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Absenteeism at state high schools and related school management policies in Turkey

(Ankara Case)

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Abstract

The problem of the present study: What is the opinion of administrators, students, counseling teachers and course teachers in public schools about the reasons for student absenteeism and the applications and policies of the school administration regarding absenteeism? The survey was given to a total of 568 participants selected by “stratified sampling method” from 28 schools, and 35 students with high rate of absenteeism selected from the same schools were also interviewed. The school staff believe the students and their families to be the factors causing the absenteeism problem, the students regards educational factors to be the main reason for absenteeism problem.

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1. Introduction

Any kind of education system emphasizes the importance of the fact that children are encouraged to continue with secondary school education upon completing their formal education and that children attend school. In today’s world, it is essential and compulsory that all students complete their high school education not only because they need to get prepared for the university education or gain the qualifications for a vocation, but also because all citizens of a nation need to gain general educational values. The students who remain in the school system until they graduate from the high school have the chance to discover their personal interests and become happier individuals thanks to the curricular and extracurricular opportunities offered to them (Ellis, Cogan & Howey, 1991). The findings of effective schooling research reveal that there are several factors that determine performance of students at school, among which self-concept of the student, his attitude towards school and learning, the magnitude of school, and the policies to keep students at school can be highlighted as the most crucial (Silins and Murray-Harris, 1999).

No definite solution has been found to the problem of student absenteeism since compulsory education was implemented. Little success has been obtained in spite of the research and programs to prevent student absenteeism. Absenteeism due to various reasons has always happened and stills remains to be one of the most important problems of schools and nations (Reid, 2005). Various studies in the USA and the UK confirm this fact. Absenteeism is also significant due to the fact that it signals a number of anti-social behaviors that trigger personal and developmental problems in children. (Bell, Rosen & Dynlacht, 1994).

When various definitions of absenteeism in the related literature are analyzed, Reid (1999) defines it as “a natural naughty behavior that occurs during the normal development phase of children”. Stoll (1990) defines it as “not

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going to school without having a legitimate reason”. The definition of Webber (2004) is “an adolescent continuing not going to school during the school year without an excuse”. Bell, Rosen, & Dynlacht (1994) refusing going to school with no excuse or playing truant without consent or knowledge of their families.

According to Reid (1999), Osler, Street, Lall & Vincent (2002), Baker, Sigmon & Nugent (2001), Crew (2000) and Clifford (2005), absenteeism is one of the major problems that affect the future of students negatively. Students’ not going to school is such a problem that it extends the scope of school, affecting the student himself, his family and the society. The reasons for absenteeism may show variations according to different research and regions. However, a number of factors seem to be common among the reasons. Researchers studying truancy tend to classify the reasons for truancy under three categories, named as personal factors, family and social factors, and factors arising from school (Kinder, Harland, Wilkin and Wakefield 1995; Kinder and Wilkin, 1998; Baker, Sigmon and Nugent, 2001; Morgan, 2004; Edward and Malcom, 2004).

- *Personal factors:* Lack of self-respect, self-confidence and social skills of students, weakness in establishing relationship with peers, limited academic skills, special needs, failure in concentrating oneself and self-management, drug and alcohol addiction, limited knowledge of laws related to truancy, weakness in social skills, mental and physical health problems are identified as the factors under this category. Brown et al (1990) state that acceptance and being admired among peers, and being in harmony with their peers are crucial for teenagers, as a result of which some teenagers admit having displayed undesirable behaviors for the sake of “being in harmony with peers”.
- *Family and social factors:* The home environment has a significant role on children attending school regularly and duly. Poor family control and lack of determination related to education is one of the most important factors behind absenteeism. Other factors related to absenteeism are no importance given to the education of the child, problems in the family, inefficient or bad parenthood, economic conditions, lack of self-respect in the society, family members having drug or alcohol addiction problems, child having to work, single-parent families, high rate of change in the family, family having jobs with multiple aspects, high rate of mobility to earn money and being unaware of the code of laws related to absenteeism are identified (Baker, Sigmon & Nugent, 2001; Morgan, 2004).
- *Factors resulting from school:* One of the most important reasons for student absenteeism is “not liking school”. However, the reasons for absenteeism may vary across schools. The main reasons noted are school climate, attitude of administrators, teachers and other students, size of the school, difficulty in combining cultural diversity and learning styles, failure in defining attendance and absenteeism thoroughly, relations with teachers and peers, problems related to school and curriculum (Kinder, Wakefield and Wilkin, 1996).

Absenteeism is a multi-dimensional concept, one of the dimensions being the effects created by the act of not going to school, which causes numerous problems for students, schools and society. The impacts of these problems are acute (Morgan, 2004; Mc Cray, 2006). The impacts can be identified as following:

The effect of absenteeism on the absent student: According to Malcolm, Thorpe and Lowden (1996), the main effect of absenteeism on the student is his getting weaker in his learning ability, which is distinctly observed in lessons that can be learned through cumulative knowledge, such as Maths. The student who misses certain classes has difficulty in learning the others and has to put in more effort. *The effect of absenteeism on school staff:* Course teachers are the ones that are most affected among school staff. Especially, the new and inexperienced teachers are considerably affected. These effects can be identified as following (Malcolm, Thorpe and Lowden, 1996): Teachers have to revise the previously taught lessons so as not to disappoint the ones who have been away and to enable them catch up with the others; It takes a long time to get the students back in the system; Order in class and the routine are harmed. *The effect of absenteeism on other students:* Absenteeism harms not only the students who do not go to school, but also the other students at school. According to Malcolm, Thorpe and Lowden (1996), the effects are: Students with absenteeism problem become a bad model for other students and encourage them; An attitude that defies school discipline system and responsibilities is formed; School image in the society is damaged. *The effect of absenteeism on the whole school:* When absenteeism becomes an important problem, its effects are likely to become widespread in the whole school. According to Malcolm, Thorpe & Lowden (1996), these effects are: School reputation, on being degraded; The image of school in society being harmed; Lower performance of school in national exams; Decrease in the efficiency of the programs applied at school and funds being wasted.

Policies of school administration have a significant role in providing regular student attendance (Epstein & Sheldon, 2002). When school administrators and teachers view students labeled as at risk, they attach at-risk

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