School Truancy: An Old Problem Which Requires New and Innovative Solutions

M. J. van Breda

Department of Psychology of Education, College of Education, University of South Africa
PO Box 392, Pretoria 0003, South Africa
Telephone: +2712 429 4148; E-mail: vbredmj@unisa.ac.za

ABSTRACT School truancy is a known predictor of learners leaving school prior to graduation. In this study the author explored the phenomenon of school truancy among grade 8 learners in the Metro East Education District of the Western Cape in South Africa. The study aimed to examine the prevalence, nature and extent of school truancy in the specified research cite and to offer guidelines to teachers in dealing with this serious concern. The study used a mixed method approach and is based on focus group interviews with learners, a survey conducted by means of a questionnaire completed by a sample of three hundred learners. Unstructured interviews were conducted with principals of schools included in the study. The findings of the study suggest that school truancy is a fairly common among grade 8 learners in the educational district concerned and appears to be closely associated with a host of interconnected and overlapping negative individual, family and community risks factors. The study concluded that if truant behaviour is not addressed through a collaborative approach taking numerous risk factors into account, it may have potentially disastrous effects not only for learners, but also for their families and communities at large.

INTRODUCTION

In recent decades, school truancy has attracted much interest in international research as well as policy discourse (Dalziel and Henthorne 2005; Reid 2005; Winslade and Monk 2007). Most researchers agree that truancy is a serious issue facing all schools throughout the world from elementary through high school and is considered a leading predictor of dropout (Ovink 2010; Puzzanchera and Sickmond 2008). When considering school absenteeism and truancy, one of the key issues is to understand correctly the meaning and definition of the terms. This may not be quite as simple as it sounds considering the view held by Reid (2005) that there are various types of school absenteeism including specific lesson absence, post-registration absence, parentally condoned absence, school refusal and school phobia. This is where the confusion may begin as for some researchers and education specialists, specific lesson absence, post-registration absence and parentally condoned absence do not constitute truancy. For others, this may constitute truancy and are often re-titled as specific lesson truancy, post-registration truancy and parentally condoned truancy.

Thus, in some circles, 'being absent from school without good reason' can be equated with truancy, whereas in other circumstances, having a good reason for the absence means by definition that this form of behaviour is not truancy. In view of these definitional problems which often result in the generic term implying different things to different people, the author concurs with the description of school truant behaviour cited by Blum and Davis (2010) as 'any intentional and deliberate absence from school without a valid reason or permission from parents or the school'.

The negative effects that stem from school truancy necessitate a thorough understanding of the experience of truancy, including causes and consequences, how truancy is perceived and institutional responses. The author is of the opinion that understanding institutional and systemic responses to truancy, in particular, could be one way in which schools could evaluate whether their efforts are achieving or not achieving results. Much of the extant literature points to the stereotyping of truancy as deliberate school disengagement and delinquent behaviour among learners (Wright 2012; Henry 2010). However, what appears to be lacking is the voice of truants reporting on problematic issues what could lead them to begin disengaging with school. "Going truant" is far too often dismissed exclusively as an example of a leaner's apathy toward education, not taking into account that this behaviour may be related to a variety of individual, family, school and community factors.

School Truancy and Related Risk Factors

Capps (2003) argues that truancy often indicates larger issues in a child's life. He further cites that truants often perceive the world around them as unstable and confusing with many coming from dysfunctional, unstable and insecure homes. According to McCray (2006), children who do not feel a sense of belonging in a school, often seek acknowledgement, understanding and support elsewhere, which may result in truancy.

Monobe and Baloyi (2012) emphasized that there is currently a great deal of concern and disquiet about learners who deliberately miss school and certain classes daily. This anxiety is well founded considering the repercussions of consistently truanting are very severe and suggest a wider social, psychological and educational problem. Socially, truants do not know what to do with their time while they are away from school (Hans and Erikson 2013). Some for example merely wander around their neighbourhood bored, engaging in such meaningless and monotonous activities as vandalizing public or private property.

Heeyoung and Jaun (2011) report that two-thirds of adolescent offenders begin their delinquent and criminal activities while truanting. In addition, truants are also at higher risk for substance abuse, gang involvement and violence. The united Sates and the United Kingdom have implemented policies and invested significant resources to reduce truancy over several decades. Despite these significant efforts and millions spent, there is little evidence that any positive impact has been made on school attendance and in combating truancy (Maynard et al. 2013).

