Reducing Truancy and Improving Attendance using Restorative Justice Conferencing

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Background and Overview:

PCSO Shaun Casson of Humberside Police has been working with a local school to improve attendance rates and decrease truancy. Henry Cooper School in Hull by last October had referred 17 students to PCSO Casson for Accountability Conferencing as a means of illustrating to the young people the real impact and affect of their truancy. This is crucial as many students would perceive truancy as a “victimless crime.” PCSO Shaun Casson, the author of this scheme, presented his approach during a workshop at the 13th International Conference for Restorative Practices in Hull, October 2010. The following is based on ideas and findings from that workshop.

Results in Hull showed that by last October out of 17 families referred for RJ conferencing, six students’ attendance dropped, 1 stayed the same, but 8 students’ attendance improved. Latest feedback (27 March 2011) confirms success:

Of the 17 pupils that were referred last year 13 of them continue to improve on their attendance. One has now finished school and has gone on to college and one has not improved and is in the process of going to court” (Shaun Casson, PCSO, Humberside Police.

Henry Cooper School referred pupils whose attendance had only just started dropping and who at that point had not yet come into contact with the Criminal Justice System. During the Truancy Conference the students learnt how owing to their truancy they might come to the attention of the police, how truancy made engagement in anti social behaviour more likely, and how truancy therefore impacted not only upon themselves, but also their families, their schools and their entire community.

Focusing on recent and new truants appeared to be a successful strategy. Many persistent absentees had already come into contact with the police and hence were less likely to respond to an RJ conference. Results with PAs therefore have been reported as less successful, although PCSO Casson still noted a “small improvement rate.”
Rationale for Brighton & Hove:

Schools in Brighton & Hove have their own police link officers, while Sussex Police currently are rolling out their “Community Resolutions” programme. Community Resolutions within the framework of the Youth Offending Service offers Restorative Justice Interventions with the professed aim of reducing first time entries into the Criminal Justice System.

Truancy and offending behaviour are closely linked, with a large proportion of juvenile offenders displaying a history of absenteeism prior to engaging with offending behaviour. Indeed, a fair number of young people caught shoplifting in the City, were caught doing so during school hours (figures provided by Business Crime Reduction Partnership). Truancy conferencing therefore complements the ethos of the Youth Offending Service and Community Resolutions by making the students (and their families) accountable for their actions, asking them to repair harm caused and finally re-integrate them into the community.

Process:

As with all Restorative Interventions, participation of students, families and school officials is voluntary. Hence, students and their families may be offered a Restorative Conference as an alternative to EWO involvement, or even threat of future court referrals. They need to realise that an agreement will be binding and non-adherence will lead to further official actions.

For the young people, the RJ route will offer them a way to become involved in their own re-integration. They will have the possibility to explain what their concerns are regarding school attendance and what support they need in place to help them return to school. However, they also need to accept that truancy is wrong and that the right thing for them is to attend school.

In the Hull model, the PCSO would visit the student and their family and explain rationale, process and advantages of RJ. The PCSO will give the student time to think the suggestion through and they will return a couple of days later to answer any questions. If the student agrees to an RJ conference, the PCSO will explain the conference process and talk to them about an agreement.

According to the Best Practice Guidelines, published by the Restorative Justice Council in February 2011 (Section 2, p.11), thorough preparation for any conference is essential, and needs to include exploration of motivation for participation, the emotional state of the participants and, crucially, any power imbalances amongst participants. This is a significant aspect in the context of Accountability Conferencing, where the alternative might be involvement of EWOs or even the threat of court referrals. Indeed, for the Hull model to be successful the school would
have to take responsibility for selecting appropriate students for the PCSO-led Conference.

Taking into consideration that truancy has many reasons, and that one of the most well known ones is bullying, one might be forgiven to think that a police led approach might increase harm to an already emotionally vulnerable young person. It is for this reason that I would propose for an impartial RJ practitioner to prepare a truancy conference, unless the school can be certain that no hidden emotional complexities underlie the young person’s absenteeism. It is debatable whether the presence of a PCSO will be beneficial if truancy has been caused, e.g. by hitherto undisclosed family emergencies or mental health issues. On the other hand the link of future offending behaviour cannot be dismissed, and a third alternative might be the preparation and facilitation of the conference by an impartial practitioner with the PCSO invited to the circle as a participant where he/ she can explain their concerns regarding the social effects of truancy, and be part in drawing up a legally binding agreement.

