

QUALITY OF SCHOOL LIFE AND ABSENTEEISM IN PRIMARY SCHOOLS

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Abstract

This paper presents a study of possible relationships between quality of school life and absenteeism of 254 Year 5 and 6 students in 19 classes at 6 Lower Hunter Valley primary schools. The Quality of School Life (Ainley & Bourke, 1992) scales were used as indicators of student satisfaction and stress. The contextual variables of gender, school, class, number of days absent and, for the majority of students, year of schooling were collected and investigated for their relationship with student absence.

The analyses indicated a strong link between student perception of the quality of their school life and absenteeism. Where students felt less stress they were absent less often than students who were more stressed. Female students were also more likely to be absent than males.

Implications of these results are then discussed including the apparent importance of positive peer relationships and an exciting and enjoyable curriculum in ensuring students have a high quality of school life. The need for the provision of support services to students who indicated a high level of dissatisfaction with their school life is also highlighted.

Introduction

This study was founded on the concept that for primary school children the school environment they share with teachers resembles an actual workplace. Such an assumption is feasible as students spend a similar number of hours each day at school as are spent at work by many members of the work force; they undertake mental and physical tasks of similar duration and intensity to many workers; their output is monitored by superiors; and, as with many workplaces, they have a regimented daily routine.

Whilst childhood is often perceived as a happy time (Ainley & Bourke, 1992; Leonard, 1998; Schofield & Bourke, 1997), Schofield and Bourke argued that the years spent by children in educational environments is also a time of considerable stress, as success or failure in this environment was a major determinant of future occupational status. Thus, it is possible to assume that that work, social, and environmental stresses that operate in the workplace may also operate within a school context.

Review of Literature

Definition of Stress

A definition of stress was adopted that conceptualises stress as a nonspecific response of the body which is a natural and often essential reaction until it has accrued to a level that is beyond the individual's ability to cope, promoting reactions which are frequently abnormal and irrational (Alsop & McCaffrey, 1993; Gill, 1983; Greenhaus & Parasuraman, 1987; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). The implications of this definition are that pressure and strain on the body induced by the reactions of the individual to stress accompany the response of the body to stress.

Further, as the study was confined to the area of work-related stress, it was important to make the distinction between occupational stress and other forms of stress. As with all forms of stress that exceed an individual's ability to cope, stresses which operate in the workplace pose a serious threat to the health of individuals in that organisation and hence to productivity. In the workplace, stress up to a certain level results in improved job performance, but after this point performance is diminished, and is often associated with deterioration in worker health (Pelletier, 1984; Workcover Authority of New South Wales, 1996).

A job stressor is an event or environmental condition in the workplace that provokes tension or anxiety (Beehr & Franz, 1987). Three categories are often used to describe the sources of stress in the workplace: *Organisational demands* - job role, relationships and interpersonal demands, career development, structure and climate; *Extra-organisational demands* - interaction of life and work events; and, *Individual characteristics* - physiological, psychological, and behavioural responses to stress (Groen & Bastiaans, 1975; Ianni & Reuss-Ianni, 1983; Sutherland & Cooper, 1988).

The nature of the individual and their occupation may impact on the symptoms of stress exhibited by that particular person. Sources of stress in a particular job, together with individual/personality characteristics may be indicators of the presentation of stress in a variety of forms. These forms include job dissatisfaction, mental ill health, physical ill health (including high blood pressure), burnout, cardiovascular disease, gastrointestinal disorders, accident occurrence, alcohol and substance abuse, social/emotional problems, reduced productivity and, importantly for this study, absenteeism (Farber, 1983; Greenhaus & Parasuraman, 1987; Pelletier, 1984; Sutherland & Cooper, 1988). Similarly Johnson (1986) reported that occupational stress was linked to a wide range of physical problems, chronic illnesses, and the frequency of accidents.

