

Truants' Perceptions of Parental Involvement in Their Education: How Can Parents Assist?

M. J. van Breda

*Department of Psychology of Education, College of Education, University of South Africa
E-mail: vbredmj@unisa.ac.za*

KEYWORDS Truancy. Parental Attitudes. School Attendance. Learners

ABSTRACT Truancy or “skipping school” is not problematic for schools only, but also for families and communities. Children are often not in school where their parents assume them to be and they are not receiving the education which is paid for in the form of school fees and state taxes. This paper explores truants' views of their parents' attitudes towards their education and how this impact on their school attendance and attainment. A thorough exploration of extant research and literature revealed that parental disengagement is becoming one of the major causes of all types of challenging behavioural problems among adolescents, including truant behaviour. In this empirical investigation, a questionnaire was completed by a sample of 300 learners which measured among other, adolescent's perceptions of their parents' interest and involvement in their education. The research findings indicate that the participants, particularly those who featured as classical truants, are of the opinion that their parents/caregivers generally seem to display an unfavourable attitude towards their education. It is recommended that local education and social welfare services provide support for greater parental involvement if they are serious about improving learners' school attendance and performance.

INTRODUCTION

The phenomenon of truancy and school absenteeism has attracted much interest and international educational research as well as policy discourses (Jesse 2014; DeMarquis 2011; Daziel and Henthorne 2005; Reid 2005; Morris and Rutt 2004; Rothman 2004). The negative outcomes associated with truancy include delinquency, poor school performance, school expulsion and dropout, substance use and other risky and problematic behaviour (Maynard et al. 2012). Based on existing research, it does not appear that any single or even two-dimensional strategy is the most effective approach to reduce school truancy (Maynard et al. 2012). Intervention strategies often ignore the critical contribution of truants' parents in combating this behaviour which in the researcher's opinion may invariably render many well intended educational and community strategies to combat this challenge, completely fruitless. There seems to be general consensus among researchers that school truancy can clearly be linked to serious immediate and far-reaching consequences for schools, youth, and their families (Maynard et al. 2013). Despite this, the valuable role of families and parents in particular in addressing truant behaviour is often overlooked. Therefore, the focus of this paper is to explore truants' the role and influence of par-

ents in managing and combating school truancy as perceived by truants.

The research site of the current study is Metro East Education District in the Western Cape, South Africa. In this specific educational district, it is not an uncommon phenomenon to see high school learners roaming the streets often in large numbers as early as 10 am on school days. A recent study conducted by Ward and Seager (2011) on truants and street children in the greater Cape Town, established from approximately a quarter of the children interviewed, that they choose to skip school and rather prefer to be on the streets. These children ascribe their nonchalant attitude towards school to their chaotic family lives, including broken traditional family structures, a serious lack of interest shown and very little social and emotional support demonstrated by their parents. One truanting learner had the following to say about how he observes his parents position and his home circumstances: “*My parents are unemployed; all my siblings are married and no one in my family cares about me*”. This statement indicates a failure even in the extended family system to act as a safety net for children at risk.

The six schools secondary schools included in this study are situated in Eerste Rivier and Blackheath areas, which are adjacent middle to low-income communities in the Metro East Education District. These are predominantly so-

called coloured¹ and Afrikaans-speaking communities and characterized by a high rate of unemployment, poverty, drug abuse, gang activities, violence, and reliance on welfare support. According to school attendance records observed by the author at 6 of the 10 high schools in the research site, it is a common occurrence among grade 8 male learners in particular to have accumulated up to eighty days of questionable absences. A recent media statement issued on behalf of the Western Cape Education Ministry following a collaborative transversal school counter-truancy operation conducted on 23 May 2012 cited that truants live in extremely challenging circumstances and are in dire need of psychosocial support (Casey 2012).

The current learner attendance policy of the Western Cape Education Department compel teachers to record and monitor daily school attendance and take appropriate follow up action with parents and learners concerned. Principals, teachers and district officials are tasked to demonstrate zero tolerance for learner absence without a valid reason. This policy further requires schools to create a supportive and safe environment for learners and teachers. In this regard, the Safe Schools Fieldworkers address absenteeism and truancy through applying two strategies. One of the strategies is developmental and the other punitive in nature. In terms of the developmental approach, Safe School Workers conduct home visits to establish the reason(s) for learners' absence and ensure that the required guidance and assistance is provided by social agencies. Should there be no response or cooperation on the part of the learner or the parent or both, the punitive approach is pursued which may include imposing temporary suspension or restricting truants from participating in specific school activities.

