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Understanding Presence

EDLM Headteachers' Perspectives

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Understanding Presence: EDLM Headteachers' Perspectives

“And it's about the children, isn't it? I mean, but do we just forget about those two per cent? I mean, those are the two per cent that we're needing to focus on because they're the most vulnerable in terms of attendance.”

H1

1. Introduction

School attendance is crucial for students' academic success and overall development. Regular attendance not only facilitates the acquisition of knowledge and skills but also fosters social integration and emotional well-being. Conversely, persistent absenteeism can lead to significant gaps in learning, reduced engagement, and increased risk of dropping out. Since the COVID-19 pandemic, levels of attendance at schools raised major concerns across many countries. This is also the case for Scotland, where policymakers and practitioners alike have been developing approaches to tackle the issue.

One initiative, Every Dundee Learner Matters (EDLM), deals with school attendance as part of its broader aim to enhance educational equity. EDLM set out to improve three aspects of education: presence, participation, and progress. The pressing need to improve attendance has brought EDLM participants to give more attention to the presence aim and advance it using the project's enquiry-based methodology. This report focuses on these attempts.

Due to the attendance challenges, EDLM participating schools devised innovative strategies to enhance presence rates. This research report aims to illuminate these innovative approaches taken by local Dundee schools to tackle the challenges of low attendance. It is based on seven interviews with school leaders whose schools have been identified by education officers as taking various promising steps to address attendance. The report highlights how these leaders understand the complex factors contributing to absenteeism and the effective methods they employ to engage both parents and students. By sharing these insights, the report seeks to inform local officials about productive practices that can be adopted more broadly, ultimately enhancing educational outcomes for all students in Dundee.

2. School and context

Overall, seven schools participated in this study, three primaries and four secondaries. The majority of them have high proportions of SIMD 1 and 2, often associated with poverty. Therefore, it was unsurprising that the interviewees reported their schools had comparably high percentages of children with additional support needs or from families that have more challenges, including mental health, drug and alcohol abuse, and domestic violence. Some of the schools also had high proportions of children with English as an additional language, including refugees from war zones.

The level of attendance varied across the schools involved in this strand between 82.5 and 94.2 per cent for the 2023-2024 school year, with primary schools generally attaining better results

compared to secondary schools.¹ Most of these seven schools reported struggling to achieve their goals, and despite some success with strategies, maintaining higher levels of attendance was a continual challenge: “Our attendance at the moment is sitting at 90.2%. Our target is 95.5%. So we are off our target. Attendance is a continual challenge.”

3. Local and national policies and support

Headteachers frequently referred to local and national policy and strategic advice and directives as influencing their schools’ strategies and policies regarding attendance. Recent inputs at Local Authority Headteacher Learning Events and the Scottish Government’s ‘Stretch Aims’ for each local authority were reported to have enhanced and sustained the focus on promoting attendance.

And one thing we used to do prior to Covid ... and prior to the stretch aims is that when you were doing your weekly attendance meeting with SLT or we were analysing the data monthly, you would look at the numbers that were below 90. Well, we look at everything that's below 95 now or on the cusp of being below 95. And the [Government's] stretch aims,...is [emphasises that] every child [is] focused on. I think [Director of Education] put it quite well at that [Headteacher Learning Day] where he talked about attendance where this is the one thing where everyone starts at 100 per cent and the only way is down. So it's kind of keeping a focus on everything. So, yeah, I think with parents, we've had to up the communication and I've attached the flowchart and our procedures about everything we do.

H1

Some headteachers perceived a lack of resources to support and encourage parents/carers of serious non-attenders to ensure their children attended school and reported limited availability of Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS), third sector and other resources to support children and their parents/carers. One headteacher explained: “There is no way to escalate, even if you've got a child sitting at 40 per cent, you can escalate it [upwards] but it will not be picked up. And that is a real concern for me.” Nevertheless, this headteacher had adapted a particular strategy to highlight the seriousness of severe non-attendance to those parents involved and encourage their cooperation:

So what we've started to do...is we are having attendance review meetings and we're [bringing in] the educational psychologist as an extra person. And the difference that it makes to these parents that you've had in five times already, this other person sitting at the meeting and minuting it and helping to make a child's plan [as part of the] attendance review.

H2

While local and national policies provide essential structure, headteachers noted that limited support often hindered effective implementation, especially for serious non-attenders. By creatively involving additional support staff, some schools enhanced parental cooperation to deal with such disadvantaged situations.

¹ According to School Level Attendance Data, 2024.

4. Factors influencing attendance and lateness

A theme across the interviews was a recognition that to successfully address attendance strategies had to recognise and reflect numerous interrelated factors. Some of which were directly related to students' and their parents' social backgrounds. Others originated from their personal capabilities, decisions, and actions or from their interaction with the wider society, including with different social services. These personal and societal factors both relate to social backgrounds. In addition, headteachers mentioned COVID as an important contributor to non-attendance. Below we elaborate on each of these factors.

4.1. Social backgrounds

A variety of background factors were reported to influence school attendance. These could be associated with parents' and carers' mental health and child and family attitudes toward attendance at school. School closure days and strikes also influenced parental perceptions. Hence, headteachers and their staff reported having to think like social workers when addressing the underlying barriers associated with low attendance:

So, yes, we're taking on a lot of social work, I suppose. And that would be, you know, because sometimes when you dig a bit deeper, you discover they're needing food parcels, they're needing linen, they're needing school uniform, they're needing money. But I suppose it's all part of the one picture to get the child in school and ready to learn.