A survey of almost 10 000 Australian workers found that one in four workers took time off due to stress at work in the twelve months preceding the study, while 60 percent of subjects reported symptoms such as headaches, tiredness, anger and sleep difficulties (Australian Council of Trade Unions, 1998). Males reported more indigestion, ulcers, distrustful feelings, increased blood pressure, increased smoking and/or alcohol abuse, while female workers reported significantly more continual tiredness, cramps, headaches, and sleeplessness. One in four workers identified management issues such as lack of communication and consultation, increased workload, restructuring and organisational change, and lack of job security as the most stressful conditions at work. If students are considered to be surrogate workers and hence experiencing work related stress, the nature and symptoms of stress for students in the school environment would also appear to require further examination.

Student Stress, Satisfaction and Absenteeism

There is some research evidence to support the argument presented in the introductory section that school is a surrogate workplace for students (Forman & O'Malley, 1984; Schofield & Bourke, 1997; Leonard, 1998). Student stress sources, identified in the literature, can be classified into four categories: *Physical Environment* - ventilation, repetitive tasks, potential for violence, confined spaces (Workcover Authority of New South Wales, 1996); *Assessment* - school work, competition, tests (Dickey & Henderson, 1989; Elias, 1989; Elkind, 1988); *Management* - daily structure, discipline (Elkind, 1988), and; *Student-Teacher Interpersonal Relationships* - peers, teachers, social interactions (Elkind, 1988). Student variables such as gender (Garton & Pratt, 1995; Longfellow & Belle, 1984), age (Carson & Bittner, 1993), and year of schooling (Waugh & Hyde, 1993), have also been found to affect students' reactions to school related stresses.

A relationship between student satisfaction, stress and absenteeism is evident. Increased stress has been linked to absenteeism (Kasl, 1980; Leonard, 1998), poor self-concept has been strongly connected to increased susceptibility to school related stress (Barker, 1987; Reed, 1984) while student absenteeism has also been associated with poor self-concept. Both male and female students with persistent patterns of absenteeism have been identified as having significantly lower self-concepts than that of their peers (Reid, 1982). Lower levels of student satisfaction with school are also identified as resulting in students being more likely to be absent (Leonard, 1998; Reid, 1986; Schofield & Bourke, 1997).

The nature of assessment, reporting and intervention strategies for dealing with absenteeism utilised by the New South Wales Department of Education and Training point to a possible inconsistency in the consideration of stress as a source of truancy and absenteeism. Students who want to learn have been described as the Department's primary responsibility (New South Wales Department of Education and Training, 1997a), whilst the Director-General stated that schools are not welfare agencies (New South Wales Department of Education and Training, 1997b, p.26). These statements appear to overlook the antecedents that may be affecting students' willingness to learn such as increased stress (Dubow & Tisak, 1989; Schofield, 1995), the role schools may be playing in increasing student stress (D'Aurora & Fimian, 1988; Paykel, 1978; Phillips, 1993;), and the wide reporting of the negative effect of increased stress on absenteeism in the literature (Leonard, 1998; Le Riche, 1995; Miller, 1995; Reed, 1984; Reid, 1982; Reid, 1985; Schofield & Bourke, 1997). The importance of investigating this link unequivocally as intended in this paper is both lucid and pertinent.

Some debate exists regarding the direction of causality between stress and absenteeism. For example, Firth and Britton (1989) proposed that stress led to absenteeism, while Manning and Osland (1989) argued that absenteeism led to increased stress and a cycle of deterioration. In educational environments such as schools, stress can have a negative impact on the health and well being of students as well as teachers. Kiecolt-Glaser and Glaser (1988) found that environmental stress in the form of examinations has a deleterious effect on the immune function of students. Hence it would appear logical to assume that in an educational context, stress leads to increased absenteeism. This hypothesis is supported by the findings of Reid (1983) that students identified institutional factors such as the difficulty of schoolwork and teacher variables rather than factors related to their peers or home as reasons they did not attend school.

