

## **Improving attendance and punctuality of FE Basic skill students through an innovative scheme.**

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### **Abstract:**

This paper reports the findings of a study set up to establish the impact of a particular scheme on the attendance and punctuality performance of a group of Basic Skills learners against the backdrop of various theoretical postulations on managing undesirable behavior.

Data collected on learners' performance was subjected to statistical analysis through the use of the SPSS analytical toolkit in order to establish the T-value, probability value and significance, as well as the confidence level of intervals. Findings from statistical analysis were then subjected to a process of corroboration through a focus group discussion with subjects in the study.

Based on the findings, the study concludes that the scheme has a significant impact on some aspects of the learners' performance and advocates the introduction of novel ways, in the context of mixed approaches towards eradicating undesirable behaviors among young learners.

### **Introduction**

The twin issues of attendance and punctuality have in recent times assumed a very crucial role in the assessment of the quality of provision in the area of skills for life. Indeed, inspectors' reports inevitably include comments on the pattern of attendance and punctuality of students. It is commonplace to find comments like the following in inspectors' reports. "Lateness is not positively challenged and attendance is still an issue" (Feedback from OFSTED inspection of Basic Skills at Southwark College, 2003:2)

Comments such as the one above have often left tutors in the FE totally frustrated and in many cases, disillusioned. Tutors, perhaps rightly so, argue that they can not be expected to have control over what happens to students outside the college and more importantly, as they perceive it, the wilful decision of students not to benefit from the opportunity to learn provided by colleges.

Inspectorate regimes however do not share the sympathies of tutors. They, again rightly so, would argue that the pastoral duties of teachers necessitate their taking responsibility for their students' performances in terms of attendance and punctuality, after all, students can not be expected to achieve if they do not attend classes or indeed, if they come in half way through lessons.

More importantly, from the viewpoint of students, it is incontrovertible that poor attendance and punctuality will have adverse effects on their learning and achievement. This is the one point that all parties involved are agreed on. Tutors, inspectors, governors, funders and indeed students would not contest the significance of attendance and punctuality on the overall learning process. What remains controversial is the strategy to deal with this problem. Should tutors assume what essentially amounts to a dictatorial stance by challenging and insisting that students have to be present and punctual at lessons, or should they assume a stance that would ultimately nurture students' desire to be present and punctually so, at their lessons? If the latter is the case, how do they go about achieving this goal? This paper is a

report of a small-scale experiment based on an attempt at nurturing rather than ordering students. It presents the perceived impact of a scheme designed to enhance what McPhillimy (2001:177) calls the “self-concept” of the learner.

The central philosophy of this scheme revolves around the view that, rather than continuously challenging students on their attendance and punctuality, a role could be created for this category of students that actually devolves some responsibility on them in terms of their and their colleagues’ attendance and punctuality. In this sense, the scheme borrows from the fundamental principle of combining behavioural, reflective and relationship approaches in tackling undesirable behaviour among students.

### **Approaches Towards Tackling Undesirable Behaviour**

Practitioners and researchers have often proffered various solutions for undesirable behaviours among learners. While some, like Rogers (2001) offer solutions recommending more active control on the part of the teacher, with what he calls “language of discipline” with emphasis on a “discipline plan” p.170. others recommend approaches that are more friendly towards the student and tend to put the blame on factors outside the control of students. (See e.g., Bradley 2001, Marsh 2001) Others still recommend what can be seen as multidimensional approaches as typified by McPhillimy (2001)

In my opinion, all of these approaches are best captured in the structure presented by McPhillimy (2001:182-183) when he talks of a BBR approach towards dealing with undesirable behaviour among learners. He identifies two central approaches namely the behavioural and the cognitive. He then advocates a combination of the two as a third approach. According to him, this approach combines the strength of the other two approaches to achieve better results in managing undesirable behaviours among learners. For instance, while teachers, in consonance with the dictates of behavioural approach, take responsibility for ensuring good behaviour among learners, they must also strive to identify learners’ motives and must recognise the importance of learners’ academic and general self-concept. It would seem that most approaches recommended in the literature could fit into one of the three models identified by McPhillimy.