H1

This type of thinking led headteachers to express their concerns regarding deprivation, poverty, and cultural differences that influenced school attendance.

4.1.1. Poverty

Most headteachers mentioned poverty as an issue that affects school attendance:

One of the things [is] finance. You know, whether that be, kind of, you know, access to clothing, kind of, decent, sort of, food and diet. You know, from other things like, you know, overcrowding in houses, not having, necessarily, you know, a decent bed to sleep on, sleeping conditions then impacting on their ability, pupils' ability to come into school.

H3

Some interviewees also explained how and why deprivation could affect parental behaviours and, hence, influence attendance. For instance, access to cheaper holidays encouraged parents to take vacations during term time:

The other thing that affects our attendance as well is due to lack of money and living in an area of higher levels of deprivation, for people to have holidays together, they will do it during term time. Because that's the way that they will be able to afford time together.

H2

Headteachers highlighted the negative impact of poverty, especially as a circumstance that pushes children and families to consider schooling a minor issue compared to their financial challenges.

4.1.2. Cultural factors

In some of the schools, the range of family ethnicity meant that cultural holidays and gender roles presented a challenge for attendance in some instances. In some cases, the time away from the UK and school could be significant and disruptive to students' learning. The following description elaborates on and exemplifies these problems:

So we have families that are not English and additional language and ...going back to Pakistan, etc, who will take a holiday because of the cost. And, you know, we have the same conversation and there's the same standard letter and same script. I can't really say that for a Dundee family to access a holiday at like a tenth of the price is something that, you know, they shouldn't be doing, because I think they get so much from that experience. And sometimes for the families, it really is helpful for health and well-being. But unfortunately, some of the Pakistan holidays are four weeks or four months. You know ... what it does to your attendance.

H1

The impact of cultural holidays and associated issues meant that some headteachers questioned the feasibility of achieving the Local Authority's attendance goals and suggested that those students involved should be removed from the attendance calculations and statistics.

4.2. Personal factors

Many headteachers perceived personal choice as a dominant cause of low attendance. They acknowledged the influence of external factors (described above) and nevertheless felt some decisions that led to absenteeism were unjustified. One interviewee described some of the thinking and reasons associated with these choices:

Short weeks, e.g.: it's a four day week this week. Last week it was a four day week because it was an in-service day. So what's the point of coming back on Friday... What's the difference of another day? And again, you know, the Monday holiday, it's hard to get them in on a Tuesday because there's lots of parties. So our children who we struggle to get in with most, we know has been bank holidays and parties as well.

H2

In primary schools, parental decisions were considered highly influential, and a few headteachers had to report that "some of [their] parents don't put any importance on the child's education" (H1). Interviewees in secondary schools viewed student choice and decision-making as an increasingly significant factor.

4.2.1. Struggling parents

One prevalent challenge that schools experience is working with families who face significant issues or problems. The headteachers pointed to different, sometimes interrelated, reasons that make families dysfunctional and lead parents to make decisions and take actions that result in student non-attendance.

Some of the interviewees mentioned parents in their communities who suffer from mental health issues or use non-prescription drugs. In such cases, parents' focus on attendance could diminish. In certain cases, the children are even compelled to take time off from school and look after their parents:

A high percentage of the parents that we interviewed had mental health difficulties and actually wanted their children close because they wanted them there to look after them. And the children, when we interviewed [them]... 80% of them...didn't want to come to school because they were worried about their parents. So they actually said, sometimes they said they weren't feeling well, so they could be at home with their parents.

H2

A few headteachers suggested that some parents lack the necessary parenting capabilities, and consequently, the children experience a “lack of routines at home [...] quite chaotic home lives [...] a lot of it is to do with gaming, and being up [all night] on their PlayStations [...]” (H4).

Therefore, some students are:

tired in the morning. And then it's that cycle that you get into, “I'm not feeling well,” but it's not because “I'm not feeling well,” it's because they're tired and haven't had enough sleep and they're not into the collective teams that they need to be in. So they stay off because they say to their parents that they're not well, and then they stay in bed all day, and then they're up all night, and then get back into that continual cycle again.

H2

Acknowledging these struggles was important, as it allowed the schools to take responsibility. It was not an act of blaming parents, but rather being realistic about their situation before devising solutions.

4.2.2. Struggling students

Secondary headteachers focused most of their comments on the students and talked much less about parents and families. Somewhat like the parents, some struggling students reportedly suffered from anxiety, mental health issues, and drug abuse. These headteachers also shared that absenteeism is sometimes related to students' vaping addiction, which causes them to skip lessons and sometimes to “relationships with staff and school, it was relationships with peers, it was sometimes, subject choice. Or having been off, feeling like they were behind” (H3).

Noteworthy, compared to primary headteachers' elaborate explanations about struggling parents, the secondary headteachers shared many reasons relating to students' decisions and behaviour but little information about their underlying challenges. Perhaps this implies that forming close relationships with struggling parents and getting to know them is easier than with struggling students.

4.3. Interactions with professionals and services

Interviewees suggested that parents' past and present interactions with the broader society, especially with different professional workers, were characterised by mistrust. While many of these feelings were more directly associated with public services, some seemed to have originated from other interactions. For instance, a headteacher explained that “generational unemployment in the city and within this area” led to developing a careless attitude towards attendance: “you [my teacher] should be grateful I [the student] am here. The fact that the day started, you know, 20 minutes ago, isn't a factor” (H7). Such feelings had implications for students' and parents' relationships with schools and, eventually, to attendance.