Ramifications for Educators and Education Authorities

Under the Occupational Health and Safety Act 1983 No. 20, employers are required to ensure the safety and welfare of their workers, while employees must take reasonable care

of the health and safety of others (New South Wales Parliament, 1983). If students are performing as workers in our schools then it is important that their occupational health and safety be given greater consideration. Furthermore, the New South Wales Department of Education and Training has stated that the duty of care owed by it to students, and carried out through its employees (teachers), involves teachers providing a safe learning environment for their students and taking reasonable measures to protect students against foreseeable risk and harm (New South Wales Department of Education and Training, 1998). This duty of care is derived from the special nature of the relationship between students and teachers and arises whenever a teacher/student relationship exists. Stress would certainly fit into the category of potential or foreseeable harm and thus teachers have a responsibility to minimise stress and hopefully prevent stress-related injuries or illness to their students.

A consequence of this can be deduced from other research which has propounded the hypothesis that stress leads to immunosuppression (Newberry, Jaikins-Madden, & Gerstenberger, 1991; Totman, 1988) which results in an individual being susceptible to viral disease, leading in some cases to a pattern of absenteeism (Donaldson, 1993; Galloway, Pankhurst, Boswell, Boswell, & Green, 1984). In all work environments such a pattern of absenteeism is a major financial issue, but in a school setting there is also the added impact of a reduction in the quality of educational outcomes.

Instrumentation and Method

The Instrument

Students were asked to complete the primary school version of the Quality of School Life questionnaire, the use of which was reported by Ainley and Bourke (1992). The QSL was used as a measure incorporating both satisfaction and stress based on the work of numerous authors (Andrews & Withey, 1976; Burt, et al., 1978; Gerson, 1976; Hart & Conn, 1992; Mitchell & Spady, 1978). Burt et al., for example, conceptualised a model of quality of life that distinguished between positive experiences, negative experiences and other feelings related to specific life domains. More recently, Hart and Conn argued that these positive and negative experiences were unique to each individual and impacted on the individuals' positive psychological states such as wellbeing and satisfaction and negative psychological states such as illbeing and stress (p.34). The authors indicated that it was quite normal for an individual to be satisfied with some aspects of their life whilst finding other aspects stressful.

Historically it has been accepted that positive and negative affect are not polar measurements or opposite ends of a spectrum. Bradburn and Caplovitz (1969), for example, argued this was the case, as high levels of positive affect did not necessarily correspond to low levels of negative affect. Later, Hart and Conn (1992) reported that the concept of positive and negative life experiences contributing differently to an individuals' perception of their overall quality of life or positive and negative psychological states has long been recognised in the field of health psychology. It is relevant to consider these findings with regard to the two general scales of the QSL instrument, General Satisfaction and Negative Affect. It has been argued that these scales are not opposites but rather separate constructs with overlap (Ainley & Bourke, 1988), reinforcing the notion of a continuum incorporating elements of both stress and satisfaction. The health psychology link reported by Hart and Conn also takes on added significance when considered in light of the correlation established between QSL scores and student absence (Leonard, 1998; Leonard, Schofield & Bourke, 1999; Schofield & Bourke, 1997).

The suitability of the QSL is also reinforced by the findings that sources of school based stress (see, Elias, 1989; Elkind, 1988; Forman & O'Malley, 1984), equate to items measured

by the seven scales of the Quality of School Life questionnaire, particularly the Negative Affect Scale. The behaviours reported in a number of studies, for example Waugh and Hyde (1993), of students identified as being dissatisfied with the quality of their school life, were found to be identical to school based stress symptoms. Furthermore, dissatisfaction with the work environment has been reported as a major stress symptom (Farber, 1983; Greenhaus & Parasuraman, 1987; Pelletier, 1984; Sutherland & Cooper, 1988). Accordingly it was anticipated that the broad coverage of the QSL scales would allow accurate conclusions to be drawn about the elements which students find stressful and satisfying at school.

The Research Question

The research question involved a single level analysis of student data and was in two parts. The first part, research question 1, was an analysis of the relationships between student variables, student quality of school life and absence.

Question 1. What relationships exist between the student variables, students' perceptions of the quality of their school life and absence?

