

The Position on Behaviour and Attendance in Wales: Some Reflections from an Insider's Perspective

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ABSTRACT

This article reflects upon the position on behaviour and attendance leading up to devolution in 1999 and since then, to the present day. In order to achieve this task, the article has been subdivided into three sections. Part one outlines a brief historical perspective. Part two considers key issues surrounding the National Behaviour and Attendance Review (NBAR) period from an insider's perspective, as well as assessing the current state of play in this field. Part three further considers some of the strengths and weaknesses of behaviour and attendance in Wales, whilst considering aspects that require further research and development. The implications of all these three facets are discussed, as these may well have wider ramifications for governments and researchers from around the world.

Key words: attendance, behaviour, Wales, school, policy.

Background

The purpose of this article is to provide a synopsis on the current state of school behaviour and attendance in Wales and in related fields, such as bullying and out-of-school provision. To achieve this aim, the article is subdivided into three parts. The first section will provide a brief historical perspective of key developments and issues. The second section will

describe and reflect upon the important developmental role of the National Behaviour and Attendance Review (NBAR, 2007, 2008; Welsh Assembly Government (WAG), 2009) and the current state of play in the field that includes out-of-school provision/education otherwise. The final section will describe some ideas on what needs to be achieved in the future in order to take Welsh education forward in this increasingly important area.

The focus within this article develops some of the themes first raised in the unique and insightful book written by former Welsh Education Minister Leighton Andrews, *Ministering to Education: A Reformer Reports* (Andrews, 2014; see also Reid, 2015b: 347–9). This book considered some of the themes and issues from his period as Minister for Education and Skills in Wales, and discussed and analysed some of the internal and external pressures which he faced in implementing the Welsh Government's desired educational priorities during this period and some of the reasons behind these difficulties.

Historical perspective

Prior to 1999 and devolution in Wales, responsibility for managing behaviour and attendance in Wales fell to the Department for Education in London and the old Welsh Education Office (1975); as such, these fields received comparatively little attention or more than was necessary with limited, if any, research funding being made available, despite the obvious needs. Explicitly, rates of both non-attendance and truancy had always been much higher in Wales than England since the 1870s and up until the point of devolution (Rubenstein, 1969; Reid, 1985).

For example, the one-day survey, in January 1974, of all secondary schools in Wales, found that approximately 10% of pupils were absent on the census date (NACEWO, 1975); this figure should place recent improvements in school attendance in Wales into their proper context, as clearly a great deal has already been achieved to improve the situation, not least since 1999. Nevertheless, across the United Kingdom (UK), and in Wales, regional differences always occurred and have continued to abound (Douglas and Ross, 1965; Fogelman and Richardson, 1974). The longitudinal National Children's Bureau (NCB) survey analysed by Davie et al. (1972) found not only major regional differences in the school attendance of children within the UK, but also some major and unexpected variations. Thus, at the age of only 7, 51% of 7-year-old children made

between 96% and 100% of attendance in Scotland, compared with only 35% in Wales.

The research of Carroll (1977), and subsequently Reid (1980), helped to draw much needed attention to the unhappy position of much lower rates of attendance in Wales than throughout the rest of the UK, more especially the higher rates of truancy (unauthorised absence) amongst pupils of secondary school age, most notably in the south Wales Valley regions and within the major city conurbations, such as Cardiff, Newport and Swansea, as well as along the north-east corridor of north Wales (e.g. Rhyl).

Rates of school absenteeism were, for instance, almost twice as high in Wales as in some English regions; 14.6% of pupils aged 11 were found to be absent from school, compared with only 7.5% in south-west England (Fogelman and Richardson, 1974). In the one-day survey, Wales had far fewer pupils making 95% or higher rates of attendance than did any other single region (Fogelman and Richardson, 1974; NACEWO, 1975).

In fact, some studies of this era suggested that the national survey underestimated the non-attendance issues in Wales. For example, Vaughan (1975) found that rates of non-attendance in the seven secondary schools in the old Cardiganshire averaged out at 13%, nearly double that for the region in the national one-day survey.

Rates of truancy were always much higher in Wales than in England or the rest of the UK (Carroll, 1977; Reynolds and Murgatroyd, 1977). The truancy rate in 1974 was 4.1%, compared with 2.1% average for England, and there were some schools across south Wales where these rates were much higher, with school differences abounding (Reynolds et al., 1976), a trend which has continued until this day, although, thankfully, at much lower levels. Some Local Authorities (LAs) in Wales (e.g. Cardiff) continue to have much higher rates of unauthorised absence than other LAs (e.g. Monmouthshire). Some parts of Wales have disproportionately high rates for their predicted locations and socio-economic intakes (e.g. Pembrokeshire).

The causes and reasons for pupils' non-attendance have changed significantly over the years. For example, up until the late 1970s, boy truants significantly outnumbered girls. Today, in both England and Wales there are more girls than boys who are unauthorised absentees (Tyerman, 1968; Reid, 1986, 2011a; Malcolm et al., 2003). A comparison between the main reasons for absence has also changed considerably. In the 1970s, home background factors were the main cause (Tyerman, 1968; Reid, 1982b, 1982c, 1983a, 1983b, 1983c, 1984a, 1984c, 1985, 1986, 1987). Today, it is

'boredom with school', curricular problems, and bullying/cyber-bullying which are three highest indicators, according to research (Reid, 2005a, 2005b, 2008b, 2008c, 2014a: chs 1–5).

