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Irene Ioannakis

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SCHOOL NON-ATTENDANCE: A LITERATURE REVIEW

Irene Ioannakis
Dip.Teach, B.Ed, M.Ed



**EDITH COWAN
UNIVERSITY**
PERTH WESTERN AUSTRALIA

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OVERVIEW

This chapter provides a review of the literature relating to school non-attendance. A qualitative meta-analysis precedes the discussion of the available definitions of the term and the various dimensions and related factors associated with the overall perception of school non-attendance.

2.1 A LIMITED QUALITATIVE META-ANALYSIS OF THE LITERATURE

A qualitative meta-analysis of the literature relating to school non-attendance was undertaken using procedures and techniques devised by Hyde (1985). This parallels the perspective of the use of meta-analysis in quantitative research as described by Glass, McGaw and Smith (1981, p.217) who stated that:

The approach to research integration referred to as meta-analysis is nothing more than the attitude of data analysis applied to quantitative summaries of individual studies. By recording the properties of studies and their findings in quantitative terms, the meta-analysis of research invites one who would integrate numerous and diverse findings to apply the full power of statistical methods to task. Thus it is not a technique; rather it is perspective that uses many techniques of measurement and statistical analysis.

The limited qualitative meta-analysis in this study displays the broad characteristics of the body of literature for the research topic and acts as an advanced organiser for the literature review. As the body of literature reviewed was relatively large, adoption of the qualitative meta-analysis principles synthesized the literature according to some pre-determined characteristics, as outlined in the conceptual framework in chapter 1, and highlighted other characteristics of the literature. The information was categorised according to the following variables:

-
- type of literature,
 - year of publication,
 - geographic area of origin,
 - authors, and
 - aspects of school non-attendance.

The qualitative meta-analysis provides summaries whereby comparisons can be conducted on the various factors. The first synthesis of information is represented in Table 1 which highlights the literature reviewed according to type and year of publication.

With respect to the type of literature reviewed, Table 1 indicates that eleven (12 percent of the total) were texts, fifty seven (60.5 percent) were journal articles, three (3 percent) were research reports, 12 (13 percent) were government reports, nine (9.5 percent) were unpublished papers or reports, and two (2 percent) were newspaper articles. The body of literature is dominated by journal articles however, a significant number of government reports are beginning to emerge on the topic of school non-attendance.

A further examination of the literature by year of publication and geographic area of origin is presented in Table 2.

Table 1
LITERATURE REVIEWED ACCORDING TO TYPE AND YEAR OF PUBLICATION

TYPE OF LITERATURE	YEAR OF PUBLICATION										TOTAL
	Pre 1960	1960-70	1971-73	1974-76	1977-79	1980-82	1983-85	1986-88	1989-91	1992-93	
TEXT		1		2	1	5	1		1		11
JOURNAL	1	4	3	3	7	10	10	3	15	1	57
RESEARCH REPORT					1		2				3
GOVERNMENT REPORT							1	2	1	8	12
UNPUBLISHED PAPER/REPORT							1	1	2	5	9
OTHER (e.g. newspapers)										2	2
TOTAL	1	5	3	5	9	15	15	6	19	16	94

Table 2
LITERATURE REVIEWED ACCORDING TO YEAR OF PUBLICATION AND GEOGRAPHIC AREA OF ORIGIN

GEOGRAPHIC AREA OF ORIGIN	YEAR OF PUBLICATION										TOTAL
	Pre 1960	1960-70	1971-73	1974-76	1977-79	1980-82	1983-85	1986-88	1989-91	1992-93	
NORTH AMERICA			1	1	4	3	6	3	9		27
UNITED KINGDOM	1	5	2	2	3	7	4		6	1	31
AUSTRALIA				2	1	2	4	1	3	7	20
WESTERN AUSTRALIA		1				1	1	2	3	6	14
OTHER (e.g. Europe)					1	1					2
TOTAL	1	6	3	5	9	14	15	6	21	14	94

The trends that emerge from Table 2 include twenty-seven pieces of literature published in North America which comprises 29 percent of the total literature and thirty-one pieces of literature from the United Kingdom which equates to 33 percent of the total literature. Publications from Australia contributed 21 percent and Western Australia 15 percent. Combining the literature originating in Western Australian with the literature from the rest of Australia gives a total of 36 percent of the total literature which represents the majority of the literature reviewed on school non-attendance. Most of the Australian literature was published in the last four years which may coincide with the trends attributed to the state and national targets to increase student participation in education and/or training, thus increasing equity in education and decreasing the number of 'at risk' students. Overall, research undertaken has been steady and consistent across the United States of America, the United Kingdom and Australia.

Table 3 gives an overview of the literature reviewed with reference to the major factors associated with school non-attendance and type of publication. Table 3 indicates literature discussing more than one of the factors identified in association with school non-attendance. This is to be expected due to two main reasons:

1. an extensive amount of information was covered by the literature, and
2. the factors associated with school non-attendance are not easily separated, often occurring as interdependent variables.