Research question 2 attempted to identify the link between higher student stress and increased absenteeism:

Question 2. Do students who perceive various aspects of their school environment as stressful, indicated by their reporting of lower levels of quality of school life, have higher rates of absenteeism?

Results will be presented and discussed in terms of these research questions.

Analyses Undertaken

1. Descriptive analyses of:
 - (i) Levels of QSL;
 - (ii) Student Absenteeism; and,
 - (iii) Other student contextual variables.
2. Simple correlational relationships between:
 - (i) QSL scales;
 - (ii) QSL scales and Absence;
3. Cross tabulation analysis of student Gender by other student contextual variables.
4. Analysis of Variance between:
 - (i) Absence and other student contextual variables; and,
 - (ii) Student contextual variables and QSL scales.

The Student Sample

There were 254 students at six schools in the total sample with slightly more male students than females. Almost one third of the sample was in Year 5, 42 per cent were in Year 6, and one quarter were members of composite Years 5/6 classes. The average number of days absent for students over the three-term period of the study (approximately 30 weeks) was 5.6 days. While 50 percent of the students involved in the study were absent for up to five days, less than 10 per cent of students were absent for more than ten days. Analysis of

these background variables indicated that this was a representative sample of students in the Lower Hunter Valley.

Relationships of School, Year, Gender and Class with Absence were examined using a series of one-way analyses of variance. Results indicated that there were no significant differences in absence for any of the schools, year groups, class groups, and male or female students, while results of the chi-square tests indicated no significant difference for gender between schools, years or class groups.

Results

Research Question 1.

QSL scale means indicated that, overall, students were reasonably happy with their quality of school life (see Table 1). Correlations between the QSL scales were all significant indicating that students who were more satisfied with one aspect of their schooling were more likely to be satisfied with other aspects of their schooling measured by the QSL scales (see Table 2). Students who perceived school as an unhappy and uninviting place (indicated by higher scores on the Negative Affect QSL scale) were more likely to have lower scores on the other QSL scales. Other researchers have observed similar results (Ainley & Bourke, 1992; Bourke & Frampton, 1992; Leonard, 1998; Leonard, Schofield & Bourke, 1999; Schofield & Bourke, 1997).

Differences in the QSL scale mean scores between the student background variables of Gender, Year of schooling, School, Class were examined using analyses of variance. Results for gender indicated that female students were generally happier with the quality of their school life than males. This finding is consistent with other studies of the quality of student school life. Ainley and Bourke (1992), for example, identified that females reported higher scores on all scales except Social Integration and Achievement where there was no significant difference from males.

Recent research has supported this finding that females are having their needs met by school to a greater extent than males. Academically, girls continue to outperform boys in the literacy component of the Basic Skills Test, a standardised test conducted across New South Wales schools by the Department of Education and Training, by approximately two percentage points (New South Wales Department of Education and Training, 1998a, p.85). Significantly, retention rates for students in post-compulsory schooling are 11.5 percent higher for girls than for boys (New South Wales Department of Education and Training, 1998a, p.85).

Table 1: Means and standard deviations (in parentheses) for QSL Scales by School and QSL Scale Correlations with Absence (N=254).



Significance Level: * $p < 0.05$ ** $p < 0.01$ (two-tailed)

Table 2: QSL Scale Correlations (N=254 for all Scales).

			Gender	
			Male	Female
Type of degree	PhD	Count	147	209
		% within Gender	31.5%	26.3%
	EdD	Count	94	93
		% within Gender	20.1%	11.7%
	Master (Res.)	Count	57	116
		% within Gender	12.2%	14.6%
	Master (C'work)	Count	156	349
		% within Gender	33.4%	44.0%
	Other PG deg/dip	Count	13	27
		% within Gender	2.8%	3.1%

Significance Level: * $p < 0.05$ ** $p < 0.01$ (two-tailed)

Students at a number of the schools indicated higher scores on some of the QSL scales as shown in Table 1. Students at School 3, for example, reported the quality of their school life to be higher and felt a greater sense of achievement and adventure than students at the other schools. In contrast, students at School 2 reported lower scores on the majority of scales than students at the other schools. On a class basis, students in Class 4 at School 1 reported lower scores than students in other classes at the same school and at other schools. Class 4 at School 1 was a composite Year 5/6 class as were three of the other four classes involved in the study at this school. The overall differences found between classes support the findings of Ainley and Bourke (1992) who identified significant differences in quality of school life scores among classes both within and between schools.

