



Understanding Secondary School Absenteeism Post-COVID: Unpacking Lived Experiences and Underlying Causes

Dr Victoria Bowen, Senior Research Associate

School attendance plays a crucial role in a student's academic success. For students to excel, regular attendance and active participation are essential (OECD, 2024). Absenteeism often stems from motivational factors, such as strained relationships with peers and academic challenges, as well as structural issues like work commitments or caregiving responsibilities (Birioukov, 2016). The consequences of missing school extend beyond immediate academic setbacks, potentially leading to long-term negative outcomes such as behavioural problems and decreased earning potential. On the other hand, consistent school attendance supports psychological well-being, social development, and academic achievement (Economic Policy Institute, 2018).

Contrary to expectations that attendance rates would quickly rebound after the COVID-19 pandemic, data from the Department for Education (2024) reveal a troubling trend. The pandemic has exacerbated absenteeism, with many students struggling to return to their pre-pandemic attendance habits. For instance, the number of persistently absent students in English state schools nearly doubled between 2019/20 and 2021/22, rising from 921,927 to 1,672,178. This increase is largely attributed to unauthorised absences, with around half of the absences not due to illness. Historically, students from lower socio-economic backgrounds have had higher absenteeism rates compared to their more affluent peers (Kearney et al., 2022). The pandemic has only intensified this disparity, with poverty and disadvantage linked to an increase in post-COVID non-attendance.

Understanding school non-attendance requires a nuanced approach, considering factors beyond traditional labels like 'school phobia' or 'truancy.' The term 'extended school non-attendance' may better encompass the complex, multifaceted reasons behind absenteeism, which include unmet Special Educational Needs, heightened anxiety, and changes in family circumstances. Therefore, addressing this issue involves more than simply reviewing attendance statistics. It requires in-depth research into students' lived experiences and the underlying mechanisms of non-attendance.

My proposed study aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of the situation by conducting interviews with students, surveying policy actors, and carrying out an in-depth case study of a secondary school. By focusing on the authentic reasons behind non-attendance, this research seeks to inform policies and support strategies that could effectively address the challenges faced by students and educators alike.

If you know of a young person or family affected by extended school non-attendance or you are a school leader interested in participating in this research project, contact Dr Victoria Bowen (victoria.bowen.2018@bristol.ac.uk).

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Learner talk: the need to 'mix it up'

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Instructors at both the school and tertiary level are increasingly using student talk as an active learning strategy to promote higher-order thinking skills in the classroom. Of personal concern is who learners are conversing with, especially when they are engaged in paired talk interactions. Brion-Meisels (2023) asserts that it is 'easy for students to get into a routine of where they sit and [thus] who they talk to. While this might build a sense of familiarity among some students, it naturally limits the sharing of perspectives and building of community among all.' Talking to the same people has the potential to help form reciprocal friendships and support student mental health, but I fear that there is a danger that paired verbal response work can become stale and academically unproductive if the pairings are not regularly changed. This is why I argue that there is a need to 'mix it up'.

In simple terms, 'mix it up' refers to getting

learners to find someone new to talk to in the classroom. This, I believe, can be achieved through a wealth of creative strategies*, these being organised into three main categories:

1. Pairing strategies that require no resources, e.g., *Favourite...* – pair students up by their favourite season, favourite primary/secondary colour, or favourite meal of the day.
2. Pairing strategies that require simple, purchasable resources, e.g., *playing cards* – pair learners up by suit, suit colour, or card value.
3. Pairing strategies that capitalise on readily available digital/online resources, e.g., *Team Shake* (app) or *Random Name Picker* (website).

By embracing the above, I assert that by the end of a unit of work or a module, instructors at both the school and university level will have ensured that 'every student has worked with every other classmate ... which promotes a strong classroom community and helps [learners] feel more comfortable participating' in paired talk opportunities (Reid, 2019), with the added benefit of improving the language capabilities and social skills of students.

*Please read Brownhill, S. (2024). *Mix it up*: Creative strategies to get students into talking pairs in the university classroom. *Learning and Teaching*, 17(2), 117-125.

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Reid, R. (2019). 9 strategies for getting more students to talk. *Edutopia*, 25 April. <https://www.edutopia.org/article/9-strategies-getting-more-students-talk/>

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On Transformational Learning

Mark Neild

The 2022 Times Education Summit called for a radical rethink in assessment, echoing many voices that describe today's schools as "Exam Factories" that fail as many as 1/3 of learners and don't provide the skills that many employers seek. Many argue the current system is based on a Victorian intellectual snobbery that values the abstract over the applied.

