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Truancy –A Prevailing Problem Among Students

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Abstract

Absenteeism from school is a serious public health issue for mental health professionals, physicians, and educators. Theprevalence of unexcused absences from school exceeds that of major childhood behaviour disorders and is a key risk factor forviolence, injury, substance use, psychiatric disorders, and economic deprivation. A range of various types of school absenteeism can also be classified as being truancy. These include specific lesson truancy, post-registration truancy, psychological truancy and most controversially, parentally condoned truancy.

Absenteeism from school is a serious mental and physical health concern for many children and adolescents. Absenteeism or placement in alternative educational settings is a key risk factor for suicide attempt, perilous sexual behaviour, teenage pregnancy, violence, unintentional injury, driving under the influence of alcohol, marijuana, tobacco, and other substance use.Chronic absenteeism is often associated as well with school dropout, an even that leads to immediate disconnection from school-based health and mental health programs, economic deprivation, and marital, social, and psychiatric problems in adulthood which include anxiety, depressive and disruptive behaviour disorders.

School absenteeism and school refusal behaviour continue to represent critical public health problems for educators and health and mental health professionals. The specific issues considered will be the role of parents, early intervention, literacy and numeracy, the views of children and young people, the role of schools, pastoral care and the curriculum, inter-agency and multi-agency practice, the link with bullying and the law and sanctions. Persistent absence from school has serious negative consequences, both for for truants to endure significant problems in their later adult lives. To date, there has been no single solution or panacea to resolve truancy, despite much good professional practice and effort. All the evidence suggests that different pupils and different schools and local communities require their own solutions.

Keywords: Truancy, Absenteeism, School Refusal Behaviour, Unauthorised Absence.

Introduction

One of the key issues when considering the term 'truancy' is to understand correctly what it means. There are various types of truancy per se. They include deliberately missing school without good cause. A range of various types of school absenteeism can also be classified as being truancy. These include specific lesson truancy, post-registration truancy, psychological truancy and most controversially parentally condoned truancy. It is for these reasons that official statistics on 'truancy' or 'unauthorised absence' need to be treated with a great deal of caution.

Truanting from school matters for several reasons.First, the national study showed that pupils' non-attendance was directly correlated with academic achievement. Pupils who truanted from school were regularly outperformed in terms of academic achievement at every level of schooling from primary to secondary and sixth-form phases, irrespective of natural ability as measured by IQ scores. Second, truancy and persistent school absenteeism have been adversely linked with lower levels of pupils' self-esteem, behaviour, career ambitions, and their subsequent quality and economic status in adult life. Third, the link between truancy and crime has been established for over 100 years. In one study, the Youth Justice Board found that 65 per cent of truants had committed criminal offences. In another, truants were found to be more likely to smoke, drink and use illegal drugs than non-truanting pupils. At the age of fifteen, half of all truants in the study reported using drugs during their last year of schooling.

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Fourth, the economic costs of truancy are high not only for the individual but also for the state. Fifth, truancy causes harm. Whilst most harm is done to the truants themselves, their behaviour often has adverse consequences upon others. This includes teachers and fellow pupils. Returning truants disrupt the learning of other pupils, divert their attention and frustrate and demoralise staff. When truancy behaviour is linked with bullying or challenging behaviour this phenomenon becomes worse.

Objective of the Study

The main objectives of the study are to reduce the numbers of truant children and adolescents because truancy may be a first step to a lifetime of unemployment, crime and incarceration. The study also aims to assess the barriers that prevent the school system and the community from implementing effective truancy prevention programmes and strategies to overcome those barriers.

Review of Literature

The causes of truancy keep changing and becoming increasingly complex. Tyerman (1968) found that most truants were 'isolates' who were 'feckless'. This perception has now changed with the rise of group truancy, girl gangs and the link with bullying, criminality and disruptive and antisocial behaviour. One of his early studies Reid (1985) found that persistent school absenteeism was due to a combination of social, psychological and institutional factors. Each case was unique. There were, however, some related trends in a high percentage of cases such as truants having lower levels of general self-esteem and academic self-concepts than their regularly attending peers (Reid, 1982).