4.3.1. Mistrusting professionals

Some interviewees identified an issue where parents and carers were wary and untrusting of professionals tasked with supporting those in the community, such as social workers. There was a perception and fear that being involved with such services might negatively affect their parental roles. This made relying on social services and third sector support difficult because of a lack of relationships and trust:

There's also a lack of trust with working with other professionals [...] there is a fear in our community about children getting taken off them by social work... So it might take us a year to persuade our families that they need extra support and it's okay to access support.

H2

This mistrust and denial of other services by the community meant that in some situations and to some extent, schools had to rely solely on themselves to find ways forward.

4.3.2. Mistrusting schools

Some parents adopted a suspicious approach to the schools and school staff. These uneasy feelings were partially related to parents' general lack of trust in professionals: "It's taken a long time to actually build a relationship [...] Because I think that, like... for instance, if myself or [Teacher] were to contact that parent, I think she sees us as, like... almost like an authority role" (H4). These feelings were also related to parents' memories of their time at school: "So a lot of these families, the Dundee families, had really bad memories of school themselves. And headteacher was a very scary person" (H1).

Consequently, many of the mistrusting parents did not associate schools with positive outcomes:

... we've got a lot of families that don't see the value in school, have been let down by school themselves, who are frightened and engaging with professionals or who, you know, two of my families, in fact, three of them who [...] had been in the care system themselves. So they had a complete lack of trust with professionals.

H2

Accordingly, parents modelled mistrust towards school and were less concerned about their children's attendance or non-attendance.

4.3.3. Impact of COVID

The ongoing and often nuanced impact of the pandemic also emerged as a factor influencing attendance. Insights from the interviews reveal that behaviours and norms developed during the pandemic lingered after the lockdowns and still influence attitudes towards attendance today. For example, during Covid, if children and young people reported symptoms of possible infection, there was little challenge, and they were able to stay at home during the isolation period.

If people were phoning in during Covid and saying the child had a temperature and that was a symptom, then that was it. So I suppose there's been a bit of a retraining of mindsets, both in staff and teacher and parents about not just opting to keep the child off because children are clever. And children will say, I've got a bit of a sore tummy. So that kind of building up relationships with the parents again and getting across to them how important attendance is.

As in this example, some headteachers believed that this mindset of staying away from school for relatively minor symptoms persisted after the pandemic and required addressing.

5. Improving school attendance

In trying to improve their attendance rates, each school had to deal with its own mixture of varied intensity of the above factors. Therefore, each developed a bespoke methodology to deal with non-attendance. These generally consisted of multiple overarching approaches and strategies. Each approach was commonly underpinned by three principles:

1. Grounding decisions on data and information that support quick and accurate responses,
2. Using a combination of different overarching approaches and not relying on one alone,
3. Designing and implementing specific strategies that allow the fostering of close, trusting relationships with students and parents/carers.

Unsurprisingly, these three principles are closely intertwined. They overlap in practice as well as in interviewees' descriptions, which merge together the use of data, adoption of approaches, and design of strategies as blended aspects of their overall endeavour to improve attendance. This overlapping is reflected in the account below. We believe that distinguishing between these aspects could benefit readers, and therefore, we have dedicated a section to each.

5.1. Using data to move forward

A common argument that arose from almost all interviewees was that data crucially supported the overall attempt to improve attendance. Using data allowed the schools to gain a deeper understanding of the scope and complexity of non-attendance. By combining quantitative and qualitative data, schools could track patterns, identify at-risk students early, and design targeted interventions.

5.1.1. Quantitative data

Quantitative data provided schools with a clearer and more accurate picture of attendance at both the school-wide and individual levels. By regularly analysing attendance figures, schools were able to understand the scope of the problem and respond more effectively. Initially, many schools reviewed attendance data retrospectively, looking at previous years' numbers. However, they realised the importance of real-time data to stay on top of the problem as it emerged. One headteacher explained this shift in approach:

I suppose the first year of EDLM when [teacher] was doing a school enquiry into numeracy, I was doing a school enquiry...using the same kind of processes [to look at] attendance. I would like to say that our school enquiry group are quite far ahead in using enquiry. So I use it enquiry as my school improvement plan. And no matter what's being led by our devolved leadership, we're using enquiry questions... I'm thinking like five years ago, was we would sit and look at the previous year's attendance... whereas now we're using the real-time data and looking at it all the time. You know, I suppose it's changed our mindset in that way.

This evolution in the use of data allowed schools to better understand the overall attendance trends and react quickly to emerging concerns instead of relying on outdated information.

At the individual level, quantitative data was crucial for identifying students at risk of becoming long-term absentees. By tracking daily attendance, schools managed to spot worrying trends and act swiftly to intervene before minor problems escalated. One secondary headteacher explained: “I will sit down and look at all the young people who have had more than 15 days absence in the primaries, okay, and I will bring that information back so that we target them” (H5). By monitoring students who had significant absences in their primary school years, schools could implement early interventions and hopefully prevent the development of persistent non-attendance.

The real-time availability of data also enabled schools to address attendance issues more effectively by integrating it into broader conversations about student progress. One principal described how linking attendance data with academic achievement helped staff engage in more meaningful discussions with parents:

We also had the staff tracking the attainment, but they now get the attendance figures and they're looking to see, they're looking at attendance alongside attainment. So that we can then have these conversations more in depth with the parents as well... So that was when we then started putting it on Seesaw regularly to share with the parents, because we were thinking, well, we need to keep this at the forefront all the time.

