

PREVENTING ABSENTEEISM IN THE PRIMARY SCHOOL BY SOCIAL WORK COUNSELING

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Abstract: *Absenteeism is a major problem that affects all levels of the education system from primary to university. Chronic absenteeism leads to gaps in knowledge and difficulties in obtaining adequate school performance.*

Two third classes from a general school in Arad were studied: an experimental one and a control one. In the experimental class the children with absenteeism were advised by the social worker for 2 months. At the same time there were five counseling sessions with their parents and a program of interest stimulation for the school was introduced to the class.

The obtained results confirm that by the assistance counseling the number of absences of the children can be reduced and the chronic absenteeism can be prevented.

Keywords: *school children; primary school; absenteeism; social work counseling.*

Theoretical framework

While there is no consistent definition of chronic absenteeism, either the academic literature defines a chronically absent student as one who misses at least 10 percent of the school year. On defining problematic levels of chronic absenteeism for a school (Bauer et al. 2018).

Frequent absences in the primary grades are associated with school disengagement, academic failure, and eventual dropout (Cook et al, 2017). Frequent school absenteeism has immediate and long-term negative effects on academic performance, social functioning, high school and college graduation rates, adult income, health, and life expectancy.

Absenteeism from school is a serious public health issue for mental health professionals, physicians, and educators. The prevalence of unexcused absences from school exceeds that of major childhood behavior disorders and is a key risk factor for violence, injury, substance use, psychiatric disorders, and economic deprivation (Kearny, 2008).

Chronic absenteeism from school is a pervasive problem with complex causes and long-reaching consequences. School refusal has been associated with increased likelihood of engaging in criminal behavior, sexual risk behaviors, abuse of illicit substances, and dropout of school entirely (Kiani et al. 2018).

The study realized and presented by Muj, F. and Toderici, O. (2019) presents some of the causes of absenteeism and school dropout that Romanian pre-

university education faces. Thus, it is specified that the lack of interest towards the school, various problems in the family, are the main causes of absenteeism that lead to school dropout.

Pellegrini (2007) comments on the behavior commonly known as school refusal. After reviewing its established descriptions, the article argues for a different definition, namely extended school non-attendance, which describes the visible behavior neutrally, aims to direct one's attention to the school environment, and stresses its persistent nature.

School absenteeism encompasses several terms such as school refusal, truancy and school phobia, all of which have been used inconsistently and confusingly in the past. Moreover, the question of how many days of absence can be seen as problematic remains unclear. Due to these definitional problems, available data is inconsistent. Therefore, the prevalence rates of school absenteeism can only be estimated (about 5% of all students). School absenteeism affects not only individual students, but also family, school and society structures (Lenzen, Brunner, Resch, 2016). Absenteeism and truancy can, on the other hand be correlated with contextual and aggregated characteristics at the school level (Hatos 2012).

Birioukov in 2016 also shows the problems related to the theoretical foundation of absenteeism. Absenteeism has been linked to diminished academic outcomes and is one of the leading causes of high school dropout. Although absenteeism is a serious one concern for educational scholars, the definitions of absences and their subtypes are inadequately developed in academic literature. The overreliance on excused / unexcused absences that posit the school and the family as the arbitrators of the validity of an absence.

Gubbels et al (2019) analyze the risk factors that can lead to absenteeism. School absenteeism and dropout are associated with many different life-course problems. To reduce the risk for these problems it is important to gain insight into risk factors for both school absenteeism and permanent school dropout. The findings of their study contribute to the fundamental knowledge of the etiology of school absenteeism and dropout which in turn contributes to a better understanding of the problematic development of adolescents.

Knollmann et al. (2019) argue that school attendance problems become manifest in many ways and are associated with multiple risk factors, calling for comprehensive assessment methods. They propose in their study to document the development of the inventory of school attendance problems, which assesses both the quality and function of a broad spectrum of school attendance problems.

Mauro and Machell (2019) highlights the many challenging issues faced by children who struggle to attend school. They integrate and explore recent trends in digital technology that both provide resources and challenges as children have more opportunity to connect to educational activities but also be distracted by them. Digital technology is part of the children's' life starts already at preschool years, the counseling of parents by social workers proved to be beneficial for the adequate socialization of the children (Goian, 2019). In case this does not happen,

children are at risk of developing internet addiction, due to a low quality of family relationships and lack of social support (Tudorel, Vintila, 2018).

Researches show that there are both individual and social causes to justify this phenomenon. Individual causes can be mental or physical.

