
CONFERENCE ARTICLE**Mechanisms For Preventing Unexcused Absence Of Students In General Secondary Schools**

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ABSTRACT

The article establishes the mechanisms by which unexcused absence of students in general secondary schools may be prevented. The author proceeds from the thesis that the category of unexcused absence is administrative rather than explanatory: it records the fact that the school did not receive or did not accept a justification, and says nothing whatever about the cause of the absence, since every absence has a cause and only some causes are documented. The consequence of treating an administrative category as a causal one is that a heterogeneous population receives a uniform response — ordinarily a sanction — which is appropriate to at most one of the conditions it contains and counterproductive in several. Employing the comparative-analytical, systemic and structural-functional methods, the study constructs a functional typology of unexcused absence comprising five types distinguished by the mechanism that produces them, drawing upon the interdisciplinary model of C. Kearney, the participation-identification model of J. Finn, the social bonding theory of T. Hirschi, the theory of self-efficacy of A. Bandura and the conception of basic psychological needs of E. Deci and R. Ryan. Differentiated preventive mechanisms are established for each type, together with the early-warning indicators preceding absence and the institutional risks of the preventive apparatus itself.

Keywords: unexcused absence, truancy prevention, general secondary school, functional typology, school refusal, disengagement, early warning indicators, self-efficacy, social bonding, participation-identification, family-school contact, labelling.

INTRODUCTION

The prevention of unexcused absence occupies a settled place in the duties of every general secondary school, and the procedure by which it is pursued is in its essentials the same everywhere: the absence is recorded, the family is notified, a conversation is held, a warning is issued, and in persistent cases the matter is referred to bodies outside the school. The procedure is applied uniformly because the category to which it responds is treated as though it designated a single phenomenon. This treatment is the error from which the difficulties of prevention proceed, and it is an error of classification rather than of execution. The category of unexcused absence is administrative in origin and in content. It records a fact about documentation: that the school did not receive a justification, or received one it did not accept. It records nothing about causation. Every absence has a cause — a child who is not in a classroom is somewhere else, and is there for a reason — and the category divides absences not by their causes but by whether their causes were successfully communicated to and ratified by an institution. Two students whose records are identical may be absent for reasons that have nothing in common, and two students whose reasons are identical may be classified differently according to the literacy, the confidence or the availability of their parents. The category is in this respect a record of the school's own information rather than of the student's situation, and it is accordingly unsuited to the purpose for which it is habitually used. An instrument of accounting has been pressed into service as an instrument of diagnosis, and it performs the second function no better than a register of unpaid invoices would explain why debtors do not pay. The practical consequence follows directly. A category assembled on documentary grounds contains a heterogeneous population, and a uniform response to a heterogeneous population will be appropriate to a fraction of it. The response actually applied — escalating pressure upon the student and the family — presupposes that the absence results from a choice that pressure can reverse. Where that presupposition holds, the

response is rational. Where the absence results from an aversive condition within the school, from an obligation within the household or from a material barrier, pressure adds a cost without removing a cause, and in the first of these cases it increases the aversiveness of the institution the student is avoiding. The reclassification required was accomplished by C. Kearney, who proposed that school absenteeism be analysed by the function the behaviour performs for the child rather than by its administrative description, and distinguished absence maintained by the avoidance of stimuli provoking negative affect, by escape from aversive social or evaluative situations, by the pursuit of attention from significant others and by the pursuit of tangible reinforcement outside the school [8, p. 257–282]. The merit of a functional classification is that it is prescriptive: two absences serving different functions require different interventions, and an intervention appropriate to one function will frequently aggravate another. It is also obtainable, since the function a behaviour performs is established by enquiry into the circumstances of the particular child rather than by the examination of documents, and the enquiry is within the competence of the class teacher. The temporal structure of the process was established by J. Finn in the participation-identification model, according to which withdrawal proceeds cumulatively — from declining participation in classroom activity, through declining involvement in the wider life of the school, to the loss of identification with the institution — and physical absence appears only at the end of this sequence [6, p. 117–142]. Prevention in the strict sense must therefore act upon the precursors, since by the time absence is recorded the process it terminates has been running for a considerable period and is correspondingly expensive to reverse. The mechanisms underlying the precursors are supplied by three further conceptions. T. Hirschi demonstrated that conformity is sustained by the strength of the bond to the conventional order — attachment to persons within it, commitment to what has been invested in it, involvement in its activities and belief in its

