Delinquency in Australia
A Critical Appraisal

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School, Truancy and Delinquency

Background

A study was made of Brisbane schoolchildren generally, and truants in particular, in three schools, in an endeavour to understand why children truant. The survey was conducted at two high schools, Richlands and Newmarket, and one primary school at West End.

The original intention had been to select the poor attenders from the school registers, until it was pointed out that most of the sample would be loaded with the genuinely sick, so a teachers’ list was proposed instead. While it was realized that the sample would then be based on the teachers’ views, it was nevertheless decided to accept this aid for the compilation of the lists. For, despite its shortcomings, this seemed a valid starting-point, since the definition “good” or “bad” attender intended to be used in the cross-tabulation was the child’s own report of his attendance behaviour—itself by no means above suspicion.

The word “truancy” is applied as a shorthand term for all those absences that were for reasons other than those acceptable for the school. The interviewers were undergraduates.

This chapter is an abridged and amended version of a chapter from a Research Report to the Commonwealth Commission of Enquiry into Poverty by Paul Wilson, John Braithwaite, Ann Guthrie, and Greg Smith in April 1975. We wish to thank the Australian Government Publishing Service for permission to reproduce this extract from the major report to the Commission.
almost all from the Sociology, Social Work and Psychology Departments at the University of Queensland. The students were interviewed singly, in complete privacy, and the mothers were interviewed at home, privately, taking as much care as possible that no child was in earshot.

**Introduction**

Truancy is commonly regarded as one manifestation of the broader phenomenon of delinquency. However, in our view, truancy is best considered to be a phenomenon on its own, not subsumed under the diverse range of activities associated with delinquency. Nevertheless, when relevant, we will discuss that theoretical literature that relates experiences at school to delinquency, if only because many similar experiences seem to be shared by those that we call truant as well as those that have been defined by law as delinquent.

Both our own research on truancy and the available literature leads us to subscribe to a multifactor model of truancy. The causes of truancy are seen as partly inhering in the family; partly in the social structure of the society; partly in the peer group; and partly in the school. Nevertheless, even though we subscribe to a multifactor model of truancy, we urge that particular attention be paid to the role of the school in policies relating to the prevention of truancy. Unlike the family or the society at large, the school is an institution uniquely under the control of public policy, and on these grounds alone disproportionate attention should be paid to the social structure of that institution as a factor in truancy.

**The Relevance of School or Students’ Futures**

Our study of Brisbane schoolchildren generally, and truants specifically, clearly demonstrates the lack of relevance of much of the curriculum of a school to the students’ future. For example, 230 high school students were asked the question: “Is there anything you would like to be learning at the school that you are not learning now?” Only 11 per cent mentioned “traditional school skills” such as writing, spelling, a language or domestic science. An additional eight students specifically mentioned “better English”, which could also be regarded as a traditional school skill. Twelve per cent mentioned vocational skills, and a good number also mentioned artistic skills, hobbies and sports. Answers reflected a concern for more studies at school that were relevant to the future—either vocationally or for recreation—and less interest in having more of the traditional school subjects, which overall did not seem to be perceived as particularly relevant to their futures.

Various interpretations could be placed upon the responses to the question: “Do you think that what you have learned at school will help you with your job?” The fact that so large a number as 42 per cent said that what they had learned at school would help them “a lot” with their job could be interpreted as indicating a high level of relevance to vocational futures. On the other hand, the position could be taken that since a primary function of the school is specifically to prepare students for their work life, anything less than an overwhelming majority of students stating that the school has a lot of relevance to their work life would seem to be a major failing on the part of the school!

To the question: “Do you think that what you learned at school is likely to be helpful to you after you have left school, apart from your job?”, only 29 per cent responded “a lot”. Parents were slightly more optimistic about the relevance of the school for future work life and considerably more optimistic about its usefulness for future non-work life.

If students displayed a less than desirable optimism about the relevance of school for their futures, they were practically unanimous in agreeing that good grades were important for getting the kind of job that they wanted. Only 8 per cent would say that they were not at all important. Thus commitment to school is not so much because the school is seen as intrinsically valuable for the things they will be doing in the future but because getting good grades is seen as necessary for obtaining the jobs they want.
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There is a very strong tendency for those who perceive school as irrelevant to both their work and non-work futures to like school less. Whether students stop liking school because they perceive it as irrelevant or whether they begin to see it as irrelevant because they don’t like it is a question that can only properly be answered by a longitudinal study. Nevertheless, one of the necessary conditions for the validation of the hypothesis that the irrelevance of school to their futures is one of the things that turns kids off the school has been established by way of this strong correlation.