Chronic absenteeism appears to be driven by overlapping medical, individual, family, and social factors, including chronic illness, mental health conditions, bullying, perceived lack of safety, health problems or needs of other family members, inconsistent parenting, poor school climate, economic disadvantage, and unreliable transportation. If absenteeism is caused by chronic illness, management should include clear expectations about school attendance and care coordination with school personnel. Mental health conditions that interfere with school attendance can often be treated with cognitive behavior therapy and / or pharmacotherapy (Allen, Diamond-Myrsten, Rollins, 2018).

A 2014 study by Haagmans and Kamphuis reveals that frequent school absenteeism is associated with psychological problems.

Students who are chronically absent display high rates of psychiatric comorbidities, with anxiety disorders and disruptive behavioral disorders being particularly prevalent. Current data suggest that behavioral interventions, including social skills training, cognitive behavioral, and dialectical behavioral therapies are the primary treatment modalities, with the addition of pharmacological management when needed (Ozbas, 2010).

Stempel et al. (2017) studied the association between chronic school absenteeism and adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) among school-age children. ACE exposure was associated with chronic school absenteeism in school-age children. To improve school attendance, along with future graduation rates and long-term health, these findings highlight the need for an interdisciplinary approach to address child adversity that involves pediatricians, mental health providers, schools, and public health partners.

In the same direction Crouch et al. (2019) confirms that ACEs can have an impact on childhood and adolescence, not just later in adulthood, as demonstrated by the association between ACEs and measures of school success. These findings further illuminate the connection between ACEs and childhood outcomes of education and health.

The most common psychic cause is the social anxiety of children. Diegel (2015) presents the criteria of anxiety-based absenteeism as well as problems of terminology and classification with emphasis on school phobia as a combination of separation anxiety and social anxiety. The multimodal treatment focuses on cognitive interventions, graduate exposure and close cooperation with teachers. The counselor is also in charge of the networking and cooperation of all concerned persons.

Lingerfeld and Hartung (2015) state that school refusal behaviors go beyond a child's dislike or disinterest in school. Their research investigated the underlying anxiety, depression, and social phobias that often accompany these behaviors and the importance of early recognition and treatment. Successful

treatment and resolution of school refusal behaviors need to be a multidisciplinary approach. Teachers, administrators, guidance counselors, school nurses, and parents need to be involved in the diagnosis, treatment, and readmission processes.

Other studies link absenteeism and depression in children and adolescents. Depression in young people may lead to reduced school attendance through social withdrawal, loss of motivation, sleep disturbance and low energy. Findings suggest associations between depression and poor school attendance, particularly absenteeism and unexcused absences / truancy. Clinicians and school staff should be alert to the possibility of depression in children and adolescents with poor attendance (Finning et al., 2019).

Katz et al. (2016). state that pediatric consultations in school refusal cases need to explore the presenting medical symptoms and discuss with families any psychological function of the problems that have led to non-attendance. More chronic and persistent refusal often requires support from an extended team around the child, often requiring input from mental health professionals. Behavioral strategies are the recommended approach to improving school attendance and to address the underlying anxiety or depression, or both, that may be the root cause of their non-attendance.

Among the major physical problems affecting school attendance is mentioned in the obesity literature. An and col. (2017) argue that obesity may affect children's school attendance through its detrimental impact on their physical and mental health. The meta-analysis found that the odds of being absent from school were 27% and 54% higher among children with overweight and obesity than among their normal weight counterparts, respectively. Juvenile diabetes is a disease which will make a life change for the child with this diagnosis, but also for the entire family. Keeping the environment of these children as close to normal as possible, by accepting the diagnosis and manage the illness will make it possible for these children to also attend school normally without an excessive absenteeism (Vintila, 2009).

The research of Berendes et al. (2019) links absenteeism with gastrointestinal and respiratory illness. Their data underscore the importance of preventive measures, such as hand hygiene promotion and education, and the opportunity for both homes and schools to serve as an important point for implementation of public health preventive measures, including hand hygiene practice and education.