A study conducted by the Community Agency for Social Enquiry in the Western Cape, South Africa (2007) found that teachers, principals and district officials felt that truant behaviour is caused by risk factors such as poverty, transport problems, illness, lack of parental involvement and food insecurity. In her research findings, Moseki (2004) cited that truancy is a major problem in most South African township communities, linking this behaviour to a number of school related factors, including the nature of interaction with peers and teachers, bullying, the content and delivery of the curriculum and its relevance, discipline issues, boredom with school and the academic ethos of the school.

The research sites for this study are six secondary schools situated in Metro East Education District in the Western Cape, South Africa. These schools are located in predominantly so-called coloured[1] and Afrikaans-speaking communities which are characterized by a high rate of unemployment, poverty, gang activities, violence, and reliance on welfare support. According to school attendance records observed by the author at the 6 high schools included in the study, it does not seem uncommon for many grade 8 learners to have accumulated up to one 100 days of questionable absences. This alarmingly high absentee rate represents approximately half of the school year and seems to occur predominantly among grade 8 male learners. A further motivation why the study focussed on 8 learners only is the high volume of referrals for psycho educational support due to irregular school attendance which are rife among learners in this grade.

Upon enquiring about measures in place to address learner attendance in the research site, neither a formally structured attendance nor anti-truancy policies were found in place. Also lacking was a support programme for grade 8 learners in facilitating their transition from primary to high school, a shift that usually comes with its unique challenges, opportunities and expectations. This situation appears to be exacerbated by poor school-parent and school-community partnerships and cooperation.

Aims

In response to the aforementioned issues, the main aim of this article was to explore the prevalence, nature and intensity of truant behaviour among grade 8 attending schools in the research site. A second aim was to provide practical and preventative guidelines to teachers in helping them to combat truancy which is escalating at an alarming rate particularly among grade 8 learners attending the high schools in the research cite.

METHODOLOGY

This study was conducted mainly from a Positivist and Interpretive Paradigm and employed a mixed method research design. To determine the nature and extent of school truancy in the research site, data was collected via a focus group discussion, a questionnaire and unstructured interviews with school principals.

Instruments, Data Collection Procedures

A focus group discussion was conducted at one of the 6 schools included in the research.

The group comprised 6 learners who were identified by their teachers in consultation with the author. The following selection criteria were applied - firstly, evidence of skipping seven to 10 classes per week; secondly, their ages had to range from 13 to 14 years and thirdly they had to be in grade 8 at the time of the group discussion. The purpose of the discussion was explained to the learners, including the privacy and anonymity of transcriptions of their responses. The participants were invited to be frank and detailed in their responses and could respond in the language of their choice. The discussion, which lasted about 60 minutes, ended once the facilitator felt satisfied with the responses. Recurring themes which emerged from the focus group discussion are presented in the section which covers the research findings. These themes were drawn upon in constructing the research questionnaire.

The questionnaire consisted of 43 focussed questions and one open-ended question. The focussed questions primarily aimed at eliciting responses from participants which reflected their opinions of various influences in their life-worlds which might or might not encourage them to play truant. These influences included the following aspects - the role of their peers, caregivers, teachers and their own self-images as factors which may or may not play a role in shaping truant behaviour. The open-ended question on the other hand invited participants to indicate whether they have truanted before or not, and to briefly motivate their response

Participants

The questionnaire was administered to a sample of 300 participants comprising 50 randomly selected grade 8 male and female learners attending each of the six participating schools. Parental consent to participate in the study was obtained through the schools concerned. Teachers at the respective schools volunteered to assist with the administering of the questionnaire. In order to secure honest and frank responses, anonymity was maintained by making use of a numbering system, whereby a number was assigned to each learner's questionnaire which was recorded next to their names on a class list.

To obtain a school perspective, unstructured interviews were conducted with the six principals of the schools which participated in the

empirical research. The common themes which emerged from these interviews are presented in a later section.