H2

By using both academic and attendance data together, schools provided parents with a clearer understanding of how absenteeism impacted their child's educational outcomes, further reinforcing the need for consistent attendance.

5.1.2. Qualitative data

While quantitative data provided valuable insight into attendance patterns, schools recognised that understanding the individual circumstances behind those numbers was equally important. Qualitative data, such as information gathered through direct contact with students and families, helped schools to identify the root causes of non-attendance. One principal described how digging deeper into the reasons behind poor attendance led to a more nuanced understanding of the barriers that students and families faced:

I was going to child's and attendance meetings and going out and collecting children and bringing them into school, but our attendance wasn't changing. So we needed to find out more about why. We needed to dig deeper. We needed to...find out what the problems were, what the issues were, what the barriers were. And that was when we discussed my deputy head unit as part of an into-headship [course]. So she did a huge amount of research around attendance and then analysed all our data and then...targeted children. And she did it in partnership with an educational psychologist at the time. And they did a whole research project to find that. And so we started to understand parents' mental health and all the rest of their health needs. And... we found out that so many more of our children were young carers.

H2

Qualitative insights also informed the urgency with which schools addressed non-attendance. While some schools waited until several days of absence had accumulated before contacting parents, others made it a priority to reach out on the first day of absence. One principal explained that although the school is obliged to contact parents only after three days of absence, her school does it

on day one with every child. If we haven't heard from them, we're on the phone or I'm messaging them on to see sort of to find out where the child is and encouraging them to come in.

H1

Similar to the use of quantitative data, qualitative data also supported schools in becoming proactive and preventing small issues from developing into more serious problems.

5.1.3. Combining different data sources and quickly responding

The integration of quantitative and qualitative data enabled schools to develop more comprehensive strategies for addressing non-attendance. By using quantitative data to identify patterns and qualitative data to understand individual circumstances, schools could devise tailored solutions. One principal described the risk of allowing non-attendance to go unnoticed if data was not properly used: “We get to a point where people are really poor in their level of attendance and then, oh, where do we go from there. Because it, kind of, falls off the radar, if that makes sense” (H4). By constantly focusing on both the numbers and the stories behind them, schools were able to intervene early and effectively, preventing long-term disengagement from education.

5.2. Overarching approaches to dealing with attendance problems

The complexity of the attendance problem demanded that schools develop multi-layered approaches. Each adopted its version of the whole-school universal approach and at least one of two targeted and focused approaches. These three approaches are described below.

5.2.1. Personal approach

The first focused approach emphasised supporting the children and families with the most persistent attendance or late coming issues. The use of data and professional knowledge allowed for the identification of these cases and then the development of bespoke strategies that reflected what was known about the children's and their families' circumstances that were contributing to the attendance issues. The premise behind this approach was threefold. First, it was about making sure educators are not giving up on children and insisting that all students receive an equal schooling opportunity, even those with the lowest attendance rates:

it's the eyes on. So we know that, you know, they've not disappeared, we know that they're not involved in child sexual exploitation, we know that because we've got someone who's not just seeing them on teams but actually physically seeing them [...] for me it's this idea that you still belong to us, there's still that sense of belonging, that although you've not set foot in the building.

H5

Second, schools believed that improving the attendance of those “who are the ones who are dragging our attendance down” (H2) had the highest potential for improving their overall attendance score. Third, solving personal problems in specific cases was expected to have a

positive ripple effect on additional students and families: “Even if you can influence some of these families, that might be eight children. So I can improve things for them in the home and that’s better. They can then talk to other parents” (H2).

The resulting strategies and practices that the schools used could draw on external sources of support, such as school-home workers, educational psychologists and various third-sector organisations. The design of these approaches was informed by practitioner inquiry, extant research and professional knowledge as well as drawing on the expertise of partner professionals. Often, these approaches used support workers and focussed on building relationships with families and supporting their mental health and were iterative, adapting over time depending on what was found to be effective. Above all, headteachers stressed the importance of building positive personal relationships with children and families as they facilitated dialogues that allowed issues to be tackled quickly and solutions developed collaboratively.

The personal approach was specifically important for building rapport and relationships with families and often promoting the mental health and engagement of parents and carers. One headteacher clarified this rationale:

[We’re] trying ... to get to the families who absolutely need it [...] it was about trying to get them the wider access to support that they needed...build up their trust in their relationships... to build confidence and the self-esteem of our parents.

H2

Some schools also adopted a direct approach going out to visit parents and carers. Such approaches did have a positive impact on building relationships with families allowing various supports to be introduced that helped promote attendance. However, this process took additional time and resources and could falter from time to time, requiring adaptation and renewed efforts. Targeted strategies were generally seen as resource intensive.

But you only know that as well if you go out door knocking. Which is very challenging because staffing is tight. I only have a school and family development worker on Wednesday afternoon and Thursday Friday. That’s one thing I would say that’s been more challenging for me this year because I have two school and family development workers that work job share. So for me the school and family development workers are crucial moving forward.