It needs to be recognised, however, that more pupils in Wales tend to emanate from deprived working-class backgrounds than in England (Egan, 2007). Moreover, the causes of school absenteeism are complex and interrelated, often involving a range of social, home background, psychological and school-based reasons and exacerbated by such factors as poverty, ill health, housing difficulties and familial traits (Reid, 2014a).

On behaviour, there had been much less specific research appertaining to Wales, although the link between non-attendance and truancy with poor behaviour had long been established (Tyerman, 1968; Davie et al., 1972; Welsh Office/South Glamorgan, 1977; Reid, 1981, 1984a, 1984b). Between 1977 and 1980, the old Welsh Office, in conjunction with South Glamorgan, established a three-year postgraduate training course at Cardiff University to train future specialist staff on behavioural issues. This course, which was a great success, was led by such notables as Professor Ron Davie, Professor Graeme Upton and Professor David Fontana, and they and their colleagues trained a number of specialists who subsequently rose to prominent positions in the field across Wales and who, in some cases, have been in post for the thirty-odd years since. One of the features of this programme was its innovative and multidisciplinary approach, which can now be seen as an early forerunner of the interdisciplinary features within the Children Act of 2004 and the gradual increased importance given to listening to pupils' voices (Welsh Office/South Glamorgan, 1977; WAG, 2007a).

However, this excellent course ended when the funding stopped after three years; the fields of behaviour and behaviour management have never since been so richly and uniquely funded or supported. It could subsequently be suggested that these important fields have suffered proportionately in Wales in terms of educational research activity, apart from a few individual studies and books (Reid, 1984b, 1984c, 1986, 1989a, 1989b; Pritchard and Williams, 2001; Ellis and Morgan, 2009; Morgan and Ellis, 2009, 2011; Morgan, 2009; Reid and Morgan, 2012; Ellis, Morgan and Reid, 2013), as well as some official guidance documents from the Department for Education, on behalf of the Welsh Assembly Government, which are updated periodically (e.g., NAW, 2006; WAG, 2009).

Much the same can be said of related areas, such as bullying and out-of-school provision, both in terms of the lack of educational research and in

professional terms of the lack of prominence given to these fields in Wales. For example, during the initial data-gathering exercise for the National Behaviour and Attendance Review (NBAR, 2007, 2008; WAG, 2009; Reid, 2010a, 2010b, 2010c) it was found that:

- a. there were comparatively few out-of-school places available for excluded pupils in Wales, compared with other parts of the UK, both at the primary and Key Stages 3 and 4;
- b. there are virtually no alternative curriculum schemes available, such as there are in places like Sefton, not too far from the Welsh border (Reid, 2004a; Ofsted, 2006);
- c. some pupils with specialist behavioural needs were still being sent to England for their education, as there was no equivalent provision available in Wales, and there were limited specialist units available for such conditions as autism or ADHD;
- d. little research into differential rates of both fixed and permanent exclusion had been undertaken in Wales;
- e. staff working in the out-of-school sector had often undergone little training for their posts (Reid, 2011a, 2011b; McCluskey et al., 2013) and the field was viewed very much as a 'Cinderella' area in Welsh Government circles;
- f. efforts to prevent bullying in Wales were then in their infancy, although a great deal of much-needed work and guidance has been undertaken in this field since; and
- g. the link between pupils who are NEETs (not in education, employment or training) and those with either behaviour or attendance problems had never been scoped or properly researched.

Finally, Welsh education in the fields of behaviour and attendance has been adversely affected by a number of related points. These include the facts that:

1. Given the number of LAs across Wales (still 22 in 2015, although change is on the horizon), the lack of specialist expertise in behaviour management, and in related specialist fields within both LAs and some schools across Wales, has meant that appropriate behavioural support and intervention strategies have been spread much too thinly across the ground, with frequent diagnostic time-delays for both initial and subsequent assessments often the norm, to the extent that some small LAs have very

little expertise at all in these areas. This also affects assessments for specialist educational and additional learning needs within some parts of Wales. Teachers in Wales have generally received much less initial and in-service training in behaviour support and management than, say, their counterparts in England or the USA (NBAR, 2007; Reid, 2014a).

2. Support for pupils with bullying problems within schools can be variable, despite recent updated guidance (WAG, 2003; WG, 2011a, 2011b);
3. There are often no places available for pupils who require essential out-of-school places and provision;
4. Support for pupils with attendance problems can be both patchy and variable, for various reasons: recent staffing cuts within some LAs of existing education welfare/education social-work cuts; the lack of relevant and available professional training (Reid et al., 2007, 2008a; Reid, 1999, 2014a, 2014b); the rise of largely unqualified para-professional support, such as school attendance officers and home-school liaison specialists; cost-cutting; and organisational and local schools' needs.

The National Behaviour and Attendance Review: some reflections

It is probably worthwhile to track back and remind ourselves of the reasons why the National Behaviour and Attendance Review, which was conducted between 2006 and 2008, came about in the first place (NBAR, 2007, 2008; WAG, 2009). Initially, post devolution in 1999, the then Education Minister, Jane Davidson, quickly realised that standards in Welsh education would never be raised significantly when school non-attendance rates in Wales were considerably higher than those in the rest of the UK. She was acutely aware of the higher and equally disproportionate rates of social deprivation and disadvantage in Wales and was determined to try to do something about it (Reid, 1985, 1999, 2000, 2002a, 2004b, 2004c; Egan, 2007), a trend within Welsh education which has continued to this day and can be seen as part of the equality and social inclusion movement. Her initiative can also be seen as one part of the Learning Country (WAG, 2000) agenda.

