

Truants' Perceptions of Family Factors as Causes of School Truancy and Non-attendance

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ABSTRACT There is a growing recognition that truancy or "skipping school" is not solely due to school related factors, but may stem from among other, dysfunctional home circumstances as well. This paper explores truants' perceptions of the role of family-based factors in causing school and lesson non-attendance. An in-depth exploration of extant available literature on school truancy revealed that unfavourable family circumstances is becoming a serious cause of challenging behavioural problems adolescents present with. The study used a mixed method approach and is based on the completion of questionnaires and focus group discussions with adolescent learners. The research findings suggest that the respondents, particularly those who featured as classical truants, perceived their home circumstances as highly unfavourable and disruptive of their school attendance. This study highlighted the seriousness and complexity of truancy and demonstrated that dysfunctional home factors may lead to several social problems among learners including school truancy and non-attendance.

INTRODUCTION

Review of Specific and Recent Literature

Despite increasing evidence that school truancy and absenteeism have attracted much interest, international educational research and policy discourses over the past two decades (Reid 2010; Daziel and Henthorne 2005; Rothman 2004; Morris and Rutt 2004), this behaviour remains a serious issue for schools and communities worldwide. General consensus seem to exist among researchers that school truancy may be linked to serious, immediate and far-reaching consequences for youth, families, schools and communities at large. Jesse (2014) refers to truancy as a gateway crime in that a great majority of inmates in adult jails report their first appearance before a judge was as a juvenile on truancy charges. This level of concern over truancy has inevitably resulted in significant efforts by researchers, practitioners, schools and policy makers to try and understand and address this in-

creasingly serious problem (Maynard et al. 2013). However, much of the extant literature focusses predominantly on the school and community related factors which lead to truant behaviour, with limited attention being paid to the contribution made by the learners' home-based circumstances in leading to school truancy and non-attendance (Maynard et al. 2012). This study therefore seeks to explore family related factors and circumstances that may contribute to the prevalence of skipping school by learners which may be one of several risk factors for serious pathologies later in life.

The research site of this study is Metro East Education District (MEED) in the Western Cape, South Africa. In this area, it is nothing out of the ordinary to observe high school learners roaming the streets often in large number at 10 am. In a recent study conducted on truants and street children in the greater Western Cape, Ward and Seager (2011) established from approximately a quarter of the children interviewed, that they choose to skip school and rather prefer to be on the streets. They 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 of the youth interviewed had the following to say to the researchers: "My parents are unemployed, all my siblings are

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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 6 secondary schools included in this study are situated in two adjacent low income communities in the MEED. These are predominantly so-called coloured¹ and Afrikaans-speaking communities which are 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 researcher at 6 of the high schools in the specified educational district, it is a common occurrence particularly among grade 8 male learners to have accumulated up to fifty days of questionable absences per year.

A recent media statement issued on behalf of the Western Cape Education Ministry cited that truanting learners live in extremely challenging circumstances and are in dire need of psychosocial support (Casey 2012). Based on the current learner attendance policy of the Western Cape Education Department (WCED), teachers are obligated 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 towards learner absence without a valid reason. The policy further requires schools to create a supportive, an inviting and safe environment for learners and teachers. In this regard, the Safe School Fieldworkers address learner absenteeism and truancy through applying two intervention strategies - one of the strategies being developmental in nature, while the other being punitive in essence. According to the developmental approach, Safe School Workers conduct home visits in order to establish the reason for learners' absence and ensure that the required guidance and support is provided by social agencies. In instances where there is a lack of or extremely poor cooperation on the part of the truants' parents or caregivers, 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 specified research site, there ap-

pears to be little evidence that any positive impact is made on school and lesson attendance. What is particularly evident is a sense of helplessness and laxness among the parent community to partner with education authorities in addressing truant behaviour. This is clearly a factor which hampers efforts by the Education Department to combat truancy which is reaching alarming proportions in the research site. This observation concurs strongly with a review carried out by Desforges and Abouchaar (2003) which hypothesised that truants' parents invariably exhibit a care-free attitude towards their children's education and believe it to be the sole responsibility of teachers to take care of children's school attendance and ensure that they attain academically as expected. In working with data from a larger doctoral study (van Breda 2007); the current study therefore aims to explore truants' views of their parents' attitudes towards their education. It is suggested in the literature that parental disengagement, lack of interest and support shown for their children's education, are common predisposing factors for truant behaviour (Sheppard 2009). In view of this, the author is hopeful that the findings of the present study may contribute significantly towards developing much needed support strategies to guide and motivate parents in the communities concerned, to become enthusiastically involved and positive stakeholders in their children's schooling.