Although all students did not provide their year of schooling, results indicated that students in Year 6 reported higher scale scores than students in Year 5. One explanation for this trend is that perhaps Year 6 students can see the end of the primary school tunnel and have a greater insight into how their academic program is preparing them for their impending transition to high school.

Research Question 2

Absence was significantly related to all of the QSL scales as shown in Table 1. This result indicates that students who reported higher QSL scores were likely to have a lower rate of absence than students who reported lower QSL scores were. Importantly a strong correlation was evident for the Negative Affect scale reinforcing the link between negative stress, feelings and emotions regarding school, which is measured by this scale, and increased absenteeism. This result supports the findings of other researchers that students' perceptions of the quality of their school life were strongly related to their rate of absenteeism (Leonard; 1998; Leonard, Schofield & Bourke, 1999; Schofield & Bourke, 1997). The present study also confirmed the findings of Schofield and Bourke that the negative aspects of the affective dimensions of student quality of school life represent a significant source of stress in students' lives, which was commensurate with the stress experienced by adults in the work environment. The need for appropriate remediation of student stress is explored in the concluding section.

Discussion, Conclusions and Further Research

The implications of the negative correlations between Absence and the QSL scales of Opportunity and Adventure are important and powerful. The primary school children surveyed indicated strongly that they were well aware, even at this young age, of the preparation school is providing for their future and also most enjoy and are motivated by learning that is meaningful to them. Educators can take this on board by incorporating the benefits of an outcomes-driven curriculum whilst minimising the competitive aspects of such an approach by ensuring their programs are individualised and enjoyable. Further research to establish the effectiveness of these innovative curriculum approaches on student's perceptions of the opportunity and adventure school is providing them with could prove useful.

Similarly, the significant negative correlations between Absence and the Relationship with Teacher and Social Integration QSL scales provided evidence of the need for programs aimed at developing social skill competencies. These programs could be implemented as part of the broader curriculum at a classroom level and would be beneficial for all students and especially those who may need help in this area. Implementation and assessment of the effectiveness of such programs would be an appropriate outcome derived from these findings.

Overall, QSL results indicated that some students were deeply dissatisfied with various factors impacting on the quality of their school environment such as their relationships with their teacher and peers, and the level of fun and enjoyment they perceive in their learning. It would appear that at an individual school level their dissatisfaction is being lost in a maze of absenteeism data and school attendance procedures. These students were stressed and in need of assistance. Further research regarding the early identification and provision of appropriate support services for these students would be extremely useful.

It may well be that a major challenge that confronts educators in the 21st Century is to ensure all their students are instilled with appropriate methods and coping strategies for dealing with stress. Despite the dizzying array of methodologies available to educators, the literature tends to suggest that any program that emphasises specific skills for coping has potential for some positive benefit for the majority of students. Thomas (1990), for example, outlined some of the benefits for primary school students who were assisted by their teachers in developing appropriate stress management techniques as including: an increased ability to concentrate, decreased reliance on anger, and increased self-esteem. Such changes have the power to give students a new insight and understanding of themselves and in turn that of their teacher.

Accordingly, the present authors are currently undertaking a study that attempts to identify and utilise appropriate stress management and relaxation techniques for increasing student satisfaction, minimising student stress and reducing absence. It is hoped that these minimisation techniques may also simultaneously produce improvements in schools and classrooms such as happier and safer work environments and enhanced learning outcomes. Safe and happy schools and effective learning are promoted when classrooms are rewarding, stimulating environments where students and teachers want to be. This study endeavours to provide valuable insights into this process, and a stimulus for change and improvement.

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