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Examining the Role of Parents/Caregivers of Youth Demonstrating Truant Behavior

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### Abstract

Truancy, which refers to unexcused absenteeism from school, is precipitated by numerous home and school factors. Generally, laws in most countries across the world require parents or caregivers to ensure that children attend school. In the United States, the No Child Left Behind Act requires all children to attend school (Kim & Page, 2012). The United States government's statistics indicated that a large percentage of pupils in the country fail to attend school and classes for various reasons (Dahl, 2016). The numerous causes of truancy may be broadly classified as *community* and *school-based*. This qualitative study investigated the experiences of parents/caregivers of youth demonstrating truant behavior. In-depth interviews were conducted with 5 parent/caregivers and recurring themes were identified. These themes include: parental-stress, lack of supervision, parental uncertainty, and mental health issues as contributing factors to truancy.

### **Examining the Role of Parents/Caregivers of Youth Demonstrating Truant Behavior**

Truancy among school-going children has increased tremendously, with statistics indicating a sharp increase in the number of school dropouts associated with truant behavior (Dahl, 2016). Truancy was caused by several factors, which include poverty, drug and substance abuse, bullying, stress, and academic failures, among others (Dahl, 2016). Truancy has a negative effect on the affected student and the community. For the student, truancy led to underperformance, which may increase the risk of dropping out from school. In addition, research demonstrated that truancy predisposed students to the risk of drug and substance abuse, which negatively affected their health and/or reduced their employment opportunities (Dahl, 2016). Unemployment among school leavers was a major threat to the security of a community, as many jobless individuals engaged in criminal activities to satisfy their economic needs (Reid, 2013). Parents, caregivers, and students, however, need to be supported effectively in their role of addressing truancy issues in an effort to assure nurture, recognition, admiration, and supervision to all school-going children. The roles and needs of parents/caregivers of youth, who demonstrate truant behaviors, will be explored.

### **Literature Review**

Galloway (2014) defined truancy as the deliberate non-attendance of class by a student without giving any reasonable cause for such absenteeism. Truancy led to poor performance and subsequent dropping out from school, a situation that increased the level of unemployment (Reid & Morgan, 2012). These researchers noted that the number of unemployed persons has grown tremendously in almost every country around the globe. Consequently, employers were recruiting new candidates based on merit, where the best-qualified individuals were chosen for quality jobs. Additionally, Reid and Morgan (2012) indicated that parents of students

demonstrating truant behavior tend to suffer from stress, which may predispose them to the risk of other diseases such as cardiac disorders. They proposed that truancy may also increase poverty, as an aging parent in the traditional family structure may rely on and expect support from his or her children. Truancy's association with unemployment was described as a major barrier to overcoming poverty and one's ability to achieve self-sufficiency.

Generally, truancy was expected to reduce or even cease if it was followed by interventions from parents/caregivers, schools, community service providers, and/or courts. The practice continues at times, however, and this situation underscores the need to devise other strategies to deal with the truant behavior and further examine the needs of parents/caregivers, who interact with youth demonstrating truant behavior on a daily basis. For example, according to Nauer (2016), chronic absenteeism, which refers to the unexcused missing of class by a student, may be correlated with parents/caregivers who lack the necessary support (financial or physical) to deal with their child demonstrating truant behavior. An elementary school aged student was perceived as having little or no ability to make independent decisions without the parent's approval. Therefore, Nauer suggested that absenteeism cannot be classified as intentional, as the concerned student cannot willfully and independently cut classes without parental approval. Nauer indicated that parental support was needed for students to attend school and that students lacking such support may demonstrate truant behavior.

The research conducted by Galloway (2014) and Nauer (2016) utilized diverse research strategies to propose solutions to truant behavior. While Galloway provided a review of the information on absenteeism collected from various articles and reports from national, state, and local levels. Nauer described the research conducted in a Primary School in Queens, New York, NY. Galloway suggested clinical treatment and legal/administrative sanctions, as well as

preventive action, as possible solutions to truancy. Nauer pointed out that parents/caregivers, school staff, the principle, and the community are capable of improving the situation if taught and trained efficiently. In summary, Galloway recommended legal and clinical interventions, whereas, Nauer recommended paying more attention to parent-community-child relations.

