# Absent from school

**Nichola Martin** ponders
the reasons for increased
absenteeism in the wake
of the pandemic
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I have been thinking about the reported increase in school absenteeism since the COVID-19 pandemic, and feel that the secondary school environment may not be conducive to learning for all students. Schools are mainly performance driven, meaning that economics and Ofsted grades are their main priorities, with student mental health and wellbeing way down the list, and little consideration given to the impact of not feeling safe in the school environment. Secondary schools are busy, noisy places. There may be unexpected, sometimes violent, outbursts. Some young people can cope in such an unpredictable environment, while others find it overwhelming.

Another concern I have is about the emphasis on subjects such as maths, English and science. These are necessary, of course, but not more so than creative pursuits such as art, drama, music and woodwork, which are often perceived as too expensive, disregarding the potential enrichment of young people. Having a variety of subjects with equal billing benefits those students who find academia dry and uninteresting. It offers them the opportunity to use their imagination and explore the wonders of creation and creativity. The pursuit of logic is a left-brain hemisphere activity, which can make some young people tired and disinterested; whereas creativity is a right-brain hemisphere activity that is calming and can be more enlivening. Research with older children shows how 'creative engagement impacts poor mental health and can promote engagement in school.'[1]

Perhaps the challenge for schools is to take a young person's mental health as seriously as they take academic results. The turbulence of adolescence is a difficult time for all young people. They are changing physically and emotionally. Being able to talk to someone about this can provide relief and a different perspective that can enable young people to thrive. Rather than complain about school absences, I suggest asking young people, 'What's going on for you?' and 'What can this school do to make it a place you would like to return to?' which may elicit many different reasons for non-attendance than you imagined.

A recent letter in *The Guardian* said, 'If pupils avoid school due to anxiety, the system needs to change'.[2] Professor Diane Reay from the University of Cambridge writes that absenteeism is linked to lack of social support, harsh discipline, excessive rules, regimented daily timetables and teaching to the test.[2] Dr Lorna Chessum, former principal lecturer in

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education, blames 'draconian school rules' and a rigid curriculum with reduced opportunities for creativity, and endless testing, as anxiety-provoking, anti-educational and anti-learning.[2]

A survey carried out by stem4, a charity supporting teenage mental health, shared the statistic that nearly a third of UK secondary school pupils avoid school due to anxiety.[3] The Education Select Committee found that a major reason that large numbers of children had not returned after COVID-19 were barriers to attendance presented by poverty.[4] Children's Commissioner, Rachel de Souza, said in her response to the persistent absence inquiry, 'Children are not absent from school because they don't want to learn. They are desperate to learn, but every day thousands of children find themselves without the support they need to engage in education and attend school.'[5]

Professor Priscilla Alderson from the Institute of Education states that young people are experiencing extreme anxiety or distress relating to attending school, and it is the educational system that needs to change, not the young people. She states that, 'Well-meaning therapists might flock around distressed students who feel unable to attend school. Yet they often treat symptoms, not the causes, and position problems within young individuals, instead of within adult-run systems.'[2] Furthermore, she considers that many young people avoid school due to anxiety. 'Like canaries in coalmines, they warn that schools damage mental health – by punishing failure to learn, and enforcing petty rules and detentions, isolation rooms and exclusions. Teachers feel bullied by Ofsted. Students feel bullied by teachers and often go on to bully peers, setting up a pyramid of fear and coercive control.'[2]

The Children's Manifesto,[6] published in 2011, provided a voice for pupils to show how the most important work in schools can be achieved by preventing distress, and working with children and young people to promote ways to enjoy living and learning together. I would be interested to learn what other therapists think of this. ■

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