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Factors Affecting Non-Attendance in Irish Primary Schools and Reasons for Differences between Urban and Rural levels of Non-attendance

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Background

Introduction

This study will investigative the factors that influence school non-attendance, in designated disadvantaged Irish primary schools (DEIS[1]). Currently, no comprehensive data exists on the factors contributing to the levels and types of non-attendance within the Irish context. Since 2003/2004, the National Educational Welfare Board (NEWB, Appendix A) the agency with responsibility for school attendance, has collected specific data on attendance levels and the frequency of non-attendance across all Irish schools. However, this does not provide information at the individual student level (NEWB, 2007).

Our study is also concerned with understanding why there is a difference between the levels of non-attendance in rural and urban primary schools. In 2005/2006 the rate of general

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[1] The DEIS Programme is an action plan that aims to ensure that the educational needs of children and young people from disadvantaged areas across Ireland are prioritised and effectively addressed.

non-attendance in primary schools was 30% higher in towns and cities than in rural areas[2] and absences of 20 days or more was 70% higher (Mac Aogain, 2008). By law, schools are obliged to notify NEWB once a student is absent over 20 days in any academic year (Mac Aogain, 2008; Millar, 2009).

The research question under investigation is an area of interest for all members of the group. Each member brings a different perspective to the topic from their personal and professional lives. One member of the group currently works with NEWB. Previously he worked for the Health Services Executive (HSE) on different programmes with children and families from disadvantaged areas of Dublin. The second member of the research team is a primary school teacher who for many years has been interested in understanding why children fail to come to school and the effects this has on children's lives. The final member of the group works in the area of special education. He is also a parent of two young children and has a keen interest in developing his understanding of non-attendance at primary school level. All the members of the group hold a strong view that the voice of the child should be a central component of this research project.

General Educational Problem and its Significance in the Field

There are many different factors that affect children's non-attendance. Little research exists in the Irish context that explains the type and levels of non-attendance and the factors contributing to this.   Although most of the data collected in Ireland is based on post-primary students (NEWB, 2007) we know that in Ireland today, 10% of primary pupils, approximately 50,000, children miss more than 20 days of school annually (O'Briain, 2006, p.10). Research in America suggests that "missing just 30 hours of instruction negatively affects a student's academic performance" (McCray, 2006, p.31). Missing school can affect a child's learning and future life opportunities with research continuing to show a link

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[2] Urban and rural schools as designated by NEWB criteria.

between educational attainment and employment opportunities (INTO, 2004; NESF, 1997). Education plays a vital role in breaking the cycle of unemployment, poverty, and disadvantage. Therefore, the rationale for this research project is to gain an understanding of the factors that contribute to non-attendance by exploring the views of key stakeholders. It is imperative that school principals, teachers, parents, Education Welfare Officers (EWOs) and policy-makers develop an awareness of the issues surrounding non-attendance in the Irish context. This is even more important at the present time with the down turn in the global and local economy as it is vital that limited resources are appropriately allocated to gain the best possible benefit for individual students and society as a whole.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this two-phase sequential mixed method study is to investigate the factors that influence non-attendance at primary level. One of the main objectives of this study is to try and establish why there are differences in attendance levels between rural and urban schools. A goal of this research project will be to explore the views of those involved (principal, teacher, parent, EWO and student) in order to gain an insight into their different perspectives. Ultimately, we hope that the findings of the research will inform policy at local and national level.

Literature Review

Definition of Persistent Absenteeism

The dearth of pertinent literature about non-attendance in the Irish context necessitates a search for such literature in other settings. Although an examination of existing

research in the international context allows one to gain further insights into the issues relating to non-attendance, one must remain conscious of the fact that they may or may not be applicable to the Irish context.

Many terms exists to describe students' non-attendance at school. The relevant literature is littered with terms such as "authorised" and "unauthorised absence", "persistent" and "chronic absenteeism", "school phobia", "school refusal", and "truancy" to name but a few. The way these terms are used in the literature and what they aim to signify for researchers and their audiences often differs, thus creating an obstacle in gaining a "shared understanding of this behaviour" (Pellegrini, 2007, p.65). In the Irish context, NEWB concurs stating that "the definitional boundaries between 'poor attendance', 'non-attendance', and 'early school leaving' have not always been well demarcated, resulting in ambiguity in research" (2007b, p.1). For the most part, absenteeism and non-attendance seem to be used interchangeably by many writers and throughout the current study we shall also use the various terms interchangeably. Notwithstanding, regardless of the terminology used to describe non-attendance, the fact remains that despite a legal obligation to do so, a sizeable number of Irish students fail to attend school on a regular basis, for whatever reason.

Absenteeism and Educational Disadvantage

International research has indicated "a persistent tendency for absentees to come from disadvantaged backgrounds" (Galloway, 1985, p. 52). Various Irish studies have also linked persistent absenteeism and early school leaving to disadvantage (Boldt & Devine 1998; INTO 1995; NEWB 2007b). The first ever analysis of school attendance at national level in Ireland, commissioned by NEWB in 2004, confirmed this, finding that absenteeism was prevalent throughout the country, but was "significantly worse in disadvantaged areas" (p.6).

Considerable research remains to be undertaken into the specific links between educational disadvantage and non-attendance but later reports by NEWB also confirm that

schools with high levels of disadvantage have significantly lower annual attendance rates than non-designated schools. In addition, the relationship between attendance and the socioeconomic indicators[3] used by NEWB was discovered to be much stronger in urban than in rural schools (Weir, 2004).

A consensus of opinion appears to exist, therefore, between Irish researchers that persistent absentees are likely to come from disadvantaged backgrounds. However, Galloway (1985) cautions that "whether or not any particular child is absent from school, probably depends not on his family size, income, or social class, but on other factors within his home, school or community (p.12).

Factors

For the most part, researchers in the area of school absenteeism are now agreed that there is no single factor which causes children to miss school. Zhang (2003) attributes school absenteeism to two factors: "one being familial circumstances, for example, irresponsible parents, low incomes and related disadvantages; the other being the schools which may not be well organised to meet a pupil's need" (p.11). Most researchers, he informs us, emphasise both these factors in their study of school non-attendance and he stresses that care must be taken not to separate them. NEWB (2007b) also link poor school attendance to "socio-economic disadvantage", as well as to "school factors" or "a combination of both" (p. 9). However, according to The National Centre for Mental Health Promotion and Youth Violence Prevention (2007) there are as many as four factors associated with non-attendance: student, family, school and system factors.

Student Factors

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[3] The socioeconomic indicators used by the NEWB are: the percentage of students whose families have medical cards, whose parents are unemployed, who live in local authority housing or with lone parents.