However, identifying approaches by their typology cannot be an end in itself. What is more important is to be able to identify which of the approaches would be most suitable for dealing with particular situations. In consonance with the arguments underlying the BBR approach, it is my opinion that no one approach can work unilaterally. Indeed, the recipe for success, I would argue, must include elements of both the behavioural and cognitive approaches. The crucial issue is identifying the immediate stakeholders. Without a doubt, this must include the teacher, the learner and other learners who share the same environment. We can safely assume that the stakeholder that identifies the problem would normally be the teacher. In simply earmarking a benchmark for behaviour, the teacher is already implementing elements of the behavioural approach. It would seem therefore that every good teacher must start the process of correcting undesirable behaviour by using elements of the behavioural approach.

Beyond the above point however, the teacher would probably be open to a number of choices in terms of how to deal with the identified behaviour. It is in this respect that we can begin to debate the suitability of one approach when compared with others. By the same token, once a student agrees to actively participate in the process of changing the identified behaviour, we can argue that elements of the cognitive approach are being introduced.

In essence therefore, the perception underlying this work is that every good teacher must necessarily combine these approaches and that a failure to do this might in some cases amount to abdication of responsibility on the part of teachers. It is along the above line of reasoning that the present scheme presented in this study is designed. The central theme is the allocation of responsibility to all the stakeholders in the hope that they can all work towards achieving the same end.

## Attendance and Punctuality

As is the case with the general perception of how to deal with disruptive behaviours, suggested approaches for dealing with punctuality and attendance can also be grouped into two. While one approach perceives this problem as behavioural and therefore correctable through strict control by teachers and behavioural change by students, the other assumes a multidimensional approach similar to BBR as proposed in McPhillimy (2001). With the former, there is regular recourse to a combination of rebuke and reward, while with the latter; the emphasis is on innovation in order to address the underlying cause of the problem. Some strategies generating from the two approaches are examined below:

In a document on combating punctuality and attendance, Alexander (2003:2) advocates a series of measures that insists on the learner taking responsibility for attendance and punctuality, concluding with a dire warning that “if you want to retain your place awarded in any school, you must attend that school regularly and punctually. Regular attendance and punctuality are not optional.”

Similar sensibilities are portrayed in Miller (2004:1) who recommends what can be classified as a rebuke and reward strategy for dealing with the problem of attendance and punctuality. This view is encapsulated in the recommendation that we “praise and provide incentives for good attendance and punctuality” and “require tardy students to go to the office to get a pass to enter the class.”

Presenting strategies bordering on the reward and rebuke concept, the Kingston college attendance and punctuality document (2003) place an emphasis on “monitoring attendance through registers and observation data.” In a seemingly surreptitious attempt at introducing reward, the document again links attendance to the requirement of students’ EMA stipend.

In its document, Effectively managing Attendance and Punctuality and Developing a School Attendance Policy (2004), the London borough of Merton Education, Leisure and Libraries propose strategies with similar resonance, ranging from support for teachers to exploring external links in order to control guilty students and change their attendance and punctuality patterns. In another document by a similar agency, Lewisham educational Access, similar concepts are proposed. In their handbook for schools (2004:14-16) they recommend a number of strategies that reflect the twin concepts of teacher control and rebuke/reward. Some of the measures for teacher control include “phoning the home, writing and home visits,” as well as “analysis of absence” using the Wanton Samuel system.

Taking a different approach, the Nottinghamshire Education Welfare service as reported in Teacher-Net – Case Studies (2005:1-4) proposed a series of schemes, which combine the behavioural and the multi-dimensional approaches. While on the one hand, they propose teacher centred strategies like “late gates” truancy patrol and first day calling”, they on the other hand advocate that these strategies be integrated with innovative schemes such as; “Horse race derby, Tick Tock challenge, and mentoring.” In proposing the integration of these approaches, it would seem that what this document aims to do is to cater for both the behavioural and the cognitive causes of the problem.

