

Roma Education Fund

Literature Review on: *'Teacher Absenteeism'*

Commissioned by the Roma Education Fund

Author: Arthur R Ivatts

Roma Education Fund

Literature Review on ‘Teacher Absenteeism’

1. Context

“Whatever the importance of strong training, classroom experience, or advanced pedagogical methods for the scholastic development of students, these factors can have scant effect on a day a teacher is away from school.”¹

1.1 This review of the research literature focused on the topic of ‘teacher absenteeism’ was commissioned by the Roma Education Fund in March 2010. It aims to identify the educational policy issues that can be addressed by a range of research methodologies and approaches. The commission represents the first stage of an empirical research project that will investigate the levels of teacher absenteeism in a sample of Bulgarian and Romanian primary schools. The research will measure and assess the impact of teacher absenteeism on the education of primary aged Rom children in particular with recommendations for any policy measures that might be required in relation to the findings. Further, this literature review will inform the ‘Terms of Reference’ for the aforementioned planned research activity.

1.2 The review has thus attempted to identify all relevant findings, methodological procedures, evidence and discussion in the literature on teacher absenteeism from the late 1970s to the present (period of most relevant material) and in relation to the following criteria:

- Empirically-based research (methodology, findings and recommendations)
- Policy documents
- Evidence exploring academic, economic, political and social issues
- Good practice solutions and effective strategies
- Implications for future policy and practice

2. Acquiring the relevant sources

2.1 An initial discussion with the Roma Education Fund staff was held to establish the parameters of the review. A number of references were kindly provided by the Roma Education Fund. In addition, all other materials were the result of a comprehensive internet database trawl covering national and international academic research institution websites and those belonging to a wide range of international organisations including, The World Bank, UNESCO, UNICEF, OEDC, OSCE, Council of Europe, The European Commission, OSI, UNDP and others.

¹ Charles T Clotfelter, Helen F. Ladd and Jacob L. Vigdor, “Are Teacher Absences Worth Worrying About in the US?”, National Bureau of Economic Research – Working Papers Series (13648), November 2007, p 2.

2.2 The views expressed in this review are the author's and do not necessarily reflect those of the Roma Education Fund.

3. Identifying the research material for inclusion

3.1 Initial searches identified 177 seemingly relevant sources to the review. However, when research articles and or abstracts were examined in detail it was evident that a significant number would fall outside the target area in terms of their direct value to the subsequent research activity. These items were therefore eliminated from the review process. The initial focus on sources relevant to the review and the key criteria listed above, numbered 37 and this narrowing down was also compatible with the time constraints of the exercise.

3.2 Copies of the sources were then acquired by the author and subsequently considered for final inclusion. However, the final number of relevant texts scrutinized was slightly larger on account of the initial sources leading to references for additional relevant material. Although this review can not be considered to be exhaustive, it does, however, highlight a number of important and influential issues pertinent to the planned research activity.

4. Structure of the review

4.1 Information and findings from these publications were then summarised and presented under the following section headings (See individual sections for any sub-headings):

- Definitions, Heritage and Reasons for Concern
- Causal factors
- Impact on client group(s)
- Measurement and methodologies
- Good practice strategies for improvement
- General observations
- Conclusions

5. Definitions, Heritage and Reasons for Concern

5.1 Definitions

5.1.1 A good deal of the literature, irrespective of approach and angle, accepts the general definition of 'absence' as plain and simple, 'not being physically present' and with no cryptic inferences to any ambiguity in the terminology. However, in a few scholarly research papers the topic of study is introduced with a definition of '**absenteeism**'. Such definitions tend to be all embracing as that presented below: "Absenteeism is any failure of an employee to report for or to remain at work as scheduled, regardless of reason" Cascio (2003). While the derivation of such a definition is rooted in industrial relations and labour law considerations, one more

specific to education is provided by Strickland (1998) which reminds the reader simply, 'that absenteeism is a period of not attending school'. Unfortunately, the simplistic definition is not as free of complications as one would wish. In some studies reference is made to teachers being present in school but failing to visit their class to teach (Chaudhury *et al* 2005 [World Bank National Absence Survey WBNAS]) or not being in a fit condition to teach the children effectively (Castro *et al* UNESCO 2007). In terms of impact these realities would seem to be little different to the situation as if the teacher had not even attended the actual school building (Castro, V. *et al* (2007). In at least one instance the definition of teacher absenteeism is indirectly defined by it being listed as a determinant of a low performing school (Corallo and McDonald 2001).