Medical. It is commonly accepted that the most common reason given for missing school is illness (Galloway 1985; INTO 1995; NEWB 2007b). "Psychological and psychiatric reasons for school non-attendance also play a part, as in school refusal, bereavement, depression, or conduct disorders which are not confined to any social class or background" (INTO 1995, p. v).

Age. International and Irish research suggests that non-attendance is age-related, in that students with poor attendance are usually older (Smyth, 1999; Wagner et al., 2004).

Low self-esteem. Reid and Kendall (1982) contend that persistent absentees have "significantly lower academic self-concepts and general levels of self-esteem" than their peers and are "significantly more badly-behaved, neurotic, antisocial and alienated from their school than good attenders" (p.299). In concert with this view, Malcolm et al. (2003) also identify low self-esteem and behavioural and psychological problems as contributory factors to poor attendance. Although individual factors have a bearing on school absenteeism it appears that most researchers focus on the effects of family factors and school factors.

Family Factors

Family and environmental factors. The Irish National Teachers Organisation (INTO, 1995) believes that children are usually absent with the knowledge and permission of parents/guardians and suggests that most school non-attendance is related to "dysfunctional family life, social deprivation and alienation and educational disadvantage", although this is not always the case (p.v). In one NEWB survey, 54% of respondents apportioned "responsibility for non-attendance at school to parents, certainly to a far greater extent that they apportion responsibility to schools, teachers, social background or students themselves" (Ó Briain 2007, p. 9).

Socio-economic class and poverty. Zhang (2003) states that "the relationship between deprived homes and school absenteeism is unambiguous" (p. 12). Many other

researchers also contend that poor school attendance is frequently linked to socio-economic disadvantage (Darmody et al., 2007; NEWB, 2007b; Reid, 2006).

Inadequate family support. Webb and Vulliamy (2004) report that almost three quarters of persistent absentees do not live with both their parents. In concert with this view, NEWB (2007b) reports that non-attendance is more common among students in single-parent families. The Children First National Guidelines for the Protection and Welfare of Children (1999) suggest that consistent absence from school may be an indication of possible child neglect (7.1.2).

Family responsibilities. Sometimes children are kept at home to act as carers (NEWB, 2007b). Parents, who are drug or alcohol dependent, or suffering from physical or mental health problems, may keep children at home to look after younger siblings, or to even care for parents themselves (Malcolm et al. 2003).

Educational attainment of parents. The INTO (1995) claims that the parents of non-attenders sometimes do not see the value or relevance of education. Statistics show that students whose parents are professionals or hold a third-level qualification tend to have better attendance records (NEWB, 2007b). Maternal education, in particular, has a significant effect on drop-out, over and above that of social background (Smyth, 1999, p.93).

Attitudes and expectations of parents. Dalziel and Henthorne (2005) have stressed that until their recent study linking parental attitudes and poor attendance this area of research into non-attendance had been overlooked. They discovered that "the reasons being given for non-attendance often masked a deeper underlying problem. Indeed, rather than there being one obvious reason for poor attendance, it was more likely to be a result of a number of factors, which were often difficult to discover" (p.53). In addition, students sometimes opt

out of school due to feeling excessive pressure from parental academic expectations (INTO, 1995).

School Factors

Researchers now readily admit that as well as family factors and children's motivation, aspects of schooling can impact on attendance (NEWB, 2007b). Galloway (1985) believes that a school's influence on attendance can be positive or negative. His advice, that emphasising a school's influence over its students' attendance, does not imply that individual, family and community factors are not equally important, is worth heeding. At times, too, students' non-attendance may simply reflect their disaffection with school.

Relationships. There may sometimes be a link between poor attendance and teacher-student relationships, especially if they are not seen to be respectful or fair (Kinder et al., 1996). Darmody et al. (2007) found that "students who experienced their school climate as supportive were significantly less likely to truant while those who reported a more disorderly school climate were much more likely to truant" (p.11). Ryan (2001) and Lauchlan (2003) contend that hostile pupil-teacher relationships may even precipitate non-attendance.

Bullying. Children who are being bullied in school, or on the way to or from school, may be afraid to attend school (INTO 1995; Malone 2007). In Britain, Malcolm et al. (2003) found that many parents believe that bullying is the main reason why children do not want to go to school. In contrast, few people surveyed by NEWB saw absenteeism as being related to bullying (Ó Briain, 2007).

Curriculum. Failure to cope with the demands of the school curriculum can deter children from attending school and may result in non-attendance (INTO, 1995). Kinder et al. (1996) and Malcolm et al. (2003) discovered that the suitability of the curriculum, its delivery and difficulties with keeping up, most affects levels of attendance. For many students,

especially those in disadvantaged areas, the curriculum does not reflect their experiences and is often irrelevant to them (INTO, 1995). Boldt (2000) supports this view and adds that the actual education system itself is inappropriate for some. Interestingly, only a tiny minority of those surveyed by NEWB considered school absenteeism as being related to the suitability of the curriculum or to problems with their teachers (Ó Briain, 2007).

Emotional and behavioural difficulties. "Effective teaching and learning are closely linked to the promotion of positive behaviour and regular attendance" (NEWB 2007a, p.19).

System Factors

Partnership in education is central to ensuring each child reaches his/her full potential (Education Act 1998). It is important that all partners involved in education "find good ways of emphasising to parents that the foundation of educational success is laid down in primary school and that poor attendance at primary level can damage a child's educational outcomes in the long term" (Ó Briain 2007, p. 20). Both the INTO (1995) and Pelligrini (2007) suggest that the child, the school, the family and all other agencies which are involved need to actively work together to facilitate the reintegration of non-attenders. However, Malcolm et al. (2003) found that a multi-agency approach to tackling absenteeism can itself cause tensions as each agency is pursuing its own objectives.

The Voice of the Child

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) espouses the principle that all children have the right to be heard in matters affecting their own welfare. In recent years, various researchers in the Irish context have highlighted the need to listen to the voice of the child (Boldt 1997; Devine 2001; Downes & Gilligan 2007). Little research exists that investigates children's views about non-attendance.

The Gap in the Literature

Researchers and practitioners could increase understanding of school non-attendance by working towards a shared definition of this behaviour, and engaging in well-designed empirical research to answer questions still unanswered about this behaviour and ways to redress it (Pellegrini 2007, p. 75).

The lack of pertinent Irish literature for this study suggests the need for further research into the area of non-attendance in the Irish context. Persistent absenteeism is linked to disadvantage (Weir, 2004), is habit forming (NEWB, 2007b) and increases with age (Smyth 1999; Wagner et al. 2004). For the most part, researchers are agreed that most students begin their histories of non-attendance in primary school (Boldt 1998; Reid 1999; Zhang 2003). NEWB (2007) admits that "little is known about the factors influencing attendance among primary-school children" and has recommended that research attention needs to focus on "the attendance behaviour of students in the primary sector, on the experiences of schools and the factors impacting on this" (p.63). The need for further research into absenteeism in the Irish context, especially at primary-school level is clearly evident.