H2

Still, despite their demanding nature, home visits were sometimes irreplaceable as they provided educators with opportunities to learn about students’ backgrounds and provide relevant support, as expressed by an interviewee’s words: “Sometimes when you get out, you’ll see that Mum’s in a state and she’s needing a bit of help. Well, you wouldn’t have got that on the phone” (H1). In fact, the impact of personal home visits was so valued by this headteacher, who decided that instead of home-school workers conducting visits, members of the senior leadership team would do them to promote attendance:

I went as probably as far as you could go this morning to pick up a family because the mum and dad are ill. And literally, you know, there’s no way of getting them across the city. It’s three buses...[and] They can’t just walk...We are the first ones that have chosen not to have a school and family development worker.

H1

Moreover, despite its time and resource-consuming nature, the personal approach was essential when addressing cases with more complex or extreme circumstances. For instance, the impact of drug and alcohol misuse demanded that schools pay personal attention to help address these problems, support parents and families and promote attendance:

I think the one that we struggle with the most is where we know there's the drug and alcohol use. If someone said what would be the one thing you change? I would have a magic wand to get rid of that. I'm thinking of [pupils' name] dad. There's one dad I can go and say, are you struggling? Are you are you using alcohol again? And he'll say, yeah, I'm struggling. And I'll say, well, I think she's got to go to Gran's, you know, so we can keep [her attending]. But that's hard. And that takes a lot of relationship building. I'm not sure it makes a difference for the outcome for the child. So time will tell. You've got to hope. But that's the one that's really hard to crack. It's very sad. It is the hierarchy of different challenges, but that the one that's up there, isn't it?

H1

Thus, the personal approach centred on supporting students and families facing chronic attendance challenges through tailored strategies informed by data and professional insight. Schools invested in rapport building and provided personal attention and personalised support. This time- and resource-consuming approach was necessary in severe cases.

5.2.2. Group approach

Unlike the personal approach, the group approach did not focus on individuals but rather on groups of students or families with similar circumstances, albeit following a similar aim of improving relationships. Some of these groups were formed around common background factors that influenced school attendance:

there was a growing number of young people who were finding it increasingly difficult to sustain a 33-period week school. And much of it was just around, I suppose, mental health issues and rising anxiety. And then, of course, we went into COVID. So, since COVID, we've really targeted this group of young people where we now have three separate provisions for young people who cannot actually get themselves into school either full-time or part-time.

H5

Other groups were based on the schools' existing age groups:

we're aware that our attendance within Dundee City Council isn't where we want it to be. So, we've reflected inwards really at our school, looking at what is...what does that look like. So, identifying specific cohorts of children, like, the P[rimary]-ones and the P[rimary]-fives.

H4

Focusing on groups allowed the schools to strategically approach the challenge of improving school attendance. On the one hand, it did not include plans for improving attendance tailored for every student individually, yet on the other hand, working with groups was a much more efficient way to allocate the school's resources:

We can't employ endless people to do the same with all the other groups that are of a similar attendance. So, the aim of that, another, a secondary aim was to really get a kind of, categorisation of, what are the main reasons for non-attendance.

H3

This headteacher demonstrates how the group approach served as an alternative to the personal approach, which demanded investing much time and effort in every case separately, for instance, through recurring home visits. Instead, the group approach allowed for pooling resources and work according to strategies fitting for whole groups' circumstances to deal with the attendance issue in a more practical way.

5.2.3. Whole school approach

Focused approaches were effective in bringing small- and medium-scale improvements, especially when addressing persistent and severe cases of non-attendance. However, school attendance figures were also affected by more occasional 'casual' absences and lateness. Therefore, to make the required large-scale increments, schools had to adopt a whole-school approach. This approach often focused on raising parents' awareness of the issues and consequences of non-attendance and lateness. The schools involved in this study addressed this challenge using a range of strategies. These included using digital platforms and media, in-person events and meetings as well as hard copy materials to convey information about the negative impact that even one or two days of absenteeism and lateness can have on a child's attendance statistics and on their learning. This was also seen as a way to instigate discussions with parents about how the school could support them to improve their children's attendance.

We realised as a school, our attendance wasn't going up...So we needed to tackle whole school. We needed to try something different. So in February at our parents night, [we] shared attendance with every child and parent [using a PowerPoint presentation] the information about attendance, about how important it was.

Every parent got that letter away with them and the teachers had written at the top of it what the attendance was for the child and mapped where they were on that so that they can see the impact that it actually has... Then spoke to them to see if they needed any support, if there was anything that we can do to help them.

H2

This whole-school strategy was seen as helping to raise and maintain awareness of the importance of attendance and also build better relationships via communication with the broader school community, not just the severe cases of non-attenders. Using apps like SeeSaw, parents were kept informed weekly about attendance figures, sometimes every other day. Schools strived to employ a positive and encouraging tone in these communications, adopting an appropriate level of support and challenge for parents and carers:

It's also about trying to change hearts and minds that school makes a difference...It's trying to change our understanding that if you get 90% in an exam, you would be jumping for joy. But 90% attendance means a child misses a year of learning throughout their school career. So it's trying to change their perceptions and the hearts and minds around that.

H2

Overall, the headteachers made efforts to provide all students with the best schooling experience possible. Using a whole-school approach ensured everyone was included in the endeavour to increase attendance.

5.2.4. Integrating approaches

As attendance issues involved different types of challenges, tackling them required developing sophisticated methodologies. Therefore, most headteachers did not settle for one of the above approaches but, indeed, aspired to combine them, providing a suite or spectrum of approaches that allowed them to better tackle the range of attendance issues.