If the decision is taken to use an impartial facilitator, this facilitator must be fully briefed in any child protection issues surrounding truancy, and they also need to be able to answer any queries regarding truancy legislation. It is easy to see how a trained PCSO or police officer would be able to convey the seriousness of truancy and be able to underpin legal consequences by their sheer presence. However, the seriousness of truancy that will be conveyed by the active involvement of the police may also lead to emotionally vulnerable students trying to withhold their reasons for truancy, either for fear of consequences for themselves or their families. Hence a thoroughly briefed facilitator might be able to gain a deeper understanding for the underlying causes of absenteeism by forging relationship built on trust that a uniformed official, however sympathetic might find harder to achieve.

The PCSO/ facilitator will also seek to establish during the preparation phase whether the student would like a particular school official present as support (this may be a pastoral manager, a TA, a learning mentor or their form tutor). This request will be taken to the school, and once agreed it would be confirmed to the truant and their family that this school support person would act as long term support once the truanting child is back at school. These members of staff will need to be briefed and potentially may need some coaching prior to the conference taking place. It needs to be stressed that the school would, indeed, have to commit their delegate to act as long term support to ensure successful re-integration of the child into school. Even if the conference has been successful in illustrating to the young person the seriousness of their truancy and the effects of their truancy on others, once being back at school, many of the original reasons are still likely to re-emerge intermittently and will require ongoing emotional support.

Pre-empting any difficulties and stopping any excuses is a major step in managing to achieve a conference. Hence, practicalities such as time, place and transport to a
conferencing venue need to be clarified. It is futile to set a conference for the time of day when mum needs to collect a little one from nursery or if the family will have difficulties getting to the neutral venue. This may need juggling and negotiating with the school. Often staff release is a sticking point for financially strapped schools. However, it is anticipated that schools will recognise the long term benefit for the entire learning community of returning a truanting child to school and will be prepared to release the necessary members of staff for the conference.

It is also to prevent excuses that school officials blamed by the young person (and their family) as a reason for their truanting will not be part of the conference. While one might argue that the conference would be an excellent forum to sort out any problems between students and staff member, in practice this may lead to a situation that could lead to more harm and deepen rifts rather than heal them. Any issues with a particular staff member could be integrated into a support contract with the nominated support official from school or, indeed, be dealt with in a separate conference or mediation. It is for this reason that the preparation needs to be focused and clear. However, if relationships at school (either with peers or with staff members) are identified as the key cause of a young person’s truancy, then these issues need to be explored in the preparation phase, and possible solutions need to be considered by all parties prior to conference.

**Tim and Money:**

The Experience of Humberside Police has been that in the case of PCSOs preparing and facilitating Accountancy Conferences

The time taken up by the PCSO is minimal. A first meeting with the staff at the school to introduce Truancy Conferencing can be made on their routine visit to the school. The visit to the pupil’s parents inviting them to the conferencing can be done during their normal foot patrol. The Truancy Conference itself can take up to an hour. I would say that around 4 to 5 hours of the PCSO’s time will be taken up organising a conference. (PCSO Shaun Casson, 27 March 2011 by e-mail)

When a school decides to use an impartial facilitator, these timing considerations may well translate into financial implications. It will be necessary to weigh up the short term costs against long term implications with regard to disruption to learning of the individual and their classmates, multi agency involvement if truancy persists and the social and academic outcomes and life chances of a young person who cannot be reintegrated into school. Maybe the answer lies in schools ring fencing part of their budgets to finance restorative interventions that will support and sustain the academic and social outcomes of their entire learning community over the long term?
Why Involve the Police in a School Matter?

A myriad of studies point to a correlation of truancy and crime. They point out that substance abuse (drugs and alcohol) and opportunist crimes (burglaries, vandalism) are typical offences committed by students absent from school. Indeed, truancy sweeps have shown reductions in the above mentioned types of crime by up to 60%.

These studies, both national and international, all agree that truancy is one of the typical entry routes into the Criminal Justice System.