Hence, she originally established a Task and Finish Group as part of a scoping exercise to look into how rates of school attendance could be improved in Wales (WAG, 2003); this excluded behavioural issues and was managed and chaired within the then Department for Children, Education, Lifelong Learning and Skills (DCELLS). However, she, along with

professionals across Wales, found both the outcome and final report to be disappointing.

Moreover, around this time, Estyn was producing a range of documents, on both attendance and behavioural issues within Wales, which was upping the ante (Estyn, 2004, 2006a, 2006b, 2007a, 2014), and the issues started to get more media coverage, both within Wales and across the rest of the UK (Daniels et al., 2003; Croll and Moses, 2005; Cole, 2007; DfES, 2005; Children's Commissioner's Report, 2007; Estyn, 2007b, 2008).

When the NBAR reports (2007, 2008) were published, they received a great deal of professional and critical peer-review acclaim. They brought Welsh thinking and practice back up to date after a slight lull, although not for too much longer. Interestingly, some of the key findings and recommendations of this independent review team, such as those on the need for much earlier intervention, were subsequently adopted by other, later, reviews held in different parts of the UK, like the Taylor Report (2012) in England. Paradoxically, the recommendations of both the Steer (2005) and Taylor Reports (2012) have been implemented much more vigorously and rigorously in England than Wales, with much more financial support being made available for training and other professional support needs. A clue to the differences in available resources between Wales and England can be found in a 2008 paper in *Educational Studies* which showed how, on attendance, Welsh LAs had sometimes only about a third of the staffing support of their counterparts in England (Reid, 2008b).

One of the advantages of the NBAR review was that it was an independent and thorough process, albeit initially serviced by DCELLS, which took in all parts of Wales and Welsh education in an evidence-based approach, as requested by Jane Davidson. Herein, however, lay a critical factor which subsequently recurred and which has influenced the outcome and follow-up work of the NBAR Report recommendations ever since. Interestingly, some other similar external reviews in education appear to have faced similar post-report difficulties (see, for example, the review on assessment in schools in Wales and its aftermath: Daugherty, 2004; DARG, 2004).

As Andrews (2014) indicated, there were within DCELLS (now the DfES) in Wales individuals who might frown on externally led reviews, especially reviews led by academics. This denuded their sense of 'control' of educational practice and policy-making within Wales, something that the excellent Thomas Report (2011) on the infrastructure of education in

Wales examined critically in considerable detail. Some prominent educationalists suggest the inadequacy of the DfES (see Andrews, 2014) continues to hamper further much-needed educational progress within Welsh education to this day.

Indeed, this scenario recurred when the Children and Young People Committee in Wales (2013) decided to conduct its own review into the slow rate of progress being made on the implementation of the NBAR Report (2008) recommendations. Following this review, the Children and Young People Committee pointedly re-endorsed the key NBAR proposals and indicated that they would return for a further progress review within the foreseeable future (Children and Young People Committee Report, 2013). They added one caveat of their own in Recommendation 12, which asked for the NBAR implementation process to be speeded up.

Of course, since the publication of the final NBAR Report (2008), the advent of the 'cuts' and 'austerity' era has meant that implementing most of the Report's recommendations was always going to become more challenging, especially as the Report was undertaken during a time when the Labour administrations in both London and Cardiff were all about 'Education, Education, Education'.

Initially, with the encouragement of the new Education Minister, Jane Hutt, DCELLS produced its own excellent response to the NBAR Report in a full and extremely commendable document, *Behaving and Attending* (WAG, 2009) that, at first, made rapid progress. At a private meeting between Jane Hutt, a key official and the Chair of NBAR (see private letter and notes, Hutt, 2008; WAG, 2008) it was agreed that the Chair would undertake a number of follow-up tasks post NBAR. From the Chair's perspective, these were all achieved (Reid et al., 2010a, 2010b). Explicitly, for example, the Minister asked the Chair to obtain some further publicity for the research undertaken with children and young people in Wales and provided as part of the evidence-gathering exercise to the NBAR process. This was a personal interest of hers and one to which she specifically referred at the NBAR Report launch in Cardiff Bay. She also stated that she would ask DCELLS to undertake a range of further activities (and provided a list) in order to promote the dissemination of the NBAR work within Wales in the future, such as by asking DCELLS to organise a national conference on the Report's findings and recommendations. None of this ever happened, however, and we might question why Jane Hutt's requirements were never met.

There are likely to have been four main reasons. First, there was a change of Minister shortly afterwards, as Leighton Andrews replaced Jane Hutt. Second, there was another reorganisation and reshuffle of personnel within DCELLS and it could be argued that the new brooms had a different view and approach from their predecessors, which was even more anti-NBAR. Third, these officials advised the Minister to change and scrap the Behaving and Attending (WAG, 2009) approach almost immediately, along with its related Ministerial Advisory Committee, on which the NBAR Chair also sat. Fourth, despite the support from Leighton Andrews in requesting that DCELLS bring the NBAR Chair back into their operation on managing behaviour and attendance in Wales, this never happened (Reid, 2013a). It has been documented that Leighton Andrews gave a very specific instruction to one of his most senior officials in the NBAR Chair's presence at a meeting between the three of them. This instruction was never carried out, partly because the official subsequently informed the NBAR Chair of strong opposition within his own department that he had been unable to break down. He promised to resolve these issues within six months, in order to carry out the Minister's instructions, but, in practice, it never happened. And, after that, there were further departmental reorganisations, reshuffles, the Children and Young People Committee Inquiry (WG, 2013), and finally Leighton Andrews's own unexpected departure, just as he was beginning to reinvigorate the whole process.