Allison and Attisha (2019) argue that there is a link between school attendance and good health. The rates of chronic absenteeism vary between states, communities, and schools, with significant disparities based on income, race, and ethnicity. Chronic school absenteeism, starting as early as preschool and kindergarten, puts students at risk for poor school performance and dropout, which in turn, puts them at risk for unhealthy behaviors as adolescents and young adults as well as poor long-term health outcomes

Among the social causes are mentioned ethnicity, poverty, environment of origin. Since 1979 Muller et al. presents the problem of poverty-related

absenteeism at a primary school in Basel. They point out that in the lower income group children of full-time working mothers have the lowest average of school absences, while in the highest income group they have the highest average. School absences of children in the lower income group increase markedly with increasing learning problems which may point out class differences of schools. While exactly the opposite should happen, high quality education at all ages is the key for children from disadvantaged backgrounds or having parents with lower education to not abandon school (Vintila, Vintila, Petcovici, 2011).

Amalu and Abang (2015) study school absenteeism among primary school children. Their finding revealed that financial constraints, lack of interest, illnesses, pampering of family members, school location were the major causes of pupil absenteeism. It was recommended among others that parents and their children and / or wards should be counseled on the effect of absenteeism on school performance and its long-term consequences on national development.

D'Agostino et al (2018) show that fitness is associated with absenteeism, although this relationship may differ across poverty and gender subgroups. Fitness improvements may be more important to reduce absenteeism in high / very high poverty girls compared with low / mid poverty girls and both high / very high and low / mid poverty boys. Expanding school-based physical activity programs for youth particularly in high poverty neighborhoods may increase student attendance.

Midouhas (2017) examines school poverty effects on the trajectories of child behavior and the moderating roles of ethnicity and gender. Gender and ethnic background may influence how a child responds emotionally and behaviourally to the composition of peers at school. School poverty predicted internalizing and externalizing problems concurrently, and internalizing problems longitudinally. In poor schools, girls had a steeper inclined to internalizing problems, but made greater reductions in externalizing problems. Ethnic differences were also found in the association between school poverty and child adjustment

Morrissey, Hutchison and Winsler (2014) argue that low family income is associated with poor academic achievement among children. Higher rates of school absence and tardiness may be a mechanism through which low family income impacts children's academic success. Their study examines relationships between family income, as measured by receipt of free or reduced-price lunch, school attendance, and academic achievement among a diverse sample of children from kindergarten to 4th grade.

Keppens et al. (2019) tries to appreciate the accuracy of the data provided by schools regarding the absence of children. Their results revealed a weak association between self-reported unauthorized school absenteeism and registered unauthorized school absenteeism. Boys, students in technical and vocational tracks and students who speak a foreign language at home, with a less-educated mother and who receive a school allowance, received more registered unauthorized absences than they reported themselves. Additionally, pupils with school refusal and who were often authorized absent from school received more registered

unauthorized absences compared to their self-reported unauthorized school absenteeism.

Among the causes of absenteeism is mentioned the mobility of the family. Thus Green, DeFosset and Kuo (2019) present the implications of mobility in school absenteeism. They argue that school connectedness is closely linked to academic success: students who are engaged at school have better attendance and academic performance, and are less likely to drop out. Residential mobility - having moved homes - can increase the risk of a negative academic trajectory (e.g., absenteeism and academic failure). While existing research has examined residential mobility among students and its connection to long-term consequences such as absenteeism and academic failure, less is known about how residential mobility relates to potential intermediate school experiences (eg, school disconnectedness, low perceived academic ability, and experiences with school violence and harassment) that contributes to a negative academic trajectory. The results highlight the value of developing and implementing strategies that can identify and support students who move at young ages, to prevent student disengagement and promote attendance and academic success early in their life trajectory.

Van Eck et al. (2017) establish how school climate relates to chronic absence. School climate may play an important role in influencing chronic absence rates among schools, yet little research has evaluated how school climate constructs relate to chronic absence. Using multilevel latent profile analysis, they evaluated how profiles of student perceptions of school climate at both the student and school level differentiated school – level chronic absence rates. Their results suggest that school climate shares an important relationship with chronic absence among adolescent students attending urban schools.

Regular school attendance is foundational to children's success but school absenteeism is a common, serious, and highly vexing problem. Researchers from various disciplines have produced a rich yet diverse literature for conceptualizing problematic absenteeism that has led to considerable confusion and lack of consensus on a pragmatic and coordinated assessment and intervention approach. Kearny si Graczyk (2014) propose a response to intervention model to promote school attendance and address school absenteeism.

The ways of combating absenteeism are very different. McConnell and Kubina (2014) propose connecting with the family to improve school attendance. School attendance is a rising issue in public schools. Students regularly absent from school may end up involved in destructive behaviors and dropout of school. Family characteristics are strong determining factors in students' school attendance. When parents or caregivers are regularly apprised of their child's attendance, they can provide appropriate feedback at home.