The information outlined in Table 3 aligns itself with the major concepts highlighted in the conceptual framework in Chapter 1. Hence, Table 3 was used as a basis for the structure of the remainder of this chapter.

Table 3

LITERATURE REVIEWED ACCORDING TO TYPE OF PUBLICATION AND FACTORS ASSOCIATED WITH SCHOOL NON-ATTENDANCE

	TYPE OF PUBLICATION					
	TEXT	JOURNAL	RESEARCH REPORT	GOVERNMENT REPORT	UNPUBLISHED PAPER/REPORT	OTHER
DEFINITION	Hersov and Berg (1980) Tyerman (1968)	Billington (1978) Cooper, M (1984) De Blois (1989) Elburn (1983) Galloway (1982b) Mulvany (1989) Nielson and Gerber (1979) Russel-Brown (1987) Tennent (1971) Tyerman (1958)	Coventry <i>et al</i> (1984)	Brooker (1986) Watkins (1992)	Bonjolo (1991) Ozich (1989)	
LACK OF ACCURATE DATA	Hersov and Berg (1980) Mortimore and Blackstone (1982)	Birman (1978) Bos <i>et al</i> (1990) Duckworth (1988) Elburn (1983)		Brooker (1986) Watkins (1992)	Ozich (1989)	
THE NATURE AND EXTENT OF SCHOOL NON-ATTENDANCE	Hersov and Berg (1980) Holmes (1989) Tyerman (1968)	Billington (1978) Elburn (1983) Fogelman (1978) Galloway (1976a, 1976b)	Coventry <i>et al</i> (1984)	Watkins (1992)	Ozich (1989)	

Table 3 (cont'd)

LITERATURE REVIEWED ACCORDING TO TYPE OF PUBLICATION AND FACTORS ASSOCIATED WITH SCHOOL NON-ATTENDANCE

	TYPE OF PUBLICATION				
	TEXT	JOURNAL	RESEARCH REPORT	GOVERNMENT REPORT	UNPUBLISHED PAPER/REPORT OTHER
THE PERSISTENT ABSENTEE	Holmes (1989) Tyerman (1968)	De Blois (1989) Eastwold (1989) Elburn (1983) Galloway (1982b) Jones (1974) Kahn <i>et al</i> (1981) Little and Thompson (1983) Ovard (1978)			Ozich (1989)
SOCIO-ECONOMIC BACKGROUND/ HOME INFLUENCE	Denney (1974) Hersov and Berg (1980) Holmes (1989) Tyerman (1968)	Elburn (1983) Fogelman (1978) Galloway (1976a, 1976b) Hibbett (1990) Little and Thompson (1983) Mitchel and Shepherd (1967) Nielson and Gerber (1979)		Burdekin (1989) Watkins (1992)	Bonjolo (1991) Ozich (1989)

Table 3 (cont'd)

LITERATURE REVIEWED ACCORDING TO TYPE OF PUBLICATION AND FACTORS ASSOCIATED WITH SCHOOL NON-ATTENDANCE

	TYPE OF PUBLICATION				
	TEXT	JOURNAL	RESEARCH REPORT	GOVERNMENT REPORT	UNPUBLISHED PAPER/REPORT OTHER
SCHOOL INFLUENCES	Hersov and Berg (1980) Holmes (1989) Mortimore and Blackstone (1982) Tyerman (1968)	Anderson (1973) Birman (1978) Bos <i>et al</i> (1990) Brown (1983) Bryk and Thum (1989) Cooper, M.G. (1966a, 1966b) Cooper, M. (1984) Elburn (1983) Galloway (1976a, 1982a) Jones (1974) Mulvany (1989) Rankin (1961) Reid (1981) Scherer and Bidmeade (1982) Wright (1978)	Coventry <i>et al</i> (1984)	Watkins (1992)	Bonjolo (1991)
PEER INFLUENCE	Wilson and Braithwaite (1977)	Birman and Natriello (1978) Bishop (1980)	Coventry <i>et al</i> (1984)		

Table 3 (cont'd)

LITERATURE REVIEWED ACCORDING TO TYPE OF PUBLICATION AND FACTORS ASSOCIATED WITH SCHOOL NON-ATTENDANCE

	TYPE OF PUBLICATION				
	TEXT	JOURNAL	RESEARCH REPORT	GOVERNMENT REPORT	UNPUBLISHED PAPER/REPORT OTHER
THE PERSISTENT ABSENTEE AND DELINQUENCY	Wilson and Braithwaite (1977)	Birman and Natriello (1978) Tennent	Coventry <i>et al</i> (1984)	Watkins (1992)	
CONCLUSIONS/ RECOMMENDATIONS	Denney (1974) Holmes (1989) Mortimore and Blackstone (1982)	Bryk and Thum (1989) Eastwold (1989) Hibbett <i>et al</i> (1990) Jones (1974) McDill <i>et al</i> (1985) Mitchell and Shepherd (1967) Mulvany (1989) Ovard (1978) Russell-Brown (1987) Scherer and Bidmeade (1982) Tyerman (1958)		Brooker (1986) Burdekin (1989) Groom (1992) Watkins (1992)	Bonjolo (1991)