RESULTS

Content analysis was applied and the following variables as measured by the questionnaire were identified and isolated as the being responsible for learner truant behaviour among Gr 8 learners in Metro East Education District in the Western Cape, South Africa: influence of peers; lack of parental/caregivers' involvement; educators influence; and learners own thoughts regarding school activities.

Based on the outcome of the section of the questionnaire which measured interaction with peers as reflected in Table 1, 29.3% of the respondents indicated that they engaged with peers who work diligently in school, while 70.7% indicated that they readily associate with peers who tend to display irresponsibility, rebelliousness and a negative attitude towards school and teachers. This outcome is supported by Capp (2003)

Table 1: Items that focus on respondents' perceptions of the influence of peers on their truant behaviour (%)

Item	Strongly agree/ agree	Uncertain	Strongly disagree/ disagree
1. Being present at school every day is very important for me and my friends.	33.3	2	61.3
2. We encourage each other to attend school.	32.3	5	62.7
3. We think that school is important.	34.3	2.3	62.7
4. We like our teachers very much.	33.7	4.0	62.0
5. It is important for all of us to participate in sport activities at school.	33.3	21.0	45.3
6. We like all our learning areas.	35.3	2.3	61.3
7. We attend all our classes.	32.3	3.0	64.7
8. My friends and I smoke.	55.0	0.7	44.3
9. My friends and I take alcohol.	29.7	13.3	56.7
10. Some of my friends occasionally take drugs.	6.0	42.0	52.0
11. In my circle of friends stealing and disobeying of rules occur occasionally.	17.0	20.0	63.0
12. In my circle of friends, theft occurs occasionally.	9.0	24.3	66.7
13. I hang around and mix with friends who are hard working.	29.3	0	70.7

Table 2: Items that focussed on respondents' perceptions of their parents/ caregivers' involvement in their scholastic activities (%)

Item	Strongly agree/ agree	Uncertain	Strongly disagree/ disagree
1. My scholastic performance is important to my parents.	33.0	16.3	50.7
2. My parents always attend parent meetings at my school.	33.7	10.0	56.3
3. The way my parents and I get on at home, motivates me to work very hard at school.	30.7	9.0	60.3
4. My parents have a positive attitude towards my teachers.	27.0	28.3	44.3
5. My parents and I often discuss my schoolwork at home.	31.0	3.7	65.0‘
6. My parents expect me to obey the rules that apply at home.	42.3	15.3	41.7
7. My parents allow me enough time to do my homework.	33.3	5.7	60.7
8. My participation in cultural activities at school is important to my parents.	26.7	27.3	45.7
9. My parents expect me to succeed in my school work and to pass grade 12.	57.3	12.0	30.7
10. Should my parents discover that I am not attending all my classes at school, they will be very upset about it.	57.0	13.3	29.7

Table 3: Items that focused on respondents' perceptions of teachers' influence on their truant behaviour (%)

Item	Strongly agree/ agree	Uncertain	Strongly disagree/ disagree
1. My teachers always give me attention at school.	33.7	2.0	64.3
2. My teachers treat me with respect.	32.0	9.3	58.7
3. Teachers always value and respect my contributions.	27.0	24.7	47.7
4. My teachers encourage me to attend school regularly.	33.7	5.7	60.7
5. My teachers always try to make lessons interesting and meaningful.	33.3	5.3	62.3
6. I know most of my teachers have my interests at heart.	31.0	14.3	54.3
7. I feel very comfortable to discuss anything with my teachers.	32.7	6.0	61.3
8. My teachers do not say any negative or bad things about my work in front of other learners.	27.0	32.7	50.3
9. My teachers do not really make unreasonable demands on me.	33.7	3.0	63.3
10. I will take any of my teachers as my role model.	33.3	8.7	58.0

who reported that learners who present with dysfunctional behaviour and become trapped in a spiral of negative interaction with peers and teachers, often start absenting themselves from school.

As indicated by the information in Table 2, it appears that respondents agreed that they do not enjoy much interest and support at home indicating that their parents are not involved in their schooling. This research finding relates to what is often portrait in the literature which attributes truancy to weak parenting, lack of discipline and parents who not consider education as important as they have apparently managed to survive without it. Le Riche (1995) cites that some parents do not even know the whereabouts of their children during the day. In other cases parents are aware of their child's absence from school, but are unwilling to do anything about it, leaving the child to his/ her own devices.