### **The Role of Parents/Caregivers in Influencing the Causes of Truancy**

According to Markström (2013), the causes of truancy vary based on the student's age and the general environment, implying the need to examine the parent/caregiver's influence on a child's non-attendance behavior. Markström conducted qualitative research through 52 interviews with 12-13 year-old students. The results showed that the causes of truancy may be broadly classified as family factors, school factors, economic factors, and student factors. Kim and Page (2012) explored the familial bonds that influence students' school attendance, with specific reference to the following factors: lack of supervision, poverty, and alcohol or drug abuse. The authors used a multi-informant approach and recruited 74 elementary-school students with absenteeism issues (Kim & Page, 2012). The study found that child-parent attachment was specifically important for the possible prevention or development of absenteeism. The authors recommended focusing the intervention programs on students' emotion regulation capabilities and child-parent bonding.

Chen, Culhane, Metraux, Park, and Venable (2016) alluded that much of the stress that students experience emanates from family issues. These researchers conducted a longitudinal study that included approximately 58,000 students from seventh through ninth grade. According to the study, stress was mostly associated with financial discrepancies among parents (Chen et al., 2016). The recommendations of the researchers were to be attentive to students' individual characteristics and the social context they face every day (Chen et al., 2016). It was proposed

that stress would be alleviated, in the event, that parents/caregivers are capable and prepared to provide the necessary material and non-material support that learners need. In addition to these findings, research indicates that shifts in familial roles plays a role in the causation of truant behavior.

Historically, women had an increased opportunity to track their children's school attendance based on their presence in the home. As such, they would easily detect any absenteeism before it turned chronic (Markström, 2013). Due to the high cost of living, improved women's rights, and the development of career opportunities, however, some women in the United States have increased focus on building a career (Markström, 2013). Markström proposed that the amount of time that women spend with their children has decreased as a result. In conjunction, Staunæs and Pors (2015) asserted that children (in modern day America) have more unsupervised time, which contributed to truant behavior. It was proposed that parents who are not aware of truancy, due to the decreased contact with their children, are unable to mitigate the behavior. In addition to lack of supervision, Staunæs and Pors cited poverty among parents/caregivers as one of the factors that contribute to truancy among students.

Recent research by Bodén (2016) established a link between stress among parents and children and truancy, which was greatly attributed to unfavorable relationships between students, parents, and teachers. In her study, Bodén used literature review, observations, and systematic reviews to explore the issue of truancy. Bodén, who attributed stress to the fear of failure, argued that such pressure may precipitate truancy. Generally, students are under pressure from parents and teachers to pass their exams in order to continue with their studies, hence increasing the fear of failure. Such apprehension of disappointment often led to "test anxiety", a condition that presents itself in the form of overexcitement before, during, and after exams (Bodén, 2016). An

increase in high-stakes testing demonstrated an increase in test anxiety for children of all ages. Bodén suggested that stress emanating from the fear of failure may be avoided by preparing well for the exams before the examination day. She concluded that factors such as technology, demanding schedules, multiplying learning materials, and others all lead to increased truancy and need to be considered. Additionally, Stenliden (2014) found that adequate information regarding exams could help reduce test anxiety and the fear of failure. Many scholars have agreed on the aforementioned exam preparation practices to avert stress among students and parents at all academic levels, which was suggested as an approach to decrease truant behavior. Additionally, there are various student-based factors that demonstrate an impact on truant behavior.

### **Student-based Factors That Impact Truant Behavior**

In the research conducted by Muula et al. (2012), 2257 pupils took part in a survey regarding school related issues. The authors used SPSS software to analyze the results collected in 2004 during the global school-based health survey. The study found that unsupervised time with peers that resulted in harmful behavior was linked to truancy, along with low parent-child bonding (Muula et al., 2012). In response, the authors recommended paying more attention to the relationships between students and their parents/caregivers (Muula et al., 2012).

Markström (2013) explored the student-based factors that are linked to truancy with reference to poor study habits, poor preparation for exams, and drug and alcohol use. In this research, poor study habits referred to the failure of the student to adopt effective learning behaviors. For example, students' postponement of assignments led to work overload and inability to complete tasks within the stipulated timeframes. The research indicated that many learners at all levels of education often spend much of their time in extracurricular activities while forgetting about or procrastinating on schoolwork. Markström suggested that parents play

an important role in advising their children to create balance between extracurricular activities and studies.

Students often work under strict time frames established by educators to ensure that the assignments are submitted on time. Most institutions often punish students for late submission of assignments, a situation which may cause learners to skip classes for fear of such criticism (Markström, 2013). In correlation, Sherman (2012) revealed how learners can avoid truancy by completing their schoolwork sufficiently and on time, firstly by heeding to parents' guidelines concerning study habits at home and secondly by splitting the assignments into several sections and deadlines. This requires parents/caregivers to demonstrate interest, guidance, supervision, and expectations upon children and play an active role in ensuring that academic work was completed. This parenting strategy also helps to ensure that students do not fail during exams because of a lack of preparation or lack of a balance between studies and other activities. Implementing such strategies may also provide support to students experiencing learning difficulties (Sherman, 2012).