Truants were also less likely than non-truants to believe that what they were doing at school was useful for their futures. Saying that a greater number of subjects was a waste of time was also correlated with truancy. Truants were even somewhat less likely to believe that getting good grades was important for getting the kind of job they wanted. Even the powerful extrinsic motivations of the school had lost some of their attraction for many truants.

Many of our students spontaneously rejected school as being both irrelevant and boring. Consider this response from one truant.

I have played truant a few times. Most of the times just to be in with my friends, but also because I was bored of school and because homework was uncompleted. Everything at school is the same old routine: Parade, class, lunch, class, go home. Lunch hours are all the same and the main activities are for pantries. The teachers have too big a classes, which makes them cranky and also leaves the slower learners behind. Home is a nice place to wag it when my mum goes out, but I don’t smoke and I do feel guilty because of disloyalty to her, but with the exceptions of my friends, the rest of school is totally boring.

In our view, the truant’s analysis of the school’s relevance for his future is a realistic one. No attempt is made to have work experience integrated into the school programme. Adequate labour market information is not made available to the students. School does not give young people the bureaucratic competence necessary to work the job market. Our observational studies of Brisbane schools revealed that there is no flexibility to allow students with unusual interests perhaps related to vocations to which they aspire (say, architecture) to follow those interests. And in the content of courses generally, little effort is made by teachers to find out what the job world is like and how their courses might be made relevant to that world.

Just as the school fails to prepare the adolescent for the world of work, so it fails to prepare him for that growing proportion of his existence that is leisure. The school should be working hard at involving students in recreational interests, which will provide them with fulfillment and satisfaction for the rest of their lives. Instead, the narrow range of activities that are offered are nearly all team activities, which only young people engage in (e.g., basketball, softball, cricket, athletics, football). Most drop these strenuous team activities soon after leaving school, so the recreational legacy that the school leaves is nil for the rest of the person’s life. As with vocational interests, there is insufficient attempt to cater for the diversity of recreational interests that exist in any population of students. If your interests do not lie in one of the mainstream activities, you are ignored. Efforts to involve students in recreation are notably important in the context of coping with truancy.

Teacher–Pupil Relationships

Our research clearly indicates that strains in the relationships between teachers and pupils contribute substantially towards dissatisfaction with school. It is significant to note that when we asked our sample of school attenders what they least liked about the school, the most common response from pupils was “teachers” or “some teachers in particular”.

The thing that their parents mentioned most often was that discipline in the school was not sufficiently strict. The finding is interesting in relation to the frequent advocacy by radical educationalists for the involvement of the community in the running of the schools as a strategy for liberating children from their repressive situation. Our data suggest that parental and
community attitudes are such that increased influence by them in decision-making within the school would increase repression through more tightly regimented discipline. When asked directly what they thought of the standard of behaviour expected of them, students were equally divided between thinking it was “a bit too strict” and that it should be “a bit more strict”, but mothers overwhelmingly thought it should be stricter. The public-opinion obstacles to a more “liberated” school environment are therefore considerable.

When asked if they felt “picked on” by teachers, only 13 per cent of students said “a lot” or “quite a bit”. Eighty-five per cent of students and a similar percentage of their mothers felt that teachers took enough interest in their work. Only a quarter of students didn’t care about what their teachers thought of them, and only 13 per cent of mothers thought their children didn’t care what teachers thought of them.

Thus teachers were found on some issues to be held in high regard. An exception was that a majority of both students and parents felt that the standard of work expected by teachers was too high.

Not surprisingly, however, those who thought the teacher did not take enough interest in their work; who didn’t care what the teachers thought of them; who thought both the standard of work and standard of behaviour expected were too high and too strict; and who thought that the teachers picked on them, were those who liked school least. Of course, not liking school is associated with high levels of truancy. Thus we find that those with high levels of truancy were more likely to think that the teacher did not take enough interest in their work; not to care what the teacher thought of them; to think that the standard of work expected of them was too high; and to think that the teachers picked on them. There was only a slight relationship between the extent to which the standard of discipline was regarded as too strict and truancy.

Thus we find that the truants are far more critical of teachers in a number of respects, and hostility is apparent. As final evidence for this, on the open-ended question: “What do you like least about the school?” there were no real differences in response between truants and non-truants, except on one category—“the teachers”. Truants were twice as likely as non-truants to mention “teachers” or some particular teachers as the thing they liked least about school.