Research Question and Hypothesis

The primary research question this project will investigate is:

What are the factors that contribute to school non-attendance in designated disadvantaged primary schools in Ireland? In addition, the research will also examine why the rate of non-attendance is 30% higher in towns and cities than in rural areas of the country?

We hypothesise that the levels of non-attendance will be higher for students where one or more of the factors highlighted in the literature review are present. It is also

hypothesised that a greater number of these factors would be evident in the lives of students attending disadvantaged urban schools. This is a directional hypothesis which is based on prior literature, NEWB statistics and the professional experience of the research team.

Since our aim as researchers is to provide evidence beyond reasonable doubt that the correlation coefficient is significantly different that zero (Onwuegbuzie et al., 2004) we have chosen a significance level of 0.05 for our hypothesis (Hinton, 2004). This ensures that we are more that 95% confident that there is a relationship between non-attendance and the factors already mentioned.

We hope that the qualitative phase of this research will confirm which factors mentioned in the literature review are significant in the Irish context. This initial phase of the research may also highlight emerging themes that will need to be developed and incorporated into the quantitative aspects of the study.

Methods Section

Justification for Research Methodology

Robson (2002) contends that the qualitative/quantitative debate of the 1980s and early 1990s has become "increasingly unproductive", and states that some researchers now recommend the use of a "pragmatic approach" which utilises the "philosophical or methodological" strategy that works best for the particular research problem in question. This can lead to "mixed-method studies where both quantitative and qualitative approaches are adopted" (p.43). Bogdan and Biklen (2003) concur with utilising this "pragmatic approach". They state that there is "no best method" (p.38) and advise researchers to "pick the right one for the job" (p.41). Consequently, this study adopts a sequential mixed methods strategy as the best approach to answering the research question. Operating within the "pragmatic

paradigm" allows us the flexibility to study the problem of non-attendance in the ways we deem most appropriate (Figure 1).
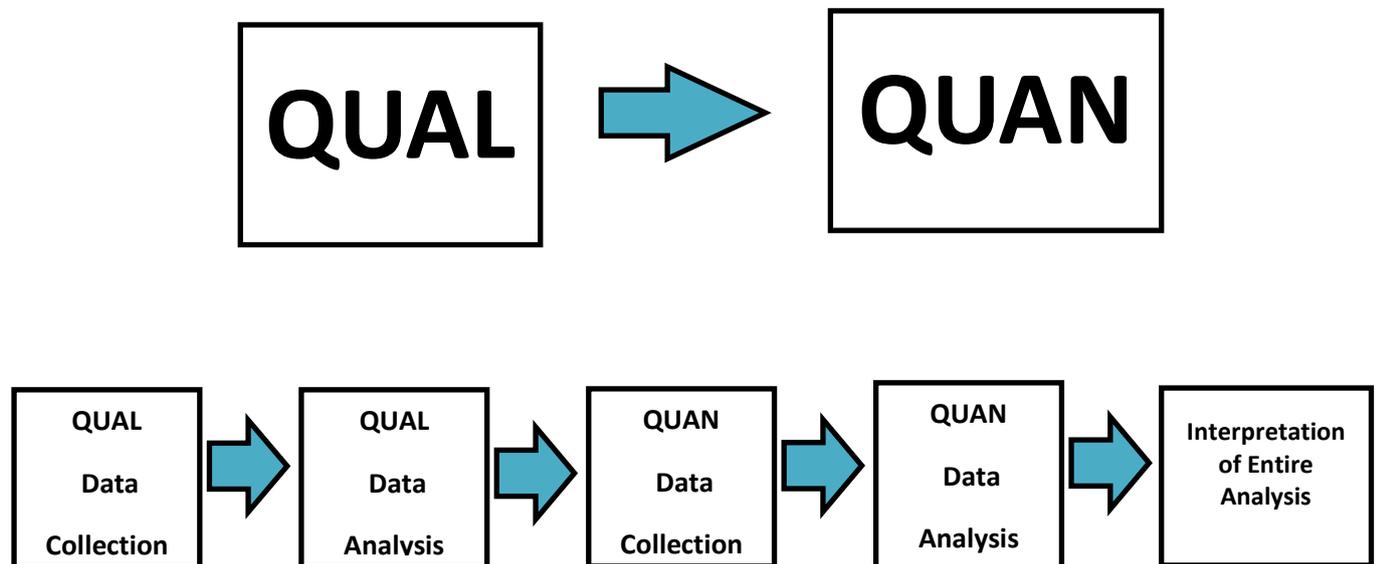
Figure 1: Two-phase sequential mixed methods study from Creswell et al., 2003

The first phase of the research will involve a qualitative exploration of the factors affecting student non-attendance in twelve disadvantaged Irish primary schools, six rural and six urban. Through the use of interviews and focus groups, data will be obtained from all key stakeholders: principals, teachers, EWOs, parents and the students themselves. The findings from this qualitative phase will then be analysed and interpreted. Subsequently, based on themes which emerge from the qualitative data, instruments will be developed and surveys will be carried out to examine why the rate of non-attendance is higher in towns and cities than in rural areas of the country. A comparison analysis of all data collected will be performed and cross correlated to establish why there is a difference in non-attendance between rural and urban primary schools.

The rationale for using both qualitative and quantitative data is that a useful survey of the factors influencing student non-attendance and the reasons for differences between rural and urban attendance could best be developed only after a preliminary exploration of the factors affecting student non-attendance in the Irish context. The research project has an unlimited budget and time schedule. Nevertheless, we would aim to complete the qualitative phase of the research within three months and the quantitative research stage within nine months. From our research we would hope to be able to make recommendations about attendance in Irish primary schools.

Qualitative Methodology

Site selection. Careful selection of the research site helps to ensure the success of the research study (Gall & Borg, 2003). Since research has shown that non-attendance is linked to disadvantage the research will take place in twelve Irish primary schools which are designated disadvantaged by the Irish government (DEIS, 2005). The selection of schools and other key participants in the research was guided by the need to maximise what could be learnt about non-attendance in such disadvantaged Irish primary schools. Schools were selected for the research after an analysis of the Annual Attendance Report (Appendix B) submitted to the NEWB. The ten schools with the highest non-attendance rate and the lowest non-attendance rate in each of the following categories will be selected initially:

- Disadvantaged urban: boys, girls and mixed schools.

- Disadvantaged rural: boys, girls and mixed schools.