Recommending a similar approach, The QCA (2005:3) recognise among other factors, that the role of the learner linked to their self-perception can improve attendance and punctuality. Focusing on the role of physical education and school sport in particular, they recommend “targeting and selecting pupils for activities” in order to facilitate improvements in their attendance and punctuality patterns. Central to this is the concept of role allocation according to the behavioural patterns of learners. They conclude that taking such a stance would promote the factors of feeling valued and wanted, thus enhancing an improved pattern of attendance and punctuality.

OFSTED (2003:5) present us with injunctions emanating from a similar line of reasoning. For instance, they recommend that in order to improve attendance and punctuality, schools must facilitate the extent to which “pupils are enterprising and willing to take responsibility.”

The Illinois State Library Office document (2003:4) while focusing on the issue of retention, recommend in conjunction with other teacher centred schemes, what they call “special events” Central to this is providing “students with the opportunity to volunteer in programmes and give back, ----- for which they earn recognition.”

What is obvious from the various contributions examined above is that suggestions on how to deal with the problem of punctuality and attendance are as varied as the problem itself is rampant. In the context of these multiple suggestions therefore, it is difficult to identify any one or group of strategies as most suitable or adequate. What therefore appears to be logical is to employ whatever strategies are suitable to the context of the problem within the multi-dimensional framework illustrated in the BBR strategy for dealing with disruptive behaviour. In so doing, we would be able to avoid the rigidity and ultimately fruitless adherence to a straightjacket position of postulating a universal theory for dealing with the problem of attendance and punctuality. It is in the context of such a position that the type of scheme reported in this study can find a niche.

### **The Present Study: The Telephone Peer link Scheme**

The scheme was designed to tackle a persistent pattern of absenteeism and lateness in basic skills class after the traditional approaches of challenging concerned students and having one-to-one discussion with them had failed.

The group of concerned students were invited to a meeting, and at the meeting, the following steps were agreed toward finding a remedy to the situation.

- (1) The students would vote for a leader every fortnight that will be responsible for reminding other members of the group about their classes.
- (2) The leader would carry out this task by telephoning every other members of the group on a daily basis about their classes.
- (3) The leader would also be responsible for recording the attendance of members of the group and would present this to the tutor at the end of every lesson.
- (4) The tutor would take responsibility for funding the cost of telephone by providing telephone cards.
- (5) At the end of the scheduled period, the group will meet again as a focus group to discuss the outcome of this experiment.
- (6) If the group agrees, it would be possible for a chosen leader to have more than one term in office.

The performance of this group in terms of attendance and punctuality was closely monitored and recorded by the tutor for a period of eight weeks. This forms the basis of the data that is compared to their performance before the introduction of the scheme. It is important to note that both the tutor and students agreed that there was a problem and that there was a need to address it.

In order to be able to compare the impact of this scheme, another group of students with the same problem pattern was set up as a control group. Their performance in terms of attendance was monitored over the same period and forms the basis of data for comparing their performance with the first group.

The performances of both groups over the eight-week period were then recorded and analysed along the following lines.

- (1) The performance of members of group 1 during the scheme was compared with their performances prior to the scheme.
- (2) The performances of members of the control group during the experimental period were compared with the performance of the same group before the period of experiment.
- (3) Performance of group 1 during the eight-week experimentation was compared with that of the control group over the same period.

- (4) A focus group with group 1 was then set up to discuss the pattern of performance in order to establish factors that might be significant in the change of pattern if there was any.

Focus group is used here in the tradition of Powell and Single (1996:499) to refer to “a group of individuals selected and assembled by researchers to discuss and comment on, from personal experience, the topic that is the subject of the research.”

In line with the arguments of (Morgan 1997 and Clarke and Dawson 1999) this method of interviewing was used because the researcher is convinced about the following facts.

