



TRUANCY AMONG MALAYSIAN STUDENTS: AN ANALYSIS BASED ON ETHNICITY

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Truancy remains a significant problem in the education system of countries when schooling is made compulsory for at least eleven years. The purpose of this study is to determine the factors contributing to truancy and the mean differences among the constructs based on the students' ethnicity. The sample consisted of 472 truants from three main ethnic groups in Malaysia who have been routinely absent from school for 10 days to more than 40 days per year. Data on students' truancy were obtained from the school administration. Results demonstrated that students' attitudes toward school, environment in school, school administration, teachers' teaching, teacher's personality, and environment outside school, peers and family are significant constructs for truancy. Significant mean differences were also found in constructs of environment in the school, school administration and environment outside the school based on ethnicity.

Keywords: Truancy, Ethnicity, Teacher personality, Peers, and family.

Introduction

Truancy is one of the challenges faced by education systems in many countries where schooling is made compulsory. According to Desocio et al. (2007), truancy is the biggest problem encountered by schools today. As a result, student truancy remains an unresolved issue which has drawn the attention of educators, parents, society and the government. When students commit truancy, it means they have lost their interest in school and decided to use their time for activities more meaningful to them.

Truancy has gained persistent concern of many parties because it is an early marker of many social problems among adolescents which may bring serious negative consequences to individuals, family, society and country. According to Gary (1996), truancy is the starting point to a life time of problems for individuals. Truancy has been found to be closely associated with many social problems namely, dropout (Baker, Sigmon, & Nugent, 2001; Fergusson, Michael, & Horwood, 1995; Hibbett et al., 1990; Vermont Agency of Education, 2010), substance use (Herny & Thornberry, 2010; McAra, 2004; National Center for School Engagement, 2006), academic problems (Balfanz et al., 2008; Heilbrunn, 2007) and delinquency (Wang, et al., 2005; Yeide & Kobrin, 2009).

In Malaysia, truancy has been identified as the second top discipline problem among the students which comprises of three main ethnic groups namely, Malay, Chinese and Indian. Truancy is defined as the practice of staying away from school without permission (Oxford Dictionary, 2010). According to Ministry of Education records, in 2010 out of 111, 484 discipline problem cases, 19, 545 cases involved truancy. In 2011, out of the 108, 650 discipline problem cases, 18, 550 involved truanting behaviour. In

combating truancy, the Ministry of Education has implemented the system of warning letter. The school administration is given the authority to assign three types of warning letter to students who play truant. Warning letter type one will be given to students who skip school for more than ten days. Students absent from school unexcused for more than twenty days will receive warning letter type two; warning letter type three will be issued to students playing truant for more than forty days. Students will be expelled from school if they continue to play truant. However, parents and guardians can apply for them to be re-registered to the school.

Literature review shows that various factors contribute to truanting behaviour. Age, gender, ethnicity, family criminal history, special education and substance abuse are predictors for truancy (Zhang et al., 2010). The Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, OJJDP (2001) states that generally four factors correlated with truancy are family, school, economic and students themselves. This is aligned with the findings by Baleinakorodawa (2009) which revealed that students' perceptions of their own ability and academic performance, the school and classroom environment, lack of parental, community and family support and teachers' attitudes have contributed significant impacts on truanting behaviour.

On the other hand, Malcolm et al. (2003) also found that secondary school students are more likely to truant due to the school factors rather than family factors; having problems with school and teachers, being bullied, pressure from peers and social isolation are factors that resulted in truancy. Gerrard et al. (2003) reported in order to increase attendance and prevent truancy, strong, healthy and positive relationship based on mutual trust and respect need to be built between students and teachers, peers and other adults in school. Garry (1996) explained that most parents of truant students have neglected their children and do not value education. Students also play truant because of problems in the family, school and neighbourhood. Eastman et al. (2007) asserted that students skip school because of problems in the school, family and community. Factors such as school phobia, difficulties in learning, problem in relationship with teachers or peers, bullying, boring pedagogy, poor parenting skills and inability of parents to encourage and monitor children's studies are contributing factors to truancy.