Then, using a random stratified sample of these schools, six urban and six rural schools will be chosen (Figure 2). In each category, two boys schools, two girls schools and two mixed schools will be chosen. These will then be divided into boys' schools with good and bad attendance etc.
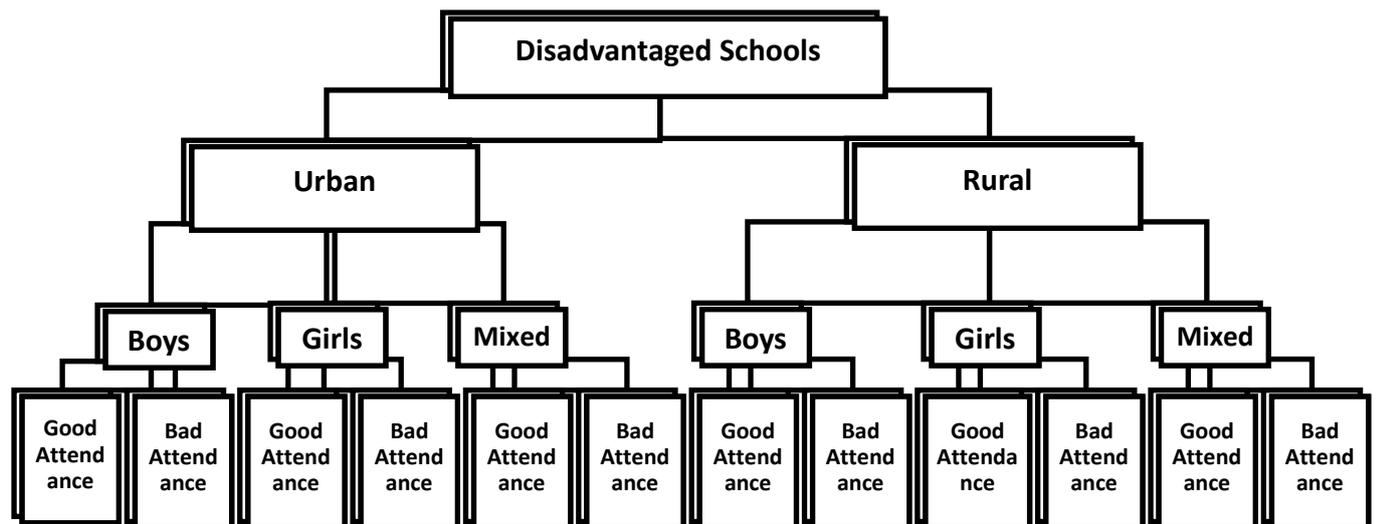
Figure 2: Random Stratified Sample

Research participants. "Key informants help give perspective to the entire methodological front" (Woods 2002, p. 85). This study will endeavour to capture the variety of views that all key stakeholder groups (principals, teachers, parents, EWO'S, students) have in relation to school non-attendance. Due to the confidential and sensitive nature of the research, the EWO attached to each school will help co-ordinate access to the schools, parents and students.

Access to site and participants. Access to the twelve sites would be facilitated by NEWB Regional Managers and EWOs. The principal is the "key gatekeeper" in every school and their support "carries a great deal of weight" and is central to any research in schools (Bogdan & Biklen 2003, p.76). Therefore the project would first be discussed with each school principal. Subsequently, a letter would be sent to the Board of Management in each participating school to obtain formal permission for the research. Parents of students with poor attendance who have built up a rapport with the local EWO would be asked to participate in the project.

Justification for case study strategy. A case study approach is adopted in the present study as the most appropriate research method. Case studies allow the researcher to

investigate their research question in depth (Creswell, 2009). Case studies can include both single- and multiple-case studies and can be based on a mixture of quantitative and qualitative evidence. Yin (1994) describes case study as a strategy for doing research which involves "an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context" and "relies on multiple sources of evidence" (p.13). Therefore, adopting a case study approach allows us to bring multiple sources of data and multiple perspectives to bear on the specific phenomenon of school non-attendance (Ó'Briain, 2008). We will, at all times, remain conscious of Bell's (2005) concerns about "selective reporting" and "the resulting dangers of distortion" (p.11) coupled with Yin's admonition to report all evidence fairly. Each of the twelve chosen sites will be a separate case study. This will facilitate cross-case analysis and will enhance the richness of the data.

Role of researchers. Since qualitative research typically involves an intensive and prolonged experience with participants, it gives rise to certain personal, strategic and ethical issues which we, as researchers, would have to take account of. In addition we will have to consider our values, biases and personal backgrounds as they might also shape our interpretations during the study (Creswell, 2009).

Confidentiality and ethical considerations. Bogdan and Biklen (2003) advise us that it is more difficult to be an ethical and responsible researcher than it first appears. They inform us that the two issues which dominate the "traditional official guidelines of ethics in research with human subjects are: informed consent and the protection of subjects from harm" (p.43). Greig and Taylor (1999) caution that all researchers are "potentially in a position of power and that power carries the potential for abuse". They strongly advocate that as well as observing the basic rights of children "the ethical principles of autonomy, beneficence and justice should be adhered to" (p.149). Informed consent, Waldron (2006) maintains, is the most frequently addressed ethical issue in relation to research with children.

The practice of obtaining consent from parents and "gatekeepers" is well established in research with children. The idea that children have the right to grant or refuse consent themselves is less well so. This is a complex issue. It can be difficult for children to refuse consent. We will remain mindful of this. All participants, both children and adults, will be advised that they are free to take part in the study or not and that they can withdraw at any stage. They will be told that pseudonyms will be used for their names and that of the school, and will be assured that whatever they shared would be treated confidentially.

Qualitative Research Instruments

During the qualitative phase of the project a combination of individual interviews and focus groups will be used to obtain the views of all key participants.

Individual interviews. Interviewing can be a very useful technique for collecting data which may not be accessible using other techniques (Blaxter et al., 2006). Bogdan and Biklen (2003) state that "good interviews produce rich data filled with words that reveal the respondents' perspectives" (p.96). Interviews are useful for gathering facts; accessing beliefs; discerning feelings and motives; and eliciting reasons or explanations (Silverman, 2001). They can also be used "to corroborate certain facts that you already think have been established" (Yin, 1994, p. 85).

In-depth, semi-structured interviews will be conducted with all the "key informants" (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003, p.61). (See Appendices C-G for sample interview questions). The interview schedules will be based on issues arising from the literature review. The main focus will be on individual perceptions with regard to attendance and also on organisational issues, including policy and practice, both within the school, the home and NEWB.

Contact will be made with all "key informants" well in advance of the interview, either through personal contact, telephone, e-mail or a combination of these. Each person will

be informed beforehand about how long we anticipate the interview will take (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003). All interviews will be tape recorded where participants give their consent. Copies of the interview questions will be supplied in advance and all interviews will be conducted under strict research conditions. At the beginning of each interview, we will briefly inform the subjects of our purpose, and give assurances that what is said in the interview will be treated confidentially (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003).