As shown in Table 3, the results of this section revealed that a non-supportive school environment may result in causing and sustaining truant behaviour among learners. The findings fur-

ther demonstrated respondents' extremely unfavourable and school experiences as well as learners' perceptions of educators' uncaring and authoritarian attitude of their teachers. Respondents revealed that being subjected to undue and humiliating punitive measures, discrimination, rejection and antipathy displayed by educators towards them play a significant role in their truant behaviour.

According to the information in Table 4, respondents considered themselves largely incompetent to make adequate progress in school and to eventually achieve their goals and dreams. Generally there appears to be a significantly high level of doubt among respondents as to whether they would achieve success in life, secure sustainable income and be able to live comfortably through the type of education obtained at school. Previous research in this regard conducted by Reid (2000), confirms that a higher proportion of truants than the normal school-age population have lower academic self-concepts, low general self-esteem and present with greater patterns of alienation from school.

Table 4: Items that focussed on respondents' perceptions of their own thoughts and feelings regarding school activities and attendance (%)

Item	Strongly agree/ agree	Uncertain	Strongly disagree/ disagree
1. I consider all my classes important to attend.	34.3	3.3	61.3
2. Generally, I find schoolwork very interesting.	31.7	4.0	63.3
3. All classroom activities are relevant to my everyday life.	30.7	17.3	51.0
4. All the things that I learn in school will help me to find work one day.	29.3	21.0	48.7
5. Through education obtained at school, I will be able to live a comfortable life one day.	29.7	23.3	46.3
6. I always feel happy with my test and examination results.	34.0	5.0	60.3
7. Generally, I feel that I'm coping very well with my schoolwork.	33.7	5.3	60.3
8. I'm sure one day when I have finished with school, I'll certainly miss it.	31.3	16.3	51.7
9. Regular school attendance will help me to achieve my goals and dreams in life	32.7	16.3	50.0
10. Even if I had a choice, I would choose to go to school.	35.3	5.3	58.7

A thematic analysis of the relevant research findings emerging from the focus group discussion which fed into the questions of the questionnaire included the following: discriminatory behaviour, unfairness and a lack of interest demonstrated by certain educators towards learners mainly from low socio-economic background; learner anxiousness, embarrassment and fear of exposure as a result of scholastic underachievement; lack of parental support and interest in their schooling; bullying by older learners in the senior grades, administering of corporal punishment by certain educators and feelings of hopelessness about the future which seems very bleak.

The most common themes which emerged from the interviews with school principals included the following: unfavourable adjustment of grade 8 learners to the general demands which their new learning environment offer, a serious lack of support and parental involvement regarding their children's education and their future and the domestic backgrounds of truant learners characterised by poverty, parent unemployment, single parenting, family violence and anti-education values demonstrated by many parents and caregivers.

DISCUSSION

Despite the small scale nature of the study, its overall findings suggest that the problem of school truancy seems to be common among grade 8 learners in the research site. The evidence further indicate that truant behaviour originates from factors inside the child, in the child's immediate environment extending to factors further away, which still influence the child, such as school problems and general social issues. In considering the nature and prevalence of truancy among learners who enter high schools in the communities concerned, this study has found that learners may perceive the world around them as unstable, threatening and extremely confusing. Furthermore, evidence both from the literature and the empirical study suggest that questionable absence among grade 8 learners may invariably be associated with unstable families, poor parental involvement, inconsistent monitoring of learner attendance by schools, lack of supportive school environments and low self-esteem exhibited among learners.

Persistent absence and truant behaviour may have serious negative repercussions, both for truants themselves and for society, which may include criminality and the tendency for truants to endure significant problems in later adult lives. This highlights the extent to which truants are influenced by their environment and to what degree their current and future challenging behaviour could impact on their environment. However, more worryingly, seems to be the apparent lack of attention to the underlying reasons for learners' truancy in the research site. This could be the most telling indication that educational authorities, welfare societies and parents are not effortful enough in addressing this phenomenon through a multimodal approach with emotional, behavioural, cognitive and social components across home, community and school settings.