It is time for a change.

Most people, whatever their age, want to make a difference, but for Gen Z this feels particularly prevalent. Educationists like John Dewey and Paolo Friere have long

argued that people are far more likely to be engaged in learning something that they can see the use of. Why should this be the preserve of Adult learning?

Transformational learning equips pupils to have an impact, *to critically challenge their assumptions about how they relate to the world* (Mezirow & Taylor, 2009). Far too many students arrive at university feeling that they need to be told what to do rather than building on their authentic experiences and going where their passions take them. Few really understand what they are capable of. Sure, there is still much to learn before they can be truly effective, but learning through doing is far more powerful than learning about the experiences of others. The latter develops *pseudo* concepts, the former the ability to apply them.

Rather than assessing what people know, we should test how their capability to apply learning has developed and then the impact that capability could have. The former is revealed through reflective writing and dialogue, the latter through measures of influence through building effective relationships – a good leading indicator for real world impact. Recent Bristol graduates have built a £1M per annum cereal brand, saved over a million women from queuing longer than men and rejuvenated local events venues.

Many more could do as well!

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Re-imagining the English Curriculum at the BERA Conference

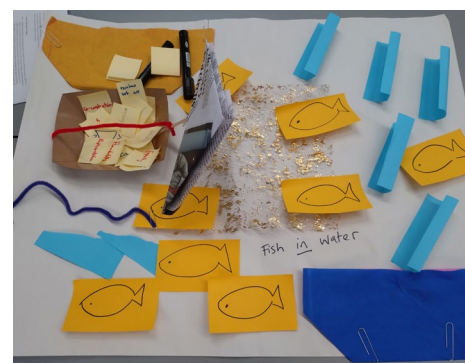
Dr Lorna Smith

The English in Education BERA SIG is a forum for researchers to investigate the school subject of English across all phases of education, including all elements of English initial teacher training. We celebrate the four language modes of reading, writing, speaking and listening, separately and holistically, and are interested in both literacy and 'literaturacy' in emancipatory and critical ways.

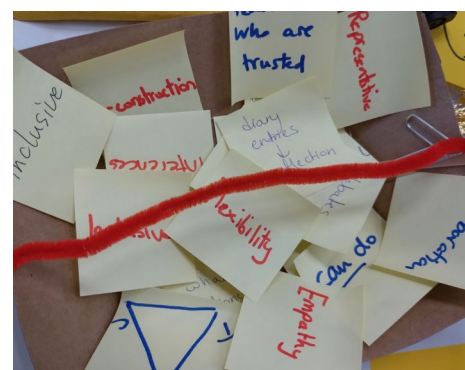
In September, the SIG ran a series of three sequenced sessions at the BERA Conference in Manchester entitled **English: Towards a New Curriculum**. The sessions ran over one day of the four-day event, exploring the aims, purposes and values in education as they relate to curricular design, with a special focus in English. The theme was inspired by the

recent announcement of a Curriculum Review, and an understanding that subject English has been 'distorted' (CEF, 2024, n.p) by the current national curriculum and associated accountability.

The first session was a cross-subject panel, entitled *What can we do with a curriculum?* explored 'English' with specialist insights on curricular issues and English across the four UK nations. The second was a series of papers on issues affecting English from primary to FE level, variously highlighting the lack of diversity in texts studied across all key stages; the importance of fostering imagination; and the challenges and affordances of AI. The third session was, *How can we make a new English curriculum?* run by Lorna Smith. She invited participants to create a model of a new English curriculum.



This example highlights fish in water, inspired by the testimony of a Black teacher of English who didn't see himself in texts he read at school and so felt like a 'fish out of water'; it was only when his GCSE teacher recommended books that actually spoke to him that he could belong. He's now also a successful novelist.



The boat, a marine conservation vessel, is a metaphor for the teacher, who steers flexibly and with assurance, making decisions based on the students that they teach with empathy and expertise.



BERA Conference 2024 and WERA Focal Meeting

The BERA conference 2024 was held at the university of Manchester from the 9th – 12th September and was attended by several PGRs and academics from the school of education who presented on a variety of topics including a workshop entitled *How can we create a new English curriculum?* (Dr Lorna Smith), *Places to Rethink Connectedness: Excluded Students and Outdoor Educational Settings* (Dr Lucy Wenham, Dr Tom Ralph, University of Exeter), *Ethnographic research with children: the contested ethics of empowerment* (Stephen Pickering), *Critical voices of social justice in education: four teachers' stories from rural Peru* (Silvia Espinal Meza), *Empowering marginalised L2 writers' motivation through a creative writing strategy: an expectancy-value theory perspective* (Nako Abdullah), *As others see us? Reflections on an intercultural homestay by prospective teachers and teacher educators* (Sally Wai-Yan Wan, Arthur Pak-Hei Lam and Dr Janet Orchard), and *Exploring the challenges of global citizenship education at post-16 through visual engagement with outdoor spaces* (Pen Williams).