One school's story provides a distinct example of such an amalgamation of approaches. In that school, Pupil Equity Funding (PEF) had been used and support enlisted from a third sector organisation, the [name of the charity], to put in place enhanced levels of support for children and families with mental health issues. This has been in place for just over one and a half years with a charity worker who has received training and is supporting specific families and children through a focused approach:

We're implementing 'Thrive together' [mental health support] pilot project as an alternative to involving, Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS) because the waiting lists for CAMHS is huge. It's something that ... we've embarked on and it's going to be a significant part of my school improvement plan next year...it's to support children with additional support needs in general...But will also support families who struggle in the home which should then impact positively on attendance as well.

So the pilot initially was for the charity to work more directly with schools but to train third party agencies... on reflective parenting, sensory, sleep, strategies to support children with additional ADHD.

H2

However, the school is also ensuring that this training is being provided to a principal teacher and a class teacher so they can implement aspects of the support on a whole-school level for the benefit of all students. These staff help parents develop skills to help promote their and their children's health and behaviours like sleep hygiene and morning routines.

Thus, the combination of approaches meant that schools could not settle for quick fixes and had to develop their staff capacity for implementing the required changes over time. Still in the long run, these complex approaches were seen as providing a better way for improving attendance.

5.3. Strategies that show potential

Schools developed multiple practical strategies to work with children and families to deal with the factors that they identified as responsible for creating attendance issues. Each school applied only some of these strategies. Commonly, primary schools focused on working with parents, while secondary schools targeted the students. Indeed, we mentioned some of these strategies previously. However, we dedicate this section to providing an exhaustive description and illustration of the most ubiquitous of them because most strategies could have been incorporated within different approaches. We hope such an account would help inspire other practitioners who deal with attendance and lateness issues. Nevertheless, it should be noted that this is not a stand-alone section and that these strategies are not fit-for-all fixes. Rather, as

our interviewees explained, they are but one piece of a larger puzzle that includes the above-mentioned aspects of using data and developing appropriate overarching approaches.

5.3.1. Working with parents

Communicating the severity of the problem

One of the initial steps schools took was to ensure that parents understood the seriousness of their child's absenteeism. Principals emphasised the need for consistent communication that went beyond simply reporting absences. As one principal shared:

We are communicating with families every term to say thank you for everything you've done and then giving that feedback of your child's attendance. [...] It's a suggestive message or a supportive message and it also [...] if you take so much time off, this is the impact it has on your attainment. So we've taken that and that goes out with that message and so we're doing that every term.

H6

This approach helped convey the importance of attendance without being punitive. Schools also provided information on the potential long-term impacts of absences, helping parents see the direct connection between attendance and their child's academic success. By communicating this concern regularly and thoughtfully, schools aimed to build a foundation of trust that would encourage collaboration.

Encouraging parental responsibility

Schools worked to enhance parental involvement and responsibility over their children's attendance by offering support and guidance, particularly when misunderstandings or gaps in knowledge existed. For instance, one principal explained how they responded to feedback from parents regarding morning routines for younger children:

At the moment, our primary one's really quite a poor attendance. And we got feedback from our parent council, saying that the primary one parents maybe view the soft start in the morning, from nine till half past nine, as they're just playing. So, explaining to the parents, what does that soft start look like in primary one, it allows them to actually develop those social skills. You know, so giving them the understanding, I guess, underpinning as to why those things are happening.

H4

This illustrates how schools provided parents with a deeper understanding of their child's education, empowering them to take an active role. Schools complemented this explanatory attitude with more challenging discussions that included directly requesting that parents become accountable for their children's attendance. One interviewee described how home visits served as good opportunities to engage in such conversations:

Yesterday we just went out door knocking for families who were saying their children weren't well but they are consistently off after a bank holiday. And we've been able to have different conversations with children today because three of the families the children weren't in. So if they're phoning up and saying they weren't well, why are they not in their house, in their beds if they're unwell? So we're able to have a wee bit different level of challenge conversation but with the support as well with families. But you only know that as well if you go out door knocking.

H2

Informing and challenging parents encouraged them to better support their children, and provided another path for strengthening the trust between home and school.

Supporting families' needs and circumstances

Schools acknowledged that some attendance issues were rooted in families' background circumstances and addressed these barriers by offering different types of support. One principal shared how the school organised a "walking bus," where staff would assist in collecting children from their homes:

We'll try and organise something like we've organised the walking bus. And [our] active schools assistant will go round and collect children. If we know there's a parent having a particular difficult time, we'll see is it helpful if someone comes to get them.

H1

In more complex cases, schools worked to support families facing long-term social difficulties. For instance, one principal explained how the school helped a single parent whose son had stopped attending due to grief and financial stress:

A pupil who had a bereavement of a parent, about a year and a half before this, but it kind of, ploughed on, and then it just, sort of, you know, about a year later, the grief, sort of, started to kick in, and he just stopped engaging with school, wouldn't come in. Dad, you know, great guy, really supportive, but he, kind of, buried his head in the sand, and because he was now a single parent, took on a weekend job, and that was how, it was like, we need more money in the house. Son stopped coming in, dad wasn't, you know, dad was working all hours, so you know, wasn't able to support as much with that. Got him in, and he met with Chris, because Lesley said, Chris, I need your help with this, get this parent in, and I think they ended up going visiting. And ended up claiming enough benefits that, basically, covered all the wage he was getting for the weekend. So, he quit his weekend work, spent time with his son, and then his son is now, went from, like, pretty much 30 per cent up to over 60 per cent, you know, massive increase.