legitimacy — rather than by the threat of sanction [7, p. 16–34]. A. Bandura established that convictions concerning one's own efficacy govern the activities a person undertakes and those he avoids, and that such convictions are formed principally from the experience of mastery [1, p. 79–115]; it follows that a student who has concluded that he cannot succeed is avoiding the site of repeated public failure, which is not irrational conduct requiring correction but reasonable conduct requiring a changed prospect. E. Deci and R. Ryan showed that engagement depends upon the satisfaction of the needs for autonomy, competence and relatedness, each of which the school either supports or frustrates [3, p. 227–243]. The setting within which these mechanisms operate exceeds the school. U. Bronfenbrenner's ecological framework represents the developing person as participating simultaneously in several settings whose interconnections constitute a determinant distinct from the properties of any one of them [2, p. 3–42], and S. Sheldon and J. Epstein established empirically that reductions in chronic absence are associated with systematic practices of family and community involvement rather than with the intensity of enforcement [10, p. 39–56]. In the conditions of Uzbekistan this places a particular significance upon the local community and upon the formation of the worldview within which the obligation to study is understood, which proceeds through the system of continuous education [4, p. 314–316; 5, p. 10–13] and through the renewed models of professional preparation of teachers [9, p. 325–328]. The aim of the present article consists in establishing differentiated mechanisms for the prevention of unexcused absence on the basis of a classification by cause rather than by documentation. The tasks subordinate to it comprise the construction of a functional typology of unexcused absence, the determination of the preventive mechanism appropriate to each type, the identification of the indicators preceding absence, and the examination of the risks that the preventive apparatus itself generates. The scientific novelty of the work lies in the demonstration that the administrative category cuts across the causal one, and in the derivation of a differentiated system of prevention from a typology constructed upon function rather than upon the presence or absence of a document.

The study employs logical-conceptual analysis in order to establish the distinction between the administrative and the causal classification of absence, and to identify the misclassifications that the administrative category produces. The comparative-analytical method has been applied in order to correlate the functional model of absenteeism with the conceptions of withdrawal, social bonding, self-efficacy and basic psychological needs, and to establish which mechanism each of them describes. The structural-functional approach has served to distinguish the declared purposes of the preventive apparatus from the latent effects it produces for the students subject to it. The systemic approach has made it possible to represent prevention as a sequence extending from the precursors of withdrawal to the recorded absence, and to locate the point at which intervention is least costly. The material of the investigation comprises the interdisciplinary literature on school absenteeism, the research on student withdrawal and engagement, and empirical studies of family and community involvement.

The first result establishes the typology upon which differentiated prevention rests. Five types of unexcused absence are distinguished by the mechanism producing them. Avoidant absence is maintained by escape from a condition within the school that the student experiences as aversive — a relationship with a particular teacher, the prospect of public evaluation, intimidation by peers. Disengaged absence arises where the student has ceased to attribute meaning to attendance, either because he has concluded that he cannot succeed or because he perceives no connection between the activity and any outcome he values. Obligation absence is produced by a demand of the household — paid work, the care of younger children, assistance in seasonal labour. Barrier absence is produced by a material