In the Malaysian context, Mohamed Sharif and Hazni (2010) highlighted the important impacts of students' attitudes, relationship with family, teachers' personalities, peers and school facilities which can influence truancy; these were supported by a study under Kamalia Nor (2007). The findings of Azizi Yahaya et al. (2007) and Johari and Nik Selma (2011) also indicated that the most important predictor for student truancy is the teacher, followed by the factors of environment in school, peers, students' attitude and family. Manivannam (2002) found that the most significant contributor to truanting is the environment where the students lived, followed by personal attitudes, family, peers and school.

Ethnicity is another factor to be considered in addressing the problem of truancy. In England, Malcolm et al. (2003) reported that very few secondary students from ethnic minority groups were involved in truancy. Glynn and Berryman (2005) explained that Maori and Pasifika students are more likely to commit truancy compared to New Zealand Europeans and Asian students. Jones (2009) revealed that students of racial and ethnicity minorities are more likely to commit truancy compared to white students in Washington State. However, causes to the truanting behaviour among the minority students are difficult to identify. Sanchez (2012) confirmed that the truancy rate in Redwood City is different based on ethnicity.

The major goal of this study is to identify the predictors for truancy among the secondary school students in Malaysia which comprises Malay, Chinese and Indian. Besides that, it is aimed at gaining an in-depth understanding of whether the predictors for truancy are significantly different based on ethnicity.

Methodology

Respondents for this study were students aged between 13 to 16-year-old from public secondary schools which have been identified as schools with high rate of truancy by the Ministry of Education in Malaysia. Respondents have been given either warning letter type one, two or three by the school administration.

From the total of 472 students, 322 are male and 150 female. The respondents are 346 Malay, 64 Chinese and 62 Indian.

Purposive and random sampling procedures were applied in obtaining the samples. The Ministry of Education of Malaysia has identified schools of high rate of truancy and the researchers randomly selected 15 schools. Selected schools have to prepare name list of all the students who have been given warning letter of three types. All the students in the name lists are classified as the sample. A survey was carried out to get the data using a self-administered questionnaire. The instrument of this study has been developed by a team of researchers based on educational theory and literature review. The questionnaire consists of two sections, one on respondents' background information and the other on predictors for truancy. A pilot study had been conducted to validate the instrument.

Results of Research

The reliability of the instrument was evaluated using estimates of internal consistency (Cronbach alpha). The cut-off value for Cronbach alpha is .70 and above (Hinton et al., 2004). SPSS (Statistical Package for Social Science) was applied to analyse the data in order to generate the descriptive statistics of the respondents and to achieve the objectives of this study.

The Cronbach alpha value for the instrument is .79 which means the instrument has reached acceptable reliability (Hinton et al., 2004). Table 1 revealed the mean and standard deviation for the eight constructs which are predictors of truancy. The mean for construct personality of teachers is the highest whereas the lowest mean comes from the construct of peers. Other significant predictors for truancy are environment in school, environment outside school, administration of school, family, students' attitude towards school and teachers' teaching.

Table 1. Mean and standard deviation of predictors for truancy.

Constructs	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Standard deviation
Personality of teachers	21	70	44.47	9.05
Environment in school	13	61	40.46	8.33
Environment outside school	13	65	38.85	8.93
Administration of school	13	55	35.32	8.21
Family	14	70	34.56	9.45
Students' attitude towards school	16	50	31.67	6.35
Teachers' teaching	10	50	31.41	6.60
Peers	9	42	25.82	5.74

One-way between subjects ANOVA was conducted to compare the effects of predictors on truancy between Malay, Chinese and Indian ethnic groups. As reported in Table 2, the analysis yielded a significant result with F -ratio of 6.922 ($p = .001$) for environment in school, 6.988 ($p = .001$) for environment outside school and 4.461 ($p = .012$) for administration of school at $p < .05$ and $p < .01$. This implied that environment in school, environment outside school and administration of school can result in different impacts on truancy among the Malay, Chinese and Indian students. Therefore it can be concluded that the effect of environment in school, environment outside school and administration of school on truancy are different among the three ethnic groups.