Eileen M Garry of the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention wrote in her bulletin Truancy: First Step to a Lifetime of Problems that

Truancy is a stepping stone to delinquent and criminal activity. A report compiled by the Los Angeles County Office of Education on factors contributing to juvenile delinquency concluded that chronic absenteeism is the most powerful predictor of delinquent behaviour” (B. Shuster, L.A. School Truancy Exacts a Growing Social Price, Los Angeles Times, June 28, 1995, Sec. A, p. 1.)

She continued:

A report from the University of Maryland found that 51 percent of female juvenile detainees not in school at the time of their arrests tested positive for drug use (E.D. Wish, T.A. Gray, and E.B. Levine (1996), Recent Drug Use in Female Juvenile Detainees: Estimates from Interviews, Urinalysis, and Hair Analysis (College Park, MD: Center for Substance Abuse Research, University of Maryland, p. 4.)

And concluded:

When police in Van Nuys, California, conducted a 3-week truancy sweep, shoplifting arrests fell 60 percent. Police in St. Paul, Minnesota, report that crimes such as purse snatching dropped almost 50 percent after police began picking up truants and taking them to a new school attendance center (Shuster p.1). Officials in Roswell, New Mexico, say daytime burglaries and other two high schools have decreased significantly since a daytime curfew ordinance was enacted in 1994.

The FBI Law Enforcement Bulletin, March 1997 by Tom Gavin, entitled: Truancy: not just kids' stuff anymore follows up with the following results:

After implementing a truancy interdiction program, the Inglewood, California, Police Department recorded a 32 percent reduction in daylight residential burglaries, a 64 percent drop in vehicle burglaries, and a 36 percent decrease in strong-arm robberies, citywide. (J.T. Rouzan, Jr. and L. Knowles, “A Streamlined Truancy Program That Really Works,” The Police Chief, vol. 54, no. 1, 44-45.) Another interdiction effort in California, implemented jointly by law enforcement agencies in Chula Vista, Imperial Beach, and National City, yielded similar reductions in daytime burglaries.

Finally, former Home Secretary Jack Straw went on record (19 October 2000) saying
Statistics showed a close correlation between crime and truancy. "I've never met a young offender who hasn't been involved in truancy," said Mr Straw. "Many young offenders can barely read and write and it's because they haven't been in school," he added.

It is because of this recognised link between truancy and offending behaviour that the inclusion of PCSOs or school link officers may be warranted: it is a clear sign to absentees that their choice of behaviour may eventually lead to involvement with the Criminal Justice System.

Furthermore, once an agreement has been signed it is binding. It needs to be made clear that subsequent non-adherence would lead to a referral for further action. It is for this reason that the presence of a PCSO or link officer, even if they were not the primary facilitator, would be highly significant. The PCSO at this point could spell out what the consequences of non-adherence would be and they could impart the seriousness of the agreement to be signed. This, I feel, is the theoretical underpinning upon which the Humberside model is based.

I would like to reiterate, however, that police involvement could range from a PCSO preparing and facilitating the conference (Hull model), to a PCSO/ link officer being invited as a participant to a circle facilitated by an impartial practitioner, to a PCSO accompanying the outside facilitator during one of the preparatory home visits. Indeed, when considering police involvement I feel it is essential to differentiate between the type of young person who may benefit from Police involvement to bring them back to the “straight and narrow” and the kind of child who might clam up and withdraw even more, particularly if there are unknown underlying emotional difficulties that have led to their truanting in the first place.

**The Conference Script**

The Real Justice Script is based upon five key questions:

- What happened?
- What were you thinking?
- What are you thinking about it now?
- Who has been affected?
- What needs to happen to put things right?

These are open questions, that are not judgemental and will encourage open exploration and genuine reflection upon the reasons, causes and effects of truancy. Indeed, in the course of the conference the student will be required to reflect on the effects of their truancy on the school, their fellow students, their families, the wider community and themselves. This is not an easy process, and may well be met with resistance.
It is at this point that a brief digression to the work of Donald Nathanson is appropriate. Nathanson wrote a seminal work on the concept of Shame, based upon the Theory of Affect as developed by the late Silvan Tomkins. He explains the possible manifestations of Shame through his “Compass of Shame” (Shame and Pride. Affect, Sex, and the Birth of the Self, 1994, pp.303-377) whereby Shame is shown in a number of manifestations, from Withdrawal (e.g. avoiding eye contact) to Attack Other (trying to turn the tables, blaming someone else). It is important that all parties are coached and ready to expect such reactions and, indeed, recognise them not as defiance or lack of engagement but as valid expressions of Shame. It is the facilitator’s role to make sure all participants are briefed and are aware of these possible manifestations of shame. While watching someone feeling shamed may be uncomfortable, it is essential to be aware that this feeling of shame will be temporary and is an aspect of taking responsibility for one’s previous behaviour. However, looking at the Real Justice Script one can see how this temporary “exilement” of the student (and possibly their family) will by question five be turned into a process of re-integration by the offer to repair harm and re-enter their community as restored and valuable members.