For example, the Minister had specifically asked for the Chair of NBAR to become re-involved and to share his expertise with other key groups looking at some of the other major issues within DCELLS at the time (such as the School Effectiveness Framework (SEF)) and to participate in these discussions, so that the findings from the NBAR Report could be incorporated into their group's work as well as into that of a number of other similar working groups of the period.

This also never happened. It has been further documented that, quite by chance, and without any prior discussion, the former Chair of NBAR discovered that the excellent *Behaving and Attending* (2009) response report, which had been put together by all sides in the post-Report process, had been shelved and replaced by a *Behaviour and Attendance Action Plan, 2011–13* (WG, 2011a), which was almost entirely the result of DCELLS officials' own thinking. Therefore, rather than proceeding to follow Jane Hutt's ministerial instructions to fully implement the NBAR Report's recommendations, a subtle change of action had taken place. Interestingly, the cross-party position within the Senedd was also to implement all the

NBAR recommendations, something that was re-examined later in the Children and Young People-Committee Review (2013).

In reality, the NBAR post-review experience is a good practical example of the difficulties faced by government ministers in Wales in their relationship with a comparatively fledging and inexperienced civil service in which the control lines between the administration and the administrators are sometimes blurred or not as effective as they ought to be, something which the Thomas Report (2011) as well as that by Andrews (2014) also recognised. In future educational policy reviews, I would suggest that the role and post-review involvement of the chair needs to be more carefully thought through to lessen both expectations and potential tensions or disappointments on both sides. Due to the often close relationship between the civil service and ministers, it is not always apparent that ministers always receive a full, clear and rounded picture and sometimes, obfuscation can take place.

Paradoxically, although the NBAR Chair came from a behaviour and attendance background, with a greater emphasis upon attendance (Reid, 2010, 2012a), the NBAR Report team spent a disproportionate amount of time on behaviour-related rather than attendance issues. This was partly because of Jane Hutt's wishes and her follow-up ideas, and partly because of the composition and make-up of the Review Team itself and the wishes of the then DCELLS officials.

The precise details of the key findings of the NBAR Review document (NBAR, 2008) need not concern us in great detail here because they can be ascertained from a reading of the Report itself, as well as from a number of papers in other academic journals on its specific findings on behaviour, attendance, exclusion and out-of-school provision (Reid, 2009a, 2009b, 2009c, 2010a, 2010b, 2010c, 2010d, 2011a, 2011b, 2011c, 2011d, 2011e, 2011f, 2012b, 2013b, 2013c). Rather, it is probably more apposite to cast a critical eye on the present state of behaviour and attendance in Wales and to suggest some ways forward.

The state of play

Need One

Since NBAR, a lot has happened in education in Wales. Moreover, the structure and process of both the administration and management of

education in Wales has undergone several significant changes. These include personnel, departmental reorganisation within the renamed Department for Education and Skills (DfES, formerly DCELLS), the creation of four regional consortia, and impending local authority and national curriculum transformation, as the country attempts to raise its educational standards, partly in the wake of a series of disappointing PISA results.

Herein lies one of the key difficulties facing raising standards in behaviour and attendance and related fields in Wales. Despite the original Jane Davidson and Jane Hutt vision, and the NBAR team recommendations, there remains no national strategy on behaviour and attendance in Wales. Again, why?

Once again, I would argue that the answer is to be found in the difference between the points of view among professionals in Wales (NBAR, 2007) and officials within the DfES. The NBAR vision was for there to be an all-embracing all-Wales strategy on behaviour and attendance, subdivided into three parts: part of the Jane Hutt–NBAR Chair discussions and post-NBAR agreement which, as mentioned earlier, never got implemented. The idea was for there to be a national strategy, overseen by the DFES, at a national, regional and local level (which included individual schools, pupils and parents). To this day, this core strategy policy document has never been written.

Instead, the internal DfES view is that this would have a negative impact on ‘local initiatives’. This is wrong thinking and a misunderstanding of the key issues. A national strategy is required to provide a template of standards, similarity in policies and practice and, above all, consistency in both professional and school-based practice across Wales. This is far from the case presently. For example, referral practice from schools to the local education welfare service varies considerably, based upon a number of different possible factors, as do individual school policy documents on both behaviour and attendance.

At the national level, the national strategy should provide the parameters under which the regional consortia and LAs, schools and related organisations operate. This would mean some revisions to existing guidance documents. So, for example, there would be one overarching policy document on attendance, behaviour and exclusion practice that all schools and staff would operate uniformly. What is the point in every school having its own unique and different policy document on: (a) attendance; (b) behaviour; (c) bullying; and (d) exclusions? How can you

achieve consistency and ‘fair play’ in this ad hoc and haphazard manner? How can parents have confidence in such diverse practice and procedures?