Comments from our respondents illustrate vividly the contribution that teachers play in children’s truancy. Consider these excerpts (grammar and spelling as original) from essays given to us by children on “why students truant”.

Most of the time it’s the teachers or parents fault. The teachers picks on me all the day, so why do I bother to go to school?

Children who play the wage often have very good reasons to. Some play the wage because they hate teachers, most kids hide out in drain pipes or go to a friends place, or they wonder the streets and vandalize people’s houses.

I think that people [children] played truant because they despise a teacher they have or they want to show off.

My teacher picks on me. He doesn’t like my hair, my clothes or me. He likes to try and put me down in class and show how clever he is. He doesn’t care about me, what I do at home or what I’m interested in. He just wants give me all that bullshit in class.

The irrelevance of much of what goes on at school is often compounded by the lack of interest shown by teachers in both the personal and social aspects of the child’s life. While teachers may strongly deny the validity of these allegations, it is quite clear to us, to paraphrase an old sociological dictum, that if children define a situation as real, it becomes real in its effect. The compounding of irrelevant school curriculum and teacher disinterest is nicely illustrated by the following quotation from one of our respondent’s essays.

Why do kids play truants, well I think it’s because they hate school: they have had a hard time in there life no one in there life has ever taken time to understand them and if they have, they don’t want there help. They haven’t had teachers help and haven’t done anything at school to interest them. There bored stupid and they want something to interest them.
Punishment

As part of our investigation into the relationship between the school and truancy, we paid particular attention to corporal punishment and to other classroom punishments. Let us begin by considering corporal punishment.

Corporal punishment

Our sample of 222 (half of which were female) reported a total of more than 259 occasions upon which they had been sent to the principal, deputy principal or senior mistress and caned. Sixty-eight per cent of the sample, mostly female, had never been caned. There was also a large number of canings reported as having been administered by ordinary teachers—more than 158. Seventy-six per cent had never been caned by a teacher. Thus caning is a very frequently used method of social control in the Queensland schools studied. It is noteworthy that all of the upwards of 158 canings perpetrated by ordinary teachers were illegal under Section 36(1) of the Education Act, which expressly restricts the right to cane to principals, or deputy principals, who are authorized by the principal to do so.

The extent to which students reported liking school bore little or no relationship to whether they had been caned by a teacher or not. However, more of those who liked school had not been caned by the principal, deputy or senior mistress. There was no consistent relationship between truancy and being caned by the teacher. The relationship between truancy and being caned by the principal or deputy principal was a confusing one. More truants than non-truants reported not having been caned! But all of the 17 students who had been caned on more than eight occasions were truants, and mostly frequent truants. Thus while we might be able to say that the students who are caned regularly are typically serious truants, at any other level the relationship between canning and rejection of the school is very tenuous.

This is borne out by other findings in our survey. Only one of the entire sample mentioned caning as the thing he liked least about school. When students were asked if they had ever felt bitter about something a teacher had done to them, and why, “smacking, hitting and caning” did not emerge as a very common cause of bitterness.

Thus corporal punishment did not emerge as the source of antagonism that we expected it would. This is consistent with the findings from a New Zealand study of caning by Mercurio. Many of Mercurio’s informants expressed a strong preference for caning over other forms of punishment.

You actually prefer it. A detention takes an hour of your life. A caning—well—it’s only a couple of minutes.

Far from being a psychologically damaging experience, Mercurio reported that it was more often a means of asserting manhood and achieving sought-after popularity with the peer group. However, even though caning did not appear to be a significant factor in engendering a bitter reaction towards the school, it would be remiss of us not to comment on some dangers associated with this form of social control. If the teacher acts as a role model for the impressionable youngster, and in the last section we expressed the hope that he would, then what are the consequences of modelling upon a violent adult example? Surely the behaviour of the teacher, which is portrayed to the child as the ideal, is socializing the child into the belief that violence is an acceptable and common way to solve problems. The culture of violence in our society, which we blame on the delinquents and the unwashed protesters, may have its roots less in the gutter than in the respectable atmosphere of the headmaster’s waiting-room. A final extract from Mercurio sums up the problem.

“You really respect a teacher more who canes,” Tony offered. I said, “Well, Mr Jamison canes a lot. Do you respect him?” Michael acknowledged, “No. He canes all the time.” “But take Mr Pierce,” John now inquired of the other boys. “Would you like him as much if he didn’t cane?” The other six agreed that they really wouldn’t. “Why do you fellows so respect a master who canes?” I asked. “He’s kind of on a pedestal,” Chris answered, on the group’s behalf.