Despite the implementation of the aforementioned interventions aimed at combating truant behaviour among young secondary school learners in the identified research site, there appears to be minimal evidence that any positive impact has been made on school and lesson attendance. A striking challenge in this regard appears to be a spirit of unwillingness and a general sense of helplessness which reign among the parent community to partner with education authorities in addressing this problematic behaviour among young secondary school learners. This observation concurs with the outcome of a

review conducted by Desforges and Abouchaar (2003) which findings postulated that truants' parents invariably exhibit a care-free attitude towards their children's education. These authors' research evidence further suggests that parents believe it to be the sole responsibility of the school to take care of their children's school attendance and ensure that they attain as expected. Therefore, it is commonly believed that parents of truants ignore their responsibility of co-operating with educational stakeholders in improving learner attendance and maximising scholastic achievement. In working with data from a larger doctoral study (van Breda 2007) the present study aims to explore truants' views of their parents' attitudes towards their education. It is suggested in the literature that parental disengagement and lack of interest and support shown for their children's education, are identified as predisposing factors for truant behaviour (Jesse 2014; Maynard et al. 2013). Therefore, in the light of the aforementioned, the author is hopeful that the findings of this study may contribute significantly towards developing much needed support strategies to guide and motivate parents in the communities concerned, to become positive role players in their children's school attendance.

School Truancy and Parental Neglect

Previous research investigating the issue of parental engagement in children's school work has consistently shown a strong negative correlation between most measures of social disadvantage and school attendance and achievement (Cox 2000a). Walls (2005) contends that parental unemployment, lack of guidance or parental supervision, drugs or alcohol abuse by parents, lack of awareness of attendance laws and conflicting views among parents about education, are the most serious causal factors for school truancy. In spite of school-based interventions to assist learners with attendance difficulties, research findings have consistently shown that family circumstances and parental interest in and attitude to education, accounted for significantly more variation in learners' school attendance and achievement than school factors (Mortimore and Whitty 2000; Sheppard 2009). For Squelch (2006), managing learner behaviour is a primary task of principals and teachers, but it is not their responsibility alone. He asserts that parents, more

often than teachers, are responsible for their children's behaviour inside and outside school. As primary educators and caregivers, parents have a duty of care and to assume full responsibility for nurturing and disciplining their children. A review conducted by Desforbes and Abouchaar (2003) on the topic of truants and their parents, showed that socio-economic differences among learner scholastic attainment stems from differences in parental involvement in children's education. This is exhibited continuously through parental enthusiasm, involvement and a positive parenting style, or the absence thereof. In this context, involvement was defined as good parenting at home, development of children's academic self-concept and positive interaction of parents with school staff about their children's academic progress.

Sheppard (2009) cites that the impact of parental involvement is thought to work through parents' educational values and aspirations being presented in a positive or negative parenting style. This in turn influences how learners perceive education and schoolwork impacts their motivation to attend school and to achieve. A study by Reid (2010) has identified four types of parents and carers who are involved in raising poor school attendees and/or truants. These include: those who try hard to address 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 school or with other support professionals. DeMarquis (2011) emphasize that parental engagement in children's school life is a multidimensional construct which on the one hand include both direct involvement in schools, such as volunteering in classrooms and attending school-parent meeting. On the other hand it refers to parents' indirect or hidden behaviours, such as discussing school and family issues with and conveying educational expectations to their children. Recent research also highlights the trend towards a more punitive approach aimed at through addressing the problem of school absenteeism and truancy through the issuing of penalty notices to parents of absentee learners by education authorities (Donoghue 2011).

A Bio-ecological Theoretical Framework

The author conceptualises truant behaviour within the context of Urie Bronfenbrenner's most

recent bio-ecological system's theory in terms of which the psychosocial life world of a child comprises a multi-layered set of nested and interrelated ecological systems all of which influence child development (Berk 2003). Based on this theory, the interrelations among the following systems affect children's developmental outcomes: *micro* - immediate settings or environment; *meso* - link between 2 or more micro-systems, such as home and school; *exo* - settings not directly affecting the individual but that influence the microsystems; *macro* - broader society and culture that encompasses the other systems; and *chrono* - consistency or change over the life course (Hong et al. 2011). Following a thorough analysis of this theory by the author, it emerged that child development and adjustment are neither controlled by environmental circumstances nor driven by inner dispositions only. Instead, it appears that children are both products and producers of their environments, within the network of interdependent systems as described above. The author contend that Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory is not only an appropriate theoretical framework for the overall understanding of the nature and intensity of learner truant behaviour, but may also be of great value in promoting positive parent-child relationships, secure and supportive home environments for children and foster meaningful parent-school cooperation.

