in physical acts, particularly amongst boys.

As already mentioned, a competing argument would be to suggest that there has simply been a shift from adults being involved in playtime incidents to peers being involved in helping resolve conflict, befriend and help sort out other playtime problems. However, as research has indicated boys are not the primary users of peer mediation services and it is more likely that more indirect effects are operating.

The differences found between the two experimental conditions in terms of the number of recorded incidents, although being statistically significant, also highlighted a distinction between the total numbers of incidents which were recorded by mid-day supervisors in contrast to teachers. Mid-day supervisors tended to record 4 times as many incidents as teachers. This in part is likely to be a reflection of lunchtimes representing a longer break period, as well as being a period where there may be more staff on duty. However, Boulton's (1996) research findings relating to lunchtime supervisor's attitudes to playful fighting at playtimes,

suggests that mid-day supervisors are more likely to interpret playful fighting as aggressive fighting, and to discriminate less favourably between playful and aggressive behaviours in the playground (pg 368, para 2).

This would also add support to the higher numbers of incidents recorded by mid-day supervisors in the control and experimental schools and to the consistently higher ratio found post intervention. Humphreys and Smith (1987), also suggest that adults overestimate playground fights, again because of difficulties in distinguishing between real and play fights (p25). The results also indicated that for both teachers and mid-day supervisors in the experimental school, the number of incidents decreased across both school staff groups by significantly similar percentages. It could also be said therefore, that despite any tendency for mid-day supervisors and other adults to interpret playful acts as aggressive acts, there were consistent decreases for both teachers and mid-day supervisors which are likely to reflect 'real' decreases at both playtimes and lunchtimes, when the peer mediation scheme was operating.

Blachford (1989), has pointed to the 'quality of supervision provided in the playground as an important factor in pupil behaviour' (p30). Consideration might also be given to the notion of improved supervision as reflected not only in respect of peer mediators providing an increased 'supervisory' presence, but also through school staff being involved in the recording process. It is possible that this procedure actually leads to heightened awareness of both potential and real conflicts at playtime. The additional

presence of peer mediators, coupled with the implication that both teachers and mid-day supervisors have more potential time to supervise, owing to a decrease in incidents involving adult intervention, may also lead to opportunities for improved supervision. An analogy would be that of putting more policemen on the 'beat' to act as an observable deterrent to potential criminals, or as in this case potential bullies.

In conclusion the outcomes of the study appear to support the experimental hypothesis in confirming that a primary school peer mediation service has the potential to impact on the number of bullying type behaviours which occur at playtimes and lunchtimes. It is also suggested that the significant decrease recorded in the number of physical/aggressive incidents involving boys in the experimental school, might best be understood in terms of wider more indirect influences relating to, as Salmivalli (1999), has suggested, the restructuring of social networks through increased befriending opportunities, more limited opportunities to bully and increased supervision. The study's experimental design is limited in terms of any causal explanation other than at the level of cause and effect. Further investigation into the why? elements of the study's' findings would have been useful in developing our understanding of the use of peer mediators further. Within this study, this could have usefully included data in relation to the 'client' group, in terms of who is actually using the peer mediation service, how frequently is it accessed and for what types of problem. This in conjunction with the data already described, would have helped bolster explanations which

attempt to interpret and support the study's findings other than at the level of a cause and effect explanation.

## References Assignment 4 – Peer Mediation and Playtime Incidents

### Primary References

Arora, C.M.J. (1994) Measuring bullying with the Life in School checklist. *Pastoral Care in Education*. Vol 12, 3, 11-16.

Blatchford, P. & Sharp, S. (1994) *Break time and the school: Understanding and changing playground behaviour*. London: Routledge.

Blachford, P. (1989) *Playtime in the primary school. Problems and Improvements*. Windsor: NFER Nelson.

Bolton, M.J. (1996) Lunchtime Supervisors attitudes towards playful fighting, and ability to differentiate between playful and aggressive fights. *British Journal of Educational Psychology* (1996) Vol 66 367-381.

Cowie, H. and Wallace, P. (2000) *Peer Support in Action. From Bystanding to Standing By*. London: Sage.

Cowie, H. (1998) Perspectives of teachers and pupils on the experience of peer support against bullying. *Educational Research and Evaluation*, Vol 4 108-125.

Cremin, H. (2000) An investigation into whether the 'Iceberg' system of peer mediation training, and peer mediation, reduce levels of bullying, raising self esteem and increase pupil empowerment amongst upper primary age children. Thesis. University College, Northampton and Leicester University, Leicester.

Cremin, H. (2003) *Pupils Resolving Disputes; Presentation of research from 15 English primary schools with successful peer mediation services*. Paper presented at the International Conference on Violence in Schools, Quebec, Canada.

Crick Report (1998) *Education for citizenship and the teaching of democracy in schools*. London: QCA.

Duncan, Y. (1993) Report on 'Cool Schools Mediation Programme'. In Cowie and Wallace (2000), *Peer Support In Action* (p 33, 2).

Evans, J. (1989) *Children at Play: Life in the School Playground*. In Blatchford and Sharp (1994) (eds.) *Breaktime and the school* (p 23, 2).

Fry, D.P. & Fry, C.P. (1977) *Culture and Conflict Resolution Models: Exploring alternatives to violence*. New Jersey: Erlbaum.



Gergen, K. (1985). Social Psychology as history. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 26, 309-320.

Gilhooley, J. & Scheuch, N. (2000) *Using peer Mediation in Classrooms and Schools*. California: Corwin Press Inc.

Johnson, D.W. & Johnson, R. (1996) Conflict resolution and peer mediation programmes in elementary and secondary schools. *Journal of Social Psychology*, 134 (6), 803-817.

Kochenderfer, B.J., & Ladd, G.W (1997). Victimized children's responses to peer's aggression: Behaviours associated with reduced versus continued victimisation. *Development and Psychopathology*. 9, 59-73.

Mental Health Foundation (2002). *Peer Support Manual*.

Mummery, A. (1995) Letter. *Xcellent*, March, 6-7.

Osterman, K. (1997) Sex differences in styles of conflict resolution: a developmental and cross cultural study. Mahwah, New Jersey: Erlbaum.

Pellegrini, A.D. (1995) *School Recess and playground Behaviour: Educational Developmental Roles*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.

Rosenthal, R., and Rosnow, R.L. (1989). Statistical procedures and the justification of knowledge in Psychological science. *American Psychologist* 44, 1276-1284

Salmivalli, C. (1999) Self evaluated self esteem, peer evaluated self esteem and defensive egotism as predictors of adolescents' behaviour in bullying situations. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 25, 1268-78.

Sharp, S. & Smith, P (1994) *Tackling Bullying In Your School*. London: Routledge.

Sharp, S., Smith, P. & Whitney, I. (1993) A survey of the nature and extent of bullying in Junior/Middle and Secondary schools. *Educational Research*. Vol 35, number1.

Silverman, D. (2000). *Doing Qualitative Research, A Practical Handbook*. London: Sage.

Stacey, H. & Robinson, P. (1997) *Let's Mediate*. Bristol: Lucky Duck Publishing Ltd.

Stacey, H. (2001) *Learning how to mediate*. Bristol: Luck Duck Publishing Ltd.

Stevens, R. (1984). *Social Psychology: Development, Experience and Behaviour in a Social World*. Milton Keynes: Open University Press.

Thomas Coram Research Unit (2003). *Tackling Bullying: Listening to the views of children and young people*. Institute of Education.

Thomas, K. (1984). *Introduction to Psychology. Methodology Handbook*. Milton Keynes: Open University Press.

### Secondary References

Bandura, A. (1977) *Social Learning Theory*. In *A First Course in Psychology*. Hayes, N. (ed) (1994). Edinburgh: Nelson

Humphreys, A. & Smith, P. (1987) Rough and tumble play in the preschool playground. In Boulton. M. J (1996) (ed.) *Lunchtime supervisors attitudes*. *British Journal of Educational Psychology*, Vol 66, 367-381

Miller, R.W. (1993) *In search of peace. Schools in the middle*. In Cowie.H and Wallace.P (2000) (eds.) *Peer Support In Action*. (p32, 2)

Stephenson, P. & Smith, P. (1989) *Bullying in the junior school*. In Blatchford P. and Sharp S. (eds.) (1994) *Breaktime and the school*. London: Routledge.

Stuart, L.A. (1991) *Conflict Resolution Using Mediation Skills in the Elementary School*. In Cowie H. and Wallace P. (eds) (2000) *Peer Support In Action. From Bystanding to Standing By*. London: Sage.

Week beginning: \_\_\_\_\_ School: \_\_\_\_\_

Day: \_\_\_\_\_

Playground Incidents Log

| Morning Break<br>Lunch<br>Afternoon Break<br>(Please circle) |                                       | <u>Category of incident</u>                            |                     |                                |                       |                           |
|--|---------------------------------------|--|---------------------|--------------------------------|-----------------------|---------------------------|
|  |                                       | Verbal:<br>name<br>calling/<br>teasing/<br>threatening | Physical<br>contact | Ignored/<br>left out/<br>alone | Taking<br>possessions | Individual<br>differences |
| G<br>I<br>R<br>L<br>S  | Teacher<br>intervention/<br>proactive |  |                     |                                |                       |                           |
|  | Approached                            |  |                     |                                |                       |                           |
|  |                                       |  |                     |                                |                       |                           |
| B<br>O<br>Y<br>S   | Teacher<br>intervention/<br>proactive |  |                     |                                |                       |                           |
|  | Approached                            |  |                     |                                |                       |                           |

Please record gender of who approaches you and categorise the nature of the incident (tally record)

## How to complete the Playground Incident Log

### Guidance

- Please record (as a running tally, i.e IIII II) the gender of the child that reports the incident to you whilst you are on playground duty, together with the type/category of the incident.
- Categorisation

Examples of each category would be:

Verbal – name calling, teasing, threatening.

Physical contact – pushing, kicking, pulling, hitting, using an object to make physical contact.

Ignored/left out/alone – having no-one to play with, being excluded or shut out of games or social groups.

Taking possessions – kicking bags around, taking balls/toys, throwing possessions around.

Individual differences – comments made in relation to size, skin colour, gender, disability, class, language or sexuality.

**Assignment 5 - *How do teachers experience the use of a Solution Circle as an intervention in relation to difficult to manage pupil behaviour ?***

## **Contents – Solution Circles**

|  | <b>page</b> |
|--|-------------|
| <b>1. Abstract</b>                           | <b>242</b>  |
| <b>2. Literature Review</b>                  | <b>243</b>  |
| 2.1 Problem Solving                          | 244         |
| 2.2 Solution Circles                         | 246         |
| 2.3 Pupil Behaviour                          | 247         |
| 2.4 Consultation                             | 251         |
| <b>3. Methodology</b>                        | <b>253</b>  |
| 3.1 Research Paradigms                       | 254         |
| 3.2 Qualitative and Quantitative Research    | 255         |
| 3.3 Design/Design Issues                     | 258         |
| 3.4 Interviews                               | 263         |
| 3.5 Ethical Considerations                   | 264         |
| 3.6 Subjects                                 | 265         |
| 3.7 Materials/Instruments                    | 267         |
| 3.8 Procedure                                | 268         |
| <b>4. Results</b>                            | <b>270</b>  |
| 4.1 Integrated Systems of Support            | 272         |
| 4.2 INPUT – Threats to Teacher Identity/Role | 273         |
| 4.3 Manageability of Problem                 | 277         |
| 4.4 Justification for Action                 | 279         |
| 4.5 OUTPUT – Impact Transference             | 283         |
| <b>5. Discussion</b>                         | <b>290</b>  |
| 5.1 Support from Colleagues                  | 292         |
| 5.2 School Culture                           | 294         |
| 5.3 Group Processes                          | 296         |
| 5.4 The Grounded Theory                      | 299         |
| 5.5 Potential areas for further research     | 301         |
| <b>References</b>                            | <b>303</b>  |

## **Appendices**

### **Appendix 1 – Solution Circle: Getting Unstuck**

#### **Appendix 1a – Solution Circle – Collaborative Problem Solving Process**

### **Appendix 2 – Researcher Assumptions and Beliefs**

### **Appendix 3 – Semi Structured Interview Framework**

### **Memo Writing 1 – 4**

## **Assignment 5 – Solution Circles**

### **1. How do teachers experience the use of a Solution Circle as an intervention in relation to difficult to manage pupil behaviour?**

#### **1.1 Abstract**

A Solution Circle represents a 'short and powerful tool, which is effective in getting 'unstuck' from a problem in life or work. It assumes and demonstrates that nearby people, in any community or work place, have the capacity to help – if asked (Pearpoint and Forest 1997).

In this study, a Solution Circle a four step collaborative process, lasting approximately half an hour, was introduced and facilitated in the educational context, with teachers, teaching assistants and in some cases other LA (Local Authority) support staff, as a way of intervening with and finding potential solutions to the more effective management of difficult pupil behaviour. The process conceptualises the idea of joint and collaborative problem solving as a potentially rich source of individual support, using the notion that 'together we are better'.

The study seeks to explore, more specifically, how teachers actually experience the use of the Solution Circle process, and to generate some understanding, at a more theoretical level of the use of this problem solving framework, from the perspective of those teachers that have been involved in this as an intervention process.

