

School Attendance: Understanding the Processes and Complexities from Diverse
Perspectives

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Background

This work is being completed as an aspect of a larger project which will comprise my dissertation for a Ph.D. in Human Studies at Laurentian University. It is being written from my personal vantage point as an educational researcher and a full-time elementary vice-principal. To this work I bring countless hours of research and seventeen years of classroom experience. The general context for this project is the Rainbow District School Board (RDSB) which is a north-eastern Ontario public school board in which I am employed. I have elected to undertake a study of RDSB due to the fact that my employment with the board will ease access to relevant data and the involved stakeholders, and will allow me a depth of understanding of the issues not likely for those without my wealth of involvement in the board. More importantly, as a former student and then classroom teacher in the board and now as a school administrator, I am committed to addressing the issue of school attendance because I believe that students who attend school more frequently are more likely to be academically successful. Therefore, within this setting, the phenomenon of school attendance will be explored, specifically factors which combine to create a situation in which compromised school attendance negatively impacts academic achievement. Through an interdisciplinary bricolage of methods within critical pedagogical methodology, a diverse selection of stakeholders will be interviewed to determine their perspective on the complex phenomenon of school attendance.

For the purpose of this paper, school attendance can be understood to mean consistently attending the elementary or secondary school at which a student is registered. School attendance is considered to be a key factor in academic achievement,

passing grades in elementary school, attainment of the provincial average on large-scale assessments and the rate of credit accumulation in secondary schools.

Upon first glance, the notion of school attendance appears to be quite straightforward. One might assume that because school attendance is compulsory, students will therefore attend as required, except perhaps, in the event of illness or an unforeseen family situation. One might also assume that students who attend the most frequently, have the best chance of succeeding academically. However, as it has been unpacked throughout this paper, it is obvious that the phenomenon is incredibly complex with far-reaching implications for young people and academic achievement. There are, in fact, many varied and complex reasons why students do not attend school. In some cases, a student may be absent from the classroom, but may actually be benefiting from opportunities provided to them by the school and outside of the school classroom. Such examples include, but are not limited to, participation in a Math-Science competition, the Kiwanis music festival, on a school volleyball or soccer tournament, or even an out of town excursion to an art gallery. In the aforementioned situations, participation in these activities would act as a form of enrichment that could not be easily replicated in a typical school during a typical school day. In other cases, a student may not attend school due to participation in activities not related to the school. Such activities may include participation in a speed skating or swimming meet, a vacation to a foreign destination, or visit with distant family members. Again, it does not appear that such involvement constitutes anything other than enrichment and fulfilment for the student. On the other hand, a student who misses school in order to hang out at the mall with friends, to loiter at a near-by coffee shop, or to play online video games may not be engaging in activities

which constitute the same type of enriching experience. Similarly, a student who is obliged to miss school due to familial reasons, such as having to care for younger siblings or having to work in order to provide financially for the family, may not necessarily be engaging in the types of activities which promote academic success. In some cases, a student may choose not attend as a result of feeling that they have been pushed out of school such as through the implementation of certain policies or practices that promote the attendance by certain students while discouraging the attendance of others.

This work seeks to determine the complex character of school attendance and whether or not all absences have the same negative effect on student achievement. It may be that the presence of other factors combined with frequent absence combines to create a situation wherein student achievement is compromised. Such other cultural, social and familial factors may include the presence of an Individual Education Plan, socioeconomic status, First Nations status, the number of schools attended during a school career, placement in the applied or academic pathways in secondary school, etc. Through interviews with students, teachers, attendance counselors, and administrators combined with a contextualization through the use of demographic, attendance, and achievement data, the complex character of school attendance will be examined. From this deeper understanding of the complex issue will come an opportunity to attempt to formulate strategies to be used by educators and school leaders to positively impact school attendance. The inclusion from the outset of educators and administrators in the project and on the advisory board should assist in knowledge mobilization for programming and policy.

Research Questions

1. What trends are identifiable in RDSB data related to school attendance?
2. How do the trends related to school attendance intersect with the results on EQAO assessments in Grades 3, 6, 9, and 10?
3. What perceptions/beliefs/practices are held by students, educators and administrators related to school attendance and school non-attendance?
4. What factors contribute to school non-attendance? Of these factors, which can be influenced by educational practice? How?
5. How can I facilitate the uptake of this new knowledge for educational policy and practice mobilization?

Summary of Literature

Initially, the topic of school attendance may seem rather straightforward. However, it has become clear that the character of school attendance is complex, inter-woven, and multi-faceted and requires an interdisciplinary methodology and interpretive framework.

International authors, particularly those writing in Asian and African countries tend to focus on concerns in regards to school attendance that seem unique from a North American perspective. Gender-based decisions regarding school attendance are frequently cited in such international research. Families often consider school attendance of females as potentially problematic given that education continues to be thought to negatively impact a women's willingness to embrace the roles of wife and mother (Iyamu & Obiunu, 2006). Similarly, where financial resources are scarce, families are often reluctant to subsidize the education of their daughters as any financial gain would then be

reaped by the husband's family (Iyamu & Obiunu, 2006; Levine, 2006; Li & Tsang, 2003; Postiglione, Jiao, & Gyatso, 2005). Also considered as significant in influencing school attendance are such factors as participation in economic activity (Guarcello, Lyon, & Rosati, 2008) and parental death (Evans & Miguel, 2007).