CONCLUSION

This study sought to promote an understanding of the multifaceted nature of truancy in the research site. It also brought to the fore that

school truancy is a universal phenomenon and that learners play truant due to predisposing intrinsic and extrinsic factors. On the one hand it seems as if problems in the school system, such as difficult working conditions and a lack of support for teachers from the Department of Education, contribute to the pressure teachers feel in class. On the other hand, socio-economic problems and problematic families create a reality where educators are expected to handle behavioural and emotional problems in learners often without support from parents.

Truant behaviour seems likely to result in multiple negative consequences, not only in terms of learning outcomes, but also with regard to risky behaviour such as drug abuse, theft, vandalism, violent gang activities and school dropout. In view of the fact that truancy may play a salient role in undesirable outcomes for early adolescents, the prevention of this behaviour is an extremely important topic for on-going research. A commitment to develop and test truancy prevention efforts is therefore imperative. Finally, this article has examined a few causes of truancy but has focused mostly on the part played by the teacher and the school in dealing with this behaviour. Although guidelines for teachers may take us a certain distance in addressing truancy, a holistic and wider approach is still needed to address this serious issue in the Western Cape Province of South Africa with its distinctive social and educational challenges.

RECOMMENDATIONS

This study highlighted the multifaceted nature of truant behaviour among grade 8 learners in the research site. Addressing pathological issues which feature in truants' home and societal systems remains a challenging task for teachers in these communities, which are plagued by social ills like unemployment, drug abuse and violent gangster activities. Aside from poor cooperation teachers receive from parents, they are not empowered to change policies, nor are they able improve the dire socio-economic conditions of families. However, what is in their power is to keep all these circumstances in mind when addressing inappropriate learner behaviour, including patterns of unexcused learner absenteeism. Based on the above findings derived from the literature study and the empirical investigation

which were reported earlier, the following preventative measures are proposed for teachers to combat truant behaviour.

Truancy intervention strategies with learners who are chronically truant must focus on helping them become reengaged through the provision of educational experiences that youngsters themselves feel are safe, caring, academically supportive interesting and relevant. Schools have to become institutions where learners wish to attend and feel invited to acquire fresh knowledge and acquire new skills. Addressing learning difficulties ought to be included in all interventions aimed at reducing truancy. In this respect, teachers can be equipped to identify and assist learners who are academically challenged through in-service and pre-service training. In addition, teachers can embark on programmes where some learners are trained to become learning mentors to assist peer who experience difficulty mastering their learning material.

Teachers should always endeavour to display a positive and empathetic attitude towards learners. Although learners may often act in a defiant and unruly way, they may want to change and improve. Therefore, teachers must keep in mind that every learner should be treated as a valuable, unique human being. This means that the teacher should strongly reject the unwanted behaviour, but never the learner. Chronic truants should be assessed to determine if a possible cause of their absenteeism is frustration with school work, emotional problems, domestic difficulties or barriers to learning. Teachers should set an example by attending school every day, report to their classes punctually, create a pleasant classroom environment, exhibit a friendly personality and maintain a positive working relationship with all learners in their classes.

On-going truancy prevention programs should be established in schools and be ensured that learners face firm sanctions for truancy by communicating to them that the school has a zero tolerance for unauthorised absenteeism. Consider learner capabilities by conducting special projects or particularly interesting assignments on Mondays and Fridays when truant behaviour tends to be the highest. Keep accurate attendance records and revise class registers if needed in order to enable better recording of lesson attendance. Good attendance should be noted or rewarded by giving attendance certificates, pins,

charms or attendance patches which can be sewn on jackets. Follow the attendance procedures of the school strictly. Follow up should be done by phoning parents of repeated truant learners and discussing the problem at hand. It is critical that the parents of a truant learner assume responsibility for this type of behaviour demonstrated by their child. Therefore, it is essential that teachers initiate and maintain cooperation between them and parents to make a shared commitment for reducing truancy Schools need to use reactive and proactive approaches when dealing with truant behaviour. For instance, parents could be invited to participate in the drawing up of conduct policies such as school attendance and conduct policies. Schools need to arrange and conduct training workshops for parents in order to inform them about their roles with regard to schoolwork.

NOTES

[1]   The use of this term 'coloured' does not imply acceptance of the racist assumptions on which this label is based. It is recognized that this category is a social construction that has served particular political purposes during the earlier South African policies of racial segregation or apartheid.

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