The study's findings are indicative of the Solution Circle process as representing a contextual theory reflecting the integration of systems of support which are made available to the teacher, with consequential



benefits for both the teacher and targeted young person. This process also reflected subsequent positive changes in teacher practice, provision and perceptions of pupil behaviour, as well as teacher efficacy in the further management of the pupils' behaviour.

## **2 . Literature Review**

The idea of increasing competence through collaborative problem solving opportunities was highlighted by Hanks (2002), who found that when teachers were given the opportunity, as Hanks suggests, 'to explore difficulties in problem- focused staff groups, teachers tend to be surprised by how much they can in fact do for their pupils as well as for each other.' However, such opportunities for collaborative problem solving amongst teachers and their colleagues, in particular, do not appear to be the norm in schools. Thornton's (2000) article in the Times Educational Supplement, entitled, 'Thousands of teachers are desperate for help,' reflects a report that in a single year, over 12,000 teaching staff contacted a counselling line citing, amongst other things, a lack of support with difficult to teach children. This is also interesting in light of the fact that schools often have access to a range of local authority support agencies, including Educational Psychologists and Behaviour Support Teachers, yet teachers can continue to feel unsupported, particularly with children who exhibit more challenging behaviours.

This has also been emphasised by Lieberman and Miller (1990), who suggest that 'loneliness and isolation are high prices to pay but teachers

willingly pay them when the alternatives are seen as exposure and censure' (p94, para 2).

Hanko (1995), also points out however, that so called 'specialist advice' may imply criticism of the teacher and appear irrelevant to the classroom. 'Both sides frequently feel unappreciated and unfavourably judged by the other'(pg 10), whilst Eavis (1983) has also cited teachers professional pride as 'a major barrier to teachers sharing their anxieties and frustrations in attempts to tackle their difficulties' (p11).

Galloway (1985) has also suggested that teachers' may even attempt to 'transfer responsibility to the specialist, thus absolving themselves from considering their interaction with the child or from looking for the precipitating factors in a crisis' (p10).

What has emerged here therefore, is a more complex picture of the potential barriers to effective collaborative problem solving with teachers, than perhaps would have been anticipated. This in turn, is likely to influence the impact of, as well as the willingness of teachers, to engage with behavioural interventions which identify the teacher as the 'problem holder.'

## **2.1 Problem Solving**

Definitions of 'Problem solving' include the specifying of a goal that the solver is not immediately able to achieve. The goal may be 'blocked' through, for example, a lack of resources, knowledge, or information, thus leading to the 'problem'. What you do in order to achieve your goal is

'problem solving'. The willingness or desire to solve a problem is however, as already highlighted, a variable which needs to be taken into account when considering the potential benefits of any intervention, as is the idea of using collaborative problem solving opportunities with colleagues in order to enhance the problem solving process. Although the acclaimed benefits of peer and adult collaboration have been well documented, (for example Vygotsky 1978), in demonstrating that collaborative language enhances learning, and that both children and adults are able to contribute to their own learning through small group social interactions, opportunities for this to happen in schools do not readily occur.

Steinberg (1989), would see such opportunities for collaborative consultation amongst colleagues as representing 'a joint exercise in problem clarification...which enhances the professional competence of consultees, as well as helping them to learn how to consult others. Questions can be asked which allow the situation to be looked at anew, with people assisting each other in finding their own workable alternative solutions'.

Hanko (2002), in her role as a psycho-dynamically oriented educational consultant, highlights the need to 'take account of the psychological and institutional difficulties which are likely to militate against its acceptance and implementation' (p9, para 2). Although referring to the use of collaborative consultation as a problem solving approach, there are similarities with Solution Circles, with an Educational Psychologists acting as the facilitator of the joint exploration of a problem, and with such

'collaborative exploration encouraging others to develop their own sharing capability in a problem solving framework, to address existing problems as well as those that may yet arise' (p9, par 4).

## **2.2 Solution Circles**

A Solution Circle begins with a problem presentation phase which is used by the 'problem presenter' to outline the problem to colleagues. The rationale for facilitating the process is grounded in a Solution Focused approach. Such approaches are based on methods which relate to Solution Focused Brief Therapy (De Shazer 1985), which aim to 'induce new 'viewing', new 'doing', or call upon forgotten strengths and resources (O'Hanlon and Weiner-Davis (1989).

Therapists adopting solution focused methods often try to construe a 'clients' attitude to change and to themselves as therapists. Three potential 'positions' have been highlighted that may be adopted by a client. Goal oriented tasks which clients are likely to undertake are seen to vary in relation to the position they adopt. For example, 'Visitors,' are often reluctant to play any part in steps towards change and are unable to identify goals as they often don't see that there is a problem.

'Complainants' (or information givers) will generally view themselves as a victim of the problem and powerless to change. 'Customers', considered the ideal clients, usually have some clarity about goals, accept that things need to change and are motivated in having a part in doing this. This latter position also implies that there is also acceptance of some responsibility for solving the problem.

This would appear to be significant when looking at the use of a Solution Circle as a school based intervention, since the 'position' of the teacher is likely to influence the 'process' and ultimately determine the effectiveness of any subsequent action, which may be taken as a consequence of being involved.

Rhodes (1993), for example, suggests that teachers 'are often in the position of being information givers (complainants), since they are concerned, yet feel overwhelmed by work and believe the cause of the problem lies outside the classroom. Hence complicated and time consuming interventions are not likely to be carried out, even if polite agreement was given' (p29, para 6).

This also implies that it is not the 'strategies' themselves which are important in determining the effectiveness of any intervention, but that consideration needs to be given to the interrelation of an individual's thinking and beliefs, their internal processes and the problem situation. There is also the implication that the likely 'position' of teachers as complainants, is unlikely to give rise to an effective focus on possible solutions.

### **2.3 Pupil Behaviour**

Miller (2003), highlights the inevitability of emotional consequences for teachers in having to manage difficult behaviour in classrooms. Teachers reported feelings of frustration and stress, which gave rise to attributions of parental blame for pupil behaviour, as well as doubts about their own professional competence. A frequent emotion expressed by most

teachers interviewed, was that of feeling 'alone and solely responsible for the pupil's behaviour, even in schools where colleagues were seen as generally friendly and supportive.' (p71, par 5), also alerts us to the need to consider the perceptual readiness or otherwise of teachers in relation to remediation in the form of collaborative problem solving.

It has also been found that the 'culture' of the school can either be viewed positively or negatively by teachers, and that when perceived negatively, this was often accompanied with a sense of isolation in relation to responsibility for pupil behaviour.

Hamilton (1993), reinforces the importance of understanding the influence of school culture in relation to the actions and choices of teachers in the classroom, suggesting that 'an exploration of cultural factors provides a means of more fully understanding the teacher's decision making process and the motives behind certain beliefs and action. (p87). This point is also raised by Olson (1988) who suggests that 'what teachers tell us about their practice is most fundamentally, a reflection of their culture, and cannot be properly understood without reference to that culture.'

Hamersley's (1984) study of school staffroom news provides an example of the way in which the school culture can confirm and form teacher beliefs and expectations regarding individual pupils, and construct 'typifications' of difficult pupils, giving rise to expectations, and ultimately shaping their own responses in the classroom. Such 'typifications' can place blame for difficult behaviour with the pupil concerned, whilst at the same time reducing the possibility of altering the situation.

Gray and Richer (1988), in an investigation into the descriptions teachers' gave of disruptive pupils, summarised the most common descriptors as; malicious, rude, easily distracted, lazy and having a short attention span. The implication being that whilst teachers may be sensitive to the relevant characteristics of difficult pupils, they may construe them in such a way so as to remove the opportunity for intervention.

It could be suggested therefore that in a prevailing negative school culture, which encompasses more negative interpretations about the nature of difficult pupil behaviour, the likelihood of teachers being able or willing to effectively engage with the Solution Circle process would also be reduced. Even if teachers did participate, there is indication given here that an ultimate change in classroom practice or actions would be unlikely.

Gray and Richer (1988), consider that 'the views of those concerned directly and personally are too coloured by their need to protect their own self esteem, so they tend to pin the blame on other people, or institutions or circumstance' (p7). In other words to elements outside ones self.

Kelly and Michela (1980), have for example demonstrated that attributions of this nature do little to resolve situations, and that the job of trying to resolve it becomes very difficult. Teacher's causal attributions for difficult pupil behaviour therefore become significant when considering interventions, since they can be directly related to notions of control, influence and responsibility.

Miller (1996) also suggests that 'a greater insight into teachers' responses to strategies for pupil management may be obtained from an

analysis of teachers' attributional processes' (p141). This in turn can be seen to be a reflection of a teachers' beliefs about the degree of responsibility taken for the cause of the problem, as well as the possibility of strategies and interventions being successful, in other words, the degree to which teachers take responsibility for finding solutions or are willing to engage in problem solving.

Fiske and Taylor (1984), have represented these variations in the form of an attributional model, reflecting varying degrees of responsibility for effecting a solution, including Moral, Compensatory, Medical or Enlightenment models.

In Miller's (1996) study, 37% of teachers attributed a Compensatory Model to themselves, which reflected 'not seeing themselves as having had any involvement in the origin of the problem, but still seeing it as their responsibility to effect a solution' (p149), whilst a 'Medical Model' was applied in 54% of cases, whereby teachers believed they had no responsibility for the cause or the solution to the problem.

Since this study attempts to explore how teachers experience the use of a Solution Circle, as an intervention in relation to difficult pupil behaviour, the notion of causal attributions for this behaviour are likely to emerge in respect of either, the response to emergent strategies within the process, or in the subsequent actions of the teacher.

It has already been suggested that intervening with difficult pupil behaviour involves far more than the generation of appropriate strategies, which on the face of it could be the perceived aim of a Solution Circle. However, as Miller (2003) points out, 'If all we lacked to put right the



problems surrounding difficult behaviour in schools were more strategies, surely the swelling ranks of books containing these to be found in publishers' catalogues and on booksellers' shelves could, by now, provide the answer' (p2, para 4).

The purported, albeit subjective notions, of a Solution Circle being an effective form of intervention for some teachers, is therefore worthy of further exploration and explanation at a more theoretical level.

## **2.4 Consultation**

Miller's (2003) review of 'Successful Strategies' with teachers, alerts us to the idea of 'personal engagement' as being a potentially significant difference between off the shelf implementation of text book strategies, and those which result from some level of personal interaction or collaboration. Educational psychologists engaging in professional consultations with teachers, were, in some way, felt to be addressing the emotional needs of teachers experiencing difficult student behaviour. The process of consultation has therefore been viewed as being something significantly more than advice giving. Teachers interviewed specifically referred to the importance of active listening skills and questioning which led to the identification and exploration of developing strategies, reflecting joint problem solving between teachers and educational psychologists.

Miller cites Conoley and Conoley's (1990) definition of consultation, who describe it as a problem solving relationship between professionals from different fields, with the aim of enhancing the problem solving capacity of

the consultee, through providing new knowledge, skills, a greater sense of self efficacy and degree of objectivity.

Such desired outcomes are also inherent in the use of the Solution Circle process, but the extent to which these outcomes occur, through the experiential accounts of the teachers who engage with this process is to be determined through the present study.

The literature review has alerted us to a number of potentially useful influences and processes which may be experienced by teachers through attempts to adopt such a collaborative problem solving approach. These include those which may hinder the potential benefits of collaborative problem solving, as well as factors which are likely to be acting as undercurrents to any effective intervention in relation to pupil behaviour. How teachers do experience the use of Solution Circles has become almost more interesting as a result of this review, which has been kept deliberately broad in view of the methodology adopted and the exploratory nature of a Grounded Theory approach. Therefore, rather than the literature review confirming or supporting any pre-conceived ideas about the processes at work within a Solution Circle, it has served to broaden understanding of potential processes, influences or behaviours, which have been found to be operating at a more theoretical level within the context of other interventions involving teachers and psychologists, which may or may not emerge as features of this study. Solution Circles are a phenomenon that have not been investigated previously and therefore offer an opportunity to develop new contextualised theory.

### **3. Methodology**

Cryer (2000, p63) highlights the importance of commenting on the appropriateness of the research methodology when designing any research study. This includes being able to provide a rationale for choosing one methodology over another, and why they may or may not be appropriate to a specific line of enquiry. Different approaches to research can therefore be understood in terms of their ability and suitability to tackle a particular research problem or question, or in other words should be dependent on what you are trying to find out. However, there are less pragmatic ideas which reflect more philosophical notions about the nature of knowledge, the construction of reality and how to access it. Such assumptions are inter-related with the theories we hold, which subsequently play a major role in determining the kind of problem we explore, the research strategy adopted, how the results are interpreted and consequently the types of explanations that are possible. Research methods also play a substantial part in determining the nature of theory, and research findings, 'are not therefore intrinsically objective as they are rooted in and influenced by the personal and cultural background of the theorist or researcher' (Stevens 1984).

What the researcher perceives therefore, cannot be objectively separated from this being determined by the theories we hold. Theories themselves must be seen as constructions of reality, and as such cannot be regarded as absolute descriptions of the way things are, since all understanding is open to alternative conceptualisations.