- (1) This setting is likely to encourage participants to qualify their original responses or indeed to shed light on performance pattern that was hitherto not understood by a researcher.
- (2) Focus group can generate a lot of qualitative data in a short time and are relatively inexpensive.
- (3) The key issue for this study however revolves around its methodological role. As argued in Clarke and Dawson (1999:77) “ focus groups have methodological advantage over questionnaires and structured interview schedules of allowing participants the freedom to raise issues that are important to them, rather than merely respond to a set of predetermined questions.”

It is for the above reasons that a focus group interview was preferred as a methodological tool for teasing out information and seeking confirmation of already collated information.

### **SPSS Statistical Analysis of Data**

Using the SPSS tool kit, the data collected as described above was then subjected to various analyses. The findings are presented and discussed below. The raw score of the performances of the two groups are presented in appendix 1.

First, the data is subjected to exploration for anomalies such as extreme values or skewed distribution through the use of the SPSS descriptive statistics/explore function. The result shows that there are neither extreme values, nor any form of skewed distribution.

Following this, the data is then subjected to an independent sample test to see if there is a significant difference in the performance of the two groups. The test assumes the null hypothesis that the telephone scheme has no impact on the performance of students during its implementation.

### **Issues with Research method.**

#### **Selecting subject groups**

The two groups selected for this study have a lot in common. In particular, they display similar patterns of attendance and punctuality before the scheme. In addition to this, the two groups have the same set of tutors. This is particularly significant because it eliminates a potential dependent variable in the analysis of the performance of each group.

Another commonality between the two groups is manifested in their core demographic statistics. Distribution patterns in terms of age, race and employment between the two groups are similar. Students in both groups are aged between 17 and 18 and they are all of Afro-Caribbean extraction.

More importantly, both group of subjects were chosen for this study because the researcher, in his role as head of department, has access to both the classes and records of performance for both groups. In effect, it is easier to keep an accurate record of performance with these groups than it could have been with other groups that the researcher might not have direct access to.

Finally, the choice of which group would function as the control as against the experimental group was not informed by any logic. Considering the fact that both groups have a lot in common, both in terms of their demographic statistics and in-school performance, the decision was based on a random choice.

Having two groups with such similarity, it is expected, would facilitate a much more valid comparison and would enable the significance of the scheme to become obvious. In particular, having a group on which the scheme is not administered allows the impact of the scheme on the other group to become evident. The conclusions drawn from the studies would also have a higher degree of validity as the impact of the scheme on the performance of the experimental group can be compared with another group, which shares a lot of significant features.

### **Confidentiality**

It is an established norm that confidentiality and permission are given serious consideration in any research that collects information that might be of private nature. (Bell 1993, Clarke and Dawson 1999)

In the case of the present study however, these two factors were relatively insignificant. This is because the information used in the study were statutorily required to be made available in order to monitor the attendance and punctuality performance of learners. Indeed, the information is generally available in public domain. However, because the information was to be used specifically to test a scheme in a particular research endeavour, the following steps were taken.

- (1) All the subjects were clearly told of the aims of collecting the data.
- (2) Express permission of all the subjects was secured before data about their performance was used.
- (3) All the subjects willingly volunteered for the project.
- (4) Responses from focus group discussions were recorded under code names, thereby ensuring anonymity.

By adhering to the principles above, it was not only ensured that information about students was used with their consent, but also that no subject can be identified on the basis of their responses or and performance.

### **Demographic – Sociological characteristics of subjects.**

In studies such as the present one, it is important that the demographic characteristics of subjects be identified before the experimentation stage. This is because some demographic variables might be significant in terms of the findings of such a study. For instance, it is possible that a particular deviance in behaviour is informed by deviance in demographic circumstances. In order for any study to be able to give an objective interpretation of behavioural pattern therefore, it is essential that the demographic features of the subjects of the study be explored.

It is difficult to have a finite list of factors to be considered under the analysis of demographic characteristics. Indeed, it would seem that each study would select relevant demographic features to meet its scope.