Sugrue, Zuel and Laliberte (2017) analyze the methods of intervention to prevent absenteeism. Chronic school absenteeism among elementary school – age students is gaining attention from researchers and policymakers because of its relationship to long-term negative educational outcomes. Current literature on

effective interventions, however, is limited in terms of the number of studies that have found even marginally effective interventions, the lack of clarity on the interventions being studied, and the connection between the intervention studied and the factors contributing to poor attendance.

Objectives and Hypothesis

The main objective of the research was to make the children and the parents understand that the absences from the school have negative consequences on their preparation, with consequences that will be seen further in educational curricula.

The hypothesis from which the research started was that advising the children and the parents by the social worker, a reduction in the number of absences will be obtained.

Methodology

For data collection, the number of absences of children was recorded over a period of two months. After completion of the intervention, the number of absences over the same time period was recorded again and the results were compared. The obtained data were processed with SPSS 17.0.

For the intervention, counseling sessions were held with the children who had absences and once a week an intervention was made at the classroom level. The classroom intervention consisted of inviting people from different professions to tell the children about their profession and to arouse their interest in the respective field. The parents of the children with absentees were also advised by the social worker in a number of 5 sessions explaining to them the unfavorable consequences of the absenteeism on the level of knowledge of the children.

The studied lot

Two third classes from a general school in Arad were included in the research. One of the classes constituted the experimental class (EC), in which the intervention through counseling was done. The other class was the control class (CC) with the help of which we checked whether the results obtained are due to the intervention performed by the social worker.

We did not have children in the two classes with chronic somatic disorders that would justify the absences from the school for a longer period. The classes had an equal number of children: 23

Results and discussions

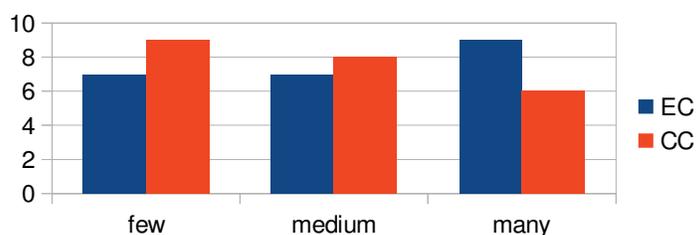
The number of absences of the children from the two classes was recorded over a period of 2 months. Absences were introduced in three categories: few - up to 1% of the total hours of the period concerned; averages - up to 5% of the total hours of the target period and many - between 5 and 10% of the study period.

The number of children according to the number of absences in the two classes in the initial phase can be observed in table 1 and figure 1.

Table 1. The number of children with absences and their frequency in the initial phase

Absence frequency	Exp. Class (EC)	Control class (CC)
few	7	9
Medium	7	6
Many	9	8

Figure 1. The number of children with absences and their frequency in the initial phase



It can be observed that the number of absences is approximately equal distributed to the two classes. The reason for the absences of the children was very different, ranging from "did not wake my grandmother" to various somatic accusations. Already at this age the children have understood that if they complain in the morning that something hurts (their head or belly usually) then the parents tell them to stay home and not go to school.

On the other hand, some of the absences are justified by the grandparents by: "let him to be absent now, as much as he can, because when he grows up, he can not be absent to the job." This attitude encourages children to miss school more often and to consider absences as something that is not particularly important. However, the results of longitudinal research presented in the literature show that absence from school has a significant effect on primary school attainments. In particular, it was found that an absence of half a year between the ages of 7- and 11-years-of-age resulted in a reduction of 0.7 of a year and 1 year in reading and mathematics test scores respectively (Carroll, 2010).

These consequences are usually not taken into account by parents or grandparents, when they propose to the children to stay home and miss school. Also, there are few parents who can request from the teacher the topics for the absence days and work with the children at home to recover the knowledge from the absent period. They are mainly based on the fact that the child will recover in class when he / she returns to school and do not think that the other children move on and there is no time in the class to recover the knowledge lost by one or the

other children. The school syllabus has a certain order that must be respected in order to be able to complete all the volume of knowledge in the period of one year.

In the experimental class the counseling of children with absentees began. They were explained, at their level of understanding, what are the consequences of staying behind with the knowledge, how the deficiencies accumulate and ultimately will no longer meet the requirements of the program. At the class level, people from different professions were invited weekly: doctors, drivers, engineers, welders, hairdressers, etc. who told the children about their profession, about the satisfactions they offer and about the salary they can get. The children were interested in many professions but in particular the driver and the veterinarian (boys) and medical assistants (girls).