2.2 A PROBLEM OF DEFINITION

School non-attendance is the broad category used to denote all absences from school. It defines a state of affairs wherein children who are required to attend school do not do so. Reasons offered may be termed justified or unjustified. Justified reasons include absences that are verified by the parents and may be due to a variety of explanations including sickness, lateness, family business, personal business, family holidays, problems with transport, work experience, and inclement weather. Unjustified reasons are deemed to be absences on the part of the student without the parents knowledge or consent. The latter are described by the general term "truancy".

Truancy is only one of several terms used to account for student absences from school. It is part of the broader dimension of school non-attendance but it is by no means the reason used to account for the majority of the daily absences. Truancy does, however, attract most attention in research into the issue of school non-attendance as it is perceived to be the major sub-category. This is depicted in the great proportion of the literature that discusses and refers to one example of school non-attendance behaviour, namely truancy, rather than discussing the broader context. Definitions on truancy abound. However, there appears to be little consensus and some contradiction from one definition to another. For example, *The Australian Concise Oxford Dictionary* (1992, p.1247) defines a truant as a "child who stays away from school without leave or explanation." The Western Australian Education Act 1928 (1992, p.31) under Section 17A(1) defines truancy as, "A child who, without a reason which is deemed a reasonable excuse under Section 14, absents himself, although not habitually, from school when he should be attending school as required by this Act, commits the offence of truancy."

Several simple and narrow definitions are offered by Billington (1978), Galloway (1982b) and Elburn (1983) who state that truancy is unexcused or unjustified absence from school without the knowledge or permission of the parents. Other definitions add the notion that parents may in fact know about their child's act of truancy and thus condone the child's absence from school. In other words, as contended by Robins and Ratcliffe (1980), a child who is absent from school and does not provide an acceptable reason, with or without the parents' knowledge or approval, may be classified as a truant and his/her actions defined as truancy.

Adding yet another dimension to the definitions already posed, the question of 'lawful' absence needs to be considered as school attendance is compulsory until the child reaches a certain age which has been predetermined. In Western Australia, for example, school attendance is compulsory until the end of the school year in which the student celebrates his/her fifteenth birthday and this is regulated by the *Education Act 1928* (1992). Thus, unjustified non-school attendance (or absence) is deemed to be an offence under the Act and offenders may be required to appear in court. This is clearly stated by Coventry, Cornish, Cooke and Vinall (1984, p.2) in their definition of truancy "as non-attendance at school when attendance is expected by law, parents and/or school." Coventry *et al* share comparative thoughts with Tyerman (1958, p.217) and the definition that he offered thirty-five years ago stating that "truants are children who absent themselves from school without lawful cause and without permission of the parents."

Many definitions exist for truancy and they tend to be used in different ways. Hence any conclusions about one group of truants does not necessarily apply to another. In the context of this report, the definition offered by Coventry *et al* (1984) is the one used throughout the report when referring to school non-attendance. As the terms "truancy", "non-school attendance" and "persistent absenteeism" are used synonymously throughout the literature, a further clarification in keeping with this

report is necessary. The clarification of the working definition is in line with Fogelman and Manor (1990, pp.23-24) who state that "truancy was inferred from poor attendance as revealed in school registers, and it is thus more appropriate to refer to persistent absenteeism rather than truancy in this context." Also, as truancy is only one of the categories that contributes to the overall rate of absence it is therefore important to study the broad context of school non-attendance or persistent absenteeism.

There are many concerns and issues that revolve around school non-attendance that are clearly highlighted in simply attempting to define the terms. Factors such as school, parents, the law and the students themselves are mentioned in a variety of contexts. The problem is further highlighted by Brooker (1986) who makes reference to work by Denne (1981) who made the following comments on truancy:

There are so many ways to truant. Many are not obvious enough to make a clear-cut count. Some children miss set classes only, or 'wag' after being marked present. Others forge sick notes or are covered by parents who can't get their children to school but don't want them taken to court. Others have an everlasting supply of good reasons for leaving school once they have arrived. Others are kept home by parents and some have simply been away for so long, their names are no longer on the roll. (p.5)

Given this, precise information about the nature and extent of school non-attendance is near impossible to obtain because of the many forms it takes. Commonly held concerns about defining truancy are exacerbated further in an effort to highlight and define the nature and extent of school non-attendance. A variety of terms are used to this end by authors such as Tyerman (1958), Kahn and Nursten (1989) and Ozich (1989) who introduced the terms, "frequent", "infrequent", "chronic", "persistent", "occasional", "school refuser", "school phobic" and "school withdrawal." Apart from the last three terms, there are no universal or standard definitions for any of the other categories. Attendance figures do not highlight any of the categories and the

inaccuracy of any data gives little information about the nature and extent of school non-attendance. Chronic, or persistent, absentees are known by all. However, the students who miss a class here and there may be unnoticed – they may remain undetected for some time and could legitimately form yet another category, that is, 'hidden' absentees. (Galloway, 1976b; Ozich, 1989).