Sherman (2012) suggested that some students may experience learning difficulties associated with addiction, which may affect not only their studies but also their overall daily functioning. Sherman used Check and Connect Intervention as the case study for her research and a literature review was also concluded. Sherman recommended medical intervention in which a student needs to visit a psychologist for the necessary therapeutic treatment. Some of the therapies available for such students include family-focused counseling, where parents are expected to be fully involved in the treatment focus of changing the students' undesirable behaviors. The overall study's findings indicated that teachers had the greatest impact on students' attendance and that family-focused therapies help improve student attendance, thus

demonstrating the important role that parents/caregivers play in reducing truant behavior (Sherman, 2012).

### **The Role of Parents/Caregivers in Reducing Truancy**

Reid (2013) asserted that schools should work closely with parents and guardians to address issues of truancy. Many parents are unaware of education laws, including the consequences of truancy on the child and the society. Reid used literature review, case studies, observations, questionnaires, and experiments in the research to explore the causes of absenteeism. The sample sizes were primarily from schools in Wales and England. The study findings showed that absenteeism was tightly linked to poor parenting skills, low socio-economic status, poor teaching, and negative teacher-student relationships (Reid, 2013). In response to the research findings, Reid recommended the following: the community needs to be enlightened and included on the concerns of truancy to ensure that they play a role in eradicating the behavior; school administrators need to understand the affected students' familial relationships to devise effective strategies to mitigate truancy; parents who work long hours have less time to spend with their children and such parents need counseling to help them understand the importance of taking good care of their children in preventing truancy.

McConnell and Kubina (2014) argued that truancy could be avoided through encouraging students to prepare well for class and stressing the importance of education. In the study, the authors examined a variety of literature using Educational Resources Information Center, Journal Storage, and others. The large sample size consisted of all the sample sizes from the books and journals reviewed in the study. To mitigate truancy associated with test anxiety, McConnell and Kubina asserted that parents and teachers need to help their students to prepare well for exams. The researchers suggested that parents need to offer a favorable studying environment at home

and avoid overworking their children. This strategy gives learners ample time to prepare for their exams. The study proposed that parents should also provide their children with the relevant material and non-material support to facilitate their preparation for exams. Such support could include providing the relevant study materials and offering physical and mental support.

Research indicated that students who get enough support from their parents tended to perform better than those who did not have access to such support (Galloway, 2014). Therefore, it was suggested that parents and caregivers need to adequately support their children to fight truancy.

According to Markström (2013), the traditional methods for dealing with truancy involved informing parents about student's failure to attend classes. Markström observed the family support as the heart of fighting truancy since parents/caregivers are in direct contact with their children for a majority of the time and are therefore best positioned to influence their child's behavior. Research completed by Dembo and Gullledge (2009) suggested a systems approach, incorporating parental, school, and community providers as collaborative partners in reducing truant behavior. The study suggested that informing parents of the youth's absence, engaging parents in conversation about absenteeism, providing meaningful incentives and consequences, incorporating necessary community service providers (i.e. law enforcement, mental health providers, social services, etc.), school administrative support to keeping youth in academic environment, and ongoing evaluation as effective strategies to reducing truant behavior. The study demonstrated statistical significance in reducing truant behavior through these intervention efforts, thus highlighting the importance of implementing a multisystemic approach to reducing truant behavior.

## **Summary**

Truancy refers to an unexcused intentional failure by a student to attend classes. Such absenteeism was attributed to several issues that fall under the purview of economic, school, personal, and familial factors. As the literature review reveals, detachment with parents, lack of supervision, low teacher-student attachment, student stress and anxiety related to testing, and addiction among parents are some of the major causes of truancy. From the findings of the review, it was proposed that truancy may be improved by informing parents about the problem and collectively developing strategies to mitigate the behavior. Teachers, community, and caregivers need to be equally enlightened about the negative impact and outcomes associated with truancy. Additionally, parents need to be educated about the importance of fighting truancy by tracking their children's school attendance and engaged in the process of addressing student absenteeism from a family-centered approach.

## **Method**

### **Participants**

The participants of this study consisted of parents/caregivers of urban middle school students who had 15 or more absences during the 2016-2017 academic year. The total enrollment for grades 6-8 was 473 students. A total of 85 students met the criteria of 15 or more absences during the identified time period, representing 5.6% of the total student population. Of the 85 students identified, 43 were identified as having English speaking parents/caregivers. Ten students did not have current contact information on file. The school social worker contacted the 33 identified parents/caregivers and introduced the research topic, identified the researcher, and requested permission for the researcher to make contact regarding the study. There were five (n=5) consenting participants out of a total possible 33 interview subjects, yielding a response

rate of 15.2%. Four participants identified as a biological parent of the child demonstrating truant behavior and 1 participant identified as a maternal grandmother.