5.1.2 To further complicate the simple definition of 'teacher absenteeism', at least one study defines it within a trilogy of factors that fundamentally hinder instruction, namely, 'teachers arriving late at school, teacher's lack of adequate preparation and teacher absenteeism' OEDC *Talis'* (2009). As a continuation of this seeming dilemma, other authors focus on the importance of the identification and measurement of 'instructional time' Venäläinen (2008). Reference is also made to the possibility of negative connotations associated with the use of the term 'absenteeism' and its seemingly inappropriate use for such things as teachers being away from school for training purposes. In one case 'teacher absence' as a term was preferred. "The term has pejorative flavour that we do not wish to impart" (Miller *et al* 2007). In some of the debates surrounding definitions a distinction is made between legitimate and illegitimate absence from school and the complications associated with this aspect of description and measurement is dealt with in a subsequent section (Patrinos and Kagia [World Bank] 2007).

5.1.3 Despite the semantics of the different definitions, for the purposes of this literature review the general interpretation of 'teacher absenteeism' will mean (unless otherwise stated) that for whatever reason(s), a teacher is not physically present at school when, all other things being equal, they would otherwise be expected to be so. "A teacher who is absent through illness or any other cause, or who leaves teaching because of persistent illness, is lost to the children whom she/he would otherwise have taught. We might intuitively expect a teacher's absence to lower the quality of the school experience for the students whom she/he would otherwise have taught." ²

5.2 Heritage route to research interest

5.2.1 The majority of academic interest in teacher absenteeism would seem to be most strongly evidenced within the last two decades. Earlier references to absenteeism *per se*, mainly focus within the literature on industrial relations and human resource management and their direct links with psychological theories (Steers and Rhodes 1978).

5.2.2 Interestingly enough, some of the research initially comments on the seeming paucity of empirical investigation into this field of education (Ehrenberg, *et al* 1991). A similar observation was also made a decade later by Bowers (2001), "Yet teacher

² Bowers, Tony, "Teacher Absenteeism and Ill Health retirement: a review". Cambridge Journal of Education, Vol.31, No.2, 2001.

absence *per se* has attracted little interest from researchers”. The inherent arrogance of the present time behoves caution in this regard. The subject of absenteeism was the focus of a study in medicine as long ago as 1947 (Pennington) and later a major teacher union in the United Kingdom commissioned research on ‘repeater’ teacher absence in 1976 (Simpson). It is interesting to note that the search for sources did not result in the identification of published books dedicated to this topic, but rather in research findings published as papers within learned journals.³ However, the current decade has undoubtedly seen a greater interest in teacher absenteeism and thus Ehrenberg’s assertion in 1991 that, “the study of the causes and effects of teacher absences from the classroom has received very little attention”, may be a much less accurate claim today.

5. 3 Reasons for concern

5.3.1 The literature on teacher absenteeism is rich with references to the importance of the issue as a dimension of educational policy dysfunction. The direct cost factor for public finances is generally given pre-eminence, but the indirect costs are also highlighted particularly in relation to pupil/student achievement levels. Teacher absence can be seen as a non-trivial impact on productivity (Miller *et al* 2007). Teacher absenteeism is ubiquitously defined in negative terms with serious questions being asked about the cost, quality, training and availability of substitute teachers in advanced economies, and the damaging effects on educational outcomes for children in developing countries where it is common for them to be sent home or to be ‘doubled up’ with other over-sized classes when their teachers fail to attend school. Thus “there is wide consensus that teachers’ absenteeism has detrimental consequences for the educational systems” (Rosenblatt and Shirom 2004).