### **3.1 Research Paradigms**

Different research paradigms therefore represent different schools of thought about how to get at the truth and reality and consequentially, about how research should be conducted to this end. Nomothetic and idiographic approaches in psychological research, for example, reflect theory from both Realist (Positivist) and Idealist perspectives. Nomothetic approaches follow those of the physical sciences, 'seeking general laws, often cause and effect, using methods and concepts which are objective, clearly operationalised, replicable, usually empirical, and free from value judgements or any other bias that cannot be quantified' (Thomas 1984).

The assumption here is that all human behaviour and experience is definitive and causally determined, thus that there are universal laws of human nature that are fixed and waiting to be discovered by psychologists.

This traditional research paradigm would see 'truth' as grounded in mathematical logic, but as Cryer (2000) points out, 'it can answer questions about what is happening and the statistical chances of it happening in the future, but it cannot directly answer questions about why something is happening or may happen' (p78, para2). It can be argued therefore, that an idiographic approach, which aims for a more holistic understanding is needed to understand, since truth and reality are not fixed or stable phenomena.

Gergen (1985), would also highlight the fact that psychological processes and categories differ and vary across cultures, arguing that a social

constructionist approach to psychology, which reflects the cultural bases of world constructions, is also required in psychological enquiry.

Idiographic approaches have been used to explore single cases, in particular in depth studies of individuals, whilst also maintaining that such an approach could also contribute to our understanding of social processes and people. The distinction between nomothetic and idiographic approaches is therefore not quite as clear cut as it would appear, since idiographic approaches, whilst reflecting what's true for an individual may also have the potential to contribute towards general statements which can be applied to other situations.

### **3.2 Qualitative and Quantitative Research**

These differing approaches to explanation and understanding have given rise to the terms qualitative and quantitative research, as representing separate paradigms within psychology. Qualitative designs attempt to capture insight and meaning associated with human behaviour and are often much more detailed in terms of the descriptions they are able to generate. The capacity of theories to encompass the richness of human behaviour highlights a methodological difference between qualitative and quantitative approaches in terms of reflecting a continuum of description, ranging from simple cause and effect explanation, associated with quantitative research, to the more complex understanding of qualitative approaches, often involving inferences which go beyond given or generated facts or information. However, the ability of qualitative research to provide us with rich descriptions also provides us with the

problem of being able to assess its validity. More meaningful and complex explanations, by their nature, are less likely to be testable in rigorous ways, such as those which are adopted by the experimental sciences.

If we demand more reliable measures we may also have to lose the richness of description, or alternatively risk a less valid explanation. The problem here is that it is often assumed that the more testable a theory is the more valuable it is, regardless of the level of description it is able to provide. However, the evaluation of a particular theory and the methodology chosen, should also reflect the kinds of explanation we are aiming to achieve. It may also reflect the need for alternative criteria in order to evaluate the usefulness of qualitative methods. Indeed, Willig (2000), when considering the need for 'quality in qualitative research' (p147), identifies six qualitative research methods which are discussed in terms of their epistemological positions. Willig argues that in order to evaluate qualitative research methods we need to understand their epistemological position so that appropriate evaluation criteria can be identified. There is a recognition therefore, that whilst the ultimate choice of methodology will provide an insight in to the phenomena in question, different insights may be found using alternative methodologies and starting points.

Silverman (2000), also recognises that our decision to use qualitative/quantitative methods should not reflect our methodological preferences, but rather should reflect the robustness and credibility of our research design. The issue of reliability and validity remain central to any

research study and are the products of the appropriateness of a research methodology to be fit for purpose. Each approach must be seen to have its own strengths and weaknesses and the methodology adopted should be more of a reflection of the nature of the enquiry and the type of information that is required.

The study adopts an exploratory rather than confirmatory stance, and this is reflected in the openness of the research question in not wanting to make prior assumptions about the findings or process. However, the aim of the study is to adopt a methodology which reflects an open and inductive approach, whilst remaining mindful, open and explicit, in relation to any theoretical bias. The choice of an essentially qualitative methodology, is based on the notion that the study is concerned with the meanings and experiences which participants attribute to the use of the Solution Circle process, both during and following this event, as an intervention strategy. It is not therefore concerned with pre-defined variables or hypothesis testing, as it seeks to explain and make sense of Solutions Circles from the participants' perspective, rather than to pre-determine or predict outcomes, as would be reflected in an essentially quantitative methodology.

The notion of reflexivity is an important consideration, since prior experience of the use of Solution Circles by the researcher, is likely to have some influence on beliefs and expectations regarding the use of the process. Likewise, the formulation of a research question could also predetermine or limit the findings of the study.

A Grounded Theory approach was selected in order to attempt to tackle the issues of epistemological reflexivity, including the researcher's potential influence on the construction of data and its findings, but also because of its appropriateness to the phenomena in question. As Willig (2001, p32) points out, Grounded Theory allows us to 'facilitate the process of discovery', and the need in the case of this study, not to want to represent an extension or test of an existing theory, or to make prior assumptions about it, but to develop an explanatory framework which supports our understanding of the Solution Circle process. The method employed in Grounded Theory, focuses on the identification of categories abstracted from the data, which systematically label and interpret the phenomena in question, and which ultimately allows for the development of such an explanatory framework.

### **3.3 Design /Design Issues**

To assume that the prior use of Solutions Circles, by the researcher, would not give rise to any assumptions or beliefs in relation to their potential effectiveness, would be ignoring the potential influence of researcher bias on the research process and its findings. Strauss and Corbin (1998) refers to this potential within Grounded Theory as imposing theoretical bias on the data during the process of analysis. Although they also accept that it is not possible to be completely free of bias, it is important to have the ability to be able to recognise its existence and find ways of moving beyond it. It is furthermore suggested that



keeping a journal of the research experience can help to raise awareness of ones own thinking during data gathering and analysis. Appendix 2, reflects the researcher's attempts to make explicit, prior to the data collection and analysis phase, some of these assumptions and beliefs in respect of the use of the Solution Circle process, and to acknowledge any likely researcher/theoretical bias.

Grounded Theory does however, make assumptions about language as being a reflection of internal categories of understanding which can be used to get at individual experiences of reality. This is in contrast to other qualitative methodologies which may use the notion of language as reflecting the social construction of reality as their starting point. Reicher (2000), (cited in Willig 2000, p145), sees this as representing a significant difference, since such views consequentially 'have different philosophical roots, they have different theoretical assumptions and they ask different types of questions'.

The choice of methodology here, whilst providing us with an insight into the phenomena in question, needs to be considered alongside the notion that alternative methodologies and starting points may yield different insights into the same phenomena, and need to be recognised as a limitation of the study. As Madill et al (2000) (p146 cited in Willig 2000) emphasise, qualitative researchers have a responsibility to make their epistemological position clear, conduct their research in a manner consistent with that position, and present their findings in a way that allows them to be evaluated appropriately'.

Willig (2000), suggests that Grounded Theory needs to be evaluated in terms of the objectivity and reliability of the knowledge it has generated. These issues are addressed through the potential a Grounded Theory approach offers to adopt a systematic analysis, which allows for categories to emerge from the data. This is in contrast to methodologies which impose meaning onto the data itself. Henwood and Pidgeon's (1992), guidelines for good practice in qualitative research, highlights the importance of the researcher in being able to 'write explicit, clear and comprehensive accounts of why phenomena have been labelled and categorised in particular ways' (p97-112). The use of memo writing in this study, forms an integral part of the research process in aiming to provide an open account of theoretical development, whilst also aiming to refine and focus the research question itself. The notion of validity, in terms of the extent to which this method and its findings will capture what is being experienced by participating teachers, through their engagement with a Solution Circle, is also an important consideration. As Denzin and Lincoln (1994) point out, we need to evaluate 'the degree to which the findings correctly map the phenomenon in question', (p91 cited in Silverman 2000).

The full version of Grounded Theory method was adopted in line with those outlined by Strauss and Corbin (1998) and Charmaz (2006), in an attempt to achieve 'theoretical saturation'. This followed the collection and exploration of data from the initial Open Coding of audio taped semi-structured interviews with teachers who had participated as 'Problem

Presenter' in the Solution Circle process. This involved the use of a number of key strategies. Open Coding (Level 1 Codes) employed the use of Constant Comparative Analysis, using a line by line approach which aimed to identify and name ideas, events, processes and action within the text at a higher conceptual level than the text itself. Memo writing formed an integral part of defining Level 1 Codes allowing similarities and differences within subsequent categorisation (Level 2 Codes) to be identified and sub categorised so that categories could become integrated and account for the variations emerging from the data. The development of Level 3 Codes, reflected the development of theoretical constructs based on the application of academic reading and professional knowledge which define their relationship and connectivity with Level 1 and 2 Codes.

Categories were labelled with reference to 'theoretical sensitivity', (Glaser and Strauss 1967), which refers to the application of meaning to the data, based on the researchers previous reading and experience, developed further through the research itself. This process also helped identify conceptual connections and again supported the development of core categories. Coding is a fundamental process in Grounded Theory methodology, however, there are differences in the way in which researchers see the process evolving. Glaser (1978) for example, would not support the use of a coding paradigm unless this was driven and indicated by the data itself.

Strauss and Corbin (1998), on the other hand would direct us to question the data in line with the application of theory from our reading around theoretical constructs emerging from the data. Strauss and Corbin suggest that it is the development of these 'theoretical/mini frameworks', representing concepts and their relationship, that allow us to revisit the data and to move backwards and forwards in developing categories which can later emerge as major concepts or core categories in the analysis.

The methodology therefore engaged the researcher in identifying the most frequent and significant codes and in sorting, synthesizing and integrating the large amounts of data generated from the initial and focused Level 1 coding from transcribed interviews. These were sometimes reworded in order to be able to best capture and reflect the meanings and actions of the teacher's experiences. However, the process cannot therefore be regarded as 'neutral' since the categories themselves are created by the researcher, and represents how the researcher interprets the data and the perspectives they bring to it, and the language they use. Whilst this can be seen to be a limitation of the use of a Grounded Theory approach, it also, as Charmaz (2006) indicates, gives us the opportunity to and 'inspires us to examine the hidden assumptions in the language we use' (p46). The interactive nature of the coding process does however, force us to revisit and refine our codes and to do this from the point of trying to understand meanings from the participants' view, so that rather than representing the researcher's view, codes come to reflect a shared understanding.

The use of negative case analysis was also employed to allow for instances or features which did not fit into these emerging categories and subcategories to be highlighted.

The identification of such instances as Willig (2001) points out is to 'allow the researcher to qualify and elaborate the emerging theory, adding depth and density to it, so that it is able to capture the full complexity of the data on which it is based'.(page 35, para 1). Chamaz (2006), also highlights the notion that 'realising that your data has gaps or holes is part of the analytic process (p43, para 3).

The ultimate aim of the Grounded Theory approach was to achieve Theoretical Saturation, a situation in which no new categories could be identified, whilst also remaining mindful that it is possible to see this as a potentially ongoing process, in which perspectives can change and continue to emerge in the generation of theory.

### **3.4 Interviews**

The study used semi-structured interviews with teacher participants, following their involvement in the Solution Circle. A number of predetermined questions were developed in order to provide an initial framework for the interviews, but with the recognition that flexibility was required in terms of the proposed sequence, exact wording or focus of the interview, in relation to the responses of teachers (See Appendix 3). This included introductory comments related to the purpose of the

interview, given that several weeks had passed in the interim, and a list of topic headings with a number of key questions to act as potential questions or prompts for each heading. This flexibility was also required in respect of the use of a Grounded Theory approach and the potential this offered to allow for further data collection on the basis of any evolving theory. Interviews were all scheduled to take place approximately two weeks after the Solution Circle had taken place, to allow for the implementation and evaluation of any action intervention or strategy by the teacher.

### **3.5 Ethical Considerations**

The introduction of the use of a Solution Circle to teachers who may be experiencing difficulty to manage pupil behaviour, required consideration in terms of the nature of the initial presentation. As previously highlighted in the literature review, pupil behaviour remains an emotive and sensitive area, with situations in school often involving negative emotions including frustration, despair and isolation. It was therefore important to explain the process prior to any notion of consent. This was approached by offering the process as an opportunity to engage in a collaborative problem solving process, that may or may not guarantee a solution, but which may at least point to the next logical step and which would involve the Educational Psychologist and other participants of the teachers' choice. The process was described as being in need of evaluation and it was pointed out that although it was a process that a number of teachers had

engaged with there was little evidence available, post Solution Circle, to understand this process from the teachers perspective or for any identified potential benefits or deficits arising from its use to have been confirmed. There was recognition by the researcher that there could otherwise be high expectations on the part of the teacher, and also that initial perceptions in relation to the process had the potential to be influenced by the way in which it was initially presented. Teachers also had to be prepared to adopt the role of 'Problem Presenter' as a first step in the process, and this was agreed prior to the Solution Circle taking place. Other participants had the opportunity to volunteer for the remaining role of 'Time Keeper', whilst the Educational Psychologists, who were trained in the use of the process, undertook the roles of 'Facilitator' and 'Graphic Recorder' in all cases.

### **3.6 Subjects**

Subject participants were identified following a request from the researcher to colleagues working as practicing Educational Psychologists in Nottinghamshire primary schools. The selection of primary schools, rather than secondary schools or a combination of the two, reflected the view that primary school teachers often have greater knowledge of individual pupils, as a consequence of being their primary teacher. This is significant in terms of being able to present a view of the 'problem' and in being able to take ownership and responsibility for any subsequent action identified through the process.