Physical methods of punishment probably have some ef-
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ficacy in bringing about conformity in the short term. However, the practice is based on an overly simplistic theory of social control. Once the immediate threat of physical punishment is removed, all incentive to conform disappears. This is not the case with methods of social control, which depend on the development of a conscience or feelings of personal responsibility. It is possible to achieve limited success by bashing a child into learning, but once the child leaves school, and the threat of being bashed is removed, he may never learn anything for the rest of his life. Our study suggests that too many teachers operate on a theory of social control that overvalues visible short-term goals at the expense of more important long-term goals.

Other school punishments

Teachers have a great repertoire of punishments at their disposal apart from corporal punishment—most of them informal. Only four children in the sample had ever been suspended from the school for any period. Fifty-five per cent had been sent from the classroom at least once in their careers.

Only a third of the sample said they never worried about punishments that could be put upon them. While 92 per cent of the sample had never stayed away for this reason, there were more than 112 truancies that arose from students’ “fear of being punished or ridiculed by teachers or principals”. This reason for truancy was twice as common as fear of “being bullied or ridiculed by other students”, but far less common than staying in “help at home” or staying away “just because there was something else you would rather do”. Therefore, fear of punishment is very real as a strain among children that leads to truancy. Truants do not seem to worry about punishment any more or less than non-truants.

Students who like school are less often sent from the classroom, and so are non-truants. There is a tendency for both more students who do not like school, and more truants, to feel bitter about something a teacher did to them.

The reasons for this bitterness seem very important. We have pointed out that corporal punishment did not figure as a reason of great import. By far, the most frequent single cause of bitterness was being wrongly accused of something that the student did not do. Moreover, truants were more likely to cite this as the reason for their bitterness than non-truants who were bitter. Many teachers fancy themselves as ace private detectives. Often they are too arrogant to conceive of the possibility that they have the wrong man. And in the rare situation where the innocent is able to disprove his guilt to the teacher, an apology is rarely forthcoming. There is no more certain way to turn a child into a hateful rebel than to wrongly accuse him of a misdemeanour. This problem will be further discussed in the next section on labelling.

To conclude this section though, it would be remiss for us not to point out that the fear of punishment is an immense force in preventing truancy. If the traditional competitive school system creates great pressures that push kids to the brink of delinquency, its authoritarian system of punishment at the same time creates almost equal pressures pushing them back from the brink. Nowhere was the effect that the fear of being caught had in preventing truancy more apparent than in the essays that we asked many of our respondents to write about truancy.

We were dragged back to school then told to go back to class after we got a big lecture by old Lane Brain (Mr Lane), the principal. The reason he missed us was because he couldn’t find us for the file band practice. I shall never play the wag again.

The Competitive School System

It is unwise to equate truancy with delinquency—after all, the latter term subsumes a wide range of behaviours that differ significantly among themselves. Nevertheless, we believe it is important to remember that the available academic literature demonstrates a close relationship between poor academic performance at school and delinquency. In our view, these forces operating in this relationship may well be similar in the case of truancy. Our data would tend to support this interpretation.
There is a clear correlation between truancy and self-ratings of poor academic performance. There is also an association between truancy and low self-ratings on literacy. A relationship, but a fairly weak one, is also to be found between poor academic performance and a dislike of school.

The most widely accepted explanation of the association between school failure and behavioural patterns, as put forward by Albert Cohen and others, is that being labelled as a failure by the school engenders bitterness towards the school and the conventional values that the school upholds. Having failed in the status system of the school, the student has a status problem, which must be resolved. He solves it collectively with other students who have been similarly rejected by the school, by banding together and setting up their own status system with values that are the exact inverse of those of the school—contempt for property and authority instead of respect for property and authority; immediate impulse gratification instead of impulse control; apathy instead of ambition; toughness instead of control of aggression. By participating in this subculture, the poor academic performer can enhance his self-image by rejecting his rejectors.

Not by any means do all of the students who perform poorly at school feel failures. When the 42 students with the poorest academic self-ratings were asked: “Do you feel a failure for not doing well at school?”, 17 of them said “no”. These students may have so totally rejected the status system of the school in a bitter reaction against the way the school has treated them that they can no longer see themselves as being a failure in those terms. However, Downes would explain their not seeing themselves as failures as indicative of “disassociation” from the value system of the school rather than rebellion against it. Downes maintains that the school failure responds to the boredom and frustration of the school by simply withdrawing interest in the work world of the school. He deflects what aspirations he has left into the areas that Downes termed nonwork (rather than leisure). If he is a failure, he simply doesn’t care.