H3

These efforts not only removed practical obstacles but also demonstrated to parents that the school staff were committed to supporting homes in all aspects, not just academically, reinforcing family-school bonds.

Building trust with parents

At the heart of all these efforts was the attempt to build trusting relationships with parents. One principal stressed the importance of engaging families in a non-punitive way, noting:

Rather than that, kind of, sort of, more punitive way, and the letters that we send, it was getting in touch with the parents and saying, I see your kid's off today, they've had a few absences, how can we help you get them in. It was very much that, building relationships with the families, and getting to know them.

H3

This example highlights how schools sought to foster partnerships with parents, where families felt supported rather than judged. In some cases, establishing trusting relationships was a long-

term challenge, as the principals explained. They were built through consistent engagement, empathy, and a willingness to provide real solutions to the challenges families faced. This sense of partnership ultimately made other interventions more effective.

5.3.2. Working with students

Improving teaching practice and making school a fun place to be

A core strategy for encouraging student attendance was creating a school environment that was engaging and enjoyable for students. Principals highlighted the importance of enhancing teaching practices to ensure that students felt included and supported and, accordingly, will develop a sense of belonging that would encourage their attendance. One principal noted:

The way that we talk probably within the last 10 years has changed completely [...] we treat basically every child as though they have an additional support need and make sure that the lesson kind of follows through for that, so it supports everyone. Partly I think that is a reason why the children then are attending.

H6

In addition to improving teaching practices, headteachers made a conscious effort to make school more appealing by integrating fun activities into the school day. One principal described how introducing enjoyable activities on specific days made school more attractive and served as an incentive for attendance:

Their session then on a Friday is something that they are now interested in. So, it's really pull... it's thinking about that push and pull to school, that's more what we've been looking at as well. So, what is actually going to pull them into school.

H4

Some schools also organised specific attendance campaigns to encourage students to attend regularly. For example, one school organised a very festive campaign:

We did this little campaign called In It To Win It, and it was, basically, the 12 days of Christmas [...] If you came in Monday to Friday in the third last week of term before December, you got entered in the raffle, you got a raffle ticket. You came in for the second last week, you got another raffle ticket, and if you came in for the four days of the final week, you got a final raffle ticket [...] and if you came in for every single day, as part of that, you got a golden ticket, and you got onto the big prizes [...] we got selection boxes, we got little vouchers for a trampolining area, Ryze, ten-pin bowling, cinema, swimming.

H3

Such initiatives provided short-term rewards that appealed to students, making school attendance both fun and rewarding.

Providing personal attention to students

Principals stressed the importance of providing individualised attention to students who were struggling with attendance. One primary principal explained how focusing on specific students and ensuring that they had something to look forward to each week helped to improve their attendance:

So we did at one point have a wee thing with our primary seven who was struggling on Fridays and we made sure that there was a nice activity on a Friday for her. You know, that was when you're focusing on particular children. So you would make sure that there was something for her to look forward to on a Friday to get her in.

H1

This personalised approach helped schools to address the unique needs and motivations of individual students, making them feel seen and valued. This kind of personal attention also allowed to maintain a sense of belonging for students, even when they were not physically present at school. As one principal noted: “Instead of saying well they're not in the building they're not our responsibility I think what we've tried to say is that they're still our students and we want them to still have the sense of belonging” (H5). By ensuring that students felt part of the school community regardless of their attendance patterns, schools reinforced the idea that every student was valued, which helped to rebuild trust and motivate them to return.

Building trust with students

The cornerstone of improving student attendance was the establishment of trust between them and school staff. Schools recognised that fostering positive relationships was key to encouraging regular attendance. When students felt supported and valued, they were more likely to engage with the school environment. This was achieved through fostering one-on-one relationships, with each student having at least one staff member that they trusted. One principal exemplified how the student support worker built such vital relationships:

They will be supported by the Pupil Support Worker full time who is currently in the primaries doing an enhanced transition with these young people. So she already knows these young people really, really well and she's built up a really positive relationship and I think that if they know that they're coming into a 33-period week where [the student-support worker] will be there the whole time, I think that will get them over the door.

H5

This demonstrates how trust was built by providing consistent and dedicated support, helping students to feel secure and comfortable in transitioning to new phases of their education.

In addition to personal relationships, schools worked collaboratively with students to address attendance issues. One principal shared an example of how students were involved in creating their own attendance improvement plan:

That was done in partnership with the children, [...] to ensure that they're at school on time. And [we talked about] whether it's their responsibility to make sure that they're coming straight to school rather than going to the shops or [...] maybe be outside, like, tying up their bikes for 15 minutes, and then coming in. So, just trying to eliminate all those factors [...] [we created] a programme where they would come down, they would have breakfast, [...] And then the other session would be quite a physical [one], where they would do, like, they would play games and do role-play.

H4

Involving students in the process and addressing their individual challenges strengthened the atmosphere of trust, showing that the school was there to support the students in overcoming obstacles.

Trust was not built overnight but through consistent, personalised support. These efforts made students feel valued and related to the school, rather than just its attendees, thereby reinforcing their commitment to regular attendance.

6. Conclusion

This report highlights the main factors underpinning the complex issue of student non-attendance and identifies some of the innovative strategies implemented by a number of schools in Dundee to address this challenge. By understanding the diverse origins of absenteeism, including socio-economic factors and individual student needs, these schools have crafted tailored approaches that effectively engage both families and students.