However, international and North American research also shared factors relating to school attendance. For example, North American researchers referred to the socio-economic status (SES) of a student's family, most international researchers, although referring to similar financial phenomena, were more likely to use the term poverty. Specifically Iyamu and Obiunu (2006) cited the difficulty that parents in Nigeria experienced when asked to pay both school fees and for school materials. Li and Tsang (2003) noted the financial burden that education was on Chinese parents.

Kearney (2008), while advocating an interdisciplinary approach to addressing school attendance, noted that the issue is often approached from one of three distinct disciplinary perspectives, psychology, social and criminal justice, or education. Researchers examining school attendance from a psychological perspective focused on such issues as peer group affiliation, sometimes referred to an alienated student sub-culture (Hartnett, 2007; Macdonald & Marsh, 2004;), permissive parental behaviour (Steinhausen, Muller, & Winkler-Metzke, 2008), and family and student expectations that do not include school-related goals (Finn, 1989; Brimm, Forgety, & Sadler, 1978).

Redmond and Hosp (2008) made an interesting discovery when examining the impact of "identification" on school attendance. They found that students with Communication Disorders were typologically different than students with learning disabilities (LDs) and Emotional Disorders (EDs) and therefore simply correlating the

presence of an identification with attendance would be misleading and potentially inaccurate.

Literature emanating from the discipline of social and criminal justice tended to focus on punitive interventions in response to chronic absenteeism. A fairly standard approach to addressing chronic student absenteeism or truancy is a progressive policy which begins at the school level with interventions by school staff and administration. Where unsuccessful, the scope of the interventions was broadened to include outside social service agencies, attendance officers, the police, and the judicial system (Carroll, 1995; Mueller, Giacomazzi & Stoddard, 2006; Perez McCluskey, Bynum, & Patchin, 2004).

A number of researchers, while acknowledging the virtually indisputable role of SES (Lamdin, 2001) focused on the role of the school in promoting regular attendance. Often cited as a factor in school non-attendance was the inhospitable school environment (Postiglione, Jiao, & Gyatso, 2005), boredom as a result of intellectually under-stimulating classroom environments (Lee & Burkam, 2003; Macdonald & Marsh, 2004; Postiglione, Jiao, Gyatso, 2005; Reid, 1983; Tilleczek, 2008), and strained relationships with teaching staff (Lee & Burkam, 2003; Tilleczek, 2008). Other factors of impact were noted to be social competence with peers, self-esteem, poor academic self-concept, involvement with anti-social behaviour in class, and the presence of neurotic disturbances (Corville-Smith et al., 1998). Students who struggled in school, failed credits, and had been kicked out of school were also found to be more likely to be absent (Tilleczek, 2008). Many researchers noted that the transition years were often characterized by feelings of stress and vulnerability (Lan & Lanthier, 2003; Tilleczek et al., 2010) while

some argued that attendance issues leading to early school leaving could be noted as early as kindergarten (Hockman, 2008).

A number of recommendations for school-based strategies emerged from the education research. For example, many school boards and school districts have embraced the concept of small schools which are designed to allow for a more supportive and personalized social and academic environment (Kahne et al., 2008). Of benefit to all students, particularly those who struggle to attend regularly, are recommendations to make the curriculum more challenging, interesting, and flexible (Brimm, Forgety, & Sadler, 1978). Strategies for differentiated instruction and the use of more personalized instructional techniques were advocated as a means of promoting the connectedness of the student to the school as a learning environment (Hartnett, 2007; Wilkins, 2008.) Furthering this sentiment was the recommendation for early academic intervention (Lan & Lanthier, 2003), the explicit teaching of learning skills and strategies (Lan & Lanthier, 2003), and an alternative curriculum for chronically absent students (Epp & Epp, 2001; Levanto, 1975). Also recommended was the use of non-traditional structures in secondary schools such as block scheduling to allow for credit accumulation within a shorter period of time, credit given for prior learning, and distance education options (Epp & Epp, 2001). Mentoring was found to be an effective preventative measure, especially for students from environments of risk and disadvantage (Dubois et al., 2002). Explicitly targeting school attendance, Levanto (1975) promoted the use of a firm, fair, and consistent discipline policy.

Lastly, the issue of school attendance has also been studied by professionals from the health care field. Unfortunately, although data has been found to support the

assertion that issues like obesity (Taras & Potts-Datema, 2005) and asthma (Taras & Potts-Datema, 2005) do negatively affect school attendance, support was not found for a subsequent decline in academic achievement. Similarly, evidence to identify specific factors which prohibit school attendance by obese children was not identifiable in the study.