School Truancy and Parental Involvement

Previous research investigating the issue of parental engagement in children's education has consistently shown a significant negative correlation between most measures of social disadvantage and school attendance and achievement (Cox 2000a). Walls (2005) asserted that parental unemployment, lack of parental guidance, drugs and alcohol abuse by parents, lack of awareness of attendance laws and conflicting views held by parents about the importance and relevance of education, can be considered among the most serious causal factors for school truancy. In spite of school-based interventions to assist learners with attendance difficulties, research findings continually reveal that family circumstances and poor parental interest in education, accounted for significantly more variation in learners' school attendance and achieve-

ment 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. It is argued by the same author that parents, more so than teachers, are ultimately responsible for children's behaviour inside and outside school. He further cites that as primary educators and caregivers, parents have a duty of care and to assume full responsibility for nurturing and disciplining their children.

Based on a report commissioned by the University of Pretoria Centre for Child Law, learners are often subjected to harsh measures of corporal punishment in South African schools which often go unreported (Skelton 2014). It is the opinion of the author that corporal punishment breeds aggression and hostility. Rather than acting as a deterrent, corporal punishment experts in the field of school discipline on their part accentuate that corporal punishment not only has the potential to turn learners into violent monsters, but may also create low self-esteem. This often results in failing, missing school and certain lesson and finally dropping out of the school system (Maynard et al. 2013). Skelton (2014) asserted that some parents reject their children's version of undue school disciplining incidents and are simply reluctant to see teachers brought to book for administering even the most violent forms of punishment to their children.

A study conducted by Reid (2010) has identified four types of parents and carers who are likely to raise poor school attendees. These include: parents 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. De Marquis (2011) emphasized that parental engagement in children's school life can be considered a multidimensional construct which include direct involvement in schools, such as volunteering in classrooms, developing children's academic self concept and positive interaction with school staff about their children's scholastic progress. It also refers to parents' indirect or hidden behaviours, such as discussing school and family issues with and conveying educational expectations to their chil-

dren. Controversially however, recent research highlights the trend towards a more punitive approach aimed at addressing the problem of school absenteeism and truancy by issuing penalty notices to parents of absentee learners by education authorities (Donoghue 2011).

A Bio-ecological Theoretical Framework

The author conceptualised 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 these systems influence child development and adjustment (Berk 2003). Based on the ecological systems theory, the interrelations among the following systems affect children's developmental outcomes: *micro* - immediate settings or environment; *meso* - link between 2 or more microsystems, such as the 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 the theory concerned, 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 the interdependent systems as described above. Therefore, the author contends 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. It also proves to be of great value in promoting positive parent-child relationships, secure and supportive home environments for children and in fostering meaningful parent-school cooperation.

RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

Research Approach and Design

This study employed a mixed method research methodology and was guided by a phenomenological descriptive design due to its focussed nature. A phenomenological study aims

to understand people's specific perceptions and perspectives of a phenomenon as in this case - truants' perceptions of their parents' attitudes towards their schooling and to relate the findings to an existing body of knowledge. Therefore, the combination of literature reviews with the empirical study was embarked upon.

Selection of Participants

A questionnaire was applied to 300 grade 8 learners at the 6 participating high schools. This sample group of whom everyone remained anonymous comprised both genders and were randomly selected by their respective schools. The main aim of the questionnaire was to ascertain who the truants and the so-called non truants in the sample were, with the objective to select 2 suitable candidates purposively as participants for in-depth case studies which followed. Purposeful selection is crucial in a phenomenological study in order to get 'rich information' to describe the phenomenon which in this case was truants' views on their parents' attitudes towards and involvement in their schooling (de Vos et al. 2005).

Measuring Instruments

Based on a thorough literature review, a questionnaire was designed and used to ascertain the general feeling among early adolescents regarding their parents' interest and involvement in their education. The questionnaire was administered qualitatively and quantitatively and it contained an open-ended question as well as closed items. A Likert scale response format was developed for the interpretation of the questionnaire. The reliability of the questionnaire was between 0,93 and 0,97 which may be considered reasonably well.

Data Collection and Analysis

The research was conducted with a specific aim in mind, namely to determine truants' perceptions of their parents' attitudes towards and involvement in their schooling, so that the findings could culminate in addressing the following open ended question: *How can parents be guided in becoming actively involved in their children's' educational lives in order to combat the prevalence of truant behaviour.* The questionnaire was administered simultaneously

at the 6 participating schools. The questionnaire data were analysed by means of appropriate statistical techniques including frequencies, percentages, analysis of variance (ANOVA) and chi-square analysis.

From the population sample that completed the questionnaire, 2 respondents were purposively selected to participate in in-depth case studies. Based on an analysis of the responses of these 2 respondents, one of them emerged as a typical truant, while the other surfaced as a typical non-truant. The aim of the case studies was to explore the influences of the participant's parents' disposition towards their school attendance and attainment.

Ethical Considerations

The researcher obtained informed consent from school principals, parents of the respondents and the educational district to conduct the research. The confidentiality of the learners was assured - participants remained anonymous throughout the investigation. Pseudonyms were used to protect the identities of the participants in the case studies. It was imperative that no harm is caused, since the aim of the research was to investigate truants' views of their parents' involvement in their education in order to offer intervention guidelines to cultivate better parental involvement in their children's schooling.