impediment — distance, the cost of transport, an illness for which documentation was not obtained. Normalised absence arises where the family does not treat regular attendance as obligatory. The five are distinguishable in practice, and the instrument of distinction is a conversation conducted with the student rather than an examination of his record. The second result demonstrates that the administrative category cuts across this typology in a manner that systematically misdirects the response. Documentation is not distributed according to the gravity of the cause but according to the resources of the family: a household possessing literacy, confidence in dealing with institutions and a flexible occupation obtains a justification for an absence of any kind, while a household lacking these obtains none for an absence occasioned by genuine necessity. The category of unexcused absence therefore over-represents families of limited resources, and a preventive apparatus triggered by that category applies its pressure disproportionately to those least able to absorb it — and least responsible, in the causal sense, for the condition being addressed. The third result specifies the preventive mechanism appropriate to each type and the consequence of applying the wrong one. Avoidant absence requires the removal or mitigation of the aversive condition, and a sanction applied to it increases the aversiveness of the institution and accelerates the avoidance. Disengaged absence requires the restoration of a visible prospect of success and of a connection between the activity and a valued outcome; pressure applied here produces attendance without participation, which postpones the withdrawal without arresting it. Obligation absence requires negotiation with the household and, where possible, the adjustment of arrangements; a sanction penalises a family for a necessity it did not choose. Barrier absence requires the removal of the barrier, which is frequently inexpensive and almost always outside the competence of the procedure actually applied. Normalised absence is the one type for which the conventional response is appropriate, and even there it operates only in combination with sustained contact. The fourth result concerns the indicators preceding absence, which constitute the proper object of prevention. Since withdrawal is cumulative, the recorded absence is the last observable event in a sequence whose earlier events are equally observable and are not recorded. The indicators available to any teacher are the cessation of submitted work, the withdrawal from voluntary classroom participation, the abandonment of activities outside lessons, a change in the composition of the student's peer group, and a pattern of absence concentrated in particular subjects or on particular days. The last of these is diagnostically the most valuable and the most frequently overlooked, since absence distributed evenly across the timetable indicates a cause outside the school while absence concentrated upon particular lessons indicates a cause within it. The fifth result concerns self-efficacy and the rationality of avoidance, which determines the form that effective intervention must take. A student who has accumulated a history of failure in a subject holds a conviction about his own capacity that is supported by evidence, and his avoidance of the lesson follows from that conviction rather than from indifference. Exhortation does not alter a belief grounded in experience, and compulsion returns him to the site of the experience that formed it. The mechanism capable of altering it is the arrangement of an experience of mastery — a task at which he succeeds, within a sequence whose difficulty increases — which is a matter of instructional design rather than of discipline, and which is therefore available to the teacher and not to the administration. The sixth result concerns the family-school mechanism, in which the decisive distinction is between notification and contact. Notification transmits a fact from the institution to the household and terminates upon transmission; contact establishes a relation within which the school learns what is producing the absence, and without that knowledge the differentiation established above cannot be applied. The practices through which contact is established are organisational: communication initiated by the school before a threshold has been crossed rather than after, a route by which a

family may report a difficulty in advance, the assignment of a single identified person who holds the relation with a particular household, and the involvement of local community structures, which in the conditions of Uzbekistan possess a knowledge of household circumstances that no institutional procedure can obtain. The seventh result concerns the risks generated by the preventive apparatus itself, which must be stated if the analysis is to be of use. The first is labelling: a student publicly identified as a persistent absentee acquires a status that others act upon and that he may in time accept, so that the identification contributes to the trajectory it was intended to interrupt; the safeguard is that identification be known to those who must act and not to the cohort. The second is the reporting incentive: where unexcused absence functions as an indicator by which schools are assessed, the cheapest available response is not prevention but reclassification — the retrospective acceptance of justifications — and the figure improves while the condition does not. The third is the substitution of referral for action, in which the transfer of a case to an external body is recorded as a resolution although nothing in the student's situation has altered.

Conclusion

The analysis undertaken permits the following conclusions. First, the category of unexcused absence is administrative and not explanatory. It records the absence of an accepted justification rather than the absence of a cause, and it therefore assembles a population whose members have nothing causally in common. The uniform response applied to that population is appropriate to a fraction of it, and the difficulties of prevention follow from this error of classification rather than from any deficiency in execution. Second, documentation is distributed according to the resources of families rather than the gravity of causes, so that the category over-represents households of limited literacy, confidence and occupational flexibility. A preventive apparatus triggered by the administrative category consequently applies its pressure disproportionately to those least able to absorb it and least responsible for the condition addressed. Third, a functional typology distinguishing avoidant, disengaged, obligation, barrier and normalised absence yields differentiated preventive mechanisms. The conventional escalation of pressure is appropriate only to the last of the five; applied to avoidant absence it increases the aversiveness of the institution being avoided, applied to disengaged absence it produces attendance without participation, and applied to obligation and barrier absence it penalises necessity and poverty respectively. Fourth, prevention in the strict sense must act upon the precursors of withdrawal rather than upon its terminal symptom. The indicators are available to any teacher — the cessation of submitted work, withdrawal from voluntary participation, abandonment of activities outside lessons, a change of peer group — and the distribution of absence across the timetable is diagnostically decisive, since concentration upon particular lessons indicates a cause within the school and even distribution indicates a cause outside it. Fifth, the preventive apparatus generates risks of its own: the labelling of students publicly identified as absentees, the reclassification of unexcused as excused absence where the category functions as a performance indicator, and the recording of referral as resolution. The conditions of effective prevention are accordingly the establishment of contact rather than notification with families, the assignment of a named person to each household concerned, the involvement of local community structures, and the separation of professional data from data reported upward. The prospect of further research consists in the empirical validation of the proposed typology in the conditions of Uzbek general secondary education and in the development of a diagnostic instrument for assigning cases to its categories.

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