METHODOLOGY

This study employed a mixed method approach research methodology. The following research methods were applied in order to conduct the study. Firstly, a questionnaire was used to ascertain the general feeling among early adolescents with regards to their parents' interest and involvement in their education. The questionnaire was applied qualitatively and quantitatively and contained an open-ended question as well as closed items which were designed using a Likert scale response format. The administering of the questionnaire took place under similar conditions on the same day and at concurrent times at the 6 participating secondary schools in the research site. Secondly, in-depth case studies were conducted with two learners, one who emerged as a typical truant and another one as a typical non-truant learner, based on their responses to the questions in the questionnaire.

The reliability of the questionnaire was between 0.93 and 0.97, which may be considered as very good. Data were analysed by means of appropriate statistical techniques including frequencies, percentages, analysis of variance (ANOVA) and chi-square analysis. Percentages expressed by participants to show how they perceive their parents' involvement in their education are reflected in Table 1.

RESULTS

This section documents the findings from the analysis as measured by the questionnaire.

Gauging from Table 1 which show learners' perceptions of their parents/ caregivers' involvement in their scholastic activities, it appears that the majority of the respondents agree strongly

that they do not particularly enjoy much interest and support at home.

Table 2 shows that for learners who live with their parents, more or less the same number have truanted or have not truanted (46 and 48). The same applies for those who live with their grandparents, sisters or aunts (9 and 11). However, when learners live with a single parent only, significantly more have truanted than not (136 versus 39). This means that for approximately every four learners staying with a single parent who responded with a "yes", only one responded with a "no" ($136/39 = 3.5$).

Case Study

Gary², who on the strength of his responses in the questionnaire, emerged as a typical tru-

Table 1: Parents/ caregivers' involvement in truants in their scholastic activities

<i>Item</i>	<i>Strongly agree/agree</i>	<i>Uncertain</i>	<i>Strongly disagree/disagree</i>
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.	30.7%	12.0%	57.3%
10. Should my parents discover that I am not attending all my classes at school, they will be very upset about it.	29.7%	13.3%	57.0%

Table 2: The Chi-square and significance of difference between learners who live with different caregivers for having truanted or not.

<i>Live with</i>	<i>Response</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>Chi-square</i>	<i>Significance</i>
Parents	Yes = 46	2	26.862	P < .0001
	No = 48			
Single parent	Yes = 136			
	No = 39			
Grandparent/sister, aunt	Yes = 9			
	Yes = 9			
	No = 11			

Frequencies missing: 11

ant, reflected as follows on his home environment and how he experiences his parents' involvement in his schooling.

"I live with my mother and my grandmother, and my two cousins. We live just around the corner from the school ... not far from here ... But we first lived somewhere else, and then my parents separated about six and a half years ago. So my mother and I moved in with my grandma here in Eerste River"

"I never see my father, because my mother and he don't worry with each other. You see, he used to have a job before, but not anymore, now that is the big thing... He had a job as a general worker at a nursery in Bellville, but I think he was retrenched and he is still without work at the moment. Now my mother doesn't want him to see me or visit me. My grandmother is just so strict with me. I can't do what I want to ... or how can I say ... she has far too strict rules. She likes to spoil my two cousins and allows them to do the things that they want to ... and she doesn't even give them all the things to do that I must do at home."

Gary's comments regarding his parents' attitudes and approach towards his schooling:

"The feeling I get when think of my parents is that I am a very lonely child. My parents don't seem to understand that I depend on them to support me in my school work and to guide me in life. They are almost like absent people and only fight and argue whenever they are in contact with each other... They never attend any parent teacher meeting."

DISCUSSION

The reason for collecting both quantitative and qualitative data for the present study was to bring together the strengths of both forms of research and to compare and corroborate the findings thereof.