Probably those who opt for dissociation rather than rebel-

lion are less likely to have major behavioural problems. Certainly, our data show that those poor academic performers who regard themselves as failures have higher levels of truancy than those who do not.

Also consistent with Downes’s theory is the finding that those who dislike school downgrade its importance on the question: “How important is getting good grades to you personally?”

Although many students may either disassociate from or rebelliously reject the status system of the school, the fact remains that more students said they would like to be “a bright student” than the combined number who would prefer to be “good at sport”, “popular with own sex”, “popular with other sex”, a “student leader”, or “well-dressed”. Nevertheless, an even greater number of students said they would like to be “just average”. On the same question, although somewhat more ambitious than their children, a third of the students’ mothers indicated that they would prefer their child to be “just average”, to be “a bright student”, “good at sport”, etc. The culture of mediocrity.

When asked what best described them (as opposed to what they would most like to be), 62 per cent of students and 41 per cent of their mothers described them as “just average”. The greatest discrepancies between what mothers and students would like and what they actually were occurred in the “bright student” category. Whereas the greatest aspiration of 34 per cent of students was to be “a bright student”, only 8 per cent of students could actually describe themselves as such (42 per cent versus 18 per cent for mothers). Thus academic aspirations was the greatest source of frustration. In contrast, for example, there were more students (and mothers) who claimed to be “good at sport” than there were who claimed this as their main aspiration.

Mothers of truants were less likely to describe their children as “a bright student”, but slightly more likely to describe them as “good at sport”.

Surprisingly, there was no tendency for the mothers of non-
truants to indicate higher aspirations by more frequently indicating that they would like their child to be “a bright
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Parental aspirations therefore being equal for truants and non-truants, discrepancies between mothers' aspiration and success in actually becoming a bright student were most common among truants. It may be, then, that failure to measure up to parental standards of attainment causes distress, which is manifested in rejection of the school.

Students were asked: "What job would you like to have when you leave school?" Mothers were also asked what sort of job they would like and expect their child to have when they leave school, as well as what sort of job their husbands would like the child to have. Only 23 per cent of students said they would like to get a professional or managerial job when they left school. The gross discrepancy between what the sample expected to get and what they aspired to was very small, with 17 per cent expecting to get professional or managerial jobs. Similarly, there was little discrepancy between what mothers would like and fathers would like (18 per cent compared with 15 per cent professional and managerial); and between what mothers would like and mothers expected (18 per cent compared to 16 per cent professional and managerial). Thus aspirations were generally fairly realistic in relation to expectations and there were not great discrepancies between the aspirations and expectations of students compared with those of both parents.

Level of truancy bore little or no relation to the kind of job the mothers would like their children to have. Lower job aspirations was not characteristic of the mothers of truants. Fathers of truants were less likely to have professional aspirations for their sons and more likely to support skilled jobs. Unlike the jobs aspired to, the jobs expected by mothers showed a marked decline in status with increasing truancy. Therefore, maternal job aspirations being equal for truants and non-truants and job expectations being lower for truants than for non-truants, truants are characterized by an adverse discrepancy between what their mothers would like them to be and what they expect them to be.

A three-way cross-tabulation between truancy, students' job aspirations and students' job expectations reveals more about the relevance of the aspiration-expectation discrepancy as a factor in truancy. Sixty per cent (18 out of 30) of those who both aspired to a professional job and expected a professional job had never truanted, whereas 45 per cent (5 out of 11) of those who aspired to a professional job but did not expect a professional job had never truanted. Clearly, the numbers are too small in the latter case to put any faith in the data trend. Nevertheless, as with our earlier results, the data is consistent with an effect of adverse aspiration-expectation discrepancies on truancy.

The discrepancy between aspirations to be "a bright student" and actually perceiving oneself as a "bright student" was also examined in a three-way cross-tabulation with truancy. Sixty per cent (6 out of 10) of those who aspired to being a "bright student" and achieved that aspiration had never truanted, while 36 per cent (24 out of 66) of those who aspired to being "a bright student" but did not achieve that aspiration never truanted. Again the data trend is in the expected direction, but again the numbers in one of the categories is too small.