Significantly, the fifth question deviates from the classic Real Justice script, insofar as it does not ask “What do you need to do to put things right”, thus allowing access for young people who disclose underlying emotional strains and complexities that may have led to their absence from school.

However, truancy causes harm and the offer to repair harm is a crucial tenet of the restorative process. The decision on how to repair harm caused is made neither for the young person, nor does reparation happen to them. Instead, reparation follows a process of discussion and negotiation. It will be fair, appropriate and achievable. And it will be decided with the young person who has an input when deciding how to put things right. Being able to put things right is a crucial predecessor to being restored and re-integrated.

For this reason the eventual agreement will include an element of how the student will repair the harm done to others. Harm in the context of truancy could be lack of progress for class mates whenever the student turns up in class, having lost the connection to all previous learning. It could be resources lost as pastoral managers need to spend disproportionate amounts of money (and time) on a particular student, or even the worry of parents who fear being referred to court for parenting orders, fines or even prison. The agreement therefore needs to be very specific as to what the student will do to repair harm caused and how success will be measured.

It is during the discussion to formulate an agreement and consider ways to repair harm caused that the following questions need to be asked:

- Student: what they need to make it easier for them to attend school
- Parents: what help they need to support them get the child back to school
• School: what incentive/ support they can offer

Following the discussion of the effects of truancy and the reparation of harm Restorative Justice seeks to re-integrate, and it is for this purpose that the supporters from school are crucial, as it may be their role during the conference to mention the positives about the young person such as comments about their strengths, that they are missed by their class mates and that their teachers send their best wishes and hope to see them soon.

Furthermore the inclusion of the above questions will ensure that any necessary support required from outside agencies can be addressed when formulating the agreement, particularly if truancy is related to family difficulties (e.g. parental illness or disability).

It would greatly aid the re-integration process if the school could think of ways of how to offer a (fair) incentive of progress (e.g. late acceptance to end of year event; postcard home...). Again, a trained and skilled facilitator (whether PCSO, link officer or outside facilitator) will brief and coach the school officials prior to the conference in order to support a positive and reconciliatory atmosphere.

Significantly, the contract is also with the parents, and it needs to include precisely what the parents’ role will be. PCSO Casson suggests that “part of contract would be that the parents call the school immediately if the child does not want to come in”.

If parents are supporting truancy, or are one of the causes for truancy (e.g. through physical illness or disability, or mental health issues) there is a high likelihood that Child Protection agencies (FIP, social workers or similar) would already be involved and be working with the family and that they, too, would be part of the conference circle and their recommendations or requirements form part of the final agreement.

Again, the complexities of truancy against such a background may warrant the involvement of an impartial facilitator who has the time and the skill to ensure the conference is thoroughly prepared, that there will be “no surprises” at the conference (e.g. disclosure of a family crisis that led to child feel unable to come to school) and that it is, indeed, in the child’s best interest to hold an Accountability Conference in the first place (see Best Practice Guidelines on Sensitive and Complex Cases, RJC, 2011 pp 22-24).

Conclusion:

A restorative intervention is always the preferred option when the desired outcome is one of re-integration and restoration. Since our objective is to return children and young people to school, we need to favour a non-punitive approach that will aid us in healing relationships and offering restoration.
The Humberside model is an exciting initiative that has shown how restorative intervention can work successfully in reducing truancy rates. It would be worth investigating how the school selected the students referred to the PCSO, and whether they were students the school felt could be “turned” through the dual approach of restorative intervention and police presence. It would also be worth investigating how the school has been dealing with emotionally vulnerable absentees, and what the success rate has been amongst that group.

While the Humberside model has recognised the power of restorative intervention in dealing with unauthorised absence and has acted within the framework of Hull becoming a Restorative City, the model has relied upon referrals from its partner school, and has recently been impeded by time constraints upon the PCSO who carries out the restorative interventions and staffing constraints in the school.