The quantitative results of this study concurs to a large degree with the findings of earlier and more extant truancy studies that found dysfunctional home circumstances such as the lack of parental interest in their children's school work, non attendance of parent- teacher meetings and the lack of understanding of school attendance laws (Jesse 2014; Walls 2005). However, one striking difference that surfaced in the quantitative findings was the substantially high level (57%) of parental upset and disappointment

as expressed by the respondents in the present study in the event of their parents discovering their non attendance of classes and school absence. However, this appears to be in stark contrast to earlier findings whereby truants have not identified any difference with regard to their parents concern as far as non class and school attendance are concerned (Maynard et al. 2012; DeMarquis 2011; Rothman 2004). This particular research observation suggests the possibility that participants in the study perceive their parents to be more concerned about their children's school attendance, but do not attach much value to their own responsibilities in terms of promoting a home climate that is conducive for academic learning and regular school attendance. In this regard it may be deduced that truants view their parents as imposing high educational expectations on them and in turn are not doing much to support them in maintaining favourably scholastic attendance and achievement levels.

On the other hand, the findings of the qualitative data suggest that parents of truanting learners' personal experiences of school are likely to influence their attitudes towards school, teachers and academic learning that they present to their children. This finding concurs significantly with the recent findings of Jesse's (2014) research which indicated that parents of learners in dysfunctional communities in England deliberately avoid teacher parent meetings and often do not even take the trouble to enquire about progress reports. Gauging from the present study, it seems that parents of poor school attenders were perceived as unable or unwilling to support and show interest in their children's education.

Parents' inability to model and promote discipline, dedication and study skills at the micro level of the chosen theoretical frame work which guided this study, clearly place their children at an academic disadvantage compared to those who are benefitting from parental interest and receive continuous encouragement and support from their parents. This in turn would ultimately have an adverse effect on their children's attitude to, liking for and attendance of school. In this regard, the current study's findings are in congruence with the care free attitude towards education of parents alluded to earlier by Desforges and Abouchaar (2003). Furthermore, it also appears to be a case of parents of the respon-

dents being of the opinion that it is the school's exclusive obligation to ensure learner success throughout their children's entire school career and particularly when they reach Grade 12. This is evident in the negative parent-school relations in the research site, where truants' parents invariably demonstrate extremely limited to no interest and inclination to participate meaningfully in their children's school activities. As far as Bronfenbrenner's bio-ecological systems theory is concerned and particularly at the meso level (the relation between 2 or more systems), this study substantiates the existence of individual and environmental factors among truants which exert a profound influence on their school attendance behaviour. However, for Bronfenbrenner, it remains the ideal when all systems work in harmony and are supportive of an individual particularly in the case of a developing child who attends school (Berk 2003).

Previous studies have showed that early adolescents living with both mother and father were less likely to present with truant behaviour. On the other hand, certain factors and principles identified at the micro level of truants' life world appear to influence his or her school attendance and attainment patterns. In this regard it was established that the order from least to most likely to play truant among early adolescents is as follows - live with both parents; live with mother; live with father; live away from parents (Sheppard 2009). It has furthermore emerged that in households handled by a single parent; too much pressure is brought to bear on the individual to the extent that he or she may not be able to bring up the children to the best of his or her ability and society's expectations.

In summary, the results show that truants view their parents demonstrating no meaningful regard and consideration for their scholastic progress. The most important implication from this study appears to be that parents' level of home and school involvement, regardless of their socio economic status, is directly linked to the educational aspirations they hold for their adolescent children. In practical terms, it seems that parents with greater educational aspirations are more likely to engage in communication that revolves around learning and participation in school activities that help their children succeed. One of the best ways for parents to convey the importance of education to their children is through demonstrating extremely high education-

al aspirations for them. These aspirations appear to be translated into greater parenting behaviours (i.e., parental involvement) that have been linked to improved school attendance as well as greater academic attainment among children.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