The emphasis on open communication with parents to build trust and rapport, coupled with initiatives designed to create a supportive and enjoyable school environment, demonstrates a commitment to fostering trust and collaboration. Schools have recognised that informing and challenging parents while offering assistance can significantly impact student attendance. Furthermore, providing personal attention to students and ensuring they feel valued within the school community is crucial for encouraging their return.

As this report illustrates, developing specific strategies grounded in a comprehensive understanding of the challenges faced by students and their families can lead to gradual improvements in attendance. Therefore, it is essential for local officials to consider these insights when formulating policies and practices aimed at enhancing educational outcomes in Dundee. By investing in targeted interventions that address the root causes of absenteeism, educators can cultivate an environment where every student has the opportunity to thrive.

6.1. EDLM's role in informing school improvement plans and approaches

All of the headteachers involved in this study stated that the EDLM strategy had made a positive impact on their approaches to promoting attendance. Typically, this had been in the form of a more systematic use of data to better understand students' attendance and inform related strategies:

what EDLM certainly gave us was that re-permission... [to] start speaking to people about what's working and what's not working... [to] find out who's got success and can we do a wee bit of that? But it also allowed us to take that, test the change model, and apply it.

H7

Collaborative inquiry processes on other foci had enhanced the critical reflection of staff generally and their capacity for using these methodologies. Thus, headteachers and staff had felt experienced enough to conduct collaborative action research activity to explore attendance issues in detail, which then informed School Improvement Plans:

I suppose the first year of EDLM when [teacher] was doing a school inquiry into numeracy, I was doing a school inquiry...using the same kind of processes [to look at] attendance. I would like to say that our school inquiry group are quite far ahead in using inquiry. So I use it inquiry as my school improvement plan. And no matter what's being led by our devolved leadership, we're using inquiry questions...I'm thinking like five years ago, was we would sit and look at the previous year's attendance...whereas now we're using the real time data and looking at it all the time. You know, I suppose it's changed our mindset in that way.

In addition, the enhanced partnership working via the SIPs had supported sharing ideas on how to promote attendance. It has added a focus to challenges and helped to use inquiry and evidence to inform school improvement strategies. This included ringfencing time to meet with other school leaders across schools:

Yeah, our School Improvement Partnership works really well together. As you know, we have four head teachers that came together. We love our jobs, we're motivated by our jobs and we use networks anyway. So actually coming together, the way we work together has been, I would say, much more focused.

Whereas we might have like phoned as friends, you know, 'what's your thoughts on this?...Do you have any ideas about this?' We'll actually protect time [now].

We plan together, we've all got on our attendance, we share with initiatives that we're doing, along with other things as well. So for instance, Rosebeath, when I've been talking about the Strive together. [So] much more focused conversations, protected times. We challenge each other. So yes, I mean, I would say it's, we were a group of headteachers who would reach out and work with other people anyway, but we've done it in a much more strategic way.

H2

Overall, the EDLM strategy has played a crucial role in shaping school improvement plans, particularly by promoting the systematic use of data and inquiry to address attendance issues. By fostering collaboration and evidence-based reflection, it has strengthened partnerships between schools and empowered headteachers to adopt more focused, strategic approaches to improving attendance.

6.2. Attendance as an ongoing challenge that requires long-term commitment

An emerging realisation that results from this study is that tackling attendance problems means more than hitting a benchmark. Headteachers stressed that improving school attendance demands sustained effort and a deep understanding of the complexity of underlying issues. One of them reflected:

I've got a lot of wins in terms of the children [who] are much more settled now [with] the supports that need to be in place with them, the structures and that supports are there. The families are really appreciative of that. When we have school events, we are overloaded with parents... [who] never used to come to school events.

So now they will come in and be part of the school now [that] has significantly improved. But for most complex families to get systematic change, you have to look further into what's going on in the homes and how to support the families. How to change hearts and minds that they can do it for their families. So that's the bit that I'm now on. How do we get into the homes and change these things? And that's about parents reflecting on what they're doing themselves.

H2

While this beginning of a success story represents a shared experience among the interviewees who reported making positive impacts, achieving accomplishments involved overcoming repeated setbacks. Indeed, as the narrative unfolded, such challenges were reported, as were the gains achieved through perseverance:

I know [that] I'm going to have a fallout... a drop off from somebody's parents, because some of them that'll just be too much. Reflecting on their home life. But even if I think that group ends up with four families involved, that's four families, you know, most of them have got two or more children, that could be eight children.

H2

Therefore, to improve their attendance, the schools who participated in this study were committed to this work for the “*long-term. We want a systematic change for families. not quick fixes.*”

In summary, the analysis presented here offers some important insights into the challenges associated with improving the presence of children and young people in Dundee’s schools and early years settings. The report also offers some helpful insights and suggestions for ways of thinking about complex issues associated with school attendance and some practical examples of the strategies and approaches that have been developed to improve the situation across the City. Whilst progress has been made, especially in comparison to some other areas in Scotland, the challenge remains stark. The evidence suggests that some specific approaches lose their potency over time, and new or revised interventions are required to sustain or secure improved outcomes. One thing remains clear, presence is a thorny issue, which the pandemic and financial crisis have exacerbated with no magic bullet or recipe that can guarantee success. The continual review of existing strategies combined with innovation involving engagement with trends and blips in data would, however, seem to be key to ensuring a proactive and positive perspective on the issue.