The class teacher in all three cases became the 'Problem Presenter', with this role being shared with that of SENCO/Class Teacher in two out of the three cases. The Solution Circle process was offered as a potential problem solving strategy in schools where individual teachers had been identified who were experiencing difficult pupil behaviour and felt they required support in the form of new ideas, strategies or interventions in order to try and remediate.

Three Solution Circles were carried out in three separate primary school settings. All three teachers were female and agreed to act as 'problem presenters', prior to engaging with the process. Pupils who were the focus of the process were all boys, two from Year 3 classes and one from Year 4. One pupil was 'Looked After'. Two of the teachers were SENCO's within the school, the other a Class Teacher of 15 years experience.

The Solution Circle group participants varied across educational contexts as follows:

School 1 – 2 x Educational Psychologists, Class Teacher, Teaching Assistant, LA Behaviour Support Teacher, and Deputy Head Teacher.

School 2 – 2 x Educational Psychologists, Class Teacher/SENCO, Child and Adolescent Mental Health Social Worker, Behaviour Support Teacher.

School 3 – 2 x Educational Psychologists, Class teacher/SENCO, Head Teacher, Teaching Assistant, Foster Carer.



The group composition, with the exception of the Educational Psychologist, was determined by the school themselves. This therefore was partly a reflection of who the school, usually the Problem Presenter, invited, often people who were already involved with the pupil in terms of any outside agencies, but also included in 2 out of 3 cases other staff members from the school. In the case of School 3, the Behaviour Support Service Teacher was invited but did not attend. In the two other schools, participants were as planned. This variation in group composition is likely to reflect a variable which has the potential to determine the effectiveness or otherwise of the process, but it was considered that owing to the exploratory nature of the study this could therefore be a factor which may or may not emerge from the data.

### **3.7 Materials/Instruments**

The process is based on the Pearpoint and Forest (1997) outline, as indicated in Appendix 1, but an abbreviated version of this process was given out to participants as Appendix 1a. This was intended only to act as an aid to following the structure of the process, without the distraction of text to read, whilst an explanation for each step was given verbally to the participant group by the Process Facilitator.

The role of Graphic Recorder also involved the use of a large, approx 1 metre square, piece of plain paper which was pinned up on the wall in front of the participants and which was used to record key features, ideas and descriptors as a reflection of the participants thinking, views and

ideas, and which attempted to capture this at each step of the process. This was subsequently left with the 'Problem Presenter'.

### **3.8 Procedure**

Teachers from three separate primary schools in Nottinghamshire were asked by their link educational psychologist for the school whether they wanted to take part in a Solution Circle, in order to try and identify further action and strategies to support the management of a targeted pupil's behaviour, which had become a cause for concern for the class teacher. The pupil would have been one who had been brought to the attention of the educational psychologist and for whom the educational psychologist felt the use of a Solution Circle would be an appropriate problem solving approach. It was therefore based on the professional judgement of the EP whether to offer the process or not. The suggestion to use the process was outlined with regard to the ethical considerations already outlined in this study. It was also made clear at the outset to teachers, that taking part in the process was optional, but that participation would involve being prepared to adopt the role of problem presenter, and what that would involve. Teachers were also asked at this time whether they would be willing to be interviewed by another educational psychologist colleague, following the Solution Circle process, in relation to the use of the process from the teacher participant's perspective. Again consent to engage with the interview process was optional for teachers, and the Solution Circle would still have been initiated if felt to be an appropriate next step. Teachers were told that if in agreement the

researcher would like to record the interviews for purposes of transcribing and analysis. None of the teachers who took part in the process refused to take part in the follow up interview or to the interview being recorded.

The researcher carried out all interviews approximately 2 weeks after teachers had participated in the process, in the teacher's school, at a mutually convenient time. Only the teacher who had taken part as Problem Presenter was present during the interview.

The teacher was again asked if they were happy for the interview to be recorded, owing to the length of time that had elapsed since the Solution Circle and also informed that in the study's write up, no reference to any school or individual teacher by name would be used and that data collected would therefore be anonymised.

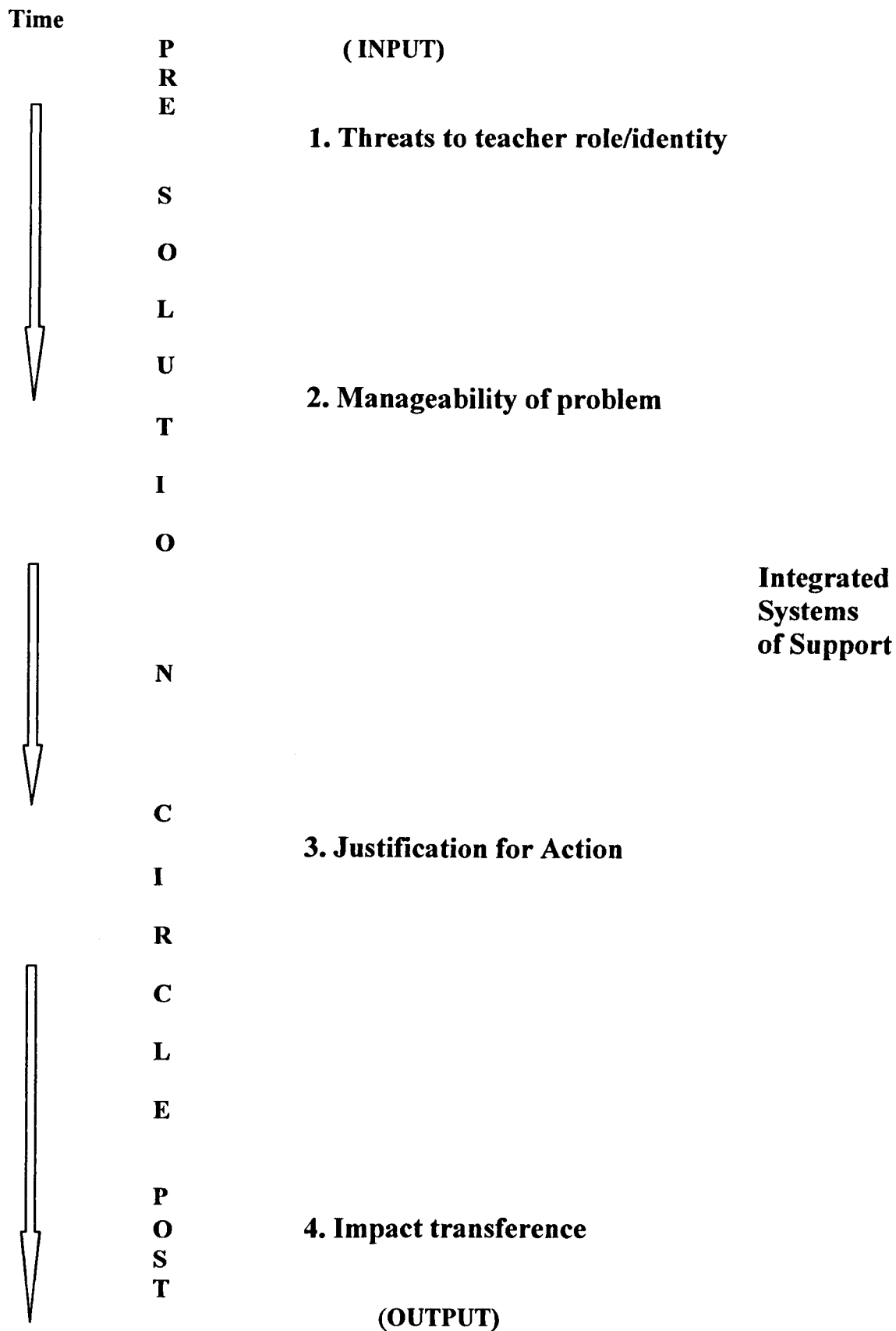
A semi-structured interview framework, Appendix 3, was used for the initial and subsequent interviews, although questions relating to interviews 2 and 3 were also supplemented with questions relating to emerging data. The graphic of the solution circle process was made available during the interview as an aid memoir for the teacher and a visual representation of the process for the researcher, this followed an initial pilot study, where it was suggested that this would be a helpful overview for the teacher and researcher to be able to share. The researcher began the analysis of data in line with the studies research methodology, immediately following the first interview.

#### **4. Results**

The integration of data from open coding, through to the emergence of a core conceptual category, representing a social psychological process, which encompassed the central paradigm of 'Integrated Systems of Support', provides a potential theory for understanding the experiences of teachers engaging with the solution circle process. What has emerged from the integration and synthesis of data, is that the experiences of the teacher participants themselves can also be mapped onto a temporal sequence of 'experiences' which reflects pre and post Solution Circle engagement, and which provides a contextual and more coherent framework for understanding the Solution Circle process at a more theoretical level.

Figure 1. conceptualises the solution circle process as a temporal sequence of stages, sandwiched between the pre and post situation of the teacher. Categories of data were found to link significantly to the steps incorporated in the Solution Circle itself, whilst the pre and post situation categories appeared to represent significant influences, relating to the initial responses of teachers engaging with the process and subsequent outcomes following the process. The notion of this representing 'Inputs' and 'Outputs' pre and post the process, also aims to capture the cultural contextual position of the teacher, and the potential impact of the use of this process, whilst attempting to understand more fully what it means for teachers to engage with the process as an intervention in schools.

**Figure 1. Mapping of Level 3 Codes 1 to 4, and the Core Construct of Integrated Systems of Support, in relation to the temporal sequence of the Solution Circle process and the overlap with pre and post context**



#### **4.1 Integrated Systems of Support (Figure 1).**

Initial open codes relating to 'support' for the teacher occurred frequently in the data. This related to differential levels of support, or the absence of it, prior to the Solution Circle taking place, then as a reflection of being engaged in the Solution Circle process itself, and as a consequence of it. This ranged from the perceived support of colleagues, particularly through their presence at the Solution Circle, and the subsequent implications of this for action and continued support, to support from outside agencies, present during the process. It also emerged that the dynamics and features of the Solution Circle 'group' participants, as well as the process structure itself, were also perceived and experienced by the teacher as providing a differential level of support.

Frequently occurring open codes in relation to changes in the teachers own thinking, beliefs and attitudes, in relation to the problem and the pupil emerged. The initial core category of 'threats to teacher identity/role', indicated that at the start of the Solution Circle process the teacher was potentially isolated with the problem and that systems of support were not perceived to be readily available to the teacher.

Table 1 shows the emergence of the core categories giving rise to the theoretical explanation of the use of Solution Circles in supporting and facilitating the integration of support systems, potentially available to the teacher and operating at different levels within and outside the school, and within the process itself.

Whilst it is clear that the Solution Circle itself, as a one off form of intervention, can only be viewed as a temporary system of support, what has emerged however, is the significance of the role and composition of the participants, together with the process structure. The involvement of teacher colleagues, the impact of group processes and structure, together with opportunities to coordinate support, when then integrated in to a unified approach to the problem, can impact on the social system of the teacher, resulting in a level of organisational change, in terms of teacher practice.

Solution Circles act to facilitate the integration of sources of support for the teacher, allowing them to be harnessed and operationalised. The implications of this will be highlighted in the discussion section.

#### **4.2 INPUT – Threats to teacher identity/role (Figure 2).**

The notion of an Input stage relates to codes which emerged within the construct of 'Threats to Teacher role/identity' (Figure 2) as a Level 3 or Axial Code. Level 2 sub categorisation within this concept indicated that a frequently recurring code related to the teacher talking about their own responses to the problem, in what often appeared to be an 'unsupportive' school culture, prior to being involved in the Solution Circle.

Codes relating to feelings of isolation and a lack of autonomy as well as negative and fixed views about the pupil and the problem itself, all tended to paint a bleak picture of the teacher trying to cope with the problem alone, without perceived support, and without naturally occurring opportunities to engage with colleagues in so called 'problem solving'.

“.....because without a doubt you’re trying to deal with it yourself aren’t you”

(Interview 1)

“ I think we do feel quite isolated when we’ve got children like that don’t you, you know you’re on your own a bit with them...( Interview 3)

“ It can feel, with pressures of delivering work, delivering the curriculum and results and things, it’s almost like a factory mentality .....I would have just passed him on to the next teacher as a problem, not as a child”  
( Interview 2).

“ You know people in staff rooms, even the best teachers spend time focusing on problems and discussing issues that arise in class, but there’s never a time when staff just get together and talk about solutions, that isn’t the way” ( Interview 2).

This category is also linked to the Level 2 Categorisation of ‘Teacher response to the problem’( Figure 2) reflecting teacher attitudes toward the problem and pupil, prior to the Solution Circle taking place, as well as those relating to pressures of the teacher role and time constraints.

These emerging features of the school culture, teacher attributional style and the pressures/demands on the teacher, were identified as having a relationship with ‘threats to the teacher identity and role’ ( see Memo1), and are very much in line with findings outlined in the literature review ( Lieberman and Miller (1990) and Miller (2003). This category highlights the position of the teacher prior to any engagement with a Solution Circle



and captures contextual information which alerts us to the teacher's world. At this point in time the features of a Solution Circle appear to be contradictory to the culture of the school, and perhaps even the teacher herself, in being solution and problem solving focused, and demanding of yet more time from the teacher.