As a result, different scholars have examined different factors under the overall umbrella of demographic statistics. In spite of this however, there are enough commonalities among the features generally chosen for various studies and these function as guideline in terms of the determination of demographic features examined. In essence, the demographic characteristics of subjects presented in this study are an aggregation of frequently examined demographic features.

While taking a look at Demographic and clinical characteristics of emotionally disturbed children, Ghuman et al (1999) examined the features of gender, ethnicity, age and residential location as primary indices of demographic characteristics. However, Colom (2003) takes this further in her report on the needs of the young Puerto Rican by adding other variables such as residential zone and type, marital status, family composition and family size, ethnic characteristics and cross-cultural experience, religious preferences, income and employment status. Similarly, Diaz (2005: Internet access) employed some of these features in his analyses of the public image of psychologists in Spain, although he left out factors like religion, employment and income. This is perhaps a reflection of the focus of his study.

In effect, there is evidence that the listed features are key indices of demographic characterisation in research work. As dictated by the particular study concerned, a combination of the list given above should provide ample choice of features for demographic description of any group of subjects.

Following from the above, the demographic characteristics of the subjects in this study will be defined on the basis of all the features as identified in Colom (2003) and Diaz (2005). This is because of the conviction that these features can play significant roles in the analysis of the behaviour of subjects in this study. These features are presented in the table below.

Variable	Group breakdown	Overall group description
Gender	8 females and 7 males	Near equal representation in terms of gender
Age	All subjects are between 17 and 18 years.	All subjects belong to the same age group
Residential zone	All subjects reside within 1.5 miles of the college. This falls into an area that is officially designated as economically deprived.	All subjects share the same residential features in terms of geographical location.
Type of residence	19 out of 21 (90.5%) live in public housing. 2 (9.5%) live in their houses purchased by their parents on mortgage	Subjects generally reside in public flats available in large state – owned estates.
Marital Status	All subjects are single and have no children	All subjects have neither parental responsibilities nor attachment to spouses.
Parental control	20 out of 21 subjects (99%) live in a 1-parent setting. 1 subject lives with both parents.	Subjects are predominantly from single parent families
Ethnicity and cross-cultural experience.	All subjects have parents who are of African/Caribbean extraction and have lived in or visited their parents' countries at least once.	There is evidence of cross-cultural experience among the subjects.
Religious preferences	12 out of 21 subjects (57%) have parents who are Christians while the remaining 9 subjects (45%) have parents who are Muslims. However, none of the subjects is particularly inclined towards any kind of religious activities.	Religion does not appear to be held in high esteem by all the subjects.
Employment	All the subjects are full-time students and are not engaged in any form of paid employment. However, 18 students (86%) indicate that they are actively looking for part-time employment.	Subjects belong to the group of full-time students and have no work-related responsibilities.

Income	All the subjects are dependent on their parents' income for sustenance. It was impossible to get information about their parents' income as it was considered sensitive	Subjects have no income of their own.
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The pattern of demographic characteristics reflected by the subjects as presented in the table above shows that there is a constant for majority of the subjects. Based on this, it is possible to eliminate these features as sources and causes of difference in behavioural patterns both between individual subjects and between the experimental and control groups. This is particularly relevant in analysing the difference in performance between the two groups because the features reflected in the table are based on the demographic characteristics of both groups.

### **Context of Research**

This study is context-specific in the sense that it is located within a specific environment and does not make any claims to an overall universal postulations. The specific variables in the study include the subject of study of the learners, the location of study and the nature of the college within which the study is located. It is therefore essential that a brief description of these variables is provided here.

### **Basic skills**

Basic skill is often used to refer to a “level of competency specifically in reading, writing and mathematics, which is required for successful college work in all fields of study. (BBC Educational Catalogue 2005:1) In essence therefore, the curriculum provided in basic skills classes are designed to upgrade the language, literacy and number skills of learners, so that they can become adequately skilled to comfortably progress to a mainstream vocational or academic study.