For schools, engagement in Truancy Conferencing would simultaneously link to the SEAL agenda, insofar as Restorative Interventions emphasise e.g. empathy, emotional awareness and social problem solving. Additionally, Restorative Interventions address a number of SEF criteria with regard to Behaviour and Attendance, since the desired outcome of the Accountability Conference is to restore the student into their schools as engaged and motivated learners.

I would like to conclude with the following suggestions, thoughts and proposals:

A selection questionnaire could be devised (see attached example) that would allow an impartial facilitator and/or a PCSO or link officer evaluate whether a truanting student would be suitable for a police led approach to truancy conferencing. Once the school have identified a student they would like to refer for accountability conferencing the designated facilitator has an initial meeting with the school to discuss the questionnaire. If they are happy that no complex, sensitive or underlying emotional issues are the root cause for truancy, and that no outside agencies are involved with the family, they can go ahead and set up a PCSO / link officer led conference.

If the questionnaire shows up that the student has underlying issues that a police led approach might make worse, an impartial facilitator will need to be appointed. The PCSO/ link officer could then become part of the circle as described above.

The appointed facilitator would work closely with the school, outside agencies and the family to prepare and set up the conference. They would follow the RJC’s Best Practice Guidelines 2011 at all times.

The facilitator’s involvement would not end with the conference, but as their exit strategy they would coach the school supporter to help them work restoratively with
the young person in question. In the case of several truants, restorative circles could become a strategy the school uses to support and strengthen returning absentees.

Most schools in Brighton and Hove have support staff trained in restorative approaches. These support staff would be ideally placed to take over the care of a returning truant based upon a restorative philosophy, thus offering an encompassing restorative service to the young person, their family and ultimately the entire community.

**Further Options and Contact Details:**

If you would like to explore the option of truancy conferencing with a trained facilitator, either with or without the involvement of a PCSO or school link officer please contact:

**Dr Bettina Jung**  
Associate Member Restorative Justice Council; RJ practitioner:

**The Three Rs: Reflect, Repair, Restore.** Improving Behaviour and Attendance through Improving Relationships

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Appendix:

On the following pages I reproduce a letter used by Humberside Police when inviting students and their families to a n Accountability Conference. It is with thanks to PCSO Casson that we can reproduce the letter and adapt it for our purposes.

I also attach a suggested questionnaire to for schools to complete when considering referring a young person for Truancy Conferencing.
Dear Parent

You and your child, pupil's name, have been referred to Truancy Conferencing at Sir Henry Cooper School on Monday 4th October 2010 at 11am, to work out an agreement that keeps your child in school.

Finding ways to resolve truancy may reduce the possibility of further action being taken against you.

During a Truancy Conference you and your child will meet together with a school representative in a relaxed, confident atmosphere to discuss your child’s truancy from school and its impact on those involved. The Conference will be facilitated by Police community support officer Shaun Casson; the facilitator will not take sides or tell you what to do. The facilitator is there to help you decide for yourself how to resolve the problem.

You are also encouraged to have other support persons present at the Conference, such as a grandparent, aunt, uncle, siblings, friends, etc.

If an agreement is reached, you and your child will sign an Agreement Form which indicates you are committed to uphold your part of the agreement. The form will also be signed by everyone else at the Conference.
In many cases, youths who attend a Truancy Conference gain a greater understanding of the gravity of the situation.

If you cannot attend the above Truancy Conference, please contact Shaun on 04182 630045 or Jan Morro on 01482 854687.

Yours sincerely

Name
Rank & No
Accountability Conferencing / Restorative Truancy Conferencing

Name: ___________________________ Year Group: ___________________

First Incident of Truancy:

Number of Incidents over past 6 weeks:

Current attendance record:

Is there a pattern to the truancy?

Have there been issues (regular or intermittent) with this young person before?

Has there been a change in the young person’s conduct in class?

What is academic attainment like? Are there any recent changes?

Have any teachers voiced concern? Is the concern subject specific?

Has young person or their carer given any reasons for their truancy? If yes, which ones?

Are there any friendship- or peer relationship problems?

Has the young person become member of a new social group recently?

Are there any known issues at home contributing to truancy?

Are any outside agencies involved with the young person or the family?

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