The first stage in the Solution Circle involves the 'Problem Presenter', (teachers interviewed), in outlining the problem to the rest of the group, having been given a time limit of six minutes in order to do this. The 'response' to this part of the process was a frequently occurring open code, which reflected levels of anxiety, pressure, potential stress and concerns raised about the teachers own abilities in this role, as well as perceptions of it being a potentially challenging experience (Figure 1).

" I think that first bit is the most difficult.....anxiety, I think that caused anxiety.....my initial feeling was that I wouldn't have enough ideas or I wouldn't be able to talk about the child enough and then that was quite challenging personally, because it made me question how much I know the child, and that's your job, and that's quite challenging , about you as a professional, that I do know enough about this child to present this in this setting with these amount of professionals of this standing, and have I got that much information ? Do I understand the problem?"

(Interview 2)

" Right at first I felt a bit Uh!" (Interview 1).

“ You feel like your starting off in a really negative way.....I didn't find it easy to talk for so many minutes and say all negative things, but I think it all needs to be said at the beginning doesn't it.....I did feel like the nasty ogre sort of thing” (Interview 3).

The emerging category of 'threats to teacher identity/role' reflects teacher experiences not only pre solution circle, but also during the first step in the process, in being in the role of Problem Presenter, and reflects the fact that teachers generally felt uncomfortable in this role. The analysis was also suggestive of teachers experiencing this initial part of the process as 'formal' and not in line with prior expectations about what it would be like.

“I didn't feel threatened by the end, but in the beginning I thought it was going to be more informal than my first impression when I went in. I thought it was very formal but then it changed into something that was informal if you know what I mean”  
(Interview 1).

This Core Category is significant since it clearly indicates, that prior to the Solution Circle process, teacher's experiences and sense of feeling supported were not only absent in their own schools, but were also not 'experienced' in the initial stage of the process. The demands of the process at this time were perceived to be, not only contrary to expectations, but placed additional demands on the teacher.

#### **4.3 Manageability of Problem (Figure 3) ( Memo 2).**

The analysis suggests that process impacts on the teachers' cognitive and affective domains, as highlighted in Figure 3, were influential in changing the way in which the problem and the pupil were subsequently perceived and thought about by the teacher.

“ It made me think about aspects of dealing with the problem in a different way, I think I knew what his problems were and I don't think that changed,..... but I felt that perhaps there were ways in which we could deal with it” ( Interview 1).

“ I found it incredibly useful in terms of being able to visualise the child as a child, rather than as another problem, and that was really useful in terms of being able to separate his problems from himself, and the more I had time to speak about Jack, the more time I had to think about all the things I know he can do and the strengths that he has” ( Interview 3)

Open codes in relation identified positive attributes of the process, indicated a distinct change in mood, highlighted in codes which captured greater teacher optimism, a greater sense of objectivity, purposefulness and empowerment. There were also a number of identifiable features to emerge in relation to the process which appeared to provide a supportive framework for organising the teacher's own thinking and allowed for a more solution focused approach;

“ as the process moves on, issues become under headings and you can see that there’s this area I could do something about and there’s this area that I could do that about... and it kind of makes it more systematic, your approach becomes more systematic I think” ( Interview 2)

“ there was a structure to it that was excellent..... the fact that you were breaking it down into such small bits was very helpful” ( Interview 1)

“ ...the first bit does feel like there’s the problem, then it’s quite logical to look at solutions, but it’s altering your mind set, because you become very stuck at looking at problems, but it gives you a very clear focus, you know I can’t do this, I can do that, but it actually moves it quickly on to questioning, and when people start questioning that moves your mind set on, and causes you to question yourself”  
( Interview 2)

An identified feature of the process was that relating to ‘Time’. The process is time boundaried and overall lasts approximately 30 minutes. A recurring emerging feature related to the succinct nature of the overall process, as well as providing uninterrupted and structured time for the teacher to focus specifically on an individual problem/pupil. This emerged as a supportive experience for the teachers involved as it appeared to recognise the time pressures of the teacher.

“ That’s another thing the timing, it was timed so it wasn’t too lengthy, because I think these things can go on endlessly sometimes and you’re always under such pressure” ( Interview 1)

“ We found it really useful because it gave us time to sit down and concentrate on the things we were able to do and you don’t normally get time do you to think about things in so much detail” ( Interview 3)

“ You don’t realise the information you’ve built up , and you don’t get chance to talk about children for six minutes without anyone interrupting” (Interview 3).

“ ...I don’t think there would have been a time when I’d have been able to sit there and think about that situation, apart from perhaps a parents evening ....then it would never have given myself the space to think about the way I perceive him” (Interview 2).

#### **4.4 Justification for Action ( Figure 4.) ( Memo 3)**

This core concept emerged from the analysis whereby the involvement of other participants in the Solution Circle process were perceived by the teacher to be in a supportive role. This included wider acknowledgement of the problem by colleagues and other participants, a sense of shared responsibility for the problem, the generation and coordination support for

the implementation of strategies, as well as providing positive reinforcement to the teacher. Group composition was a significant feature of perceived teacher support. It emerged that the teacher saw the role of outside agencies as pivotal in supporting the teacher's sense of identity and professionalism, as well as ultimately giving the justification for the teacher to go back into class and try a new strategy or intervention. The involvement of colleagues in the process, also provided the teacher with support in terms of shared responsibility, an understanding of the process and rationale for any subsequent action to be carried out, as well as opportunities to engage colleagues in joint action planning. This again helped to justify to colleagues outside the process any changes in teacher practice. This is reflected in the following extracts from the interview transcripts;

“ It was a difficult decision to make independently, but because it had been part of the process that had looked at those strategies, I could integrate that into my practice much more.. (Interview 2).

“ You know when we thought about it ( SENCO post Solution Circle) I don't think we would have had that dialogue ( SENCO and HT at SC) when we said ‘ right he'll have a structured time when he does go’ ( part of new planned timetable for play experiences suggested by group), I don't think we would have been able to talk about that” ( Interview 3)

“ Having your colleagues there is useful.. I think.. because they can chase up and make sure you’ve implemented things, but it’s also useful to be able to pass on to the senior management team so that they can sort of recognise the process and recognise, you know, if we’re going to make changes then where the changes have come from and the thinking behind it... so I think it’s important to have colleagues there so that you can go back into school and present it with some support. To do that on your own would be quite difficult.” ( Interview 2)

“ I think it’s important that you do have LEA representatives there, and also it gives you a sense that it’s important, because it means that other people who are important people, come to your meeting to talk about your children and that these are problems that are important problems that we need to do something about, ..... and that children are important and also the teacher, that I’m important and that I have support.”

(Interview 2)

This conceptual category of ‘justification for action’, links with the notion of the perceived ‘manageability of the problem’, since these levels of support are becoming operationalised for the teacher through engagement with the process. It is also apparent however, that in order for these sources of support to become integrated into the teacher’s world outside the Solution Circle, the support and action offered by any individuals within the process needed to be continued outside of this

process. This is highlighted by one teacher in response to continued support by the EP;

“ the fact that (EP) said she'd come in and set up a Circle of Friends, it gives you set dates where things have got to happen doesn't it, and it just makes it seem a bit more like we've got the support there”. (Interview 3).

Group dynamics within the Solution Circle was also a recurring theme. One dimension along which this perspective occurred was that of; Them & Us...V....Cohesive Group, whilst this is explained to some extent through the perceived distinction in group composition, with the teacher appearing to recognise the differential contribution of colleagues and 'outside agencies', the group was also experienced as a more cohesive whole;

“ I think by the end of the process you don't feel like its them and us, you think it's a group of people sitting together to come up with solutions for a child and that changes as the process goes on, and I think that becomes like a group of people, whereas initially I think you're quite separate, because you think this is school and this is outside school. By the end it's just a group of people saying what about trying that, what about trying that. That makes the group feel quite cohesive and quite supportive” (Interview 2).



It also supports the theory that the process facilitates the integration of sources of support for the teacher.

#### **4.5 OUTPUT - Impact Transference ( Figure 5) ( Memo 4)**

This Core Category emerged through features and actions which reflected the situation for the teacher post Solution Circle. The notion of this relating to an output stage, relates to the potential impact the use of the process had on the actions of the teacher and outcomes for the pupil. Recurring codes relating to identifiable impacts following the use of the process were evident in aspects of change. These related to pupil behaviour, the actions of the teacher and wider school staff, as well as the relationship between the pupil and teacher. The sub category 'Situation post Solution Circle' highlights these recurring codes as captured in the interviews;

" Me and Hannah (TA) during the holidays we are going to make him a visual time-table... we are now aware of what we want to do and how we are going to support Jordan. But it's made us think even further than what we actually decided on the day"

(Interview 3)

" Anything that enables you to begin to unpick children's problems and isolate them from children makes you think in a much wider way about a child.....that will have impacted on my class teaching in making me

think about how I can create time during my day where I can use the PSHE and self esteem building activities.”

(Interview 2)

“ ..I definitely think he’s improving all the time... he’s got a long way to go and he’s more included in the class which is the main thing”.

(Interview 1)

**Table 1 An Outline of the grounded theory for facilitating  
'Integrated Systems of Support' through the use of a Solution  
Circle with teachers.**

**Identified threats to teacher/role identity**

Unsupportive school culture

Teacher response to problem

Initial process demands

**Manageability of Problem:**

Impact on cognitive/affective domains

Changes in pupil perception

Positive attributes of process

**Justification for Action**

Involvement of colleagues

Pivotal role of others

Group dynamics

**Impact Transference**

Situation Post Solution Circle

Process expectations

Comparison with other interventions

Reflections of teacher qualities

**Figure 2. Core Category 1 - Threats to Teacher Role/ Identity (L3 Code) and relationship with Level 2 and Open Codes**

**Unsupportive school culture (L2)**

Teacher alone/isolated with problem  
 Feeling responsible for pupil behaviour  
 Professionalism undermined  
 'Factory type mentality'  
 Solution Focused not part of school culture  
 Staff isolation  
 Reduced autonomy

**Teacher response to problem (L2)**

Child has the problem  
 Not able to make decisions alone  
 Teacher problem oriented  
 Time constraints  
 Fixed ideas about solutions  
 Negative feelings about pupil

**Threats to Teacher Role/  
 Identity**

**Initial Process Demands( Problem Presenter)(L2)**

Anxiety inducing  
 Potentially stressful  
 Uncertain  
 Challenging  
 'Uh!'  
 Concerns re own capabilities  
 Nasty Ogre'  
 Negative teacher talk

**Expectations of process (pre)**

'went in blind'  
 Low expectations  
 Unclear  
 To be like Circle Time  
 Unfocused

**Figure 3. Core Category 2 - Manageability of Problem (L3 Code) showing relationship with Level 2 and Open Codes**

**Impact on cognitive/affective domains (teacher) Outcomes for teacher**

Engendered optimism  
 Changed perception of strategies  
 Greater insight into ways forward  
 Greater sense of objectivity achieved  
 'Spurred on thinking'  
 Recognition of own biases  
 Surprised by own knowledge  
 Ways to address problem  
 Altered perceptions of problem  
 challenged perceptions  
 Reflective thinking  
 Catalyst for thinking beyond Solution Circle  
 Autonomy over strategies  
 Sense of empowerment  
 'Had to think out of the box'

**Manageability of  
 Problem**

**Changes in Pupil Perception (outcomes for pupil)**

Visualisation of child not problem  
 More holistic view of pupil  
 Better understanding of pupil  
 Understanding pupil needs  
 Refocused on meeting pupil needs

**Positive attributes of process**

Boundaried  
 Process demanding clarity  
 Time for focused attention  
 Time to think about problem  
 'Kept on track'  
 Directed focus  
 Solution Focused  
 Formal .....Informal  
 'Start of a journey'  
 Organises thinking  
 Affirmative process  
 Logical sequence  
 Sense of progression  
 Purposeful  
 Formality supporting process  
 Systematic

**Figure 4. Core Category 3 – Justification For Action ( Level 3 Code) showing the relationship between Level 2 and Open Codes**

**Involvement of colleagues ( School)**

Presence of colleagues supportive  
 Colleague acknowledgement of process and action  
 Acknowledgement of problem  
 HT providing shared view of problem  
 Potentially better with more school staff  
 Colleagues need to support post solution circle

**Pivotal role of others (outsiders)**

Value sharing knowledge  
 Shared responsibility for process  
 Recognition of teacher skills  
 Opportunity to collaborate  
 Sense of being a professional  
 Reinforce the value of teachers and pupils  
 Coordination of support  
 Valued expertise and ideas  
 Carer presence difficult  
 Ability to separate person from problem  
 Acknowledgement of problem  
 Greater understanding of problem by others  
 Give sense of importance  
 Support to implement strategy

**Justification for Action**

**Group Dynamics**

Group size, 'More Better'  
 Them & Us V Cohesive group  
 Giving stimulus for ideas  
 Focus on solutions  
 Composition effecting involvement

**Figure 5 Core Category 4 – Impact Transference ( Level 3 Code) showing relationship with Level 2 and Open Codes**

**Situation Post Solution Circle**

Shared strategies/staff and carer  
 Positive impact pupil  
 Pupil positive response to strategy  
 Further development of strategies  
 Wider staff impact  
 Recognition of limitations of previous strategies  
 Alternative strategies tried/implemented  
 Different planning for pupil needs  
 Teacher responding differently to pupil  
 Pupil perceptions understood  
 Degrees of change

**Process Expectations (post)**

Expectations exceeded  
 Initial expectation changed  
 Productive time  
 Formal process  
 Not threatening  
 Supportive process

**Impact Transference**

**Comparison with other interventions**

‘Refreshing contrast’  
 Formal.....Informal  
 More Focused  
 Identifiable end point  
 Time limited  
 Meetings less effective  
 New  
 Recognition of limited teacher time  
 Boundaried process  
 Controlled  
 Realistic.....Unrealistic

**Reflections of teacher qualities**

Relevant attributes  
 Flexibility of teacher  
 Open to ideas  
 Ability to talk to groups of adults

## 5. Discussion

The grounded theory has been built around the emergence of a central paradigm reflecting the teacher involved in the Solution Circle experiencing the integration of systems of support, into a more unified approach to the problem in relation to difficult to manage pupil behaviour. This takes the form of psychosocial support including colleagues and other professionals, as well as those reflecting changes in the thoughts and perceptions of the teacher.