There would then be a second level within the overarching national policy document to meet the needs at regional and LA level, and a third to meet the more individual needs of schools, pupils and parents, all brought together into the one national strategy policy document. This would not only make it easier to achieve a consistency of approach but also make it easier to train all relevant staff appropriately, and in much the same way as is already undertaken for the schools effectiveness framework (SEF) or for the national approaches into improving literacy and numeracy across Wales. This would also ensure a consistency in the application of legal approaches for non-attendance in Wales. Presently, there is no such consistency in approach or in the legal outcomes of cases taken to court whatsoever, with different school and LA processes abounding and major differences in outcomes in local magistrate’s courts when cases eventually reach this stage. For example, between 2011 and 2013, one LA never took a single parent to court for their children’s non-attendance, whilst the two neighbouring authorities took thirty-six and seventy-five parents respectively to court. Fines given to parent/s by the courts ranged from £30 to £760 within these LAs.

Need Two

Despite NBAR’s core recommendation that ‘The Welsh Assembly Government should prioritise early intervention strategies on work with attendance-related and behavioural-related problems amongst children and young people’, too little has happened to promote this aim in the post-NBAR years, a clear failure by the DfES. Moreover, many LAs in Wales still clearly prioritise their secondary-school providers at the clear expense of nursery, infant and primary provision thereby, meaning that both remedial and intervention strategies occur often, if not usually, much too late, if at all (Reid, 2014a). For example, many primary and/or infant/nursery schools in Wales still receive little, if any, support from their education welfare service, especially in certain local authorities, a position that puts added pressure on to primary head teachers.

Indeed, because of anomalies within an outdated legal process, some LAs in Wales even continue to instruct their support staff not to engage in school attendance issues for nursery-aged (under 5) pupils because the present legal requirements under the 1944 and 1996 Education Acts only

apply for pupils aged between 5 and 16. There is a need for a legal change to be made here as well as in some other areas to reflect twenty-first-century realities and practice. This aspect on promoting early intervention and good practice also needs to be written into the stage two part of the core national strategy document referred to above.

Need Three

Despite the clear recommendations of NBAR, and the wishes of both Jane Davidson and Jane Hutt, the Welsh Government and DfES have never adequately revised their policies on exclusions, something which the NBAR team spent hours on rethinking in the wake of poor practice and the report by the Children's Commissioner for Wales (2007) into unofficial exclusions. For example, many, if not most, excluded pupils do not receive their rights to have work set immediately or to have their needs met within ten working days and to be considered for re-entry to either their own school or another school or relevant educational establishment within the existing timescales.

Although the Welsh Government has updated and revised some of its guidance on school exclusions within the last few years, including exclusions in out-of-school provision, it has never tackled all the issues fully and to the extent that is really needed to improve existing professional practice. Although in the latter stages of its remit the NBAR team spent more time on this issue than any other single matter, they were never asked to explain their findings and recommendations, despite this aspect being included in its terms of reference.

To be frank, drafting new regulations on exclusions would never be a simple task for anybody, more especially if you were trying to satisfy all parties in the enterprise: parents/carers, pupils, head teachers, school governors, local authorities, other caring and voluntary sector partners, multi-agency providers, etc. Nevertheless, major problems remain in managing school exclusions on a daily basis in Wales and the findings of the Edinburgh research team (McCluskey et al., 2013) are accurate.

The related issue of 'managed moves' across Wales also requires much more clarity of thought and practice as well as consistency in approach. Present practice in Wales is idiosyncratic, inconsistent and normally crisis-driven, often because of the lack of suitable and available places within many LAs and the wish to protect certain high-status schools at the expense of some 'sink' (or, in Welsh Government assessment terms, 'red') schools.

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Similarly, despite the excellent Edinburgh Report into out-of-school provision in Wales (McCluskey et al., 2013), and the recent higher prioritisation of this field within the DfES, much more work and provision in this area needs to be undertaken if Welsh education is to reach the heights of that in certain authorities in England (e.g. Sefton, see Reid, 2005c) or in Scotland.

The Edinburgh Review team further endorsed the picture gained by the NBAR team in the evidence that it received on out-of-school provision in Wales. In fact, the NBAR team recommended this further review, one of the positive Behaving and Attending (2009) outcomes. The key findings of the Edinburgh team Report (2013) were that there was:

- variation between LAs in implementing Welsh Government guidance on school exclusion;
- significant variation between schools in the policy and practice of managing actual and potential exclusions;
- evidence of unlawful exclusions continuing;
- some educational provision that was not being properly monitored;
- some pupils educated outside the school setting who were not receiving an appropriate education;
- some variations between authorities in the quality of the curriculum and behaviour-management approaches in educational provision outside the school setting; and
- a lack of reintegration back into school after exclusion and from education outside the school setting.

More recently, both Estyn and the Welsh Government have taken steps to move the agenda forward more quickly in the field of out-of-school provision, often known as education otherwise (than at school). Hence, in 2015, two new key documents in this field have been produced. These are: *Education other than at school: a good practice survey* (Estyn, 2015a) and *Response to the Estyn thematic review on education otherwise other than at school: a good practice survey* (Welsh Government, 2015a).

As all these aforementioned documents agree, both the staffing levels, expertise and training needs of behavioural support teams across LAs in Wales need to be improved significantly. This is especially true as certain behavioural problems are becoming increasingly difficult to manage, in these changing times when more and more pupils and parents are now much more aware of their rights. Moreover, some staff in schools, even

head teachers, are reluctant to intervene in certain situations because of any potential comeback upon themselves. Some teachers may remain unsure or unclear about their own rights, such as when and how they can legitimately use restraint procedures.