The categories share the common factor 'absence from school'. However, school refusers and school phobics are quite different and should not be confused with the persistent absentee or the school withdrawal. The persistent absentee is traditionally absent from school without permission from either the parent or the school, and the school withdrawal is supported by the parents who openly encourage the child to stay home. However, the school refuser consciously decides not to attend school while the school phobic exhibits a degree of anxiety at the thought of leaving home and attending school – even though he/she may want to attend school. The latter categories as defined by Kahn and Nursten (1989) and Ozich (1989) denote an emotional problem as in contrast to a social problem as experienced by truants. As stated by Coventry *et al* (1984, p.65), "For some students truancy is episodic behaviour that reflects day-to-day decisions to withdraw from certain subjects and teachers. For others, however, truancy may represent a rational response to their structurally induced exclusion from mainstream schooling activities."

Interpretations and subsequent discussions on school non-attendance rely heavily on adequate and accurate attendance data. Without this, as suggested by Scherer and Bidmeade (1982), any reference to the nature and extent of non-school attendance, as was highlighted with the available information on attendance figures, could be grossly misleading. Given this, precise information about the nature and extent of school non-attendance is near impossible to obtain because of the many forms it takes.

2.3 FACTORS ASSOCIATED WITH SCHOOL NON-ATTENDANCE

School non-attendance may be attributed to a variety of factors. Many of these appear to be interrelated and need to form the next part of the discussion on the literature review. Initially, it is crucial to establish the lack of accurate data and the nature and extent of school non-attendance before specifically examining the persistent absentee, socio-economic background, home influences, school influences, peer influence, and delinquency.

Lack of Available Accurate Data

The *Select Committee on Youth Affairs* (Watkins, 1992) highlighted the lack of accurate school non-attendance data throughout Western Australia and between various departments and organisations. Coupled with the inaccuracy of the existing data is the added difficulty of collecting, classifying and monitoring data. As stated in the previous chapter, there are no mechanisms in place to accurately measure the level of school non-attendance throughout the state of Western Australia. This was confirmed by the Australian Bureau of Statistics who can offer information on almost any topic or issue associated with education except data on school non-attendance. Data are readily available highlighting the number of full-time students enrolled in schools and a comparison of the retention rates over the years but no figures on actual school attendance figures exist. Hence, the interpretation of any data in existence is always questionable as they may not be a true representation of the overall population. Thus the release of non-attendance figures at the local, state or national level will always draw some criticism with regard to validity and reliability, which is partly due to the lack of consistent reporting and monitoring procedures. As suggested by Bos, Ruijters and Visscher (1990), a clear and consistent definition is necessary to represent the data accurately. The accuracy of the figures is not sufficient. There must be an indication of the data collection techniques as well as the period of time such as day, week, month, term or year, and also the nature of the

students and the absences. Mortimore and Blackstone (1982) made mention of concerns highlighted in the *Select Committee on Youth Affairs* (Watkins, 1992) in their view that interpretations (or misinterpretations) add to the discrepancies that exist on the reporting of the extent of truancy at any level. The reporting of absentee figures can vary markedly from department to department and even from school to school. Non-attendance figures are difficult to collect as the term includes genuine and justified absences as well as truancy and questionable absences. It is difficult to make any conclusive statements about the nature and extent of school non-attendance while there is both a lack of accurate data and a large discrepancy in the data that exists.

Existing school data may be questioned further with regard to the procedures employed at the school level to collect and monitor attendance. As contended by Birman and Natriello (1978), Brooker (1986) and Duckworth (1988), several problems are inherent at this level due to the nature and complexity of clearly delineating school non-attendance patterns. Although schools have developed general procedures for recording attendance, be it during the first lesson, before recess, after lunch, at the end of the day or at the beginning of every lesson, and the provision of additional procedures to cater for students who turn up late to school or have to leave early, it is almost impossible to account for all absences. Hence, concerns centre on the fact that official daily absentee figures may under-estimate the true magnitude of the problem and thus question the validity of the data. To account for the absences on a daily basis, an absentee report is compiled and published by staff allocated to this task, then amended and updated as information comes to light during ensuing stages. The introduction of computerised recording procedures are being adopted by more and more of the larger secondary schools in an effort to short cut some of the procedures used in the past. However, other complications may be introduced. The complications eluded to involve human error which can take place in the process of checking attendance and communicating all data to the staff, parents,

students and other authorities if necessary. Accurate accounting of daily absences and the subsequent need to monitor the absences are crucial. Regardless of who is designated this role, be it the class teacher, form teacher, attendance officer or the deputy principal, problems surface with regard to the amount of time necessary to trace an absence, verify it as a justified or unjustified absence, and then communicate the finding/s to the appropriate person to update the necessary records. In the past, very few schools had someone appointed to this position on a full time basis. Similarly, the degree to which it is possible to thoroughly investigate some absences is questionable. Also, should the concern be with known persistent absentees only or the students who miss the odd lesson here and there? As Duckworth (1988) contended:

Skepticism is widespread among school personnel about the absentee excuses presented by students or parents. Some suggest that it would be better to eliminate the distinction between excused and unexcused altogether: An absence is an absence. The strongest argument for this simplification of policy is that it would save resources now devoted to the processing of excuses. However, simplification could unfairly penalize students absent for unavoidable causes (eg. illness). It could also hinder administration from focusing on students who are really beating the system. (pp.2-3).

The difficulties associated with the collection, classification, monitoring and interpretations of data further complicates, and has far reaching ramifications, on the true indication of the nature and extent of school non-attendance – be it justified or unjustified. The lack of accurate data and a clear, universal definition are significant shortcomings in the research of the topic under study.

The Nature and Extent of School Non-Attendance

Accurate information on the nature and extent of school non-attendance is difficult to obtain. Currently there are no substantive or comprehensive descriptions available in Western Australia, Australia or internationally. The traditional procedure of checking and monitoring attendance as discussed in the previous section gives information on the extent of school non-attendance but very little information about the nature of school non-attendance.

In Western Australia, the *Select Committee on Youth Affairs* (Watkins, 1992) highlighted the significant variance in reports about the extent of truancy and thus the lack of adequate and appropriate data about youth deemed 'at risk' due to their school non-attendance patterns and behaviour. During compilation of the report the Committee received two estimates on the extent of truancy from the Ministry of Education. Initially, a figure of 7,000–8,000 students throughout the State were termed persistent truants. A revised figure provided by the Ministry of Education estimated only 1042 out of 5531 absences could be considered truants. A third figure was submitted by the Police Department which estimated 1500 persistent truants through the operation of their truancy units. (Watkins, 1992, p.61). Apart from the significant variance in the three claims, a number of concerns centre around the use of the figures in an effort to define what constitutes truancy let alone the nature and extent of the issue. Firstly, there is no indication of how the first figures submitted by the Ministry of Education were gathered and, although the second figures were based on a random sample of schools in the third term in 1991, there was no indication of the number of schools involved, the time of the data collection, and whether compulsory aged students and post-compulsory aged students were included. Both the Ministry of Education and the Police Department refer to persistent truants. However, no precise definition exists for the term that is used so liberally.

Several figures exist with regard to the extent of school non-attendance within other States in Australia. Elburn (1983, p.18) highlighted figures gathered by Dom (1981) which revealed that "in any one week more than 100,000 days were lost by children truanting from schools around Australia. In NSW and Victoria alone more than 12,000 children truant from school each day" and "In S.A., up to 16,000 children, or 7% of the total government and private school population, are absent from school on any one day. Some absences are legitimate, of course; many are not." Recent figures published in Burdekin (1989, p.272), which were repeated in the *NSW Home School Liaison Program Report* (nd), state that "In New South Wales it was estimated in 1985 that at least 22,000 children were absent from school each day without any known reason." The use of the above figures as a basis for estimating the extent of school non-attendance needs to be treated with caution. There was no reference in the report to the time of the data collection, methodology, the student population or any working definition. That is, studies vary with regard to their terms of reference. For example, Dom (1981) refers to truants, while Elburn (1983) talks about school absences.

On the other hand, data on the nature of school non-attendance is easier to report and interpret. Generally, attendance levels in primary schools are higher than in secondary schools. Also, there is no doubt that the degree of school non-attendance increases from the end of the primary school years and peaks at the end of the compulsory years of schooling as found by Tyerman (1958), Billington (1978) and Elburn (1983). Tyerman also found that girls tend to be absent from school more than boys, due to a greater incidence of illness among teenage girls, and they tend not to truant as often as boys. However, in analysing attendance figures, studies conducted by Billington (1978), Galloway (1982a) and Coventry *et al* (1984) indicated no significant difference in attendance rates when comparing boys and girls.

A significant difference does, however, appear to exist when comparing days of the week and school terms within the academic year. Billington and Galloway (1985) found that attendance tends to decrease towards the end of the week and the end of the school year.

Although the figures presented in this section are cause for concern as they stand, Billington (1978) and Duckworth (1988) agree on two remaining facts – truancy represents a minor proportion of all absences and the actual figures are probably higher than indicated. Thus, the true extent and magnitude of what has been reported has significant implications and ramifications for our current education system.