Various strategies espoused in the literature with regard to effective questioning will be adopted. Woods (2002) advice to seek clarifications, explanations, opinions, corroboration, connections and summaries will be used. We will treat the interviewees as experts in their field and at all times try to communicate personal interest and attention (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003). Field notes will be written up immediately after each interview, noting our initial impressions, the attitude of the interviewee, any relevant non-verbal communication, or things worthy of note that would not be picked up on the tape (Woods, 2002).

Focus groups. Focus groups are a data-gathering method that "encourage self-disclosure" (Wilson, 1997, p.209). They provide the opportunity to interview numerous people at the same time and "consist of people you have specifically selected for their experience in relation to whatever you are studying" (Kane & de Brun, 2005, p.273). The importance of "hearing the voices of children" (Boldt, 1994; Devine, 1999; Hill 2006; Zappone, 2007), when engaging in research, has been highlighted in the literature review. Mindful of this, we consider that the use of focus groups is the best method to engage the children in meaningful dialogue, enabling them to critically reflect on their perceptions, experiences, feelings, ideas and attitudes with regard to attendance, and to give voice to this in an age-appropriate way (Wilson, 1997). The focus group discussions would be held with

sixteen children aged 5 to 12 years in each site (four groups of four children). One focus

group would be chosen from each of the following class groupings:

   i.   Junior/Senior Infants

   ii.   First/Second Class

   iii.   Third/ Fourth Class

   iv.   Fifth/Sixth Class

   "Stratified random sampling" will be used when choosing the students for the focus

groups (Sarantakos, 1997, p.145). Each focus group will include one student with excellent

attendance,[4] one with very poor attendance[5] and two students with average attendance.[6] The

profile participant in each case will be the student who has missed most days in each of the

four focus groups.   Due to the nature of the study it will be extremely important that the

researchers are flexible enough in their approach to ensure that the profile participant is

present for the focus groups.

Piloting

     A pilot study gives you "a chance to ensure that you are on the right lines

conceptually" thus enabling "meaningful data" to be collected (Robson, 2002, p.97). It

provides an opportunity to revise the design, rethink the sampling strategy and develop the

research questions (Robson, 2002). According to Blaxter et al., (2006) "the value of pilot

research cannot be overestimated" and so, in the current study, each method of data collection

will be tried out beforehand (p.137). The participants in the pilot study will not be part of the

actual research. The focus groups will be piloted and any necessary adaptations and additions

will be made. Individual interviews will also be piloted with a principal, teacher, EWO and

parent. The feasibility of what we propose to do in the current study will therefore be checked

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[4] Less than five unexplained days absent, the previous school year.
[5] More than forty unexplained days absent, the previous school year.
[6] Approximately 15 unexplained days absent, the previous school year.

out, almost like a "test drive" (Teddlie & Tashakkori, 2009). Consequently, questions might be changed, added or left out.

Trustworthiness of the Study

Teddlie and Tashakkori (2009) emphasise that "a challenge facing mixed methods researchers is that they are using two different sets of standards for assessing their data quality: one for QUAL methods and one for QUAN methods" (p.209). In qualitative research, there is "no golden key to validity" (Silverman, 2010, p.275). Borg and Gall (2003) suggest that the concept of qualitative validity "corresponds to the credibility and trustworthiness of the study's findings" (p.591). In other words, is the research report credible to the participants in the study and to what extent are the findings worth paying attention to? (Teddlie and Tashakkori, 2009). The five validity criteria suggested by Anderson and Herr (1999) will be used to evaluate the trustworthiness of this research project. They are: outcome validity, process validity, democratic validity, catalytic validity and dialogic validity.

In the current study the adequacy of the processes used in different phases of the research process will be examined regularly throughout the study thus ensuring process validity. In particular, we will examine the extent to which problems are framed and solved so as to facilitate our ongoing learning as researchers (Borg & Gall, 2003). In addition, we will ensure that all data is triangulated by including multiple perspectives and data sources.

By working collaboratively with all the parties who have a stake in the problem of non-attendance in Irish primary schools and by taking their multiple perspectives and interests into account we will ensure democratic validity in our research.

At all stages of the current research project we will engage in reflective dialogue with each other and perhaps with other researchers or "critical friends" who, since they are outsiders, might serve as devil's advocate and offer alternative explanations of the research

data (Borg & Gall, 2003). We will frequently discuss and review our findings and interpretations, thus facilitating dialogic validity in our research.

Catalytic validity refers to the degree to which the research process "reorients, focuses, and energises participants such that they are open to transforming their view of reality in relation to their practice" (Borg & Gall, 2003, p.592). We will be mindful of this at all times.

Most importantly, we will hope to achieve outcome validity in our research. By the end of the study, we hope to have a better understanding of the factors that influence non-attendance in Irish primary schools and to understand why attendance is poorer in urban areas than in rural ones. Our ultimate aim is that our research will help to improve the problem of non-attendance in Irish primary schools.

Borg and Gall (2003) emphasise that these five criteria for validity are not exhaustive and suggest that researchers should identify and apply their own criteria to evaluate the validity of their research. Through an iterative process of collaboration and discussion we would endeavour to do this, all the while bearing in mind if our research is trustworthy, authentic and credible (Creswell, 2009).

Quantitative Methodology

For the purpose of this study, the DES primary school list 2010/2011 will be used as our total population (N = 3,165) (www.education.ie). Appendix H presents sample sizes that would be necessary to ensure precision levels where the confidence Level is 95% and P=0.05. However these sample sizes reflect the number of obtained responses, thus we will increase the number by 10% to compensate for non- responses (Israel, 2009). Therefore we would hope to use a sample size of 388 for the study (n = 388). A power analysis would then be

conducted which will provide a mechanism to reduce bias and improve accuracy when determining the sample size.

NEWB data on non-attendance includes five features of school settings; location, size, gender served, DEIS and RAPID Classification (Appendix I). It is proposed that a representative sample reflecting the five features of school settings will be chosen and therefore reflect the appropriate inferences (Creswell, 2003). A sample from each of these categories will be selected in such a way that every element of the population has an equal chance of being selected. This type of sampling is known as stratified sampling, where the representative population is made up of the identifiable subgroups and a sample is drawn from each stratum (Reilly, 1997). An identification number will be assigned to each element in the specific subgroup and a random number generator will also be used. The study follows a probability design which will allow the results to be generalised to the overall population.

The validity of the project is also dependent on the control of sources of bias including minimising losses of data, efficient data collection and reducing response errors. A faulty sampling frame or faulty sampling procedures will all contribute to possible inaccurate data. Response errors may occur if people are questioned about sensitive issues which they are not willing to share. Efficient accurate design therefore needs to be followed up with rigorous pilot testing to further reduce inaccuracies and sources of bias.