Furthermore, some newish and emergent behavioural issues within schools have appeared to worsen within the last few years (e.g. pupils carrying weapons to and from schools). Data indicates that there has been a growth in bullying and cyber-bullying in some schools, with pupils often getting upset after receiving nasty text or voice messages from their peers. This appears to particularly affect girls between the ages of 8 and 14. Home-school confrontations, as well as interracial conflicts and homophobic slurs, are other growth areas, according to recent Welsh Government data on fixed-term and permanent exclusions. The causal link between bullying/cyber-bullying and non-attendance also appears to be growing (Reid, 2008b, 2014a).

Need Four

In 2013, the Welsh Government eventually met an NBAR priority to provide some core training on attendance by giving some £800,000 of funding to the four regional consortia, approximately £200,000 each. This came about partly because of the publicity surrounding Leighton Andrews's twenty-point recovery plan for Wales to improve standards and his own decision to reprioritise the outcome of the NBAR Report's recommendations, which, apparently, came as a complete surprise to some of his own officials (Reid, 2011, 2011f).

Each consortia used and spent this funding differently with completely different aims and objectives and outcomes, hardly a surprise. The best practice was found in the South East Wales Consortia (SEWC, 2013a, 2013b, 2013c), where all key support staff, including head teachers, deputies and senior managers, and other core staff, such as education welfare staff, attendance staff, home-school liaison officers, LA and school support and office staff, were engaged on two full training events each, on best practice, school change and improving school attendance outcomes. The needs of the forty-two schools underachieving worst on attendance were identified and provided with their own individual 'intervention kits'. Of all attendees at these training events for the 256 schools and other staff, 97% rated their INSET training in the highest possible evaluative category as 'excellent': not too bad, given the fact that over thirty such training events were held

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across all parts of Caerphilly, Newport, Monmouthshire, Torfaen and Blaenau Gwent (SEWC, 2013c).

Paradoxically, over the course of the eighteen months of the training and support provided by the former NBAR Chair, the average rates of attendance rose by some 3.8% across the region (to the highest rates of attendance ever achieved in Wales, with Monmouthshire leading the way and reaching almost 97% (untold levels from only a few years beforehand) and Torfaen improving by some 6.7% since the NBAR Chair's intervention with them during the period 2011–14).

Fortuitously, through the training and its ideas, some schools in SEWC have continued with the good practice from the ideas put forward. Hence, both Abersychan and West Monmouthshire schools are examples of some of the schools that have implemented their own school attendance panels, such as the individually developed School-Based Scheme (see Reid, 2002b, 2003a, 2003b, 2006, 2014b: chs 9, 10).

Despite these endeavours, attendance rates in far too many schools in Wales remain too low, certainly in terms of their peers, while exclusion rates in both primary and secondary schools in Wales remain much too high in a few schools. The growth in fixed-term exclusions and the reasons for them in a number of primary schools across Wales is of considerable concern, including the number of teacher-related and pupil-pupil assaults, with a worrying growth in parent-teacher assaults and knife-related crimes, homophobic and racially motivated attacks. Fortunately, the vast majority of schools in Wales are well managed and have comparatively few serious staff and pupil assaults by comparison with certain parts of England and in some English schools, which is a credit to staff throughout Wales.

Need Five

There is a need to understand that despite widespread school differences in rates of attendance in Wales (Reynolds et al., 1976), the vast majority of absentee, truant, behaviourally disorientated, disaffected and challenging and potentially NEET pupils in Wales emanate from deprived, working-class backgrounds, often living in poor-quality housing in families, or deprived one-parent families, where poverty and other social and educational disadvantages are the norm (Reid, 1999, 2014a). Many of these deprived pupils live within certain longstanding clusters in parts of the south Wales Valleys, Cardiff Central and East, Newport, and Swansea East and its surrounding valleys.

The links between non-attendance, poor behaviour and poverty are strikingly significant, as are the links between lack of schooling, adult disadvantage and crime (Egan, 2007; Reid, 1999). Therefore, some new and innovative research is required in this area, not least in how to engage potentially NEET pupils better in school in new and more meaningful curricula programmes, and not least because many aspects of social deprivation are higher in Wales than in most other parts of the UK.

Here, there is also a continual need to raise the literacy and numeracy levels of pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds as early as possible. The Welsh Government should consider implementing some more compensatory reading programmes with professional support across primary schools in Wales, in order to prevent pupils from falling behind too early, losing interest in learning, and giving way to the temptations of missing school, becoming truants, underachievers, disaffected or those manifesting challenging behaviour and at risk of becoming NEET (see NBAR Report (2008): p.1, Core Recommendations 1 and 2, pp.18–37).

This is doubly important, as most pupils who are persistent absentees and have disruptive behaviour tend to have much lower levels of both general self-esteem and academic self-concepts than the rest of the school-age population (Reid, 1982a, 1985). This is often compounded by their lower literacy, numeracy and reading skills, which often worsen with age as they progress through the educational system and need, therefore, to be tackled as early as possible.

Good practice in multi-agency working is another area where more and better research is required in Wales, especially as some aspects of the post-Children Act 2004 agenda on both behaviour and attendance (Reid, 2005d) are not operating particularly effectively. Improving and prioritising better home-school links should be another priority field (see Ellis, Morgan and Reid, 2013). Some of the problems here lie in the absence of suitable educational research budgets in Wales funded by the Welsh Government to implement practically based and school-based solutions, as well as in limited staff expertise within some university departments of education across Wales (Tanner, 2011).