5.3.2 As aforementioned, much of the literature stresses the central educational value of the presence of a teacher. “Teachers are not only the gatekeepers to quality education but also account for most of the expenditures in the sector. Teachers are the transmitters of knowledge who help ensure that children learn. They are role models to students, and in most rural communities, they are the most educated and respected personages. They are at the front line of developing pupils’ understanding, attitudes, skills, learning, and core values. Teachers are, therefore, the most important element in producing education.” (Patrinos and Kagia [World Bank] 2007)

5.3.3 It is difficult to secure up-to-date figures on the actual costs to a country of teacher absenteeism. However, the costs are not insubstantial in relation to the percentage of overall education costs. Teacher salaries account for a very significant part of overall spending. In the U.S.A. it was estimated that in 2000 the national cost of teacher absenteeism was \$25.2 billion dollars (Jacobs and Kritsonis 2007). In England in 1999 teacher absenteeism was estimated to cost £300,000,000 (Bowers 2001). Because of the general scarcity of resources in developing countries the impact of teacher absenteeism, and particularly as an aspect of corruption, is more damaging to the overall economic infrastructure. In countries such as El Salvador, Guinea, Morocco, Kenya and Yemen, one-fifth to one-third of the public budget is allocated to education (World Bank 2006). Of the total education budget in Nigeria, 71% of

³ A full directory search of the entire library at the London Institute of Education (London University) did not find one volume on the specific topic of ‘teacher absenteeism’ or similar terms.

recurrent expenditure on education is spent to pay teachers (Adeyemi and Akpotu 2009). In this case (period of study 1998/99) the estimated cost of absent teachers was some 6% of the total teacher salary budget. It should be remembered, however, that exceptional circumstances, in terms of teacher absenteeism, may exist in countries with high levels of HIV and AIDS infection (Castro *et al* [UNESCO/IIEP] 2007).

5.3.4 Although it is difficult to identify or predict current trends, a number of studies talk of the marked increase in teacher absenteeism. In one study it is estimated that a typical student in the U.S.A. spends the equivalent of one full year between kindergarten and 12th grade under the supervision of substitute teachers (Pitkoff 2003).

5.3.5 There is overwhelming evidence that teacher absenteeism , irrespective of a nation's economic status, impacts more severely on communities which suffer socio - economic disadvantage. In some circumstances minority ethnic status is also a disadvantaging factor (Miller *et al* 2007 and Clotfelter *et al* 2007). Teacher absenteeism is said to represent an alarming hindrance to the educational ambitions of the United Nations Millennium Development Goals and the EFA (Education For All) programme objectives by UNESCO (Duflo *et al* 2007).

6. Causal Factors

6.1 The causal factors for teacher absenteeism are clearly multifarious. As aforementioned, the negative impact on the availability of quality instructional time for pupils/students is the same irrespective of reason. It is to be noted that many of the reasons for teacher absence are also the same irrespective of a country's economic status. This review has previously established the reality that by definition all teachers are vulnerable to illness throughout their working lives. In many cases the illness may be serious enough to prevent them physically from getting to school and in a sufficiently fit state to be able to teach the children effectively. Indeed, some illnesses may represent a health and safety issue for the children and other staff, should the teacher attempt to struggle into school. This consideration may also be relevant to teachers who are pregnant but it would be important not to define this condition as illness *per se*.

6.2 The significant disparities between the level of teacher health in countries with advanced economies and those in developing (and possibly transitional) economies, may go some way to explaining a proportion of the significant gap between the rates of absenteeism that exist for some countries. This situation may be more relevant for regions with endemic HIV/AIDS infection although no direct link has been established (Castro *et al* [UNESCO/IIEP] 2007). It is interesting to note that the relatively higher absentee rate between teachers and other workers in the U.S.A. is sometimes attributed to the assertion that teachers are exposed to the many infectious diseases that are prevalent among young children (Miller *et al* 2007).

6.3 The literature betrays some ambivalence surrounding the legitimacy of reasons for teachers' absences from school. However, there would seem to be a degree of acceptance that a range of reasons, in addition to 'unavoidable' illness , might be justifiable. Many of these may well be detailed within the teachers' contractual

arrangements and may or may not be subject to head teacher discretion. Such reasons include attendance at in-services training courses or conferences; attending official meetings on behalf of the school; accompanying pupils on educational trips and visits (such events may frequently require additional teachers to cover for meeting health and safety regulations); responding to the illness of close family members; urgent child-care requirements; and attending the funeral of a close relative or colleague .

6.4 There would also seem to be a range of reasons which are justified on account of a teacher being either a willing or unwilling hostage to exceptional circumstances. These include: inclement weather conditions; floods and natural disasters which might disrupt travel and communication systems; strikes; and wars and civil disorders. In addition to all of these there are also the everyday unpredictable emergencies caused by mechanical and or technological failures such as a broken down bus in a rural area or a punctured bicycle tyre.