To summarize: Overall discrepancies between job aspirations and job expectations are not common, but when they occur they are consistently related to high rates of truancy. Low levels of job aspiration for their children on the part of fathers bears a weak relation to truancy, but for mothers there is no relationship. Discrepancies between academic aspirations and actual achievement are very common, and when they occur they are consistently associated with truancy. Mothers of truants did not have lower aspirations for their children than mothers of non-truants.

Thus truancy is related to both absolute failure in the school system and failure to achieve relative to aspirations. The implications of this finding are discussed in the concluding section of this chapter.

Streaming and the Structure of Classes

Our attempts to gain information on the effects of streaming were complicated by different procedures operating between schools. One school (West End) was not streamed, though
teachers within grades could and did “exchange” children, so that each teacher took a group with a narrow range of ability for specific subjects, usually mathematics. On the other hand, Grade 8 in another school (Richlands) is not streamed at all. Grade 9 at the same school is divided only as far as the different courses dictate, i.e. with no extra streaming within the academic or industrial or commercial courses. The tenth grade at Richlands is rigidly streamed. Although the philosophy of the present principal is against this, he felt it better to retain the groupings of the previous principal for those children already in the school. The Newmarket High School children are consistently streamed. Our three categories in streaming, therefore, are inexact, but are a fair reflection of the status of each child. Three-quarters of the sample, therefore, were streamed to some extent. When asked if they were in the stream that they wanted to be in, a small 7 per cent said “no”. In all thirteen cases, the reason for wanting to be in another stream was either a preference for a higher academic standard or the feeling that other children muck around too much in their present class. Although there is very little evidence of dissatisfaction with the stream that students are allocated, more students felt that if they did want to change streams they couldn’t than those who believed they could. While students do feel locked into streams, this fact does not seem to worry many.

A variety of educational studies have demonstrated that students from lower streams experience more behavioural problems than those of other streams. Our survey data demonstrate that the same relationship holds with truancy. In addition, the survey results show that those in lower streams more often dislike school. In this regard, two comments made by our respondents are worth noting.

You feel like the dummies. All the other kids look on us as being tough but dumb. I don’t reckon I’m as bright as other kids but I don’t care—I hate school.

I might be in the lowest class but school’s crap. Who cares about it. The worse I do the better I feel.

Hargreaves’ was able to show that boys in high streams con-
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truant on his own. Moreover, the tendency to truant with peers was even stronger among those who truanted more frequently. The peer group thus plays a major role in attracting students into truancy, as some of our students’ comments demonstrate.

Sometimes boys and girls wag it together and have an orgy. A group I know do but they did anyway until they were caught. I’m glad. It’s disgusting.

When you wag it you’re doing it because you’ve been dared or you just want to get away from school. Sometimes you do it with a mate, sometimes not. You meet at a certain place and then go down the bush or somin. Take food, money and smokes if you can get them. Mostly enjoy doing nothing and knowing you’re missing out on school. Go home like you’ve been to school forge a letter take it next day and no-one knows you’ve waged it.

While the peer group is important in the positive sense of attracting students away from the school, it is relatively unimportant in the negative sense of repelling students away from the school. Unpleasant experiences with peers do not figure largely as a factor in making students fed up with school. Eighty-seven per cent of all students felt that they were either “very popular” or “fairly popular” with their own sex, and 61 per cent felt they were very or fairly popular with the opposite sex. The vast majority felt that their friends would stick by them if they got into really serious trouble. Eighty-eight per cent of students felt that they were not picked on by other students, either “not at all” or “not very much”. Only 15 per cent said they worried either “a lot” or “quite a bit” about being bullied or ridiculed by other students.

Students were asked: “Have you ever stayed away from school because you were afraid of being bullied or ridiculed by the other students?” Ninety-six per cent of students had never stayed away for this reason. The mere sixty-odd truancies uncovered in our sample arising from ridicule or bullying by peers makes this the least common of those forms of truancy investigated. There was no relationship between either feeling picked on by other students or worrying about being bullied or ridiculed by other students and not liking school. Nor was there any relationship between these variables and truancy.

Furthermore, mothers’ judgements as to whether they were picked on by other students and whether their children worried about this was unrelated to truancy rates.

Our survey results, therefore, are totally consistent with the conclusion that unhappy relationships with school peers is not a major factor in impelling students to engage in truancy and reject the school generally. However, where the normal happy peer group relationships exist, the peer group often is a delinquent force that puts pressure on students to “join in with the gang” by truancing.