In 2007, Jane Davidson asked the NBAR team in its terms of reference to come up with some good practice on reintegration strategies within Wales. The team tried hard and duly failed. It remains an area of real need. Good practice studies into reintegration strategies on both behaviour and attendance are gaining momentum, in terms of both educational research and practical solutions around the globe (Reid, 2014a, 2015a), and it

remains important that Welsh education is not left too far behind. Some good reintegration practice is starting in a few schools in Wales through their use of restorative justice schemes (this is also the case in Scotland, see McCluskey et al., 2008).

Need Six

The Welsh Government should take a long, hard look again at the findings from the Edinburgh study (2013) that it commissioned and come up with a proper and sustainable all-Wales strategy on its out-of-school provision. This should include:

- a root-and-branch review of possible alternative curriculum strategies for underachieving and disaffected pupils (Reid, 2013b);
- the possibility of starting some 'second chance' schools/educational opportunity establishments for pupils who have 'failed' up to school-leaving age, partly to prevent them from becoming NEETs;
- the role of pupil referral units (PRUs) in Wales (perhaps something like a new title of 'small schools' might be better, in order to do away with both existing labelling and prejudicial issues);
- the link between FE colleges and schools in working together to provide joint academic and vocational opportunities. This study might also need to involve a consideration of the role of employers, not least in providing help and relevant opportunities with work placements. The financial constraints upon improving these FE-school links should also be re-examined, as presently they are unhelpful; and
- existing staff development and training provision for professionals engaged in this field, as well as an examination of their qualifications, previous experience, educational and work backgrounds.

Need Seven

In this section we will consider some specific coding issues, relating to improving school attendance, which require some further thought from a variety of perspectives, including aspects which need some new legislation and amendments to the legal requirements for parents and pupils in Wales, as well as improving safeguarding. These changes will also have implications for the present Estyn school inspection process, as well as for both governors and head teachers, the DfES and the Minister for Education and

Skills (Reid, 2014c). All of these changes could be made quite easily through amendments to the existing regulatory guidance on school attendance in Wales that is issued by the Welsh Government (see, for example, National Assembly for Wales, 2006).

Issue 1: The categorisation of absences for religious days

Prior to the last attendance-recoding exercise post *Behaving and Attending* (WAG, 2009), pupils in Wales who took absences for religious days were classified as ‘attendance not required’ which did not count against schools’ returns. Since then, these absences are counted as ‘authorised absences’ and do count against schools’ attendance figures. So what does this mean?

A useful case study and example of the issues can be considered by examining the position of Pillgwenlly School in Newport. Pillgwenlly Primary is a large school of some 684 pupils. Ninety per cent of the pupils are designated EAL/BME. Ten per cent are white British; the most deprived group. Twenty per cent of the EAL children speak no English at all and are currently being taught through the medium of their home language. There are forty-seven different nationalities in the school and thirty-three different spoken languages. The four major nationalities in the school, in order, are: Pakistani, Bangladeshi, Yemeni and Central European/Romany.

Interestingly, there are no differences between the rates of attendance for FSM and non-FSR pupils, which is quite unusual. The annual rate of attendance in the school in 2010/12 was 89.5%. In 2011/12, it dropped to 88.5%, partly due to an influx of ninety pupils from Central Europe. In 2013/14, the school’s rate of attendance had increased to 91.4%, partly because of the dedicated hard work of the head teacher and all of the staff and governors, and it has remained on a slight upward curve since.

Given the large number of Muslim pupils who take seven or eight days off school each year in order to observe religious festivals, the school’s overall rate of attendance is lower than it should be, due to the recent change in Welsh Government regulations. Therefore, in 2013/2014, up until June, 2014, some 416 Muslim pupils took a minimum of seven days’ absence due to religious observances (some, in fact, took more, for a variety of reasons, including not returning to school when festivals fell, for example, in the latter half of the week). This amounted to 2,912 missing days. Now that the school has to categorise this as authorised absence, their overall rate of attendance in 2013/2014 was reduced by some 2.3%. When

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religious festival absences were added for children of other faiths (e.g. all ninety Central European children take a day off school for St (Mikulas) Nicholas Day, Sikhs and Hindus take time off for Diwali, etc.), the school's overall attendance figure drops even further, despite all their hard work and the twenty-six in-school attendance initiatives which are rigorously being followed.

Similar issues are apparent in other primary and secondary schools that have been visited in other parts of Newport and Cardiff and elsewhere (e.g. Fitzalan, Willows High and Lliswerry), with all the same difficulties as well as the resource implications.

Therefore, it may be sensible for the Welsh Government to consider returning to the previous coding instruction in order not to penalise certain schools, especially those with high numbers of pupils from ethnic minorities.

Issue 2: Extended leave

Extended-leave issues are causing a major headache to certain schools, especially some schools in Cardiff, Swansea, Newport and Wrexham, and in related urban areas, particularly those with high numbers of ethnic pupils. The present regulation is both confusing and, in some cases, proving unworkable. So, for example, some LAs currently instruct schools not to allow any absences for children for extended-leave reasons. However, some schools and their governing bodies, even within some schools in the same LAs, do not follow this instruction, and perhaps allow up to, say, twenty days (four school weeks) for extended-leave periods. These schools normally monitor this process extensively and even set work for the parents to give to their children for the duration. This anomaly currently places head teachers and governing bodies in a difficult and conflicting position with their own LA and/or national guidance.