6.5 A good deal of the literature concerned with teacher absenteeism in developing countries focuses on it as a manifestation of levels of corruption in education. Reference is made to 'ghost' teachers (Chapman 2002 and Chaudhury *et al* 2005); teachers who moonlight to make extra money; teachers who charge fees to families for private lessons that should have been free and delivered in school time; teachers who have to travel to capital cities to pick up their pay cheques ; and teachers who may be required for electioneering work for local or national political stakeholders.

6.6 The majority of research about teacher absenteeism, and that which excites considerable academic and economic interest, focuses not so much on 'unavoidable' illness and whether teachers as a group are more susceptible to ill health , as on the categories of illness that present teachers (and sometimes their managers) with a personal dilemma of 'choice' or 'discretion' in deciding whether to attend school or stay at home for the day. The orientation of research work has thus tended to focus on a range of interests including: the identification of predictable teacher characteristics (Rosenblatt and Shirom 2004); the impact on levels of attainment and pupil/student attendance (Miller *et al* 2007); strategies for reducing absenteeism in education systems (most studies) and the impact, and eradication, of corruption (Chapman 2002; Patrinos and Kagia [World Bank] 2007).

6.7 The relevant discussions in many texts illustrate a desire to isolate a number of causal factors by dividing choices between personal moral behaviours and the extent to which they may be influenced by the potential dysfunction of institutional structures. Many of the causal factors are inexplicitly linked between the two forces. The many factors, however, represent a significant number of variables that frequently demand sophisticated research methodologies to assess their impact. Taking both groups together in no particular order, such influences/variables might stem from: poor educational administration; poor or non-existent attendance monitoring, recording and reporting procedures; visits and actions by informed school inspectors; methods of 'sickness' notification; part-time employment contracts; poorly organised schools with poor pupil discipline and behaviour; schools with very large classes; training and training opportunities; the timing of training; financial incentives/benefits/sanctions; levels of textbooks and resources; quality of infrastructure/learning environment/buildings/toilets; levels of job-satisfaction; educational background; gender; seniority; size of school; size of classes; mixed

age/grade classes; tenure and contractual arrangements; type of school (public/private); leave entitlements; years of experience; ethnic status; distance from school; willingness of colleagues to take double-upped classes; the ease and availability of securing substitute teachers for cover; the quality of management and models of leadership; culture of, or anti corruption policy and practice; the links to professional upward mobility; the controlling influence of parents and communities; education/literacy rate of parents/communities; and whether educational systems promote high levels of professional commitment. Some of these potential causal factors have been consistently found to have positive correlations, while for many others the evidence is mixed.

6.8 Many studies refer to levels of teacher absenteeism being a manifestation of a school, or administrative educational district, which has an endemic 'culture of absenteeism'. In predicting absenteeism, "The high explanatory power of prior absenteeism might be partially attributed to a shared experience of absentee culture", (Rentsch and Steel 2003). "Teachers tend to adopt environmental norms regarding absenteeism, thus exhibiting similar behaviours (Rosenblatt and Shirom 2004). One study stated that professional commitment is "a set of beliefs and practices among a school's staff concerning what frequency and duration of absence is individually and organisationally acceptable, or what they define as the 'absence culture', can be of critical importance."(Jacobson *et al* 1993). It is also argued that, "The social context of the school may have more bearing on its absenteeism level than the sum of individuals' contribution to that level. Workplace norms which tolerate high levels of absence are likely to maintain those levels irrespective of who is appointed to the staff." (Bowers 2001)

6.9 Of direct relevance to the planned research activity by the Roma Education Fund is the potential for teacher absenteeism to be linked to the socio-economic status of the client group(s). As aforementioned, there is evidence that in both advanced economies and developing countries children from poorer (as well as more rural backgrounds [Patrinos and Kagia 2007]), tend to suffer a higher level of teacher absenteeism in their schools (Miller *et al* 2007; Clotfelter *et al* 2007; Bowers 2001; Chaudhury *et al* 2005; and Jacobs and Kritsonis 2007). One study on urban schools in the U.S.A. stated that, "Students who go to urban schools where the majority of the students are minority and have low socio-economic statuses experience a larger teacher absent rate than their peers in rural and suburban settings.",(Jacobs and Kritsonis 2007).