'Systems' within the context of this theory, are conceptualised as being the school system, the teacher herself as 'support' in being able to draw on and utilise her own personal resources, the group participants as outsiders and the Solution Circle, as the mechanism for facilitating and harnessing these support resources.. This perceived sense of integration, experienced by the teacher, can also be seen to result in a level of systemic change, with the teacher modifying or changing the systems of support for the target pupil, as highlighted in the category 'Impact Transference'.

The analysis of data identified the 'situation' of the teacher as being a significant influence pre the Solution Circle process, in relation to the teacher's initial responses to the problem. This provided an insight into the social system in which the teacher was operating. Miller (1996) in looking at some key characteristics of systems theory indicates that " the parts of the system are affected by being within the system and... attempting to study parts in isolation will yield an inaccurate or incomplete picture".



( p29). The insight gained into the teacher's own social system therefore also supports a greater understanding of this process. Using a social constructivist paradigm, it also reflected a view that the teacher's construction of the problem behaviour was also a product of her social processes and interactions.

The problem presentation stage was where this, the language of the teacher reflected the social construction of her understanding and the way that she saw and thought about the pupil and problem. Whilst teachers' reported that they found this an uncomfortable, challenging and even threatening experience, problem externalisation also helps people to distance themselves from their problems.

Teacher interviews suggested that following this stage, they were already able to view the problem, pupil and what they were able to do about it, in a different way.

The importance therefore of this first stage in the process, could be associated with Bergan et al's (1979), identification of a 4 step sequence in behavioural analysis. Here problem identification was viewed as the most important step in the problem solving process, with the likelihood of an intervention being dramatically more successful, once the problem had been defined. Greater clarity and understanding of the problem was even reported by the teachers themselves, following externalisation, which in turn could have given rise to the more objective view of the problem that emerged from the data.

## **5.1 Support from colleagues**

A significant feature of the teacher experiencing 'support' was related to colleagues being involved in the process. Katz and Kahn (1966) highlighted that an essential weakness of the individual approach to organisational change is the psychological fallacy of concentrating upon individuals without regard to the role relationship that constitute the social system of which they are apart" (p314).

The analysis indicated that the presence of colleagues was key, not only in being able to acknowledge the problem for the teacher but also because it provided them with a sense of shared responsibility, and support for justifying any action outside the solution circle to other colleagues not present. In the case of the Head Teacher also being present, it allowed the teacher to be given 'permission' to make different provision for the pupil. Teachers indicated that in isolation, without colleagues from the school being present, they would have found it very difficult to have justified such action on their own. An implication of this would be to ensure that at least more than one colleague from school is present, better still for this to be someone who is able to make or sanction decisions at the time, such as a member of the senior management team or indeed the HT. The presence of colleagues clearly engendered a sense of support that would exist outside the Solution Circle itself, when outsiders had gone.

The presence of colleagues was therefore a significant feature of the teacher experiencing support, with this support becoming more integrated into the social system in which the teacher was operating. The presence

of colleagues was a variable determined by the class teacher. A further insight into how this was achieved would have been useful here, since recurring codes in relation to the lack of a problem solving culture within the schools was the norm.

Colleague support, has been captured in the notion of 'referential' support for the teacher, (Miller 1996), their need for a reference group to support and sanction their practice, and to provide them with norms and values which sustain it. Nias (1985), has suggested that once established they become a 'frame of reference' for teachers.

Miller (1996) found that teacher referential support could be as limited as that from a colleague, the head teacher or even a professional from outside the school. His study also indicated that teachers will avoid 'open conflict' with colleagues not aligned with the norms and values of their reference group, but will display 'false consensus' in their interactions with these colleagues, whilst continuing to adopt practices which reflect reference group norms. This finding is significant here since in this study the role of colleagues is a significant feature of the data analysis.

Since all of the teacher colleagues, present during the process were presumably selected by the teacher, this could reflect the presence of a colleague who shares the same reference 'group' norms. Since this did not emerge from the data analysis, it would be worthy of further investigation. This is relevant in terms of group composition, since it has also been suggested that members of the schools' SLT should be present during the process, relating to the concept of 'justification for action.' If colleagues are also seen to be the decision makers and power holders,

but also have different frames of reference, this could have implications for problem presenter teacher, in relation to potential conflict, strategy selection as well as teacher practice post solution circle and ultimately outcomes for pupils.

## **5.2 School Culture**

Miller (1996), interviewed teachers involved in Teacher – EP consultations in relation to difficult pupils, and found that one way in which teachers are able to avoid potential culture –teacher conflicts, is through the perceived creation of temporary and overlapping systems, forming a temporary boundary outside of the prevailing school culture in which to engage with the EP and parents. This served the function of allowing the teacher to “re-construe parents and children” (p108), whilst also allowing the school system to preserve its norms and values.

This theory could similarly be applied to the use of a Solution Circle in school as it can also be viewed as a temporary system of support which could be operating whilst leaving the culture of the organisation in tact.

There are indications however, that changes in teacher practice were more publicly acknowledged in the school than Millers study would suggest and the role of other agencies and colleagues also being part of post solution circle action planning is also indicative of a more integrated absorption of this problem solving approach into the life of the school.

Teachers who engage in a problem solving process, like a Solution Circle, it could be argued, are more likely to engage if they feel that the

problem of disruptive behaviour is within their power to resolve. Whilst there are indications that changes towards this view were perhaps not apparent to teachers until during the process, emerging features relating the teachers own qualities, are indicative of attributes which are more conducive to collaborative problem solving, such as flexibility and open mindedness. Solution focused therapists, as outlined in the literature review, see the ideal client as being the 'customer', defined as having some clarity about goals, accept things need to change and are motivated in having a part in doing this. It could be argued that the colleagues and teachers who chose to take part in the Solution Circle were ideal 'customers', allowing for more positive outcomes for pupils. An alternative view, offered by Social Support research would see the teacher seeking out group support in response to dealing with the emotive and often stressful nature of difficult pupil behaviour. Schachter (1959), one of the earliest researchers into the psychology of affiliation, considered that one reason we would seek out group support at times of stress is to engage in social comparison. Social comparison involves, 'comparing your feelings, behaviour and opinions to those of others in order to get a fix on your opinions and the relative strength of your reactions.'

The Solution Circle albeit temporary, could also be fulfilling this need for teachers, in testing out whether already adopted reference group norms are supported by outside agencies as well as other colleagues. A prior working relationship between the teacher and outside agencies involved

is likely to have given the teacher some insight into the supportive relationship that might be available by the group.

Another basic feature of group involvement relates to outcomes not only being dependent on an individual's actions but also on the actions of others in the group. In all three interviews, teachers indicated that there had been changes in teacher practice of varying degrees. It was also apparent that in some cases this involved colleagues in follow up activities with the teacher, and in two cases offers of further involvement from outside agencies in order to support interventions arising from the group and chosen by the teacher. A recurring code related to this continued support outside the process and this appears to be a significant component of the theory of solution circles facilitating this integration of potentially separate systems of support.

### **5.3 Group Processes**

The Solution Circle process itself appears to have achieved the principle aim of using solution focused approaches, that of inducing new viewing, new doing and calling upon forgotten strengths and resources. Teachers indicated that they were able to experience a number of these features, which in turn gave them a sense of it being a supportive and productive process.

Group processes operating within the Solution Circle were also experienced in a supportive way by teacher participants. A group has been defined by Forsyth (1983) as 'two or more individuals who influence each other through social interaction.'(p81)

Baron et al (1992), have also suggested that a 'group' can include a flexible working definition which includes the notion of a temporary group. A solution circle would fall into this definition. Some teachers perceived the group size to be small, with the implication that a larger group would have yielded more ideas or strategies. Research relating to group size has indicated that increasing group size can result in a smaller percentage of individuals contributing to a group discussion. This perception of teachers in relation to strategies, tends to imply that it was the generation of ideas that was also important in the process. Whilst it is clear that a feature of support relating to the process, was perceived to be the generation of strategies and ideas, it does not appear to be as important as teachers would believe. Lambert et al (1992) for example, identified four key factors to outcome success following 'expert intervention'. However, the most important factor in accounting for outcome success and effective change related to factors people have within their power to utilise including personal strengths, resources, qualities and skills. (40% of cases). In 30% of cases it was attributed to the good working relationship with the client, achieved through empathy, warmth, acceptance, encouragement and support in risk taking. There is evidence from recurring codes and interview data, which supports the notion of the solution circle process giving rise to a greater acknowledgement, not only of the teachers own skills and resources, but in some cases those of the pupils themselves. Solution Circles appear to support the integration of these identified sources of support by offering a

point of punctuation which interrupts the perpetuated responses towards the problem and allows it to be reframed by the teacher. Change process are accepted by the teacher and absorbed into her classroom practice.

Strategies allow the teacher to act on these changed perceptions and, as Beaver (1996), describes, ' to change the functioning of the system around the child in order to enable the child to change" (p2).

Whilst the grounded theory suggests that the perception of the teacher is that systems acting as resources of support become integrated for her, it is also dependent upon support systems continuing to operate outside of the process itself. Whilst the process is able to support the teacher via group processes and through providing new ways of thinking, the impetus to continue to engage with change processes needs to also be embraced by other colleagues and support maintained from outside agencies. The discussion section has also raised the question of whether this process is actually impacting on the wider organisational features of the school and school culture. It could be argued that if there are more positive outcomes for pupils and teachers as a result of engaging with this process then, does it matter whether there is a broader impact or not. The significant issue appears to be one of support for the teacher that is multi-dimensional, and is able to integrate and harness as many support resources as possible. The study has identified that this can be achieved in a very limited timeframe. When interviewed teachers were asked about the comparison of Solution Circles with other interventions,



with several references to multi-agency meetings lasting much longer but perceived to be achieving far less.

#### **5.4 The Grounded Theory**

The study has given us a greater insight into what it is like for teachers to engage with this process. It has also generated a potential contextual theory for understanding how teachers experience it, with implications for group composition and the pivotal role of outside agencies within this process. The extent to which the grounded theory methodology has correctly mapped the phenomena in question would have been strengthened through more interviews with teachers who had experienced this process. A limitation of this study relates to the small sample size and the broad nature of the research question. Whilst this served the purpose of not restricting the findings of the study, it became an all encompassing terminology which would now benefit from further refinement. The teachers' experiences emerged as varying across the different stages of the process, including before and after. This therefore necessitated looking at the discreet stages in the process.

In terms of existing theory, Miller's notion of temporary overlapping boundaries, offers a potential comparison. However, although the discussion has suggested that Solution Circles may be conceptualised in a similar way – this would warrant further exploration. The consistent references and codes to the need for colleagues to be involved, is not consistent with the teachers almost clandestine collaborative relationship with the EP in Miller's interviews. In the case of this study it

could be argued that the schools involved just lack the more formal structures which support a different kind of thinking and doing. The fact that problem solving 'is not the way' as one teacher put it, does not mean that it can't be the way, given appropriate structures to support it This is supported by the now adopted use of Solution Circles in a school by the SENCO at staff meetings with all staff in order to problem solve around school based issues, including pupils.

In terms of researcher reflexivity the researcher assumptions and beliefs listed prior to the research, which were predominantly a reflection of a lack of potential impact and sustainability were not supported in the analysis. Teachers who have attended courses, often feel motivated and positive about changing aspects of their practice, or indeed school systems, but will often revert back to feeling disempowered. It was envisaged that a similar response would develop post solution circle. The analysis indicates that having engaged with the process, teachers were able to sustain features of support which led to changes in teacher practice and more positive outcomes and perceptions of the pupil.