The position is further complicated by the fact that some schools and LAs are required to inform and register their extended-leave pupils as missing children and/or families with social services, the EWS and the police, who all have to conduct a full investigation, which requires both time and resources.

We need to find an all-Wales workable formula for this practice 'in the field', as it can also obfuscate certain schools' returns on attendance, especially those with large numbers of ethnic minority pupils.

Issue 3: Traveller pupils

There are numerous cases across Wales of both schools and LAs categorising their traveller children differently, even within the same LAs. Some take them off roll immediately after they leave a school (e.g. Bridgend), others after periods ranging from two to three or four weeks, some with their LA's approval and knowledge, some not.

Surely, there should be one standard regulation that everybody follows in exactly the same way.

Issue 4: Safeguarding concerns

There are three current safeguarding issues that need to be brought to a wider audience and which require more attention.

a. Afternoon registration

A number of schools in parts of Wales, especially some secondary schools, have recently decided to change their afternoon registration processes, partly in order to improve their own rates of attendance. Some schools now only have one or two lessons quite deliberately in their afternoon sessions. In fact, some schools are now taking their afternoon registration point as being 12 noon or shortly afterwards, perhaps immediately before periods 4 or 5. Section 441 of the 1996 Education Act, defines afternoon registration as occurring after lunch. Registration sessions are defined as being at the start of the day and after lunch (1944 and 1996 Education Acts). This is a legal requirement. Moreover, it means that some pupils in some schools are not only receiving their afternoon mark prior to lunch, but can decide to truant or 'mitch' their afternoon session in the full knowledge that they have already been marked present. This enables some pupils to feel that they can leave school and miss the afternoon session at school with impunity. This poses a serious safeguarding risk and should be stopped as soon as possible. Technically, under the regulations, head teachers can be personally fined for this practice. It also provides regulators with misleading attendance data. It could also raise serious issues in a future safeguarding case and is, at best, a high-risk strategy, especially if the police, the courts or another public agency were launching an investigation into the circumstances of a particular mishap or misdemeanour.

It is recommended that the Welsh Government sends out a circular to eliminate this practice as soon as possible, especially as word is spreading that this is one way of improving schools' rates of attendance.

b. Specific lesson absence and post-registration truancy

Some pupils are attending their schools at the start of the day, obtaining their marks, and then leaving their school premises. This is also a safeguarding issue and means that certain attendance returns for some schools are inaccurate. It also means that rates of attendance can differ significantly between morning and afternoon registrations.

In some other schools, pupils are choosing to miss certain classes (e.g. girls are absent from PE) whilst remaining on site.

c. Infant schools

Some LAs in Wales are taking the view that as existing legal regulations refer to compulsory school attendance between the ages of 5 and 16/18, referrals for early years pupils with erratic or serious attendance issues is not their concern. In my opinion, this is wrong, both educationally and from 'a duty of care' perspective, not least because of the potential safeguarding implications.

It may well be that as current Welsh Government policy is for pupils to commence school early in Wales, normally at 3+, there may need to be a statutory review of existing regulations in order to incorporate attendance from the start of a child's schooling through to 16 or 18 years of age, with all its implications.

Issue 5: Wider issues

Without going into any great detail here (SEWC, 2013a, 2013b), it is abundantly evident that certain practices related to attendance occur differently across Wales. These include:

- referral practices, especially to the EWS from schools and to other services;
- the facilitation of the Children Act 2004 requirements;
- LA policy guidelines and remits on attendance as well as school policy documents;
- the extent of specialist support offered to schools on improving school absenteeism, reintegration strategies, behaviour support, mental health and educational psychology issues, amongst others.

Conclusion

This article has briefly summarised the state of play of school attendance and behavioural issues in Wales. It has re-examined the impact of the NBAR Report (2007, 2008) and post-NBAR period. It has outlined several areas where further action is required, either by the Welsh Government or its officials or through good and effective professional practice, including the need for more and better training, especially in a wide range of behavioural-related fields, and in the use of more innovative and better intervention strategies in the fields of both behaviour and attendance.

Despite the important NBAR work and the subsequent hiatus in implementing all its findings effectively, especially the need for much earlier intervention, there have been some hopeful signs that Welsh education is beginning to improve in this field. First, rates of school attendance are rising. Second, most schools in Wales continue to be orderly and pupils' behaviour tends to be well managed. Third, apart from a few schools, rates of exclusions have been significantly reduced. One concern, however, is that more pupils from primary than secondary schools are beginning to be excluded, particularly in certain local authorities, whilst more pupils are beginning their histories of non-attendance much earlier during their primary-age schooling (WG, 2013, 2014). Fourth, the DFES is beginning to put more time, thought and effort into improving the state of Wales's out-of-school/education otherwise provision.

However, on a more cautious note, the sense of dislocation between Welsh Government officials and professional needs recurred recently when the former published their new review into the *Effective management of the school workforce attendance* (WG, 2015b). Why this document was needed, rather than, for example, a much more important one on producing a national strategy on behaviour and attendance, remains unclear. It is perhaps another example of the difference between theory and practice in managing educational issues and priorities, as both Thomas (2012) and Andrews (2014) have recognised previously.

It is suggested that the journey which Welsh education has been on to improve pupils' behaviour and attendance since 1999 may be of interest to both researchers and governments from around the world and may help to provide them with some insights and ideas for future research initiatives.

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