The conference also offered opportunities for the staff and PGR communities to connect and support each other; here Lala Ismayilova reflects on this:

Cultivating Community at the BERA Conference

In September, a vibrant group of PGRs and professors gathered at the BERA Conference and WERA focal meeting, proudly representing our University of Bristol family. This event highlighted the crucial role that belonging plays within an academic community and its profound impact on our collective growth.

At the conference, the warmth of our relationships was clear, creating an atmosphere where all participants felt valued and empowered to share their ideas. Each member of our group made a conscious effort to support one another, attending each other's presentations and offering encouragement. This sense of togetherness helped us navigate the complexities of academia as a cohesive group, enriching both our experiences and perspectives.

Surrounded by diverse academics and researchers, our discussions expanded and deepened, reminding us that we are part of a much larger, wide-reaching professional community. This connection was strengthened as participants actively contributed to sessions, sparking meaningful conversations that inspired fresh ideas. Shared meals provided further opportunities for informal exchanges, often leading to promising collaborations and future research initiatives.

One of the most significant outcomes of the conference was the chance to make new connections. I had the privilege of meeting several researchers with similar interests, one of whom introduced me to a broader academic community that I am eager to join. However, my biggest takeaway was during a keynote session where I posed a question directly related to my research. The response not only validated my ideas but also gave me renewed confidence in my research direction. Before the conference, I had hesitations, but this support confirmed that I am on the right path.

The conference also sparked a new sense of motivation. While we often acknowledge the importance of publishing, my conversations with fellow academics gave me a deeper understanding of why it truly matters. Being surrounded by people who value the impact of published research inspire me to start writing a new article, a task I had been putting off. I realised that waiting for the "right moment" or the elusive "next Monday" can be endless, and the interactions at the conference were a powerful reminder that these connections are key motivators to move forward.

The BERA Conference reminded us of the importance of community in academia. A strong sense of belonging not only nurtures resilience but also encourages us to push the boundaries of our work, knowing that we have the unwavering support of our peers and mentors. By continuing to cultivate this sense of community, we create an environment where well-being thrives, paving the way for collective success and growth in our intellectual landscape.

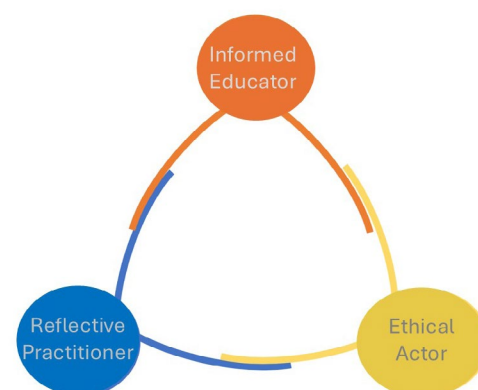
Bracing Ourselves: Embracing Policy Changes through a Long-Standing University-Schools Teacher Education Partnership in England

Nicola Warren-Lee, Lorna Smith, Janet Orchard, Lucy Kelly, Jon James and Alf Coles

As a group of six staff, all involved in teacher education at the School of Education, we have recently published an article where we tried to articulate some of the ways we think about the task of becoming a teacher. The government is instigating significant changes to teacher education in England, including recommended reading lists and, for the first time, a mandated curriculum. While we welcome challenges to our thinking and practices, we are not alone in questioning the basis of some of the evidence used to justify the changes, for example, the importance being placed on retrieval and rehearsal. It was in such a context, that we were motivated to make explicit the approach to teacher

education, developed over many years at Bristol, honed and iterated through practice and reflection, which we are using to bring coherence to how we operationalise this new curriculum.

The figure below is a graphic of the three processes we take as central to becoming a teacher and also processes we continue to engage in as teacher educators.



Becoming a reflective practitioner

is supported through structured cycles of reflection, during and after teaching, recursive reflection on practice embedded in regular lesson observations, and in both professional studies and curriculum subject-based seminars.