Quantitative Dependent Variable, Reliability and Validity

The dependent variable, in this study, is the level of non-attendance. This paper seeks to determine to what level the independent variables (factors) influence school non-attendance. This dependent variable will be operationalised through the identification and

assessment of the key independent variables which influence or predict non-attendance; already identified in the literature as student, family, school and system factors.

This study intends to collect, compare, interpret and analysise the quantitative data in the following ways:

1. Student Engagement Scale

2. Principals' Survey

3. Teachers' Survey

4. Parents' Survey

5. Collection of attendance data for each of the schools (AAR)

The Student Engagement Scale (SES) is a scale that has been developed by the Colorado National Centre for School Engagement (NCSE). It is a useful tool for assessing student engagement, achievement and attendance at school (Appendix J). The Cronbach Alpha for the different categories on the SES is reported in the range of .793 to .922 (NCSE, 2006, p.8). This indicates that the scale is clearly reliable (Appendix I). In order to assess the validity of the engagements scales, a convergent validity test was conducted on the SES (Appendix J). The SES instrument is a standardised instrument which has been developed professionally and demonstrates consistent reliability and validity (NCSE, 2006).

The research team will develop a survey for principals, teachers and parents which will correspond with the items from the SES. This will ensure consistency and comparability of data between the different scales. A Cronbach Alpha will be conducted on all scales to ensure scale reliability and internal consistency.

Quantitative Internal and External Validity

Cook and Campbell (1979) developed a 12 point list of threats to internal validity which include the following; history, testing, instrumentation, regression, mortality, maturation, selection, selection by maturation interaction, ambiguity about casual direction, diffusion of treatments, compensatory equalisation of treatments and compensatory rivalry (Robson, 2002). Potential threats to this study could include schools being amalgamated or losing their designated disadvantaged status. It is also extremely important that the different surveys and scales are conducted simultaneously at schools within the same geographic location. Otherwise, cross contamination of data could occur from one school to another, thereby threatening the internal validity of the study.

Ambiguity about casual direction refers to making assumptions about the correlation between the level of non-attendance and the different factors associated with this, which could also threaten the internal validity of the research. The research team will also need to be conscious of participants dropping out of the study and the percentage of non-responses. This will need to be taken into account when calculating our sample.

If a potential threat is identified plans will be put in place to reduce its impact. In the case of the history threat, the administration of the quantitative investigation using SPSS to large numbers of comparable schools at different locations but with similar geographic positions helps to neutralise this threat on the overall project. An added successful strategy incorporated into this project is the fact that there is randomisation of schools under investigation. This innovative design philosophy was identified by Fisher (1935) as a means of reducing potential threats to a study. At every stage of the study due diligence is required from all team members to ensure and maintain internal validity.

Different situational components such as treatment conditions, location, sampling, administration and the extent of measurement can limit generalisability and therefore be potential threats to external validity. While this study seeks to investigate national trends with the administration of a number of survey's to a representative sample of all primary schools, the relationship between attitude and behaviour of respondents under investigation is historically problematic (Hanson, 1980). The research team will need to be conscious of making inferences from the findings of this research to non-attendance in post-primary.

All of the above threats will be taken into consideration to limit their significance on the validity of the study. The research team will also be conscious of threats to validity which are outside their control. However the use of the SES and the development of well designed surveys which will be tested prior to being administered will limit threats to external validity and therefore, be applicable to the overall population.

Data Analysis and Interpretation

In mixed methods research, data analysis relates to the type of analysis chosen for each procedure. Consequently, analysis occurs both within the qualitative and the quantitative approach and also between the two approaches (Creswell, 2009). In this project, the qualitative data analysis will be an ongoing process involving "continual reflection about the data, asking analytical questions, and writing memos throughout the study" (Creswell 2009, p.184). The qualitative data analysis will include within-case and cross-case analysis and will be completed before the quantitative phase begins. Figure 3, shows the various steps that we will undertake in our analysis of the qualitative data. The first step involves organising and preparing the raw data from the interviews and focus groups. Next, we will read through all

the data to get a general sense of what participants are saying and to reflect on its overall meaning. Then we will code the data, either by hand or by using a specialist data analysis package such as NVivo or NUD*IST (Robson, 2002). As the analysis progresses, themes and descriptions should become clearer. We will look for lessons learned from the data (Lincoln and Gould, 1985). The final step in the qualitative analysis will involve making an interpretation of the data. In addition, we will also compare our findings to information gleaned from the literature to see whether they confirm or diverge from past findings (Creswell, 2009). New questions may then emerge from this process. It is hoped that the themes, descriptions, patterns, insights, statements and questions generated by the qualitative data in this study can then be used in the quantitative phase to create various instruments that are grounded in the views of the participants. Due to the sequential nature of this research we do not envisage a conflict or contradiction of data.

Following the completion of the surveys by the research participants nationwide, the questions and answers will be recorded using the Statistical Program for Social Sciences (SPSS). This will assist and enhance the analysis, interpretation and presentation of data. SPSS provides a simple application to generate Pie, Bar and Scatter plot graphs on the compiled data which reflect findings in an easily comprehensible way. Comparisons between urban and rural groups can be presented side by side for easy analysis. A number of statistical tests such as the Chi-square and multiple regression tests will also be conducted on the data.

This study could have wide ranging implications at local and national level for all primary schools across Ireland. The main purpose of our analysis is to gain an understanding

of the factors that contribute to non-attendance at primary level and to understand why there

is a difference in the level of non-attendance between urban and rural primary schools. The

qualitative part of the study will produce rich in-depth data to improve our understanding of

the factors involved in non-attendance from different perspectives. The findings of the

quantitative analysis could be used to develop and inform primary school policy at school and

governmental level. Schools, principals, teachers, parents, the DES, NEWB and researchers

would have an interest in this kind of study.

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Glossary of Acronyms

AAR   Annual Attendance Report

DEIS   Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools

DES   Department of Education and Skills

ESL   Early School Leaving

EWO   Education Welfare Officer

HSE   Health Service Executive

INTO   Irish National Teachers' Organisation

NCSE   National Centre for School Engagement

NESF   National Economic and Social Forum

NEWB   National Education Welfare Board

RAPID   Revitalising Areas by Planning, Investment and Development

SPSS   Statistic Package for Social Science

Appendices

Appendix A

The National Educational Welfare Board:

The Education Welfare Act 2000 updates the legislative framework for compulsory school attendance within the Irish state. Following the commencement of the Education (Welfare) Act 2000, the National Educational Welfare Board (NEWB) was established as the national agency with overall responsibility for tackling school attendance, absenteeism and early school leaving.   Prior to this, no one organisation had overall responsibility for compulsory school attendance. This led to a disjointed school attendance service operating across the country. Only Dublin City, Dun Laoghaire, Cork City and Waterford City employed School Attendance Officers to enforce compulsory school attendance with the remainder of the country under the remit of An Garda Siochana. At the present time there are approximately 70 Educational Welfare Officers (EWO) providing a national educational welfare service with work being prioritised in areas with high levels of disadvantage (NEWB, N.D). One of the general functions of the NEWB is to ensure that each child attends a recognised school or otherwise receives a certain minimum education. The NEWB also has specific responsibilities to assist and support children, families and schools with attendance issues (NEWB, 2009).