This study highlighted the adverse influence which inconsistent parental involvement on children's motivation for regular school attendance may have. It further emanated from the study that the parents of truants appear to be poor support models of academic learning, have not achieved themselves at school and are unable to help and support their children to do so. The researcher contend that nobody could command greater influence than his or her parent in getting a young person to attend school every day and recognise how a good education can define his or her future. In summation, it appears that school truancy and absentees seems likely to come from socially excluded families who probably need help in learning how to become more involved in their children's education. Therefore, it is concluded that it may be advisable for future interventions by education and welfare services in the research site, to focus on guiding and supporting parents in setting limits at home and encouraging them to make concerted efforts in involving them increasingly in their children's education from a young age.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Since it is critical that parents of truants assume greater responsibility for their children's school, more research is needed of parents' understanding of the value of education and how to sustain better parent-school relationships. Provision can be made for positive incentives for responsible parents who ensure their children's regular school attendance. It is further recommended that schools can help by being more 'family friendly' and encourage teachers and parents to make regular contact before problems such as truant behaviour occurs. To foster better parent-school relationships, schools could consider arranging convenient times and neutral settings for parent meetings, start homework hotlines, train teachers in working with parents and give parents a greater voice in

school decisions. Furthermore, parents should feel free to contact the class teacher or principal of the school if their child complains about boredom and should also find out if their children want to avoid school for reasons that they are frightened to tell them about.

LIMITATIONS

Limiting aspects of this study are the relatively small sample of respondents included in the empirical investigation which limits the generalisability of the research findings. More research and intervention studies are needed, using comparative data and control groups to investigate how parents of truants can help to improve their children's school attendance and achievement in the curriculum. Further research on parents' own school experiences and social exclusion during adolescence, may also give a clearer understanding of factors that either promote or inhibit truant children's school attendance.

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.
- ² Pseudo name used to identify the truanting learner

REFERENCES

- Bell AJ 1994. Truancy intervention. *Journal of Research and Development in Education*, 27(3): 203-211.
- Berk L 2003. *Child Development*. Boston: Allyn and Bacon.
- Casey B 2012. MEC Donald: Transversal counter-truancy operation a success: From <<http://www.info.gov.za/speech/Dynamic>> (Retrieved on 23 April 2013).
- Cox T 2000a. Introduction. In: T Cox (Ed.): *Combating Educational Disadvantage*. London: Falmer.
- Dalziel D, Henthorne K 2005. *Parents'/Carers' Attitudes towards School Attendance*. London: Department for Education and Skills.
- Desforges C, Abouchaar A 2003. The Impact of Parental Involvement, Parental Support and Family Education on Pupil Achievement and Adjustment: A Literature Review. *Research Report*, 433.
- De Marquis H 2011. *Predicting Parental Home and School Involvement in High School African American Adolescents*. North Carolina: The University of North Carolina Press.
- Donoghue J 2011. Truancy and the prosecution of parents: An unfair burden on mothers? *The Modern Law Review*, 74(2): 206-244.
- Hong JS, Algood CL, Chiu YL, Lee SAP 2011. An ecological understanding of kinship foster care in the United States. *J Child Fam Stud*, 20: 863-872.
- Jesse L 2014. *Bexar Country Commissioners Court*. San Antonio, Texas
- Maynard BR, McCrea KT, Pigott TD, Kelly MS 2013. Indicated truancy intervention for chronic truant students: A Campbell systematic review. *Research on Social Work Practice*, 23(1): 5-21.
- Maynard BR, Salas-Wright CP, Vaughan MG, Peters, KE 2012. Who are truant youth? *Journal of Youth and Adolescence*. Advance online publication.
- Mortimore P, Whitty G 2000. *Can School Improvement Overcome the Effects of Disadvantage?* London: Combating Educational Disadvantage.
- Morris M, Rutt S 2004. *Analysis of Pupil Attendance Data in Excellence in Cities: An Interim Report*. Nottingham: National Foundation for Educational Research.
- Reid K 2010. The causes, views and traits of school absenteeism and truancy: An analytical review. *Research in Education*, pp. 59-82.
- Rohrman D 1993. Combating truancy in our schools: A community effort. *National Association of Secondary School Principals*, 76(546): 40-50.
- Rothman S 2004. Staying longer at school and absenteeism. *International Educational Journal*, 5(1): 113-123.
- Sheppard A 2007. An approach to understanding school attendance difficulties. *Emotional and Behavioural Difficulties*, 12(4): 349-363.
- Squelch J 2006. Back to school for parents: Implementing responsible parenting agreements and order in Western Australia. *Education and Law*, 18(4): 247-266.
- Van Breda MJ 2007. *Guidelines for Secondary School Teachers in Loco Parentis in Dealing with Truant Behaviour among Early Adolescent Learners*. Pretoria: Unisa.