Researcher assumptions, with the exception of the strategy outcome, were not therefore felt to have impacted on the research data. .In terms of the practical implications of this study there are a number of factors that it would be beneficial to consider as an Educational Psychologist facilitating this process;

- teachers needing to know more about and understanding role demands prior to the process might help reduce feelings of anxiety and those induced by a mismatch of expectations

- Colleagues play a key role for the teacher in terms of perceived and ongoing support and need to be part of the process. The involvement of a member of the senior management team should be considered, whilst also understanding the implications of this for any potential conflict
- Teachers found the graphic facilitation process a useful visual prompt and aid post solution circle. Teachers found being able to take this away another form of support
- The presence of carers during the process is worthy of further investigation. although this only occurred in one Solution Circle is was perceived to make the role of the teacher as problem presenter more difficult

### **5.5 Potential areas for further research;**

- attributions affecting strategy choice
- Group composition, including carer
- Outcomes for pupils (baseline)
- Impact on organisational change and teacher practice.

The Educational Psychologist role here was one of facilitator of a process which is essentially Solution Focused. The benefits to teachers, and ultimately pupils from engaging with the Solution Circle process has emerged in the data through the use of a grounded theory approach, and reflects our increasing practice in facilitating processes which effect positive change. It is clear from the researcher's prior documented assumptions and beliefs around this process, that evidence of positive

change, through the use of this process was not available. This study has validated the view that we can usefully develop our practice in these areas, whilst also recognising that further research in this area would be beneficial.

## **References – Assignment 5 (Solution Circles)**

### Primary References

- Ajmal, Y. and Rees, I. (2001) Solutions in Schools. London: BT Press
- Baron, R.S., Kerr, N. & Miller, N. (1992) Group Processes, Group Decision, Group Action. Buckingham: Open University Press
- Beaver, R. (1996) Educational psychology Casework: A Practical Guide. London. Jessica Kingsley
- Bergan, J .R and Byrnes, I.M (1979) Effects of behavioural and medical models of consultation on teacher expectancies and instruction of a hypothetical child. In Miller, A (1996) Pupil behaviour and teacher culture.(p123) London.Cassell
- Brown, R. (2000) Group Processes. Second Edition. Massachusetts, USA. Blackwell Publishers Ltd.
- Charmaz, K. (2006) Constructing grounded Theory. A practical Guide Through Qualitative Analysis. London: Sage.
- Cryer, P. (2000) The Research Students Guide To Success, (2<sup>nd</sup> Edition). Buckingham: Open University Press.
- De Shazer,S. (1985) Keys to Solution in Brief Therapy New York. Norton.
- Fiske, S.T & Taylor, S.E. (1984) Social Cognition. New York. Random House
- Forsyth, D.R. (1983) An Introduction to Group Dynamics. Monterey, CA. Brooks/Cole Publishing Company
- Gergen, K. (1985) Social Psychology as history. Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 26, 309 – 320.
- Glaser, B. (1978) Theoretical Sensitivity. Mill Valley, CA. Sociology Press.
- Glaser, B. and Strauss, A.L. (1967) The Discovery of Grounded Theory. Chicago: Aldine.
- Hammersley, M (1984) Staffroom News. Milton Keynes. Open University Press
- Hanko,G. (1995) Special Needs in Ordinary Classrooms. From staff support to staff development. Third Edition. London. David Fulton Publishers.

Hanko, G. (2002) Increasing competence through collaborative problem Solving: using insight into social and emotional factors in children's learning London. David Fulton Publishers.

Hewstone, M. (1989) Causal Attribution. From cognitive processes to collective beliefs. Oxford: Blackwell Publishers Limited.

Hewston, M., Manstead, A. and Stroebe, W. (eds) (1997) The Blackwell Reader in Social Psychology. Oxford: Blackwell Publishers Limited.

Katz, A and Kahn, C. (1966) In Georgiades, N and Phillimore, L (1975) (Eds) The Myth of the Hero-innovator and Alternative Strategies for Organisational Change. London. Routledge.

Kelly, H.H. and Michela, J.L (1980) Attribution theory and research. Annual Review of Psychology, 31, 457-503.

Miller, A. (1996) Pupil Behaviour and Teacher Culture. London. Cassell

Miller, A. (2003) Teachers, Parents and Classroom Behaviour – A Psychosocial Approach. London. Open University Press

Myers, D. G. (1994) Exploring Social Psychology. Michigan US. McGraw-Hill Inc.

Olson, J.M (1988) School worlds/Micro worlds: Computers and the culture of the classroom. Oxford: Pergamon

Pearpoint, J & Forest, M (1997) Solution Circle: Getting Unstuck. A Creative Problem Solving Tool.

Rhodes, J. (1993) The Use of Solution Focused Brief Therapy in Schools. Educational Psychology in Practice. Vol 9, Number 1, (1993)

Schachter, S. (1959) The Psychology of Affiliation. Stanford, CA. Stanford University Press

Silverman, D. (2000) Doing Qualitative Research. London: Sage

Steinberg, D. (1989) Inter-professional Consultation. Oxford: Blackwell Scientific

Strauss, A & Corbin, J. (1998) Basics of Qualitative Research. Techniques and Procedures for Developing Grounded Theory, (2<sup>nd</sup> Edition). London. Sage.

Thornton, K. (2000) TES (Times Educational Supplement) 27:10 2001 Leader, 26<sup>th</sup> October: 14

Willig, C. (2001) *Introducing Qualitative Research in Psychology*.  
Maidenhead: Open University Press

### Secondary References

Conoley, J.C & Conoley, C.W. (1990) Staff consultative work in schools. In N. Jones and N. Frederickson (eds), *Refocusing Educational psychology*. Basingstoke. Falmer.

Denzin, N.K. and Lincoln, Y.S. *Handbook of Qualitative Research*, in D. Silverman (ed.) *Doing Qualitative Research*. London: Sage.

Eavis, P. (1983) Expertise (Review of becoming our own experts) TES 27/5/83 Cited in Hanks, G. (1995) *Special Needs in Ordinary Classrooms*, p11)

Galloway, (1985) *Schools Pupils and Special Educational Needs*. Croom Helm. In Hanks, G. (1995) *Special Needs in Ordinary Classrooms* (p.10)

Henwood, K. and Pidgeon, N. (1997) Using Grounded Theory in Psychological Research, in N. Hayes (ed.) *Doing Qualitative Analysis in Psychology*. Hove: Psychology Press.

Lieberman, A. & Miller, A. (1996) The Social Realities of Teaching .In *Pupil Behaviour Teacher Culture*, Miller (1996), p94, par 2)

Madill, A., Jordan, A. and Shirley, C. (2000) Objectivity and reliability in qualitative analysis, in C. Willig (ed.) *Introducing Qualitative Research in Psychology*. Maidenhead. Open University Press

Nias, J. (1985) Reference groups in primary teaching. In Miller, A. (1996) (Ed). *Pupil Behaviour and Teacher Culture*, p 106. London. Cassell.

Reicher, S. (2000) Against methodology: Some comments on Elliott, Fischer, and Rennie, *British Journal of Clinical Psychology*, 39: 1-6. In Willig, C.(2001) *Introducing Qualitative Research* (p,145).

Stevens, R.(1984) *Social Psychology: Development, Experience and Behaviour in a Social World*. Milton Keynes: Open University Press

Vygotsky, L. (1978) *Mind in Society: The Development of Higher Psychological Processes*. Cambridge MA; Harvard University Press.

Weiner-Davis, M. & O'Hanlon, W. (1989) In *The Use of Solution-focused Brief Therapy in Schools*. *Educational Psychology in Practice*. Vol 9, No1 (1993), p28, para 1.

**SOLUTION CIRCLE: GETTING UNSTUCK**  
**A Creative Problem Solving Tool**  
**Designed by Jack Pearpoint and Marsha Forest**

This is a short and powerful tool that takes no more than a half hour. It is effective in getting "unstuck" from a problem in life or work. Solution Circles are tools of "community capacity". It assumes and demonstrates that nearby people - in any community or work place have the capacity to help - if asked. It requires a person to ASK - not an easy thing in our culture of privacy and "do it alone". This tool puts all the values we espouse into practice and demonstrates that **TOGETHER WE'RE BETTER**.

Time required: No more than thirty minutes.

People per Solution Circle: Best with 5-9.

Roles to be played:

- \* **Problem Presenter** (focus person)
- \* **Process Facilitator** (team manager, time keeper)
- \* **Note Taker or Graphic Recorder**
- \* **amazingly creative Brainstorm Team**

For large groups, the group facilitator asks the group for volunteer problem presenters. (The number required is the total group divided by 9 approximately). Then ask for a process facilitator and a graphic recorder to attach themselves to each problem presenters so each core team is now a group of 3. The balance of the large group (i.e. the world's most creative community members) now join the various problem solving teams so each team totals approximately 8 - 9 problem solvers. Diversity in teams is best: spread the age range; have male/female diversity; the greater the diversity per team the better.

**Explain the steps to the teams in detail:**

**Step 1: (6 minutes)** The problem presenter will have 6 uninterrupted minutes to outline the problem. The job of the process facilitator is to keep time and make sure no one interrupts. The recorder takes notes. Everyone else (the brainstormers) listens. If the problem presenter stops talking before the six minutes elapse, everyone else stays silent until the 6 minutes pass. This is key! The problem presenter gets 6 uninterrupted minutes.

**Step 2: (6 minutes)** This is a brainstorm. Everyone chimes in with ideas about creative solutions to what they just heard. It is not a time to clarify the problem or to ask questions. It is not a time to give speeches, lectures or advice. The process facilitator must make sure this is a brainstorm. Everyone gets a chance to give their brilliant ideas. No one must be allowed to dominate. The problem presenter listens - without interrupting. He/she must not talk or respond. We often give the person masking tape to facilitate their listening. It's hard to just listen!

**Step 3. (6 minutes)** Now the group can have a dialogue led by the problem presenter. This is time to explore and clarify the problem. Focus on the positive points only and not what can't be done.

**Step 4: (6 minutes)** The First Step. The focus person and the group decide on first steps that are doable within the next 3 days. This is critical. Research shows that unless a first step is taken almost immediately, people do not get out of their ruts. A coach from the group volunteers to phone or see the person within 3 days and check if they took their first step.

Finally the group just does a round of words to describe the experience and the recorder gives the record to the focus person. If in a large group, the teams returns to the main group, debrief and continue.

In our experiences people love this exercise and find that it generates action. It does not guarantee a solution, but it usually gets people "unstuck" and at least points to the next logical step.



---

## **Solution Circle – Collaborative Problem Solving Process**

### **Roles**

Problem presenter

Process facilitator

Graphic Recorder

Time Keeper

Brainstorm Team

Problem Presentation (6 mins)

Collective Brainstorm (6 mins)

Explore and Clarify – positive only (6 mins)

Identifying Action and First Steps (6-10 mins)

## **Appendix 2 – Assignment 5 Solution Circles**

### **Researcher Assumptions and Beliefs**

- Teachers will find the Solution Circle process useful for identifying further strategies that they have not tried or thought of before
- Teachers and other participants generally feel that is a positive and worthwhile experience immediately following the process, but this may not continue to be the case if the situation with the pupil does not change/improve
- There may be no long term benefits for pupils, following the process and that this is most likely to reflect;
- An unwillingness by the teacher to change his/her practice, try new strategies, following the process, despite possibly giving an indication during the process that they would
- Motivation, confidence and any sense of empowerment being lost outside of the participating group, in the wider and more influential school culture (particularly if this is not viewed as supportive)
- Teachers will revert back to feeling unsupported in the absence of group participants in school
- Strategies are tried/ adopted, post Solution Circle, but are quickly dismissed as having no impact
- Positive feelings related to the process are only present at the time the Solution Circle was used

## Semi-Structured Interview framework – Solution Circles

### Introductory Script

*We discussed before the Solution Circle that I would come back and see you to ask you a few questions regarding the process, how you feel it went and what has happened since then in relation to X.*

*The purpose of this is to try and gain an insight in to the process from the teacher's perspective. Are you still happy to be interviewed? / and for me to record our conversation?*

### Initial subjective view

*Generally, how did you find the Solution Circle Process?*

### Expectations

*What did you feel the process was trying to achieve?*

*Was there anything you particularly disliked/liked about the process?  
Felt was helpful/unhelpful?*

*How did you feel during the process?*

### Perceptions of pupil/problem

*Have your views of X's behaviour changed as a result of the process?  
What do you put that down to?*

### Impact

*Following the Solution Circle you highlighted (recap on agreed actions/chosen strategies) as things you wanted to try with X. How have things been since that time?*

*Have there been any changes in X's behaviour since the Solution Circle?*

*What you do attribute this to?*

### Group Composition/contributions

*How did you feel about the solutions offered by the group members?*

*How did you feel about;*

- 1. your colleagues being present*
- 2. LA support staff*
- 3. Other members ( specify)*

*What did you think about;*

- 1. the composition of the group?*
- 2. Time allocated for the process?*
- 3. Graphic facilitation?*

## **Examples of Memo writing for major categories**

### **Memo 1**

#### **Threats to teacher role/identity**

Threats include the culture of the school if not perceived to be supportive of the teacher in dealing with behavioural issues within their own classroom, and those which reflect attitudes of blame for not being able to do something about the problem. Features such as being too busy or seeing the pupil as having the problem, or other factors beyond the teachers perceived control, act as defence mechanisms as they threaten the teachers identity and role, changing perceptions in relation to autonomy and control, reflected in the teachers own responses to the problem.