The parents were also included in a counseling program, consisting of 5 sessions in which they were presented with concrete, scientific data, the consequences of frequent absences from the children's school program.

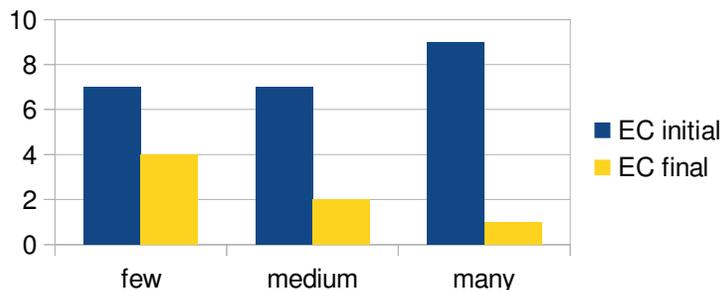
After a period of two months of intervention with children and parents, the number of absences of children was evaluated again. The obtained results are illustrated in table 2 and figure 2.

Table 2.The number of children with absences and their frequency in the final phase compared with the initial one in the experimental class

Absence frequency	EC Initial	EC Final
few	7	4
Medium	7	2
Many	9	1

The table shows a marked improvement in school attendance and a clear decrease in the number of absentees. Only 7 children from May 23 were absent: 4 had few absences, 2 had average absences and only one had a large number of absences

Figure 2. The number of children with absences and their frequency in the final phase compared with the initial one in the experimental class



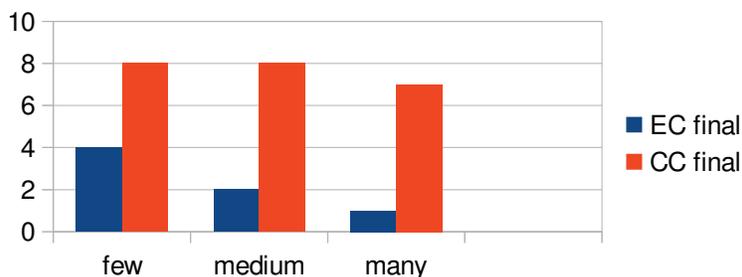
The child who still had a large number of absences had a special family situation - parents who went abroad to work and he was in the care of his grandparents. In addition, during the research, it was found that he had a lung problem, which he was absent enough.

The differences between the frequencies in the initial phase and those in the final phase are statistically significant at a significance threshold of $p < .02$. To see if these differences are due to the method we used in the intervention we will compare the final frequencies of the experimental class with those of the control class. Table 3 and figure 3 present this aspect.

Table 3. Number of children with absences and their frequency in the final phase compared between the two classes

Absence frequency	Exp. Class (EC)	Control class (CC)
few	4	8
Medium	2	8
Many	1	7

Figure 3. Number of children with absences and their frequency in the final phase compared between the two classes



It is easy to see that while in the control class the number of absences remains quite high, without differing too much from the initial phase, in the experimental class they have decreased significantly. This is proof that the method of counseling children and parents used in the intervention program has played an essential role in reducing the number of absences in the experimental class. Thus the starting hypothesis was validated in practice by the obtained results.

Conclusions:

Multiple absences from school with important consequences on the level and quality of children's knowledge. The social assistance counseling of children with absentees and their parents results in a decrease in the number of absentees of

children, and the program introduced weekly in the class has increased the interest of the children for the school.

The involvement of the counseling team at school (social worker, psychologist) is necessary to help children avoid the negative consequences of absences on reading and math and, in general, on the quality of their knowledge. A particular care should be given to the language the professionals use in their counseling process, as using the field language in the interaction with the clients (parents) can lead to misunderstandings (Goian, 2012, Goian, 2010). In addition, parents should also be involved in raising awareness of the danger of numerous absences and cooperating with the counseling team to increase school attendance by children.

Researches of this kind must continue and be more numerous so that the best method of preventing absenteeism can be found. There will be no universally valid method, but it will be possible to choose from a range of methods the most suitable for reducing absenteeism and increasing school attendance

Acknowledgement: We hereby state that the subjects involved in our research were informed about the voluntary character of participation in this research, about the understanding of information and of that fact that withdrawal from research is possible at any time without negative consequences upon the participant. The research complied with all ethical research standards, the research participants/participants` guardians giving their consent to participate in the research.

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