The Persistent Absentee

The current picture of a persistent absentee conjures up an image of a boy (although this was refuted in the previous section which stated that there is no significant difference in attendance or truancy rates between boys and girls) approximately 15 years of age who absents himself from school as he feels like it for no other reason than his sheer dislike of school, its teachers and curriculum. This perspective is unlike "The romantic Tom Sawyer-like picture of a truant spending sunny afternoons fishing by the creek" (Elburn, 1983, p.19). Instead, as Tyerman (1958) and Ovard (1978) found, persistent absentees tend to be unhappy, lonely and insecure. Also, they appear to have a lower educational ambition and are less concerned about poor school results than the average students. Elburn (1983) and DeBlois (1989) agreed that these youngsters are generally behind their respective peers in reading and mathematics skills. Galloway (1982a) and Little and Thompson (1983) added that these students generally see themselves as academic failures, finding it difficult to succeed in school, work and relationships with other students, teachers and their parents. Galloway (1982a), supported by Jones (1984), maintained that students who persist in absenting themselves from school, may miss more classes than others

because they perceive the lessons as boring, too difficult, there is a fear or dislike of the teacher, a general dislike of some of the curriculum areas and a variety of other reasons that may be related to cultural and racial discrimination, social or emotional issues. These students often have a poor self-image, a low level of self-esteem, lack of motivation, and may be living with significantly more disadvantage and/or potential stress – not only with regard to the perception of themselves (in particular their perceived failure), but also the state of their home situation. These young people have the capacity to learn and gain a minimal education. As stated strongly by DeBlois (1989), these young people are not ignorant and they do care about their future but they may need some direction.

Identifying the 'typical' persistent absentee is not an easy task. Although certain characteristics are attributed to persistent absentees, a concise description is yet to surface or be formulated. The greatest difficulty in identifying and hence stereotyping the typical absentee is the problem of nothing being typical, or standard, with any of the students who are deemed to be persistent absentees. There are many and varied factors involved with this phenomena and an oversimplified view would be dangerous in its conclusions. Persistent absentees do not constitute a homogeneous group as the behaviour may be attributed to a variety of factors. Reasons for the behaviour, like the homes and schools that the students come from, are quite varied and diverse. While certain conditions and circumstances are assumed to be of particular importance, namely school, home, society, relationships, teachers and curriculum, there is no definitive cause-effect relationship. As pointed out by Tyerman (1958):

... there is no one cause and no one treatment. Two children may play truant from the same class in the same school at the same time, but their homes, their personalities and the reasons for playing truant may be very different. Every truant is unique. (p.104)

Persistent absenteeism is a symptom not a cause, hence a closer assessment of the contributing factors needs to be attempted. Some of the main factors, including economic recession, socio-economic background, home influence, school influences, peer influence and delinquency, will be discussed in the subsequent sections.

Economic Recession

The recession being experienced in the Australian economy has been suggested as a factor increasing the risk of children leaving school illiterate. It has been reported that stress caused by unemployment and increased marital breakdown is among the reasons why many capable children have learning problems ("Truancy", 1993). The attitudinal problem of "why bother with school when we will never get a job anyway" is a factor that may be influencing students to absent themselves from school.

Socio-economic Background

Socio-economic hardship which may equate to lower class or working class families and manifest itself in poor housing conditions and periods of unemployment or erratic employment, is often associated with persistent absenteeism (Tyerman, 1958; Denney, 1973; Galloway, 1976b; Fogelman, 1978; Farrington, 1980; Holmes, 1989). Other factors related to the socio-economic level such as questionable child-rearing practices, questionable role modelling by the parent as a significant other, marital conflict/break-up, negative parental attitudes, expectations, and interests in the child's education (and the school) can further add to the picture of the circumstances that may be a very realistic part of the persistent absentees life (Tyerman, 1958; Nielson and Gerber, 1979; Farrington, 1980; Elburn, 1983; Ozich, 1989; Bonjolo, 1991).

Home Influence

Families may be classified as two-parent, single-parent, no-parent or extended. However, this alone is not enough evidence to support the issue of absenteeism based on family composition. The variables associated with a persistent absentee's home background may not have a direct association with the act of being absent from school. The difficult circumstances that families find themselves in, coupled with the added stress and disadvantage, make it difficult to attribute absenteeism to a single cause. All factors must be considered in the overall scenario. While inadequate housing and unemployment may be a consequence of a families low socio-economic status, absenteeism has no direct correlation to the families status. Persistent absenteeism may be caused by a variety of other factors. The correlation, or association, of absenteeism with any of the mentioned factors is almost impossible to qualify. While certain circumstances are of particular importance (as discussed in the previous section), correlations are not firm and are difficult to attempt to confirm with any conviction.

However, the home background and attitude of the parents is highlighted as a contributing factor to the level of absenteeism, with parental attitude to school attendance one of the major concerns. With truancy contributing to a small proportion of the overall absences, the greater proportion of unauthorized absences has been attributed to parental knowledge, whereby parents have approved or consented to the child's absence, or in some extreme cases, the parents have been unable or unwilling to ensure the child returns to school. In other words, children are more likely to be home with the parents knowledge and consent than truanting as confirmed by Galloway (1976a, 1982a, 1982b) through his research and supported by Elburn (1983). Also, both Burdekin (1989) and Bonjolo (1991) have stated strongly

that experiences at home which may include extremes in social and emotional support; discipline; abuse; financial security; and parental involvement, compound the 'truants' feelings of insecurity, lack of self-worth and belonging which may manifest themselves in compensatory behaviours such as long term absence from school.