Many criminologists take it as an inevitable fact of adolescent psychology that adolescent peer groups will put pressures on its members to buck the dictates of adult authority. However, the school education system is living proof that it is possible to create conditions in schools that make of peer groups a force for conformity with adult values, rather than a force of non-conformity. In Russian schools, conditions of intense competition are set up, but not between individuals. Rather, the competition is between social units—class against class, row against row. The consistent application of this intergroup competition from the first day at school encourages children to take an evaluative attitude towards those who are undermining the achievement of the group.

Records are kept on the relative performance of each social unit on all facets of behaviour—personal cleanliness, good conduct, reading, etc. At first, it is the teacher who monitors the performance of the different groups. But later, a monitor is appointed from among the group members for each facet of behaviour. The monitors take over from the teacher an increasing responsibility for supervising the performance of the group, as they become older. At first, the monitors simply record the evaluations of the teacher; then they start to make their own evaluations of group performance; they then state their criticisms publicly. At about the third grade, the teacher introduces still another procedure. She now proposes that the children enter into competition with the monitors, and see if they can beat the monitor at his own game by criticizing themselves. Thus the social structure of the Soviet school
creates conditions that guide peer groups into taking a self-criticism and behavioural control function.

In systematic psychological investigations, Bronfenbrenner was able to show that there were clear differences between Soviet children and those from other countries (the United States, England, West Germany) in their readiness to engage in morally disapproved behaviour, such as cheating on a test or denying responsibility for property damage. Under all experimental conditions, the Russian children were less willing to engage in anti-social behaviour than their Western counterparts. However, the most telling finding was that in an experimental condition where peers were to be informed of the children’s actions, American children were even more inclined to take part in misconduct, while Soviet youngsters showed just the opposite tendency. In fact, the knowledge that classmates would find out about it was almost as effective as parents or teachers finding out for inhibiting anti-social behaviour among Russian children. It is interesting to note the earnestness with which problems are tackled by the peer group. A transfer of power from adults to pupils seems, on this evidence, unlikely to lead to greater laxity: children can be at least as strict as their elders.

In another experiment, Bronfenbrenner compared the responses of Swiss and Soviet pupils when asked which of four actions they would take if they discovered that a classmate was engaging in some form of misconduct. (The forms of misconduct were various in nature and seriousness.) The four actions were:

1. Tell an adult, so that he could put a stop to it.
2. Tell the other kids, so that they could do something about it.
3. Talk to the child himself and tell him he should not do it.
4. Do nothing about it, since it really is not my business.

A great majority of Soviet youngsters (75 per cent) said they would deal with the problem by talking to the child themselves. Only a third of the Swiss youngsters opted for this course of action. Twenty per cent of Swiss children, compared to 1 per cent of Russians, preferred to do nothing. Swiss children were more likely than the Russians to want to tell an adult, but less likely to take the matter to peers.

The evidence seems clear that the Soviet peer group acts to inhibit behaviour disapproved by the school rather than to encourage it. Thus our finding in this study that peer relationships act to attract children into truancy is certainly not an inevitable state of affairs. A school social structure, which gives peer groups responsibility for controlling behaviour and with a formal reward structure based on the group rather than the individual, might reverse this situation.

Labelling

We have reported before on the fact that the major source of antagonism towards the school apparent in our data was being wrongly accused of something. When an innocent student is found guilty of some misdemeanour, there is no machinery available to him for redress of his grievances. The right of appeal to an impartial body is a democratic right, which apparently is only applicable to adults. The staff member concerned is always judge, jury and executioner. When the Council for Democracy in Schools wrote to the principals of twenty-nine Queensland schools, asking if they could distribute to students copies of the sections of the Education Act relating to punishment, so that students could be made aware of their rights, not one school gave permission. Opportunity is always blocked for students to exercise the few and vague rights that they do have.

The problem of bitterness arising from wrongful accusations is part of the more general problem of students being labelled as “rat-bags”, “trouble-makers”, “no-hopers”, and the like. The labelling of students in these terms becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy. The fact that they are labelled as “trouble-makers” causes them actually to become trouble-makers. Persistent labelling as deviant ultimately leads to the student accepting a deviant self-image. Consider the following comments from our respondents:
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She called me a brat, the bitch. If I’m a brat so are many of my mates.

I didn’t cheat but Mr X told everyone I did. I should have cheated though and then it would have been worth being punished.

This young teacher called me a rat-bag you know. Reckons I cause trouble. Well he’s going to be right from now on.