7. Impact on client group(s)

7.1 This review has purposely laid a trail of research evidence which suggests the potential of teacher absenteeism as being universally damaging to the education of children and young people. A lost day of quality instructional time is irretrievably lost to the individual and her/his country. Much of this alarming material was covered in the 'Cause for concern' section above. It is intended in this section to focus on the research evidence related to identifiable issues that can be demonstrated to suffer in consequence of teacher absenteeism.

7.2 It is given that children and young people experience successful education when they are exposed to a high quality learning environment. The absence of the teacher usually results in a discontinuity of sequential learning caused by frequently ill prepared substitute teachers or over-large double-upped classes or no class at all (Chaudhury *et al* 2005). Pupil and student motivation to learn is also damaged by persistent teacher absenteeism (Bruno 2002). The quality of the learning environment is also damaged when teacher absenteeism causes organisational discontinuity and where other teachers and their pupils/students bear the brunt of the institutional turmoil (Clotfelter *et al* 2007; and Miller *et al* 2007). High levels of teacher absenteeism can further have a damaging impact on the ethos of the school. “Teachers are often viewed as behavioural models for their students, and a high absence rate may be perceived as lack of professional and ethical integrity.”, (Ro senblatt and Shirom 2004). Finally, the damaging impact of absenteeism in education is know to be more so if it is school-wide and routinely witnessed year after year. “Indeed, persistently high absenteeism appears to be one hallmark of troubled schools.”(Corallo and McDonald 2001; Clotfelter *et al* 2007). Other authors have suggested that regular absenteeism is an implicit statement to the pupils/students that the teachers do not care much about their education or believe in them as worthwhile individuals (Teasley 2004).

7.3 Children who receive their education in national contexts that betray widespread corruption are grossly more disadvantaged in comparison with their peers in countries with more advanced economies and generally much lower levels of corruption. Apart from the damaging impact on standards of attainment which will be covered below, it is possible to argue that there is a more damaging aspect that subverts and distorts the personal, social and moral development of children and young people. The younger generations in a society which witness corruption in their educational institutions and in society at large, may be undermined in the essential life skill understanding that rewards are the result of effort. “The real damage to a society occurs when entire generations of youth are miss-educated – by example – to believe that personal success comes not through merit and hard work, but through favouritism, bribery and fraud.” (Chapman 2002). The impact of corruption can thus “undermine an entire generation’s core values regarding accountability, personal responsibility and integrity” (Patrinos and Kagia [World Bank] 2007).

7.4 Interestingly enough, many of the studies scrutinized for this review confidently claim links between teacher absenteeism and pupil/student attendance levels. Concerns about instructional time could be further exacerbated if the two are linked and especially so in those situations where children prefer to stay at home rather than face a strange and perhaps ill prepared substitute teacher. In some developing countries research evidence suggests that the two issues are linked. A study in 2003 concluded that teacher absenteeism induced pupil absenteeism (Bray 2003). In one study it is claimed that a 10% increase in teacher absenteeism resulted in a 1.8% decrease in pupil attendance (Kremer *et al* 2004). This correlation was also established in a slightly earlier study which explained the positive statistical relationship on the grounds that teachers are role models and thus influence students’ perceptions about what is acceptable and unacceptable behaviours. “Additionally, chronic teacher absenteeism sends an underlying message that school attendance is not important” (Uehara 1999). A decade earlier still, researchers who conducted

quantitative analysis concluded that lower teacher absenteeism would lead to less student absenteeism (Ehrenberg *et al* 1991).

7.5 The importance of quality education is frequently stressed in the literature to both individual and national fortunes. It is estimated that every additional year of schooling increases a person's productivity and increases earnings (Schultz 1997, 2002; Psacharopoulos and Patrinos 2004 and Hanushek and Wößmann 2007). In this context teacher absence from pupils'/students' classrooms becomes of crucial importance given the evidence that teacher absenteeism is linked to premature dropout from school. India has a dropout rate of 52.79% and the Prime Minister attributed this situation to **teacher absenteeism** as well as to a lack of adequate facilities and inadequate supervision by local authorities (UNICEF – Global Campaign for Education, India Resources, 2010).