School Influences

Factors leading to persistent absenteeism do not occur in isolation. The causal factors are multiple and interactive, often involving the individual, the home, the school and the broader community. Hence, as concluded by Bonjolo (1991), the relationship between the school and the home is a very significant one. This was supported by the *Report of the Committee of Inquiry into Education in Western Australia* (Beazley, 1984) with the recognition that:

the first major step which needs to be taken is to ensure that all schools, regardless of their locality and community circumstances, have a thorough understanding of the home backgrounds of their students ... too many schools and teachers have only a sketchy knowledge of their students' out-of-school circumstances and that they therefore respond inadequately and, on some occasions, incorrectly ... many schools are not geared to recognise and respond to the special needs of disadvantaged students. (pp.290-291)

Absenteeism represents different sets of difficulties for the student, the home, the school, and the community at large. Absence from school alone can be viewed from many perspectives starting with a clear definition of the problem. However, as demonstrated earlier in this chapter, a universal definition is lacking, hence schools are also disadvantaged by not having a concise working definition to implement at their level. How schools define persistent absenteeism, and their efforts to also define and understand the antecedents of the problem, tend to heighten the problem rather than reduce or minimise it. Generally, as suggested by Galloway (1976a), Nielson and Gerber (1979), Jones (1980) and Scherer and Bidmeade (1982), persistent absentees are perceived as discipline problems and are punished for their actions and

behaviours. This further compounds the problem and confirms anti-school attitudes and the dislike of authority figures who deal with the problem. Also, schools tend to focus their attention on the individuals abilities and attributes (or lack of) which may reinforce the sense of failure with some students and thus continue to perpetuate the problem rather than resolve it. Programs are constantly initiated and implemented to deal with these individuals who display behaviour that is defined to be outside the bounds of what is typically 'normal'. Information to support the relationship between poor academic performance and behaviour such as persistent absenteeism is readily available within any school. Coventry *et al* (1984) supported this statement by acknowledging the work of Denne as depicted in the following quote to describe some Australian students who have been identified as persistent absentees:

Academically they were underachievers, though only a few were of low intelligence. Three-quarters had not yet mastered basic arithmetic. Over half were two years behind in their reading but most of the other half had reading ages equal to or far higher than their real ages. Very importantly, even those who were intelligent or had achieved quite well at school regarded their own achievement as hopeless. (pp.28-29)

Persistent absentees are also said to voice dislikes for certain teachers and this was evident in the research by Cooper, M.G. (1966a), Scherer and Bidmeade (1982), Brown (1983), and Cooper, M. (1984). They reject parts of the curriculum, if not all of it, they claim to have no, or few, friends and prefer the activities outside the school grounds (Tyerman, 1958; Scherer & Bidmeade; 1982, Brown; 1983). As stated by Reid (1981), schools differ from one another in countless and varying ways including curriculum and the emphasis on academic subjects as opposed to vocational subjects, the nature of the staff, including ability, qualifications and experience, through to factors highlighted by Jones (1980), such as size of school, buildings, resources, geographic isolation, classroom management and discipline, pastoral care policies and school climate. However, studies conducted by Galloway (1976a) and Bos, Ruijters and Visscher (1990) indicated that the size of the school has no correlation with

truancy and absentee rates. The school ethos (also referred to as the school atmosphere or climate) according to Bryk and Thum (1989) is, however, associated with truancy and attendance rates.

No single factor makes a school more effective than another. This has been demonstrated by schools with similar structural and administrative characteristics and similar intakes of students having different rates of absenteeism. Unfortunately, some of these variables are not easy to access, separate and measure. Collectively, as suggested by Mortimore and Blackstone (1982), these processes are the product of the school ethos. In light of the notion of school ethos, Cooper, M.G. (1966a), Bryk and Thum (1989), and Mortimore and Blackstone (1982) tend to support one another's findings by concluding that absenteeism appears to be higher in schools where there is a greater incidence of discipline problems and where there is diversity among the students' academic experience and social background. It was also agreed that absenteeism tends to be lower, or reduced, in schools where the students feel safe and perceive discipline to be fair and effective, where students have a strong academic background and a high percentage are enrolled in academic programs, where there is a push towards doing homework, getting good grades and an interest in the academics, where individual differences and rates of learning are acknowledged, where students are involved in the organisation of the school and there is close parent-school relations, where rewards not punishments are on offer, and where school experiences are enjoyed by the students. The internal organisational features of schools can have significant educative consequences for all students, especially 'at risk' students. Similarly, estimated school effects may also be a function of the kinds of students enrolled rather than the organisational characteristics of the school. As stated by Tyerman (1968):

A child who enjoys school is unlikely to play truant. But if he is to enjoy school, he must feel that he is liked, that he can do the work, and that his parents and other adults have a good opinion of the school. I have never met a persistent truant who had these three assurances. (p.71).