### **FE College**

The term FE college is used in the UK to refer to colleges of further and higher education. While the predominant curriculum focus of these colleges are in vocational courses, academically focussed courses are also available in many of these colleges. The multiple focii of these colleges is reflected in the various qualifications awarded, ranging from A levels through GNVQ and BTEC qualifications to HND in various technical and business related subjects. Some of the more advanced FE colleges offer courses leading to degrees and in very few cases, leading to post graduate awards.

In the context of this study, the college in which the study is located is one of the largest FE colleges in England. It offers both academic and vocational courses leading to various from advance level to post-graduate diplomas. Basic skill classes are therefore offered to students whose levels of competence in language; literacy and numeracy are considered inadequate for mainstream studies. In a sense therefore, basic skills classes are preparatory to studies on mainstream vocational and academic programmes.



**Findings**

**T-Test for Performance During Scheme. (PDS)**

Group Statistics		N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
PDS	scheme	15	69.07	4.20	1.08
	group				
	control	6	51.33	3.72	1.52
	group				

**Independent Samples Test**

		F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference
PDS	Equal variances assumed	.015	.904	8.998	19	.000	17.73	1.97	Lower 13.61 Upper 21.86
	Equal variances not assumed			9.497	10.419	.000	17.73	1.87	13.60 21.87

## **Analysis of data**

### **Means**

The means for the two groups in table 1 (group statistics) is obviously different. While the scheme group has a mean of 69.07, the control group has a recorded mean of 51.07. This in itself is not necessarily significant. The extent to which it might be significant will be explored when we look at the content of table two.

### **Levene's statistic**

The Levene's test for equality of variance has a P value for F, which is greater than .05.. Because the value is greater than .05, we can assume that Levene's test in this set of data is not significant. As such, we can assume that the variances are homogenous and proceed to use the equal variances line of values for the t-test. Based on this, we can use the following equation to present the result of Levene's test for equality of variance in this data.

If  $p > 0.05$  then the homogeneity of variance assumption is tenable.

$P = .904$  so, the homogeneity of variance assumption is tenable.

### ***T value, Probability value and Significance.***

The t value (df = 19) is 8.998. The two tail p- value is .000 The p – value for a one tail test would therefore be .000. based on this, we can calim that it is significant at the 5% level as represented in the following equation.  $T (19) = 8.998; p < 0.05$

### **Confidence Interval of Difference.**

The 95% confidence interval level is 13.16 to 21.86. As this does not include 0, the result is significant on a two tailed-test.

Based on the result presented above, it is obvious that the null hypothesis that the scheme has no effect on the performance of students in terms of attendance has been negated.

A similar test is carried out for the punctuality rate during scheme for the same subject using the null hypothesis that the scheme has no effect on the punctuality rate of students during its implementation. The result is presented below.

### T-Test for Punctuality Rate During Scheme (PRDS)

Group Statistics		N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
PRDS	scheme group	15	1.27	.46	.12
	control group	6	1.50	.55	.22

### Independent Samples Test

		F	Sig.	t	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
		Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means				Lower	Upper
PRDS	Equal variances assumed	1.511	.234	-1.000	.330	-.23	.23	-.72	.26
	Equal variances not assumed			-.923	.383	-.23	.25	-.82	.35

## **Analysis of data**

### **Means**

The means for the two groups in table 1 (group statistics) is obviously different. While the scheme group has a mean of 1.27, the control group has a recorded mean of 1.50. This in itself is not necessarily significant. The extent to which it might be significant will be explored when we look at the content of table two.

### **Levene's statistic**

The Levene's test for equality of variance has a P value for F, which is greater than .05.. Because the value is greater than .05, we can assume that Levene's test in this set of data is not significant. As such, we can assume that the variances are homogenous and proceed to use the equal variances line of values for the t-test. Based on this, we can use the following equation to present the result of Levene's test for equality of variance in this data.

If  $p > 0.05$  then the homogeneity of variance assumption is tenable.

$P = .234$  so, the homogeneity of variance assumption is tenable.