It is clear that the issue of school attendance has been studied by a diverse group of education research working in a variety of contexts. However, regardless of the wealth of information of school attendance which has been amassed, questions regarding the issue remain. In particular, the question of what factors combine to create problematic absenteeism has not been answered in the existing literature. Therefore, it is my goal, using an interdisciplinary critical ethnographic bricolage, to use data from the Rainbow District School board to identify trends in school attendance. I will then study how these trends relate to results on the large-scale EQAO assessments administered in Grade 3, 6, 9, and 10. Using this data to identify the family of schools most academically challenged by school absenteeism, I will interview students, educators, administrators, and attendance counselors to learn about their perceptions, beliefs, and practices related to school attendance and school non-attendance. This combination of contextualizing attendance data, achievement data, and qualitative interview data will be used to determine the factors that contribute to school non-attendance. Most importantly, it will become clear which of these factors may be influenced by educational practice. This information will allow for the formulation of suggestions which may be used to promote school attendance through the alteration of educational policy and practice.

Methodology

The first level of the study will involve the use of probability sampling, defined as the inclusion of a large number of units from the population in a random manner where the probability of inclusion for every member is determinable (Teddie & Yu, 2007). In practice, I will begin by examining all of the attendance data for all of the schools in the Rainbow District School Board. I will use a complete data set from the previous school year and from it will identify one family of schools that reflects the most student absences per capita. The data set will contain information on all of the absences in the Rainbow District School Board. Initially, this data set will be analyzed to determine which family of schools, comprised of a secondary school and a number of elementary schools, has the highest rate of absence.

For the purposes of this research, a family of schools will be defined as a secondary school and its primary elementary feeder schools. Once this family of schools has been identified, the attendance data will be used contextualize the research setting by allowing for the identification of trends in absence rates. Such trends may include, but will not be limited to, the correlation between: gender and absence, grade level and absence, academic pathway and absence, presence of an individual education plan (excluding gifted) and absence, etc.

The identified trends, including the rate of absence by gender, grade level, First Nation status, presence of an Individual Education Plan, number of schools attended will be compared to attendance data from previous years to determine if they represent a pattern or an aberration. Where the data indicates significant rates of absenteeism representing a trend over time, investigation of the causes for absenteeism will occur.

The information from the attendance data will be correlated with the relevant results from the grades 3, 6, 9, and 10 EQAO data to determine if a relationship exists between school attendance and school achievement. The board is provided with the data from the Education Quality and Accountability Office for all of the students. This information will also be examined according to other contributing factors such as gender, social class, identification as an exceptional student, number of schools attended, First Nations status, etc.

All of the elementary students in the grades demonstrating the highest levels of absenteeism will be surveyed regarding their attitudes toward school attendance. In order to accomplish this survey, a letter of intent and permission will be sent home. All students who return the consent form will be asked to complete a paper and pencil survey. At the secondary school level, two classes of students in grades 9 and 10 will be surveyed. A letter of permission and intent will also be sent home. Those students who respond affirmatively will be asked to complete a paper and pencil survey. One class will represent the lowest rates of attendance while the other class will represent the highest rates of attendance. The objective of these surveys will be to build a general understanding of the factors involved in school attendance.

Using the results from the attendance data and the student surveys to choose a sample, I will conduct in-depth, semi-structured interviews with 10 students from each of the schools. Interview participants will be selected through a purposive sampling technique described as extreme or deviant case sampling. This technique is also known as “outlier” sampling (Collingridge & Gantt, 2008) as participants are selected based on a unique or atypical set of experiences (Fossey et al., 2002). Five of the students in each

group will be representative of the most likely to attend school, while the other five will be representative of the least likely to attend school. At the elementary level, this will result in 10 interviews with students least likely to attend and 10 interviews with students most likely to attend. At the secondary level, I will interview a total of 20 grade 9 and 10 students, 10 of whom will be most likely to attend, and 10 of whom will be least likely to attend. The purpose of these interviews is to gain a more thorough understanding of the factors which encourage students to attend and the factors which may discourage some students from attending. These interviews will be digitally recorded and transcribed verbatim.

Key Learnings

In the formal process of the completion of my dissertation, I am almost to the point where I am ready to complete my comprehensive exams. At Laurentian this means that I will present my minor paper (on the interdisciplinary nature of the project) and my major paper (sections cited above) and will be prepared to field questions on the material presented. It has taken three years to get to the point where I am ready to take this work to “comps.” I have learned an incredible amount about school attendance and probably even more about the process of completing academic work at this level.

For the purposes of this paper, it is likely more relevant to discuss what I have learned about school attendance. I think that the vital component of this project is that is allowed me to broaden my perspective from that of classroom teacher to an individual with a more specialized understanding of a very complex issue. When a student is perpetually absent seemingly without reason, as a classroom teacher, it is quite

frustrating. Reading the literature on the topic has allowed me to understand that there are a variety of factors which contribute to a student's decision to not attend school. Some of those decisions may be as a result of issues outside of the influence of a classroom teacher. However, there are also other issues which are within the realm of the classroom teacher to impact. These issues are what I believe will come to dominate the findings of my eventual research. Furthermore, it is likely that negative consequences will not result from the presence of only one factor, but rather from a collection of factors which combine to create a situation wherein academic achievement is compromised. Understanding the combination of factors and then working to devise some solutions to allow for the success of all students is the ultimate objective of this work.

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