Appendix B:

The Annual Attendance Report:

All schools in Ireland are obliged by law to report on attendance matters to the National Educational Welfare Board on a yearly basis. Since the commencement of the Education (Welfare) Act 2000 an increase in the response rate of the Annual Attendance Report (AAR) is evident. This is the first time that such information has been collected and analysed in the Irish state (Mac Aogáin, 2008). The AAR response rate from schools has levelled off since 2004/05. In 2004/05 the response rate for primary schools was 81% which rose to 95% in 2007/08. Therefore, the AAR can now be viewed as a census (Mac Aogain, 2008; Millar, 2009).

Appendix C: Principal Interview Questions

1) Can you identify three or four key reasons why you believe that children may not attend school?

2) What effect does non-attendance have on:

   a) The child

   b) Their family

   c) Their teacher

   d) Their classmates

3) List three or four key ideas / approaches for dealing with a family who fail to send their children to school?

4) What role does the principal currently have with regard to attendance?

   a) How are you supported in that role by others?

5) How would you rate our school's attendance record in the last three school years?

Very satisfactory   Satisfactory   Acceptable   Unsatisfactory   Very unsatisfactory
          1   2   3   4   5

   a) Why do you rate it thus?

6) How would you rate the support that the school receives from The NEWB?

Very satisfactory   Satisfactory   Acceptable   Unsatisfactory   Very unsatisfactory
          1   2   3   4   5
Give a key reason for your response.

7) In your experience are there any gaps in the present system of monitoring attendance?

8) Rate the usefulness to the school of having an attendance strategy:

Very satisfactory   Satisfactory   Acceptable   Unsatisfactory   Very unsatisfactory

          1   2   3   4   5
Give a key reason for your response.

Appendix D: Teacher Interview Questions

1. What is your role with regard to attendance in this school?

2. How do you encourage students to come to school?

3. If you are worried about a child's non-attendance what do you do?

4. Can you identify three or four key reasons why you believe that children may not attend school?

5. How would you rate attendance in this school?

     Very satisfactory   Satisfactory   Don't know   Unsatisfactory   Very unsatisfactory

              1   2   3   4   5

     a) Why do you rate it thus?

6. How do the following factors influence a student's decision to attend school:

     a) Family

     b) Peers

     c) Teacher

     d) Child's ability

     e) Child's personality

     f) Other School Factors

     g) Other (please specify)

7. What do you think is the most single important factor in determining that a student comes to school?

8. What changes could be made in the student's home and in this school which would encourage students to attend school more regularly?

Appendix E: Parent Interviews

1. What was your experience of school?

2. As a child did you attend school regularly?

3. What, if anything, do your children like about school?

4. What, if anything, do your children dislike about school?

5. How would you rate your children's attendance?

Very Good	Good	Satisfactory	Poor	Very Poor
1	2	3	4	5

   Why do you rate it this way?

6. Did your children ever miss much time from school?   If yes,

    a. Why was this case?

    b. When your children were not coming to school what might have helped you to get them to be in school?

7. What influence do you think each of the following factors have on a child's decision to go to school:

    a. Family

    b. Friends

    c. Teacher

    d. Child's ability to do school work

    e. Child's personality

    f. Other School Factors

    g. Other (please specify)

8. What role do parents have in helping children attend school?

9. What incentives do you think would encourage children to come to school?

Appendix F: Education Welfare Officer Interview Questions

1) Describe the role of the Education Welfare Officer.

2) How does the National Education Welfare Board "encourage and support regular school attendance?"

3) As an Education Welfare Officer what is your main priority or focus?

4) Do you prioritise certain schools, pupils or families in your area? How?

5) In your role as Education Welfare Officer, do you give equal priority to ensuring good attendance in the primary and post-primary sectors? Explain.

6) From your experience as an Education Welfare Officer:

   a) What are the key reasons offered by parents/guardians as to why their children fail to attend school?

   b) What do you perceive to be the key reasons as to why their children fail to attend school?

7) Do you regard the NEWB's national attendance statistics as accurate?

8) Do you perceive any gaps or loopholes in the present system of monitoring children's attendance at school?

9) Should alternatives to the threshold of 20 day absence be considered so as to distinguish between the levels of support needed in cases of 20, 40 or 60 days absence?

10) How do you support schools, pupils or families with attendance problems?

11) What advice would you give to schools to improve attendance and to develop workable attendance policies?

12) Your website states that "every day counts in a child's education". What do you regard as the key policies and practices of the NEWB that support this vision statement?

Appendix G: Focus Group Questions Children

1. What do you like about coming to school?

2. What do you not like about coming to school?

3. Is coming to school important? Why / why not?

4. What do you think children your age most need to help them come to school?

5. If you were unhappy in school or if something was bothering you who would you tell and why? What, if anything, would help people come to school most or all of the time?

Appendix H:

Table 1. Sample size for +/-3%, +/-5%, +/-7% and +/-10% Precision Levels Where Confidence Level is 95% and P = 0.05				
Sample size (n) for Precision (e) of:				
Population	**+/- 3%**	**+/- 5%**	**+/- 7%**	**+/- 10%**
100		81	67	51
200		134	101	67
300		172	121	76
500	a	222	145	83
600	a	240	152	86
700	a	255	158	88
800	a	267	163	89
900	a	277	166	90
1,000	a	286	169	91
2,000	714	333	185	95
3,000	811	353	191	97
4,000	870	364	194	98
5,000	909	370	196	98
6,000	938	375	197	98

a = Assumption of normal population is poor (Yamane, 1967).