Becoming an informed educator implies learning to be discriminating when using educational research as evidence, rather than straightforwardly aiming to manifest research into practice. This requires a dynamic process of enquiry and renewal within teacher education. Being an informed educator also aligns with teaching being an intellectual profession as detailed by the Universities' Council for the Education of Teachers (UCET's) – available here:



Becoming an ethical actor concerns learning to be reflexive about our impacts on others. Broad educational ideals in teaching connect to questions of why we teach as we do, as well as to more fundamental questions about the lives we lead.

The full article is available here:



The Wow in Mathematics

Genevieve Tatters

The 'wow' moments in mathematics lessons are moments to treasure: the moment of revelation, the moment of making a connection, the moment of "I get it now". These fundamental moments in mathematics can also be the positive foundation for children to carry forward on their learning journey. 'Wow' moments are the moments that stay with me as a teacher.

Children often view mathematics as a subject of right and wrong, a subject of rules and procedures. Yet, a mathematician would say "it is the study of patterns, a creative, beautiful subject" (Devlin 1997, as cited in Boaler 2015, p.22). Mathematics creates an opportunity to ask deep questions, explore rich sets of connections and experience 'wow' moments. Real mathematics is about exploration and interpretation, not definitive answers (Boaler 2015).

The core of mathematics is about patterns which leads to new knowledge; mathematics is about exploring and discovering personal methods and strategies. Consequently, children should be allowed to freely explore and investigate using graphics, resources and methods that are meaningful to them.

Numerous research studies have found that if children are given the freedom to consider a situation, ask mathematical questions and pose their own solutions, they become deeply engaged and perform well in the subject (Boaler 2015). Hersh (1999) proposed that questions drive mathematics: "solving problems and making up new questions is the essence of mathematical life". Collaboration is also an important element to the discipline of mathematics and encouraging children to explain their reasoning, convincing others by making logical connections through talk, can aid understanding. If children talk through their ideas, it not only enlivens the subject but engages them in other people's reasoning.

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Environmental reporting on the SOE, 35 Berkeley Square

The Climate Action Group would like to share the annual reporting of our energy use. We have the figures for the 12 months to 31st July 2024 and, in brackets, the change from the year before.

Gas - 283,991 kWh (+11%) - 57.5 Tonnes CO₂e

Electricity - 251,922 kWh (-21%) - 52.1 Tonnes CO₂e

The CO₂e tonnes from gas and electricity come within the scope of the University's commitments to getting to net zero by 2030, largely through moving to renewable generation. One thing we can all do help cut gas use is to ensure that radiators are not left on unnecessarily.

Water - 2,152 m³ (+31%) - 0.7 Tonnes CO₂e

Electricity transmission & distribution (1st time reporting) - 4.6 Tonnes CO₂e

To put the CO₂e figure in some kind of context, a return flight from London to Sydney is around 3 Tonnes CO₂e per person. The increase in water consumption (also up from the year before) is consistent with a small leak, or an outlet trickling water. Please report any water leaks to a member of the climate action group.

Winter on the allotment



In Traditional Chinese Medicine 'Metal 金' is yang within yin in character, its motion is going inwards and its energy is contracting. It is associated with the west, dusk, autumn, fall and old age, loss and grief." From [https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/Metal_\(wuxing\)](https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/Metal_(wuxing))

Some up-coming TLC events

You are warmly invited to attend the following research seminars.

Friday 22nd November 2024, 11.00am – 12.30pm, room 2.26, "*Exploring and Defining Relational Practice*"; with Signe Kastberg (Professor and Mary Endres Chair in Elementary Education, Bristol Benjamin Meaker Distinguished Visiting Professor

The Research Centre for Teaching, Learning and Curriculum (TLC) is concerned with questions relating to education in schools, universities, community and out-of-school contexts, including a focus on issues of social justice. We research the learning of individuals, groups and systems from a range of perspectives, including practitioner research.

This pamphlet is produced to help the diverse perspectives and research interests and activities of the Centre reach a wider audience. All opinions are the authors' own.

To find out more about TLC or to download a digital copy of this pamphlet, please visit the website.



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JOIN US FOR THE BERKELEY SQUARE CHALLENGE WITH TRANSFORM SOCIETY

4 November 2024

During the challenge, you will work in small groups to develop a solution to the following question:

"The National Education Nature Park project encourages students to learn how to make the world a cleaner, safer, greener place. Design a preferable future for Berkeley Square as an educational space and justify its sustainability."

*PGCE students you will be involved in something similar as part of your Interdisciplinary Climate Change and Sustainability Day in June

How do I sign up?

Visit our event page to sign up to the event and find out more about the challenge.

Contact Michelle Graffagnino on michelle.graffagnino@bristol.ac.uk if you have any questions about the event or would like to discuss adjustments to the event for accessibility.