## **Materials**

The aim of this study was to determine the perceptions, experiences, and needs of parents/caregivers of youth demonstrating truant behavior. To obtain this information, participants were asked 7 semi-structured interview questions. The researcher developed the interview questions with input from school personnel. The interview questions utilized an open-ended format to solicit input and feedback from the participant. Questions were: What are some of the issues that you or your child experience that prevent them from attending school; what is the biggest challenge you encounter when trying to get your child to school; and, what things have been helpful in getting your child to school? The interview questions in their entirety are listed in Appendix A.

## **Procedure**

Parents/caregivers were initially contacted by the school social worker to introduce the research project, researcher, and obtain verbal consent for the researcher to make contact regarding the interview. The researcher called consenting participants on the site's phone and offered to conduct interviews at a time and location convenient to the participant. All research participants were informed of a \$10 gift card incentive to be provided upon completion of the interview. All five consenting participants requested phone interviews be completed and were informed that extensive interview notes would be taken during the time of the interview. The researcher asked 7 semi structured questions to each participant and took extensive notes with each response. The researcher identified any and all emergent themes and combined the data.

Each interview lasted approximately 20 minutes and the school social worker was present during all interviews. Written consent was obtained by all participants and were stored in a locked filing cabinet in the school counseling office. Copies of interview notes, signed consent forms, and the gift card incentives were provided to all research participants within one week of the completion of the interview via United States Postal Service delivery.

## **Results**

Data were gathered through interviews completed by parents of students that had 15 or more absences during the 2016-2017 academic year. The themes that emerged included: parental-stress, lack of supervision, parental uncertainty, and mental health issues as contributing factors to truancy.

### **Parental Stress**

Each of the interview participants mentioned the impact that caring for a child exhibiting truant behavior has on them. Three of the participants labeled the impact as being “stressful.” One participant identified the experience as being “rough,” and 1 participant reported that the experience was “overwhelming.” One grandmother noted, “It’s very rough for me. I feel like I’m failing him, like I should have done something different or done more earlier.”

Each of the parents identified additional stressors that impacted their ability to ensure daily school attendance, such as having other children at home that need to be cared for, health issues, lack of transportation, work schedule, meeting basic needs, and caring for the home. One parent explained that they worked overnight and did not have the energy to argue with their child about going to school, as they have other children to care for and need to get sleep. Another parent noted the stress associated with several Child Protective investigations, regarding the

truant behavior, throughout the past 5 years. The mother reported that each of her 3 children struggled with truant behavior and that the stress of dealing with Child Protective Services was “overwhelming and scary.”

### **Supervision**

Four of the interview participants noted that lack of supervision was an identified barrier for ensuring school attendance. One parent noted that they left in the early morning and were not present to get their child to school. Another parent noted that they worked overnight and were getting home around the time that the child should have left for school. One parent mentioned that they did not have transportation to bring the student to school, and that they lived too close for the student to receive bus transportation. This same parent reported that the child frequently left for school on his/her own, but that he/she did not walk to school as expected and instead spent the days “hanging out with friends and walking around town.”

When asked what ideas the parent/caregiver had about helping improve attendance, one parent noted that they observed a marked improvement when they were present in the morning to help ensure that the child awoke, got ready, and ate breakfast. This same parent shared that he/she recently obtained help getting their child ready in the morning from a partner, who moved into the home and has taken on a parent role. The parent described the new morning routine, which included a home-cooked breakfast daily for the student and a ride to school, that improved school attendance. This parent reported that the student had a significant decrease in absences since an adult began being more involved in the morning routine.

### **Parental Uncertainty**

During each of the interviews the parent/caregivers discussed having moments of uncertainty in regards to how to help their child improve school attendance. Four parents responded by stating that they were unsure what to do when asked for ideas that would help their child improve their school attendance. One parent stated that she had attempted grounding the child for missed school days and that this was ineffective. Another parent reported that he followed the recommendation of the school principal and placed the child on PINS (juvenile probation program) and that this intervention was not successful at improving attendance. The parent reported that the only difference that he has noted since placing their child on PINS was that the child was angry about the decision and was argumentative about attending probation related appointments. One parent described their effort to “bribe” their child with games, toys, clothes, and other material items with little success. The parent reported that this strategy worked “a couple times,” but that the strategy was not effective at changing the behavior long term.