7.6 Over the last two decades a number of serious research exercises have set out to establish a causal relationship between teacher absenteeism and pupil/student levels of attainment. It is conceded that in earlier studies teacher absenteeism was found not to be largely associated with student test performance data (Ehrenberg *et al* 1991 and Madden 1991). However, more recently the correlation is verified with increasingly confident research findings both for countries with advanced and developing economies. The findings of one research study concluded that teacher absenteeism, among other factors, places Pacific students at risk of school failure (Uehara 1995). A later study by the same author lists all the research findings from the early 1990s that show teacher absenteeism having a negative correlation with student outcomes (Uehara 1999). A further study in India showed that a randomized intervention that decreased teacher absenteeism from 36% to 18% caused test scores to improve by 0.17 standard deviations (Banerjee and Duflo 2006). Yet another study in Bangladesh demonstrated that teacher absenteeism was directly related to a damaging impact on primary level English language test scores (Chaudhury *et al* 2007).

7.7 Complex research models applied to different types of school district in the U.S.A. clearly demonstrate the damaging impact of teacher absenteeism to pupil/student achievement. One study showed that 10 additional days of teacher absence reduced student achievement in fourth grade mathematics by 3.3% of a standard deviation (Miller *et al* 2007). These findings were corroborated by a slightly later study although caution was implicitly advised, "The estimated magnitude of the achievement effects is small, but aggregated across all students in a classroom they imply a non-negligible impact of absences on aggregate achievement" (Clotfelter *et al* 2007). Cautious and responsible qualifications accompany many of the findings including one study which suggested that the impact on pupil learning outcomes depended much on which teachers were actually absent. One finding of this study was that teachers whose classroom performance was judged by their head teacher to be 'satisfactory' were less likely to be absent than those teachers with a n 'unsatisfactory' assessment designation (Pitkoff 1993).

8. Measurement and methodology

8.1 In general terms the existing published research falls into two major genres of interest and focus. The first is related to teacher absenteeism in countries with

advanced economies and particularly in the U.S.A. and Europe. These works either emphasise the cost implications re the ineffective and inefficient use of tax-payers money on education, or the assessed impact on student learning, or more commonly, both. The second area of research interest is focused on the cost of scarce resource wastage and child learning impact in developing countries, and in some cases, with the inclusion of countries with transitional economies.⁴ The two spheres of activity are not unrelated, however, as one text comments, “Moreover, given both the increased spending on education in developing countries and the unprecedented contributions of rich countries to support education in developing countries, it is important to improve the efficiency of education systems so that taxpayers in both rich and poor countries know that their money is being well spent.” (Patrinos and Kagia [World Bank] 2007). Although the issues of research motivation are similar in many ways, the contexts of scale are clearly different. In the former, the interest is in minimising waste with the advocacy of finely tuned efficiency strategies and raising pupil/student achievement levels in the interests of personal development and fulfilment, value for public money, individual economic prosperity and equity (Bowers 2001; Rosenblatt and Shirom 2004; Miller, Murnane and Willett 2007; Jacobs and Kritsonis 2007 and Clotfelter, Ladd and Vigdor 2007). In contrast, the context of research activity into teacher absenteeism in developing countries is much more focused on the management of, and strategies for, securing the erosion of corruption in education⁵ in the interests of economic growth and social development and for reducing the intergenerational transmission of poverty (Chaudhury, Hammer, Kremer, Muralidharan and Rogers 2004 and 2005; Banerjee and Duflo 2006; Chapman 2002 and Patrinos and Kagia [World Bank] 2002). The claims in some of the literature of widespread educational corruption are not confined to developing countries alone. In one study it is claimed that corruption in the education system is endemic in many countries of the Former Soviet Union (Chapman 2002).

8.2 The identification and descriptive measurement of teacher absenteeism is initially subsumed in a discussion on the need for clarification surrounding the legitimacy or otherwise of reasons for absence from school. A number of researchers have differentiated between the different types of teacher absenteeism. One study used the categorisation of ‘employee choice’ as opposed to ‘involuntary and unavoidable’ absence (Jacobson *et al* 1993). Such a distinction is yet again seen in a more recent study in which some teacher absences from school can be defined as ‘discretionary’ (Miller *et al* 2007). A more blunt description of ‘voluntary’ absence is provided by the Auditor General of Western Australia (1997) who construed it as ‘the traditional ‘sickie’.