Table 2. Comparison of predictors for truancy One-way ANOVA based on ethnicity.

Construct	Ethnicity	Mean	Standard Deviation	F-value	P
Environment in school	Malay (n=346)	40.06	8.05	6.922**	.001
	Chinese (n=64)	43.94	6.84		
	Indian (n=62)	39.14	10.27		
Environment outside school	Malay (n=346)	39.51	8.83	6.988**	.001
	Chinese (n=64)	39.08	7.36		
	Indian (n=62)	34.97	10.10		
Administration of school	Malay (n=346)	35.50	8.45	4.461*	.012
	Chinese (n=64)	36.88	6.95		
	Indian (n=62)	32.69	7.63		
Personality of teachers	Malay (n=346)	44.92	8.99	1.721	.180
	Chinese (n=64)	43.67	7.65		
	Indian (n=62)	42.81	10.55		
Peers	Malay (n=346)	26.12	5.92	1.790	.167
	Chinese (n=64)	25.17	4.58		
	Indian (n=62)	24.84	5.75		
Teachers' teaching	Malay (n=346)	31.39	6.40	2.094	.124
	Chinese (n=64)	32.64	5.54		
	Indian (n=62)	31.24	8.39		
Family	Malay (n=346)	34.42	9.76	.377	.094
	Chinese (n=64)	33.19	7.71		
	Indian (n=62)	36.74	9.05		
Students' attitude towards school	Malay (n=346)	31.72	6.06	.284	.753
	Chinese (n=64)	31.92	6.45		
	Indian (n=62)	31.13	6.76		

* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$

Table 3. Multiple Comparisons Based on Ethnicity.

LSD

Ethnic (I)	Ethnic (J)	Mean Difference (I-J)	Stand Error	Sig	95% confidence Interval	
					Lower Bound	Upper Bound
Dependent variable: Environment in school						
Malay	Chinese	-3.87970*	1.11950	.001	-6.0796	-1.6798
	Indian	.91264	1.13464	.422	-1.3170	3.1422
Chinese	Malay	3.87970*	1.11950	.001	1.6798	6.0796
	Indian	4.79234*	1.46609	.001	1.9114	7.6732
Indian	Malay	-.91264	1.13464	.422	-3.1422	1.3170
	Chinese	-4.79234*	1.46609	.001	-7.6732	-1.9114
Dependent variable: Environment outside school						
Malay	Chinese	.43055	1.20054	.720	-1.9286	2.7897
	Indian	4.54093*	1.21677	.000	2.1499	6.9319
Chinese	Malay	-.43055	1.20054	.720	-2.7897	1.9286
	Indian	4.11038*	1.57222	.009	1.0209	7.1998
Indian	Malay	-4.54093*	1.21677	.000	-6.9319	-2.1499
	Chinese	-4.11038*	1.57222	.009	-7.1998	-1.0209
Dependent variable: Administration of school						
Malay	Chinese	-1.37500	1.10994	.216	-3.5561	.8061
	Indian	2.80645*	1.12495	.013	.5959	5.0170
Chinese	Malay	1.37500	1.10994	.216	-.8061	3.5561
	Indian	4.18145*	1.45357	.004	1.3251	7.0378
Indian	Malay	-2.80645*	1.12495	.013	-5.0170	-.5959
	Chinese	-4.18145*	1.45357	.004	-7.0378	-1.3251

* $p < .05$

Table 3 presents the results of post hoc test using Scheffe correction for multiple comparisons on the predictor for truancy. The mean difference of the effect of environment in school as a predictor to truancy between the Chinese and the Malays is 3.88 and between the Chinese and Indians is 4.79; both are significant at $p < .05$. The effect of environment in school on truancy of the Indians is significantly differ from the Chinese but no with the Malay. The Malays has no significant difference effect of environment in school on truancy from the Chinese and the Indians. The mean difference of the effect of environment outside school as a predictor to truancy between the Indians and the Chinese is 4.11 and between the Indians and the Malays is 4.54, both being significant at $p < .05$. The Malays show no significant effect of environment outside school on truancy from the Chinese.