**T value, Probability value and Significance.** The t value (df = 19) is  $-1.000$ . The two tail p- value is .330. The p – value for a one tail test would therefore be .150. Based on this, we can claim that it is not significant at the 5% level as represented in the following equation.  $T(19) = -1.000; p > 0.05$

### **Confidence Interval of Difference**

The 95% confidence interval level is  $-.76$  to  $.26$ . As this includes 0, the result is not significant on a two tailed-test.

Based on the result presented above, it is obvious that the null hypothesis that the scheme has no effect on the punctuality of students has been confirmed.

### **Findings from the focus group**

A simple focus group was convened to find out the subjects' perception on why their performances in terms of attendance changed so significantly during the administration of the scheme. The group was made up of subjects in the experimental group and two questions were addressed.

- (1) Why did members of the group improve their attendance so significantly during the scheme?
- (2) Why did their performance in terms of punctuality remain constant in spite of the scheme?

There were various responses to the first question posed to this group. The responses were as varied as they were interesting and possibly enlightening. Some respondents spoke of the recognition of the fact they felt some sense of responsibility to the group and as such, did not want to disappoint their colleagues. For some members of the group, the responsibility was not simply to the group, but to the various group leaders, as they felt responsible for electing them in the first place.

Another line of response provided by the group revolves around the element of pride in terms of the responsibility they have been given. Some felt that it was a matter of pride to be given such a responsibility and therefore would want to strive to carry out their responsibilities. In a sense, some respondents felt that it was an acknowledgement that they were capable of doing "good things" as well as their classmates not involved in the project.

Taking the same theme further, some members of the group spoke of the notion of trust and their desire not to betray the trust reposed in them by their tutor. They felt that if they did not participate as well as they could and should, it would amount to betraying their teacher's trust in them.

Another line of response from the group suggests that some of the subjects felt they were coerced into improving their performances. For example, some of the students felt that if they did not participate as well as expected, they could be withdrawn from the college. Worse still, some felt that they might forfeit their EMA allowances, which they have come to depend upon.

Finally, some respondents indicate that they simply did not want to be different from their friends within the group, who have indicated that they intend to improve their performance. It is

particularly interesting to note that some students actually said that they were forced or pressurized by their peers.

***Classification of responses to question 1***

Response type	Concept behind reason for performance	Issues
1	Responsibility	(1) Felt responsible for group performance  (2) Felt responsibility / loyalty to group leaders.  (3) Ensure that group leaders do not fail.
2	Pride	(1) Pride in responsibility (2) Confirmation that they were also capable (3) Competition with classmates not involved in the scheme.
3	Trust and betrayal	(1) Not wanting to betray their teacher's trust.
4	Peer influence/pressure	(1) Desire to be with peers (2) Compelled by peers (3) Pressurized by peers.

Some quotations from their responses include the following.

“ I did not want to disappoint my group and the leader” (Scheme group student 6 –female)

“I wanted to show that we can also be good students.” (Scheme group subject 13—female)

“ I thought that if I did not attend well, I might be asked to leave the college.” (Scheme group student 9 – male)

“I just tried to do as much as my mates in the group” (Scheme group student 3 –male)

In response to the question about their punctuality, the subjects surprisingly did not have any explanations. On the average, the subjects simply claimed that it was difficult to get in on time for various reasons including distance and domestic responsibilities. When questioned further about the possibility of better time management to enable them cope with the issues of distance and domestic responsibilities, most of them simply argued that the effort would constitute too much sacrifice of their part.

Some of their responses include the following;

“ Waking up earlier, -- that would not be fair. (Scheme group student 1 –male)

“To get up earlier and help my mum means I wouldn’t get enough rest.” (Scheme group student 4 – female)

### **Discussion and Preliminary Conclusions.**

Based on the performance of the experimental group during the scheme, it is easy for us to jump into conclusions about the efficacy of the scheme. This however would simply amount to undue optimism. While it is true that there is some ground for optimism, it is also crystal clear that there are a number of issues that must be reviewed and reflected upon. First, let us look at some of the positives.