8.3 Two important observations fortuitously stem from these discussions. The first is that the notion of a distinction between legitimate and illegitimate (avoidable/unavoidable) absence from school justifies the attention it rightly deserves as it invites researchers, policy makers and practitioners to devise measurement tools, including the analysis of casual factors and indices of impact, and the development of strategies and recommendations that hold the potential to reduce the level and

⁴ In one study on corruption in education both Bulgaria and Romania were included. Chapman, David “Corruption and the Education Sector”, 2002.

⁵ Corruption being defined by Klitgaard as the “misuse of office for unofficial ends” and in education by Hallak and Poisson 2001 as “the systematic use of public office for private benefit whose impact is significant on access, quality or equity in education”.

incidence of absenteeism in the interests of economic efficiency and the quality of the education received by children and young people. Whether this is defined as efficient management of human resources or the eradication of blatant corruption is neither here nor there. As referred to above, the impact on the pupils/students of their teacher's absence is the same irrespective of the legitimacy or dubious moral justification for such action, albeit though, extremes will probably impact more severely.

8.4 In studies with a focus on the situation in advanced economies the extent of 'discretionary' absence is seen as marginal and this is in stark contrast to the situation in developing countries in which the margins between genuine illness (involuntary and unavoidable) absence is judged as evidence of gross corruption in many circumstances. The difference in descriptive language is interesting and reminds one of the early sociological distinctions between white and blue collar crime. The exception to the seeming disparity of scale in developing countries may be evidenced in some regions with significant levels of HIV and AIDS infection. In all the studies, however, there is an obvious acceptance that the realities of life itself will result in unavoidable absence from work for most people at some time in their working lives on account of personal illness and or the illness of close family members. "Teacher absenteeism exists in all education systems" (Patrinos and Kagia [World Bank] 2007).

8.5 Although the issue of actual 'quality instructional time' is perhaps the most important aspect of the evaluation of investment in education (Venäläinen 2008), and the fact that in any case teacher absenteeism automatically reduces instructional time (Patrinos and Kagia [World Bank] 2007), governments and international agencies tend to rely on measurement data that relates to actual days missed through teacher absenteeism and presented as a percentage of the total number of days contractually required. As one research text illustrates, "We have simply to count the number of teachers employed in a given year, calculate how many days they were expected to work that year, count the number of days each took off because of reported sickness and calculate 'lost' days as a percentage of the overall 'available' days", (Bowers 2001). This seemingly widely used methodology is very useful as it not only allows comparative assessments to be made between schools, but also between different local/district/regional education authorities, and of course ultimately, between countries on the international plain. The usefulness of such holistic data outcomes is seen, as for example, with schools having marked differences, in that it further allows for the investigations to identify and measure policy, provision and practice which may illustrate causal factors as well as identifying the effective strategies to reduce the overall level of absenteeism (Miller *et al* 2007).

8.6 Much of the literature on teacher absenteeism is, however, cognisant of the statistical problems with this seemingly straightforward and simple form of accounting. Firstly, the demographic characteristics of schools and phases (primary/secondary), such as gender balance, may account for some of the measured differences (Rosenblatt and Shirom 2004). Additionally, the institutional and collective data outcomes will be totally dependent on the reliability of the data collected. Data collection will be a hostage to variable levels of efficiency and professional honesty between different institutions. Institutions may well have different legal and administrative links to the data gathering authority and the latter will have its own agenda for data collection, or be complying with national

administrative prescriptions (Bowers 2001). The situation in developing countries, and which may also be the case in some transitional economies, is likely to be significantly more problematic. In developing countries the reported extent and reasons for teacher absenteeism may not be fully reliable (Patrinos and Kagia [World Bank] 2007). Weak legal and professional accountability structures for monitoring combined with poorly developed administrative systems for recording and reporting educational data, creates an exceedingly vulnerable context for securing reliable data (Banerjee and Duflo 2006; Chapman 2002; Uehara 1999; Chaudhury *et al* 200; Patrinos and Kagia 2007; Kremer *et al* 2004).