The entire population should be sampled

Appendix I:

Location:

General Non-Attendance			
Location	**Mean**	**N Schools**	**SD**
Rural Schools	5.26	1908	1.75
Urban Schools	6.89	1014	2.71
Total	5.82	2922	2.27

20-Day Absences			
Location	**Mean**	**N Schools**	**SD**
Rural Schools	8.26	1962	6.68
Urban Schools	14.06	1051	8.95
Total	10.29	3013	8.04

Size:

General Non- Attendance			
Size of School	**Mean**	**N**	**SD**
<50	5.29	638	2.15
50-100	5.41	832	1.88
101-200	6.00	668	2.39
>200	6.58	691	2.44
All Sizes	5.81	2829	2.27

20- Day Absences			
Size of School	**Mean**	**N**	**SD**
<50	8.14	655	8.56
50-100	9.05	861	6.94
101-200	11.40	692	8.30
>200	12.49	707	7.62
All Sizes	10.24	2915	8.00

Gender Served:

General Non-Attendance			
Gender Served	**Mean**	**Schools**	**SD**
Mixed	5.69	2,589	2.22
Girls	6.57	117	2.05
Boys	7.03	216	2.47
All Schools	5.82	2,922	2.27

20 Day-Absences:			
Gender Served	**Mean**	**Schools**	**SD**
Mixed	9.72	2,661	7.75
Girls	13.64	126	6.92
Boys	15.19	225	9.70
All Schools	10.29	3,012	8.03

RAPID Schools:

The Revitalising Areas by Planning, Investment and Development (RAPID) programme is aimed at improving the quality of life and the opportunity available to the citizens of the most disadvantaged communities in Irish cities and towns.

RAPID Schools		
Type	**RAPID 1**	**Other**
Non- Attendance	8.28 (130)	5.71(2,886)
20 Day Absences	22.51 (131)	9.93 (2889)

DEIS Categories:

The DEIS categories can be equated with the amount of assistance received by schools in the

School Support Programme

Non-Attendance			
DEIS Categories	**Mean**	**Schools**	**SD**
Rural Not in SSP	5.14	1,588	1.64
Rural In SSP	5.83	317	2.12
Urban Not in SSP	6.07	707	2.10
Urban in SSP Band 2	7.98	139	2.58
Urban in SSP Band 1	9.37	171	3.18
Total	5.82	2,922	2.27

20 Day Absences			
DEIS Categories	**Mean**	**Schools**	**SD**
Rural Not in SSP	7.67	1,631	6.09
Rural In SSP	10.70	727	6.55
Urban Not in SSP	11.10	328	8.42
Urban in SSP Band 2	18.22	144	7.54
Urban in SSP Band 1	24.38	182	8.03
Total	10.29	3,012	8.03

Appendix J:

The student engagement scale was developed by the Colorado National Centre for School Engagement on behalf of the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention in order to evaluate their truancy reduction programmes (NCSE, 2006).

Emotional Engagement

Sixteen items fit this category.

When I first walked into my school I thought it was Good….Bad.

When I first walked into my school I thought it was Friendly….Unfriendly.

When I first walked into my school I thought it was Clean….Dirty.

I am happy to be at my school.

The teachers at my school treat students fairly.

I like most of my teachers at school.

The discipline at my school is fair.

Most of my teachers care about how I'm doing.

Most of my teachers know the subject matter well.

There is an adult at school that I can talk to about my problems.

I respect most of my teachers.

Most of my teachers understand me.

I feel excited by the work in school.

My classroom is a fun place to be.

I enjoy the work I do in class

I feel I can go to my teachers with the things that I need to talk about.

Cognitive Engagement

Twenty-two items fit this category.

How important do you think an education is?

How important do you think it is to get good grades?

How important do you think the things you are learning in school are going to be to you

later in life?

How important do you think it is to have a good job or career after finishing school?

I am getting a good education at my school.

I will graduate from high school.

I want to go to college

Most of my classes are boring.

Most of my teachers know the subject matter well.

I learn a lot from my classes.

I am interested in the work I get to do in my classes.

When I read a book, I ask myself questions to make sure I understand what it is about.

I study at home even when I don't have a test.

I talk with people outside of school about what I am learning in class.

I check my schoolwork for mistakes.

If I don't know what a word means when I am reading, I do something to figure it out,

like look it up in the dictionary or ask someone.

If I don't understand what I read, I go back and read it over again.

I try my best at school.

I get good grades in school.

Behavioral Engagement

Seven items fit this category

How often have you thought of dropping out?

When I am in class, I just pretend I am working.

I follow the rules at school.

I get in trouble at school.

I skip (cut) classes during school.

I skip (cut) the entire school day.

I try to stay home from school.

Appendix K:

Emotional Engagement

Location	Sample	Cronbach's Alpha
Houston	57	.884
Jacksonville	39	.895
Seattle	39	.902

Cognitive Engagement

Location	Sample	Cronbach's Alpha
Houston	66	.904
Jacksonville	41	.922
Seattle	43	.867

Behavioural Engagement

Location	Sample	Cronbach's Alpha
Houston	72	.797
Jacksonville	46	.489
Seattle	47	.793

Appendix L:

Convergent validity: In the research study the constructs that were similar to the instrument were identified, valid data sources for those constructs were gathered and the relationship between the instrument and the already established valid data was assessed. The scales were also related to other school outcomes such as attendance in order to assess the validity of the engagement scales. The results were broken down by site and are reported below.

Houston

In Houston, the emotional engagement scale was not significantly correlated with GPA, but the cognitive scale correlated with GPA. The coefficient was .369, which is significant at the $p<.005$ level ($N = 62$). This means the cognitive engagement scale accounts for approximately14% of the variance in GPA. The behavioural scale also correlated with GPA .345, which is significant at the $p<.005$ level ($N = 68$). This means the behavioural engagement scale accounts for approximately 12% of the variance in GPA. There were no significant correlations between attendance and cognitive or emotional engagement, however, the correlation between behavioural engagement and days missed was .20 ($p=.15$, ns). Finally, the emotional scale correlated with the behavioural scale .22 (ns) and correlated with the cognitive scale .68, $p<.001$. The behavioural scale is correlated with cognitive scale .52, $p<.001$.

Seattle

In Seattle, none of the engagement scales correlated with GPA or absences. Behavioural engagement correlated with cognitive engagement, $r(51) = .64$, $p<.001$ and with emotional

engagement, $r(51) = .35$, $p<.05$. Emotional engagement correlated with cognitive

engagement, r(51) = .72, $p<.001$.

Jacksonville

Since the students served in Jacksonville are primarily in elementary schools, we

received Math and English grades rather than GPA. We also received attendance information

broken down for excused and unexcused absences. The behavioural scale did not correlate

significantly with grades, but was correlated with unexcused absences, $r(40) = .352$, $p<.05$.

The emotional scale was significantly correlated with Math grades, $r(32) = .48$, $p<.01$,

English grades, $r(32) = .43$, $p<.05$, and unexcused absences, $r(33) = .61$, $p<. 001$.

The cognitive scale was also significantly correlated with Math grades, $r(34) = .40$, $p<. 05$,

English grades, $r(34) = .37$, $p<.05$, and unexcused absences, $r(35) = .46$, $p<.01$. None of

engagement scales correlated with excused absences.

The emotional and cognitive scales were significantly and highly correlated; $r(37) = .928$,

$p<.001$, where as the behavioural scale was not significantly correlated with the cognitive

scale and was only marginally correlated with the emotional scale; $r(30) = .31$, $p = .05$.