### **Memo 2**

#### **Manageability of the problem**

Whether the problem is perceived as manageable by the teacher is dependent on the teacher's response to it and whether she perceives that she is able to do anything about it. This occurs when the teacher begins to separate the pupil from the problem and begins to identify ways of addressing. It involves the teacher in being reflective about her practice and reframing the problem. There is a move towards identifying pupil needs. There is recognition that the process structure is supporting the teacher to induce new viewing and ways of doing things and a sense of empowerment and optimism emerges.

### **Memo 3**

#### **Justification for Action**

This is when the teacher begins to recognise impact of different group members in respect of perceived support for the problem. Colleagues in the group are viewed as supportive in being able to support the teacher in justifying any action arising from the Solution Circle and the rationale behind it. It refers to other group members reinstating the teacher's view of being a professional and acknowledgement of the problem and the situation of the teacher, giving it status and a sense of importance. It empowers the teacher to step outside the perceived support of the group

### **Memo 4**

#### **Impact Transference**

There is a recognition of change and the identification of the features of the process which have supported changes in the teachers own practice, and changes in the pupils behaviour. The uniqueness of the process in comparison to other interventions is acknowledged and the teacher is able to reflect on her own qualities in being able to engage with the process. A wider use of the process to other contexts within school is considered.

## **Dissemination and Impact Evaluation**

This section is concerned with the dissemination and impact evaluation of the thesis, together with the two smaller scale studies completed as part of the research period. It demonstrates the ways in which the research carried out has impacted on the researcher's own practice, as well as wider areas of the researcher's own educational psychology service and other local authority support services.

### **1. Assignment 4 - The Impact of Peer Mediation on Playtime Incidents in a Primary School**

#### **1.1 Introduction**

This small scale study formed part of the Local Authorities anti-bullying initiative which involved the training of pupils to act as peer mediators at break and lunch times in primary school settings. The introduction of mediation schemes was aimed at reducing the number of anti-social acts between pupils, including those which could be classified as bullying behaviour. The study aimed to provide evaluative data to support the introduction and aims of the training of pupils as peer mediators. The findings were indicative of a decrease in incidents of aggressive and verbal acts which could be categorised as having the potential to be perceived as acts of bullying or negative social responses towards peers. Notably, there was a significant reduction in the number of physical/aggressive incidents involving boys.

## **1.2 Dissemination**

The findings of the study were shared with the Anti-Bullying Project Manager and were subsequently used as part of an evaluation of the impact of the work of the Anti-Bullying Team. The findings were also shared at the Nottingham City Head Teachers Conference in support of the continued use of peer mediation schemes, as well as the continued 'roll out' across the city, of anti-bullying initiatives.

The study's findings were also disseminated at an EPS INSET day where the implications of the research were discussed with the whole Educational Psychology Service.

## **1.3 Impact evaluation on the researcher's own practice**

The research study impacted on the researcher's own knowledge base in respect of the use of peer support schemes in general, as well as more specifically, knowledge relating to peer mediation schemes. This knowledge included the notion of a potential differential impact with regard to gender, as well as the notion of reciprocated friendships, such as those offered by such peer support schemes, as having the potential to act as a barrier to aggressive acts by and towards pupils. The impact of this notion of the restructuring of social networks was a subsequent theme which the researcher was able to use to apply to a number of further EP initiated interventions, including those focusing on isolated and rejected children.

The benefits to school staff, including mid-day supervisors and teachers, was also highlighted as an outcome of the research study, with the head

teacher from the school in question subsequently reporting a significant decrease in the number of children seeking adult intervention over the play and break periods, including from herself. Future intentions are to focus on the perceptions of pupils themselves with regard to the introduction of peer mediation schemes.

#### **1.4 Evaluation on researcher's own service and wider practice**

The study formed part of a wider evaluation which helped to justify the continued operation of the Nottingham City Anti-Bullying Team. EPs were subsequently trained to deliver peer mediation training and were pivotal in engaging in joint training with teachers, teaching assistants, learning mentors as well as pupils across city schools, in order to maintain and sustain these schemes. All EPs from Nottingham City subsequently engaged with the training programme for peer support schemes in primary schools and were able to work alongside colleagues from the Anti-Bullying Team in order to deliver and support this implementation. Another important impact of the research study has been to highlight the importance of carrying out research which supports and grounds the practice of Educational Psychologists, as well as justify the use of EP time and their role in interventions which have the potential to have a positive impact on the schools and children with which we work.

Research has become an area which is now associated with the EPS in Nottingham City, with the local authority since having commissioned a number of research projects, including evaluative and action research



models, which have since provided evidence of the impact of educational psychologist work in achieving positive outcomes for children.

This research 'expectation' with regard to the EP role has not only helped to raise the profile of the EPS but has provided further impetus for EPs to engage with further research projects themselves.

## **2. Assignment 5 – How do teachers experience the use of a Solution Circle as an intervention in relation to difficult to manage pupil behaviour?**

### **2.1 Introduction**

This study explored teacher perceptions of the use of a collaborative problem solving tool, namely a Solution Circle, in relation to difficult to manage pupil behaviour. The study's findings were indicative of the use of a Solution Circle as providing teachers with an effective means of integrating differential systems of support available to the school into a unified approach. This included the schools' own support systems, including the teacher's own personal strengths and resources, as well as support from outside agencies. The process also highlighted the capacity for the strategies arising from the Solution Circle to impact on systemic change resulting in more positive outcomes for children. This was indicated by teacher perceptions of a greater sense of self efficacy, changes in teaching practices and reported improvements in pupil behaviour.

The study also highlighted the significance of the Solution Circle group composition, with the teacher's need for colleagues to be present being a

key feature of the process being experienced as supportive and effective. This specifically related to colleagues who were in a position of power, including members of the Senior Management Team or Head teacher. The presence of these colleagues not only provided the teacher with a sense of shared responsibility for the problem but also provided sanctioning for the teacher to change their practice and provision for the pupil. It also meant that any future action or changes in practice outside the Solution Circle process could also be justified to other colleagues who had not been present.

## **2.2 Dissemination**

The findings of the study were communicated to the researcher's own Educational Psychology Service through an INSET day. The study was also presented to a multi-professional group at the Nottingham Research Network Conference where the process of engaging with a Solution Circle was demonstrated and graphically presented in a visual pictorial form.

## **2.3 Impact evaluation on the researcher's own practice**

The study has impacted on the researcher's own practice in two main ways;

1. Having a greater insight into the processes operating for the teacher within the Solution Circle processes has impacted on the way that the use of the process is set up with teachers and schools. It was apparent from the research findings that there is a

need to brief the teacher prior to the process, particularly in their role as being problem presenter, since in all cases this triggered an emotional response often negative in nature. As a consequence it is necessary to ensure that teachers are fully aware of what this role involves and to go through the structure of the process, at the time of negotiating the intervention, rather than at the beginning of the process itself. It has also been helpful to be able to share the experiences of other teachers in this role and ultimately the more positive outcomes for the teacher experienced in the role of problem presenter, such as increased understanding and objectivity of the problem. The potential benefits to the teacher of the presence of colleagues, as well as members of the SLT being part of the group composition, is also now presented to schools as being beneficial and desirable. The outcomes of the study have served to justify and ground the use of Solution Circles in the researcher's own practice and for the researcher to feel confident that Solution Circles have the potential to have a positive impact on the self efficacy and practice of teachers as well as more positive outcomes for young people.

2. A further impact is that of the researcher being able to use the Solution Circle process to work collaboratively with other professionals, including workers from the Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services, Social Care, Inclusive Education and Autism Team, as well as Behaviour Support Team. The researcher has also incorporated the use of the process into group

supervision sessions for EPs and is in the process of evaluating the effectiveness of the Solution Circle process across a variety of contexts and for a variety of problems related to EP working.

#### **2.4 Evaluation on the researcher's own service and wider practice**

All EPs within the Nottingham City EPS are trained in the use of Solution Circles and the study's findings have been helpful to colleagues in highlighting practice with respect to the potential benefits and outcomes from its use, as well as how best to set the process up with teaching staff in order to achieve optimal outcomes.

As a result of the researcher's presentation at the Nottingham Research Network Conference, members of the Inclusive Education Service and Autism Team requested training in the use of this process. Whilst the researcher has not been personally involved in all of the training there is evidence within the local authority that the Solution Circle process has been adopted by all of the LA support agencies and is used when felt to be an appropriate form of intervention. Support service colleagues have been made aware of the features of the Solution Circle process that can support the optimisation of its use with schools.

### **3. Thesis - Exploring the experiences of Education Welfare Officers engaging with cases of persistent absence from school – A Grounded Theory Study**

#### **3.1 Introduction**

This study has highlighted the impact of systemic influences and self efficacy beliefs on the practice of Education Welfare Offices engaging with cases of persistent absence from school. These influences are specifically highlighted in relation to EWO assessment and intervention practices and how they are able to influence and determine the range and effectiveness of the EWOs engagement with PA cases.

#### **3.2 Dissemination**

The researcher has met with EWS management and the implications for EWO working arising from the study have been shared. This has given rise to a number of further interventions between the EPS and EWS which are discussed in 3.4 below. The researcher has planned to present the study to colleagues from the EPS at a future INSET day. It is also proposed that the researcher will share findings with the LA's Vulnerable Groups working group and at the SENCO Network Forum.

#### **3.3 Impact evaluation on the researcher's own practice**

The research study has already had a significant impact on the researcher's own practice. The researcher is a Senior Practitioner with a focus on 'Vulnerable Groups' of children. The research has highlighted PA pupils as being a significantly vulnerable group of children and has

served to raise the profile of this group for the researcher, as well as to influence EP practice for these children and young people. The researcher has initiated a pilot study which involves working jointly with EWOs on a number of PA cases. This is to involve EP attendance at School – EWO meetings, CAF meetings and to engage with assessment work with PA pupils. The researcher is also evaluating the use of the School Refusal Assessment Scale - Kearney (2007), as highlighted in the first literature review.

The EP attends Team Around the Schools Meetings (TAS) where the EP is able to discuss vulnerable groups of children such as those who have 'Looked After' status. PA pupils are now being raised with the school by the EP with the aim of ensuring that these children are being identified and that appropriate action is being taken by the schools. EP involvement with these pupils is being established by the researcher directly with schools and EWOs.

Further impact of the study on the researcher's own practice relates to the subsequent identification of a group of pupils who have become PA pupils but where parents have subsequently elected to Home Educate these children. There are currently 117 children in Nottingham City who fall within this category, equating to approximately 85 families. Whilst not all of these children would have previously been classified as PA pupils in school, a significant proportion had attendance issues or poor school attendance. It would appear that for some parents of PA pupils, electing to educate their children at home perhaps presented an easier option than the potential threat of court for their child's non attendance. In some

cases it has come to light that schools themselves have suggested that parents should home educate children who are otherwise negatively impacting on school attendance figures. Electing to home educate means that schools can take these children immediately off the school roll.

The researcher has since been able to raise a number of concerns regarding these children with the EPS, EWS and Elective Home Education coordinator. These pupils appear to have become much more vulnerable than if they had remained PA pupils on roll at a school since all LA support services cease for these pupils. The CAF process (Common Assessment Framework) will also invariably also cease. These concerns are currently being addressed but have been highlighted as a direct consequence of the research focus.

The researcher intends to carry out further research as a result of the current study which will focus on the PA pupil voice.

### **3.4 Evaluation on the researcher's own service and wider practice**

The research study has impacted on both EWS and EPS practice as follows;

- PA pupils have now become part of the EPS 'core offer' to schools. This means that there is no charge to schools for EP working around PA pupils. PA pupils have not historically been a priority group for EPS involvement so this represents a significant change in EP practice. As indicated in the literature review where EPs are involved with non attendance this has tended to focus

specifically on pupils with anxiety related non attendance  
(Galloway 1985).

- The EWS manager now alerts the Senior Practitioner EP to the children who have become new PA cases in both primary and secondary schools. The Senior Practitioner EP provides each link EP for the school with this information and the EP for the school then raises the child with the school and link EWO. Opportunities for joint working are identified. The EWS manager also provides a list of the 10 highest profile cases to the EPS. The EPS has responded to this by offering;

- *Consultation to individual EWOs for more complex or 'stuck' cases. Findings from the research study were indicative of EWOs valuing this EP contribution*

- *Joint home visits*

- *Support in the assessment process*

- *Contributing to the CAF process by sharing assessment information, chairing meetings, developing and evaluating action plans around PA pupils*

- *Challenging school practice where appropriate and working to develop alternative narratives for PA pupils which reflect both the pupil and parent voice*

*Attending multi-agency meetings where a CAF has not been initiated.*

This offer has been communicated at EWS and EPS whole service meetings.



In addition the EPS have provided training to the EWS on the use of Solution Focused approaches. This was highlighted in the study in terms of supporting the EWO to manage the 'problem focused' talk which pre-dominated the EWO-School-Parent meetings, particularly in relation to school staff.

In addition the researcher is in the process of setting up a focus group of EWOs in order to explore assessment process, tools and frameworks. A restructuring of the EWS and a scaling down of the service has meant that the researcher has had to be sensitive to the needs and timescales of such interventions.

## References

Galloway, D. (1985). *Schools and persistent absentees*. Oxford: Pergamon Press.

Kearney, C.A. (2007). *School absenteeism and school refusal behaviour in youth: A contemporary review*. *Clinical Psychology Review* 28 (2008) 451-471