More recent studies have seen the causes of truancy upon the lack of child-rearing skills among parents or carers (Dalziel and Henthorne,2005) and the effects of local communities (Eastman et al., 2007), and individual schools' policies and practice (Guare and Cooper, 2003; Brown, 2004). Kinder et al. (1995) found that the prime causes were personal, family, school and community-based factors. Individual aspects included: lack of self-esteem, social skills and confidence; poor peer-group relationships; lack of academic ability; special needs; lack of concentration and self-management skills. Family aspects included parentally condoned absences, not valuing education, domestic problems, inconsistent or inadequate parenting, and economic deprivation. Community issues revolved around socio-economic factors, location, housing, local attitudes, culture, criminality, vandalism and a sense of feeling safe. Within schools, the main issues were poor management, the ease at which some pupils could slip away unnoticed, poor teacher–pupil relations, the school 'ethos', the perceived irrelevance of some aspects of the national curriculum, bullying and poor learning–teaching strategies. Truancy rates are also disproportionately much higher amongst single-parent families and those pupils who have literacy and numeracy deficiencies.

The causes of non-attendance and truancy can also be contested. Malcolmet al. (2003) found that whilst parents and pupils tend to blame schools for absences, staff in schools believes that adverse parental attitudes and the home environment are more influential. In his most recent study Reid (2008) differentiated between the main reasons why some pupils miss school (institutional, home and family and psychological issues) and the role of society and the government.The truancy 'equation' involves a complex interaction between parents and carers, society, schools, the government, pupils, local authorities, the local economy, cultural diversity and research. Reasons for truancy have changed over the last quarter of a century. 'New' reasons for pupils' non-attendance and truancy included its 'being cool to miss school', cyber-bullying, 'lack of sleep' (TV generation), alcohol and drug abuse.

Finding Solutions

Having established the parameters, the remainder of this article will focus on finding strategic solutions for truancy, based on all the best available evidence. The specific issues considered will be the role of parents, early intervention, literacy and numeracy, the views of children and young people, the role of schools, pastoral care and the curriculum, inter-agency and multi-agency practice, the link with bullying and the law and sanctions.

The Role of Parents

The role of parents and carers is to look after the well-being of their children and to raise them in safe, happy and developmentally friendly environments. Research clearly indicates that almost all parents in all social classes and cultural groups, value education for their children (Lightfoot, 1978; Desforges, 2003; Brown, 2004). Conversely, parents of truants can be atypical. Dalziel and Henthorne (2005) have identified four types of parents and carers who are involved in raising poor attenders and/or truants. These are: those who try hard to tackle poor attendance; those who appear to be overprotective or dependent upon their child, those who describe themselves as feeling powerless to tackle poor attendance and those who are either apathetic about tackling poor attendance or who appear not to engage with the school or with other support professionals.Brown (2004) considers that many economically and educationally disadvantaged parents have had less positive experiences with schools. This is true both of their own experience as well as in connection with their children's schooling. When parents receive constantly negative feedback about their children's academic and behavioural progress they may tend to judge teachers and their school as being unsympathetic, ineffective and even unsafe. On occasion, this can bring parents and schools into conflict (Small and Eastman, 1991). Governments have tended to shy away from penalising parents too much for their children's non-attendance, even when they have been the direct cause, as in taking their children out of school for a holiday in term time. Communication between parents and schools can be extremely poor.

There is, perhaps, a need for a sponsored research study into the effective use of parenting orders for those parents or carers whose children

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have a long-standing history of non-compliance with national school attendance regulations. This may even include those who have refused or not engaged with the offer of a voluntary programme. Equally, school's approaches to the initial assessment, planning, intervention and review of parents and carers occurs in a single-event activity rather than as a multi-event exercise, as often occurs at present. Effective research and good practice paradigms on the most viable approaches to parenting programmes would be welcome.

Some schools need better advice and support on how best to work in partnership with parents and carers—in particular on finding appropriate ways to best engage parents who are less confident in engaging with schools. Of course, none of this can take away from the fact that mass familial breakdown is making children's lives more difficult and helping to fuel the causes of truancy. Recent evidence suggests that some young people are becoming increasingly confused by their home–school arrangements, especially when parents do not live in the same locality (Williamson, 2001).