Absence from school is not a new phenomena and school alone does not contribute, perpetuate or cause absenteeism. However, the community, and society in general, continue to attempt to place the entire problem back within the school context and demand that appropriate and relevant programs are made available to youth so that they gain basic competencies necessary to enter, and be productive in, adult life. The problem has been dealt with on an individual and school level for many years. Maybe the time has come for intervention at the community level to assist in addressing the problem that plagues the individual, the family, the school, and the community at large.

Peer Influence

Wilson and Braithwaite (1977) and Coventry *et al* (1984) support the notion that peers are 'significant others' in the lives of students choosing to absent themselves from school. Research conducted by these writers found that students are more likely to miss school while in the company of their peers (or friends) than alone. Peer groups have the ability to coerce or persuade students into the act of truancy. As contended by Wilson and Braithwaite (1977, p.89), "Truancy is very much a peer group activity." Bishop (1980) supported these earlier findings and added that the influence of peer groups on students decisions to miss school was not restricted to students attending the same school. Students were known to be absent with friends from other schools.

The overall rates of absence from school, as stated by Birman and Natriello (1978), are also influenced by the value that the students place on school attendance. A correlation was highlighted between school attendance and the perceived value of

school attendance. Schools where students had little regard, or placed little value on school attendance, tended to experience higher absence rates than schools where students placed value on attending school.

The Persistent Absentee and Delinquency

Tennent (1971) and Coventry *et al* (1984) agree that the relationship between persistent absenteeism and delinquency is unclear. The age old debate of 'absenteeism versus delinquency' is still currently unresolved. Much has been reported about the factors contributing to the two phenomena but little substantial evidence has been found to end the debate. A step closer to clarifying any causal connection has been the suggestion that persistent absenteeism and delinquency may be attributed, in part, to common antecedents. An association rather than a causal relationship may be more applicable. Factors contributing to persistent absenteeism such as home, school, peers, gender, culture and socio-economic environment, may also contribute to delinquency. This was supported by evidence made available to the *Select Committee on Youth Affairs* (Watkins, 1992, p.55) which precipitated the conclusion that "there is high correlation between school failure and antisocial behaviour including truancy, classroom disruption and juvenile crime". Tennent (1971) is quick to point out that delinquents may have a history of high levels of absenteeism but this doesn't necessarily mean that a similar proportion of persistent absentees will have a history of delinquency. He did conclude, however, that persistent absentees did constitute a high risk category for delinquency. This was supported by Wilson and Braithwaite (1977, p.74) who stated that school non-attendance "is best considered to be a phenomena on its own, not subsumed under the diverse range of activities associated with delinquency." Scherer and Bidmeade (1982) also pointed out that the phenomena of non-attendance may lead to delinquency and not the reverse.

The tenuous link between persistent absenteeism and delinquency gathers some of its momentum from the concerns voiced within the community about the increasing crime rate. Birman and Natriello (1978) strongly supported this notion by adding that:

The immediate problems are the delinquency and crime which occur when large numbers of adolescents out of school and employment are left with nothing constructive to occupy their time. The long term problem is created by these same students when they fail to acquire the basic competencies necessary for productive life. (p.31)

Evidence submitted to the *Select Committee on Youth Affairs* (Watkins, 1992) strongly supported the relationship between students absent from school and the involvement of this category of student in juvenile crime. The far reaching manifestation of this relationship, the difficulty to secure future employment and/or training, is an area of priority that requires immediate attention. However, a little caution needs to be exercised when using research to form any conclusions about the relationship between persistent absenteeism and delinquency. The available literature tends to draw on research conducted with known truants and/or juvenile offenders who have been accounted for by the police and/or court authorities. (Coventry *et al*, 1984, p.47). A final comment by Tyerman (1958) places the persistent absenteeism versus delinquency debate into perspective. This author stated:

Truancy is an offence against the law, and is, therefore, a delinquent act. In contrast to other delinquents, however, the truant has neither overtly injured anyone nor damaged any property. His offence is primarily one of omission rather than commission, though from truancy a considerable number of other delinquencies originate. (p.217)

2.4 SUMMARY

This literature review has addressed the issue of definition and concentrated on the more common factors associated with the issue of school non-attendance. It has been difficult to define truancy due to a lack of clarity of the issue and contributory factors. Thus any discussion on truancy must be set within the broader context of school non-attendance or student absenteeism.

The explanations of the cause and nature of school non-attendance have not been conclusive. Any factors associated with school non-attendance can not be delineated as they are often dependent on one another and form an intriguing mass of information that is difficult to interpret and from which to make conclusive statements about the nature and extent the issue in isolation.

The next chapter will outline the research design and methodology employed to gather and analyse the data pertaining to this research project.

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371

EDITH COWAN UNIVERSITY

References

294



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