In our study, we found teachers using a great variety of ways of stigmatizing students. They ridicule and abuse students in front of their peers; tell them to “get out of here” and “I don’t want you in my class”; refrain from choosing them for minor but prestigious classroom or school assignments; exclude them from participation in certain extra-curricula activities. This process, in turn, often subjects students to negative parental responses, representing a further penalty. Little wonder “the rat-bags” join together and hit back at school.

A great deal could be done to reduce school behaviour problems if teachers would desist from labelling kids as “rat-bags”, “louts”, “no-hopers”, “slobs”, or whatever. Contrary to the common-sense notions of most teachers, stigma is a counter-productive weapon in coping with misbehaviour. In punishing misdeeds, teachers should be careful to define the act as bad, but not to define as bad the person who committed the act. To do the latter invites the deviance-amplifying effects of labelling. There is an important difference between saying, “That was a despicable act” and “You are a despicable person.” Good teachers often go to further lengths to avert the labelling problem, namely, “That was a despicable act. I am surprised that a person like you would do such a thing.” Thus students should be punished not for being sinful but for committing a sin. We might have less truancy and less school problems generally if, when punishing students, instead of thinking and saying “rat-bag”, teachers thought, “He’s made a mistake, and he’s paying for it.”

Conclusion

Let us summarize what we have said in this chapter. In our view, much can be done to reduce truancy by paying particular attention to the formal and informal processes that characterize the school environment. Our data strongly suggest that truancy is related to a considerable extent to an overly competitive school system, which manifests itself in an overemphasis on “competition”, on streaming classes, and on the lack of relevance of much of what is taught in school to a child’s future.

The irrelevance to many children of schools is compounded by the lack of interest shown by some teachers in a child’s personal and social life, and by the labelling of many children as “no-hopers” or “trouble-makers”. Children who are unable to cope with these pressures are particularly prone to becoming truant, seeking with their peers to escape from what they perceive as the hostile school environment.

In perusing the published literature on truancy, we have noted the frequency with which writers stress the need for more school counsellors or welfare officers to combat the problems associated with truancy.11 We reject this approach to the overall issue. The evidence in the literature provides little support for the notion that counselling and psychotherapy actually improve the probability of overcoming truancy. In addition, our own data indicate that parents would be uninterested in this approach. For example, our data indicate that when parents are invited to see counsellors about a problem, the most common response by them is simply not to go.

Of course, many educationalists would argue that it is misconstruing the problem to argue that it is the system that is at fault. They point out that the majority of children do adjust to the system and that it is only a minority who have adjustment difficulties. (The possibility escapes them that the system might be changed to make that minority even smaller.) It is not that there is something wrong with the system, but that there is something wrong with a small number of individual children. In fact, there is evidence that it is the very children who try
hardest not to be "wrong" who end up being devoured by the system. Conger and Miller\textsuperscript{12} found that among children of low I.Q. (both middle-class and working-class) those who in the early grades (kindergarten to Grade 9) were rated by teachers to have good "regard for persons", good "sense of responsibility" and good "work habits" were more likely to have social and behavioural problems in adolescence than matched children who had poor ratings on these behaviour dimensions.

As our analysis demonstrates, only structural changes to the school will significantly affect the problems associated with truancy. It seems to us that a fundamental advantage of structural changes is that it avoids labelling certain children as "problems", and labelling itself is a cause of maladjustment. In the individual case-oriented approach, problem children must be singled out for special treatment, thus facilitating pathological labelling.

Consequently, while not denying the value of the individual approach in certain situations, we urge strongly that serious consideration be given to training schemes that sensitize teachers about the adverse effects of labelling, to curricula that makes school more relevant to the child's present and future environment, and to structural changes that would radically alter the crippling competitive nature of most school systems. In this context, we strongly suggest that schools can function successfully by motivating children to achieve goals of absolute worth, rather than by motivating children to do relatively better than other children. Many Australian schools are moving towards competition against the individual's own past performance, instead of against the performance of other children. Under the ipsative model, all children "succeed" and none "fail", since all improve their own past performance. A drastic reduction in competitiveness is the kind of fundamental structural change in schools that would be required to substantially reduce truancy and other behaviour problems arising from outright failure at school, worry about the possibility of failure, or failure to achieve the success either expected or aspired to.

Notes

1. Support for this assertion can be found in the studies reported in G. Smith, "Delinquency and Leisure" (M.A. thesis, University of Queensland, 1975).
3. Ibid., p. 52.
9. Of course, classes within schools and rows within classes are not organized such that some classes or some rows are far superior or inferior to others. There are no social units that are consistently failures, so that no social units lose their incentive to compete for this reason.