The Views of Children and Young People

The responsibility, motivation and decision making of children and young people tend to vary by age and developmental stage. Parents bear most of responsibility for ensuring their children attend school at the primary phase. By secondary phase, pupils make sophisticated decisions about whether to attend class or not.There is a case for involving more children and young people in the dialogue about truancy and its solution. Certainly the involvement of school councils could do more and achieve much on this front.Evidence on pupils' views on attendance found:

1. There was a definite understanding that missing school or choosing not to attend regularly adversely affected your long-term life chances.
2. Some older pupils felt they did not learn this in time and that work should start at an early age with 'at risk' children.
3. Bullying was a common concern among all age groups and a frequently given reason for non-attendance.
4. Most pupils were aware of the legal requirements of attending school and of the consequences of persistent non-attendance.
5. Many of the older children felt their parents and/or carers were powerless to make them go to school. The children and young people believed they should be given more responsibility for their own attendance.
6. School was seen as a social as well as an education setting, with friendships valued highly.
7. Nearly all young people criticised the use of supply teachers. They were seen as being powerless and ineffective.
8. There appeared to be a fear of raising the school-leaving age to eighteen, though financial allowances would encourage more to stay. Others said it would be acceptable if the school regime, style or school ethos was changed at sixteen to reflect more adult learning.
9. Younger pupils accept, enjoy and appear to respond to school-based reward systems; school trips and certificates or prizes seem to work well.
10. Some young people in the more disenfranchised groups (including truants) felt schools were boring and irrelevant.
11. The most common reasons for non-attendance (apart from illness and holidays) were bullying, tiredness, dislike of the teachers/lessons and boredom.

The Role of Schools and the Curriculum

One difficulty for schools is that they have to balance the needs of the many with the needs of the few, such as disaffected pupils (Reid, 1986). The role of schools is to educate all children, more especially when governments follow increasingly inclusive strategies (WAG, 2000, 2006). Disruptive /or absent pupils can make it more difficult to teach others well. Some teachers and/or schools may overlook or even welcome the absence of some of their most difficult pupils such as truants.

Implications: The Need for Further Research

Persistent absence from school has serious negative consequences, both for truants themselves and for society, which include criminality and the tendency for truants to endure significant problems in their later adults.To date , there has been no single solution or panacea to resolve truancy, despite much good professional practice and effort. All the evidence suggests that different pupils and different schools, and local communities require their own solutions. Effective solutions to pupils' non-attendance and truancy require comprehensive, multi-faceted strategies, whether they involve individual, local or community-based solutions.

Two critical issues need to be addressed which involve careful reflection and possibly new policies at a national, local and school level. First, these involve young people, families, schools, local communities, policy makers and the courts coming together to set attendance rules and enforces consequences that work quickly and are consistent. At present, for example, jailing parents for their children's truancy can hit the headlines but appears to be making no difference to national statistics on school attendance. Second, schools have to become institutions where pupils wish to attend, learn and feel safe. Aspects like bullying and staff–student tensions have to be eradicated. The core curriculum needs to be relevant for all pupils and involve vocational as well as academic pathways. The evidence suggests that both primary and secondary-age pupils understand the need for making school attendance regular, even those from disadvantaged backgrounds. Much earlier intervention in the initial truancy behaviour, with appropriate 'solutions' being introduced, is one way of combating pupils' non-attendance (Reid, 2002). The evidence from research clearly suggests that improving pupils' functional ability to read and write as soon as possible, operating alongside early intervention policies, should provide a major step forward. At present, too many interventions occur much too late, often after pupils have reached the persistent stage. Much earlier detection is essential.

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Conclusion

The truancy problem which is happening in many schools or institutions especially from the last classes may be cut down with the involvements of the all hands such as by monitoring attendance improving students' mental health, enhancing school culture , increasing students engagement, mentoring students for academic success, parents and family outreach, legal interventions, court-based and law enforcement interventions etc. Let's make our schools as our second home and in this way truancy problem will surely be under control.

Finally, more research into good practice in managing pupils' truancy and non-attendance is needed at a local as well as a national level. Many successful school-based schemes are not reported in the literature. If all these ideas could be disseminated and implemented, some of them universally, levels of pupils' truancy and non-attendance might start to decrease significantly. This is something which all governments have been failing to achieve over the last quarter of a century, despite much evidence of considerable effort.

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