The mean difference of the effect of school administration as a predictor to truancy between the Malays and the Indians as well as the Chinese and the Indians were significant at $p < .05$. The mean difference for the effect of administration of school on truancy between the Malays and the Indians is 2.81 whereas between Chinese and the Indians is 4.18. There is no significant effect of administration of school on truancy between the Malays and the Chinese.

Discussion

The findings demonstrated that teachers and schools are two important factors that had significant impacts on truancy among secondary school students in Malaysia besides the factors of family, students and peers. This is aligned with the reports of OJJDP (2001), Baleinakorodawa (2009) and Malcolm et al. (2003). Teachers' personality plays the most important role in students' truanting behaviour as supported by Azizi Yahaya et al. (2007) and Johari and Nik Selma (2010). Teachers with good personality can attract and sustain the students' interest and motivate them to come to school. The study also reveals that teachers who are too exam orientated, serious, like to nag and hot tempered will discourage students from remaining in the school. Hence, the school administration must ensure that the classroom and school environment are able to facilitate the learning process such as having ICT facilities as learning resources. An autocratic school policy will create stress among the students. The community around the school also needs to play a role in monitoring the students' activities outside the schools since the truant students revealed that they have never been caught by the police and received no advice nor warning from community members.

According to Manivannam (2002), the most significant contributor to truancy is the students' living environment. Besides that, family with parents who give great emphasis on academic achievement or neglect the importance of education will cause students to skip school. Students' attitudes toward school are very much influenced by external factors such as the teachers and the schools. This study also implied that students like to attend school initially, but their interest in school diminished due to the external negative factors such as the boring teaching they experienced. Peers do not have a great impact in the truanting behaviour among the students. However, truant students value their peers as people who can share their problems in life and their inner voice.

Based on the predictors determined in this study, it is found that only the factors of environment in the school, environment outside the school and administration of the school can produce significant differences in impact on truancy based on ethnicity. The impact of school environment on truancy among the Chinese is significantly different from the Malays and the Indians whereas no difference was found between the Malays and the Indians. Specifically, the results suggest that school environment can affect the Chinese students to play truant in a greater manner compared to Malays and Indians students. Hence, having a conducive school environment is more important for the Chinese students to stay in school. The environments outside the school cause different impacts on truancy between the Indians and Malays and also the Indians and Chinese, but not the Malays and the Chinese. Environment outside the school can influence greater truanting behaviour among the Malay students. According to Noraziah, Ranimah, and Hasnah (2008), attraction outside the school such as good income as part-timer in shopping complexes can lead to students' truanting behaviour. The effect of school administration on truancy is different between the Malays and the Indians as well as the Chinese and the Indians whereas no difference is found between the Chinese and the Malays. The report suggests that the system and policy implemented by the school administration are important in hindering truancy among the Chinese students.

To conclude, teachers and school management need to aware of their great responsibility in battling truancy. Teachers have to make effort to foster close and positive relationship with students by fulfilling their basic needs and also recognise their contribution and individuality. Teachers should always express care and concern not only for the academic aspect of the students but also their personal life. Conducive learning environment in the school and the classroom is essential for encouraging students to follow the teaching and learning process. A school atmosphere which is too academic oriented will hinder low achievers from attending school as they feel that school is boring and unbeneficial to them. It is vital that the teachers and schools cultivate the sense of belonging among the students by involving them in discussion and decision making on related issues. This study recommends that the government instil awareness in citizens on their responsibility in combating truancy. At the same time, the school also can channel awareness through Parent-Teacher association activities. Findings of the study also confirm differences in impacts of the predictors on truancy based on ethnicity which should be considered by all parties especially the school and the Ministry of Education in the effort to resolve the truancy problem.

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