One parent described success with improving school attendance for a short period of time when she restricted access to video games when the child missed school. The parent reported that this strategy was effective for a while, but lost effectiveness over time. The parent reported that the arguments that the strategy created were not worth the stress and that she now “sometimes” threatens to take away video games, but that she doesn’t always follow through. This parent reported that she has not figured out any parental intervention that has proven to be effective and that she does not know what to do in order to get their child to want to attend school.

### **Mental Health**

During the interviews, four of the parents stated that their child experiences mental health issues that impact their ability and willingness to attend school. Two parent/caregivers stated that their child experiences anxiety and two parent/caregivers reported that their child experiences anxiety/depression. Two of the students discussed are currently seeing an outside counselor. One parent/caregiver stated:

“When he doesn’t want to go I can’t just pick him up and bring him. He gets sick. He literally throws up from anxiety. How can I force a puking child to go to school? He has physical symptoms from his stress and anxiety.”

One parent described that her child struggled to attend school because he worried about being away from home. The parent stated that the family lost their home in a fire the previous year and that this has had an impact on the child’s attendance, as the student worried about when the family will get a new home and wanted to be part of finding a new apartment. The parent reported that this experience has been a significant driver to the truant behavior.

### **Discussion**

The negative effect of truant behavior on students’ academic, social, and emotional development prompted school districts to address the concern through various interventions. An increased understanding of the needs of students demonstrating truant behavior also lead many school administrators to engage parents in addressing the issue. Schools implemented truancy prevention efforts for many years, and gained an increased understanding of parents/caregivers needs and perspectives, which provided an opportunity to better understand the issue from a multi-systemic perspective.

### **Implications**

Though generalizability is limited, the themes identified offer important information regarding the needs and perspectives of parents/caregivers of youth demonstrating truant behavior. School counselors can work towards engaging parents of youth demonstrating truant behavior in an effort to address the issue from familial perspective. They can offer information via the school website, social media, and newsletters regarding the importance of school attendance and the impact that absenteeism has on short and long term development. School counselors may benefit from providing opportunities for parents/caregivers to meet them outside of non-conventional meetings, such as planning for a “meet the counselor” evening event. Additionally, school counselors may consider engaging parents through non-traditional outreach efforts such as performing home visits to engage parents and offer support and referrals as needed and requested.

In response to parent uncertainty, it is suggested that school counselors are well informed of community supports and resources available to link parents/caregivers with when requested. Each of the parents in this study indicated that they often find themselves unsure of what intervention steps to take with their child. Therefore, it is suggested that school counselors make an effort to educate themselves, school personnel, and parents on the research findings regarding intervention efficacy, as well as supports available.

This study highlights the importance of educating and communicating with parents/caregivers regarding their student’s attendance. School counselors can provide individual attendance reports to caregivers via email, phone, and/or postal service. Additionally, it is suggested that school counselors offer words of encouragement and acknowledge attendance improvement on an individual parent/caregiver basis.

### **Limitations of the Study**

An important note to make when evaluating the results of this study is that the researcher was responsible for coding the qualitative data into categorical data and, therefore, the potential for experimenter bias must be acknowledged. Additionally, only English speaking parent/caregivers were included in the study, thus excluding the input of non-English speaking parents. Another potential limitation is that the researcher created the instrument utilized in this research study and the validity and reliability of the survey have not been determined.

### **Recommendations for Future Research**

Expanding the study to multiple schools would be beneficial. Parent/caregivers each have an individual experience and gaining an understanding of the needs of a larger sample will allow for increased generalizability of the information gathered. Additionally, further research into the efficacy of engaging parents in truancy intervention efforts would be beneficial. Furthermore, research into barriers to engaging parents/caregivers of youth demonstrating truant behavior is suggested in order to inform best-practice efforts.

### **Conclusion**

Truant behavior has a negative impact on the student, family, and society. When a student demonstrates truant behavior, they have an increased risk of academic underperformance, dropping out, criminal behavior, substance use, and unemployment. This study demonstrates the impact and experience of parents/caregivers of youth demonstrating truant behavior, as well as the need for increased school-home partnership in addressing the issue. It would be beneficial for school counselors to increase their understanding and

engagement of parents/caregivers in order to create an individualized and multi-systemic approach to addressing truant behavior.

Additional research is needed in order to gain a more comprehensive understanding of the needs and perspectives of parents/caregivers of youth demonstrating truant behavior. This study highlights parent uncertainty, stress, mental health, and supervision as some of the issues facing parents/caregivers. The researcher hopes that continued research in this area will inform best-practice efforts to include parents/caregivers in addressing the ever-challenging issue of truancy.

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