It is important to note the following. First, the fact that some of the subjects felt the need to demonstrate their ability to take on responsibilities is indicative of the fact that perhaps, we have not paid enough attention to the viewpoint of the learner in addressing the problem of attendance.

McManus (2001:100) reminds us of the need to identify the pupil’s point of view advocating that a way forward in managing undesirable behavior in students’ is “to try to step into the pupil’s shoes” Pursuing the same theme, Hanks (1985:80) argues that “what others think of us is their problem: our reaction to this is ours” In a sense, what the scheme has done over a short period of time is to encourage these students to react positively to what others might think of them.

Secondly, the indication from the data that the scheme was significant for students’ attendance is a course for optimism. The optimism does not necessarily derive from the particular scheme that was administered. Rather it is simply an acknowledgement that constructive intervention in terms of students’ behavior might indeed yield positive results. While arguing for teachers to take the initiative in terms of dealing with problems in their own classroom, McManus (2001:135) enjoins teachers to “—increase their own expertise and therefore to give only what limited credence is due to members of other professions when they pronounce upon school matters.”

In essence, what this scheme has provided evidence for is the argument that the traditional labels given to students in the category might not in fact be as sacrosanct as some would want to argue. It is therefore possible to deal with their behavior in ways different from the traditionally prescribed ones.

Furthermore, the information provided in the course of the focus group might form part of “knowledge” which as McManus (2001:138) argues, “permits a more dispassionate and analytical stance and can be used to produce an agenda for staff discussion focused on pupils or groups whose behaviors is causing problems”

Another positive derives from some of the responses given during the focus group. In particular, it is heartening to observe that the subjects revealed that they saw their performances as part of the group rather than as individuals. Based on this, they gave what could be seen as genuine reasons for their poor performances in terms of punctuality. In a sense, this reinforces the argument of people like Bradley (2001) Explanations based solely on individuals can encourage teachers and schools to believe that they have little or no part to play” By contrast, generating the type of group-based- information collected from this scheme can lead to “modifications to institutional organization and teacher behavior and can produce beneficial effects” p.147

However, there are aspects of the findings that remind us that we still have a lot of work to do. For instance, the finding presented here is strictly of the subjects’ performance over a short period of time and significantly during the lifetime of the scheme. Valid questions could be asked about what the performance would be after the scheme. Would it remain the same? It is important that we reflect upon this before jumping to conclusions about the scheme.

Another salient issue revolves around the fact that the data shows no significant improvement in the performance of the students in terms of punctuality. This suggests, that no one scheme can be seen as remedy for all sorts of behavioral problems. This in a sense can be seen positively as it challenges the teacher and calls for creativity.

Other aspects of the scheme, which calls for reflection, are the short duration of its administration and the cost of implementing it. While the time serves as another source of reminder that

we can make no conclusive claims on the basis of this experiment, the cost might deter its implementation in a larger setting. These are aspects therefore that we must critically consider in terms of making claims about the scheme.

Finally, and most importantly, the finding does not provide any explanation in terms of the subjects' attendance prior to the scheme. This in itself would have been the most useful part of the data, as it would have provided a basis for postulating theories about this type of behavior.

In spite of its inconclusiveness, we can still make a number of assertions about the scheme. First, it gives an indication that intervention along innovative lines as advocated in McPhillimy (2001) and Bradley (2001) might indeed work. Although we might not be able to make specific pronouncements about what scheme to use in different instances of behavioral problems, we can have some form of reassurance that something can be done and that this has worked on some aspects in some cases.

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## **Appendix 1: Codes used in the Data and variable Views:**

(1) PDS: - Performance during scheme. This is calculated using the following formula.

Actual number of attendance during scheme – divided by Total number of possible attendance X 10

(2) PSAP: - Pre – Scheme average performance

Actual number of attendance before scheme – divided by total number of possible attendance X 100

(3) PRBS: - Punctuality rate before scheme

Actual number of days punctual before scheme divided total number of lecture days X100

(4) PRDS: - Punctuality rate during scheme

Actual number of days punctual during scheme divided total number of lecture days X100

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