RESULTS

The discussion of the results of the research focusses on pointing out common themes which emerged from the responses of the participants in the questionnaire based on their perception of their parents' attitude and involvement in their school life. Extracts from the case study with particular reference to the views of the truant learner will also be presented.

The research showed that respondents agreed strongly that they do not enjoy much interest and support at home and that their parents seem to display an unfavourable attitude towards their scholastic attainment. As far as attending parent-teacher meetings are concerned, an overwhelming majority of the respondents indicated that their parents never expressed any interest in discussing their academic progress with their teachers. Similarly, the vast majority of the respondents indicated that their parents nev-

er enquire about homework assignment, while discussions about school related activities were completely non-existent at home. In view of parent-child relationships, a significant minority of the respondents considered the quality of their relationship with their parents as a motivating and encouraging factor to attend and to excel at school. A further significant finding was that most of the respondents held the view that their parents do not allow them sufficient time to focus on their schoolwork in their home environments. As far as participation in extra-curricular activities, it was indicated by a minority of the respondents that they enjoyed their parents' support and interest in their involvement in after-hours school related activities. References to the literature indicate that the South African context does not differ much from the global picture regarding the negative influence that the lack of parental interest can have on children's school attendance and success.

Case Study

Gary², who on the basis of his responses in the questionnaire, emerged as a typical truant, reflected as follows on how he feels about the emotional ambiance in his home environment:

"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, 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 thinking 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. Even when I am ill-treated by some of my teachers, my parents don't care about it.

DISCUSSION

The results of this study suggest that parents of truanting learners' personal circumstances and own past experiences of school are likely to influence their approach to parenting and involvement in their children's schooling. Parents of poor school attendees were perceived by their children as being at a loss when it came to demonstrating interest in their children's education. Parents' inability to model and promote discipline and dedication at the micro level of the bio-ecological theoretical framework, seem to place their children at an academic disadvantage compared to those children who enjoyed the support and interest of their parents. This would invariably have an adverse effect on their children's attitude towards school attendance and on how they value the significance of education.

It further emerged from this study that although parents of truanting learners may expect academic success of their children, they often fail to understand and embrace their indispensable role in creating a favourable and supportive atmosphere at home for their children to experience emotional security. It also appeared to be a case of parents being of the opinion that it is exclusively the school's obligation to ensure the scholastic success of their children and help them pass their grades. This is particularly evident in the negative parent-school relations emerging from the research findings, where truants' parents invariably have no interest and inclination to participate actively in their children's school activities. In view of Bronfenbrenner's bio-ecological systems theory, 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. According to Bronfenbrenner, it is the ideal situation if all systems are in harmony and supportive of an

individual person, particularly in the case of a developing child who attends school (Berk 2003).

Based on previous literature, early adolescents living with both parents were less likely to present with truant behaviour (Morris and Rutt 2004). On the other hand, certain factors and principles identified at the micro level of a truant's 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 is as follows among early adolescents – those who live with both parents; those who live with their mother; those who live with their father; those who live away from parents completely (Sheppard 2009). Furthermore, it emanated from this study that in single headed households, too much pressure may be brought to bear on the parent or caregiver to the extent that he or she is unlikely to show much self-regulation to be able to guide their children in what are expected of them regarding their attitudes towards and behaviour at school.

Furthermore, this study presents disturbing evidence that learners are often still at the mercy of the school cane with detrimental effects for their self-esteem. It also poses a bridge of trust in learners of their parents for failing to support them against teachers who beat them viciously often for minor offences. More worrying about this situation is that children invariably learn by what they live. Therefore, instead of disciplining learners, teachers who resort to brutal corporal punishment are creating monsters by modelling to children to become aggressive and to problem-solve in that fashion. The author concurs that the damaging effect which harsh corporal punishment may have on learners may discourage them from continuing with school and result in truancy and school absenteeism (Maynard 2013; Skelton 2014).

The results further showed that truants view their parents' as demonstrating no real regard for their scholastic progress. The most important implication from this study appears to be that parents' interest and involvement in their children's schooling regardless of their socio economic status, is directly linked to the educational aspirations they hold for their offspring. In this sense, 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 academically.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

This study highlighted the adverse effects which poor and inconsistent parental involvement on children's motivation for regular school attendance may have. It was clearly demonstrated 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 contends that nobody could command greater influence than his or her parents or caregivers 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 truants and poor attendees seemed likely to emerge 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 through involving them increasingly in their children's education from a young age.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Since it is critical for parents of truants to 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. At school level, 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 occur. 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.

Recommendations for Future Studies

More research and intervention studies are needed, using comparative data and control groups to investigate how parents of truants

can assist in improving 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 how parental factors can either promote or inhibit children's school attendance behaviour.

LIMITATIONS

A limiting aspect of this study is the relatively small sample of respondents included in the empirical investigation which limits the generalisability of the research findings.

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 in the case study.

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