8.7 The model for the calculation of teacher absenteeism as detailed above carries a further statistical complication. Although governments and international agencies may be happy with overall percentage figures of teacher absenteeism for comparative purposes, when it comes to the analysis of individual institutions, and in some circumstances, school district records, then the composite figures may have little or no meaning. For example, a 10 teacher school with a high level of absenteeism on account of one teacher being absent for a full term (3% of a year's staff working time) may be less disruptive to the educational process and quality of learning delivery than the school with a reported low percentage rate of absenteeism in consequence of one teacher only taking 3 random days off work over each term (0.5% of a year's staff working time). In this case, the general conclusion is that the number of spells of absenteeism may be more problematical than the overall duration of absences (Bowers 2001).

8.8 In detailing the actual percentage levels of teacher absenteeism, the data within the literature tends to be separately descriptive of levels in countries with advanced economies or those with developing economies. However, in at least some studies an international comparative picture is given (Miller *et al* 2007; Clotfelter *et al* 2007). For obvious reasons it would seem appropriate to reproduce the most up-to-date statistics available. The general figure for advanced economies in Europe and the U.S.A. is between 5% and 6% (Ballou, 1996; Podgursky, 2003). However, caution is advised given the inherent difficulties of comparing data drawn from differing sources. For example, Bowers (2001) suggests a mean of 3.2% and in a cross public sector analysis concludes that "On both sides of the Atlantic, it seems, teachers as a group report for work more often than most other public sector employees".

8.9 More recent studies draw attention to the disparities between the absentee rate for teachers compared with other managerial and professional groups (Clotfelter *et al* 2007; Miller *et al* 2007). In the U.S.A. the absentee rate for the national workforce as a whole is reported to be below 3%.⁶ This seeming disparity would go some way to explaining the growing interests by researchers in this area of human resource management.

8.10 The modest rates of teacher absenteeism in advanced economies pale into insignificance when they are compared with the rates in many, but not all, developing countries. In one survey, which attempted to measure teacher absence rates in six developing countries, an average rate of 19% was found. The investigation in India

⁶ Measured as a percentage of hours missed due to illness, maternity leave, or child care or other family obligations, the rates for absence in 2005 were 2.3% in the public sector and 1.7% in the private sector. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2006 Table 47.

revealed significant variance between states from 15% in Maharashtra to 42% in Jharkhand (Chaudhury *et al* 2005). In a World Bank report the teacher absenteeism rate for Ethiopia was 45% and that of Uganda at 27% (World Bank World Development Report 2004). However, the author's prescription for caution in relation to comparative absence rate data is as true for many Low Income Countries (LICs) as it is for Europe and the U.S.A. One study claims that teacher absentee rates are under 5% in Botswana, Malawi and Uganda (Bennell, Hyde and Swainson 2002).

8.11 Despite the lack of data on the level of teacher absenteeism in countries with transitional economies, it is possible that an international comparison could be modelled on a continuum from lowest to highest with some transitional economies approximating to the median. Although such speculation is potentially dangerous it might be justified on the basis of the potential relevance to such countries.

8.12 The literature on teacher absenteeism provides a patchwork of different research models and techniques which would seem to have been wisely selected in relation to the particular orientation of the research activity and pervading hypotheses. For example, in the need to control teacher background variables, Rosenblatt and Shirom employed hierarchical regression analysis (2004). The importance of including demographic background variables in explaining teacher absenteeism was conceptualised as a model by Steers and Rhodes as early as 1978 and has since become the most influential and cited theoretical framework on absenteeism (Harrison and Martocchio 1998). The model uses a multi-variable approach that includes psychological as well as personal characteristics of teachers. Some studies wishing to demonstrate whether particular intervention policies are effective in reducing teacher absenteeism have adopted a randomized sample selection evaluation approach including control group selection (Banerjee and Duflo 2006). Different methodologies are in evidence for studies on corruption in education, as for example, Klitgaard's corruption framework adopted by Patrinos and Kagia (2007) in the World Bank study on teacher absenteeism as a dimension of educational corruption.

9. Good practice strategies for improvement

9.1 The literature in this field of education bears witness to the laudable intentions of the different research individuals and teams who seek the truth with the aim of improving the situation by reducing teacher absenteeism in the interests of children and young people and the quality of the education they receive.

9.2 Good practice proposals and recommendations for policy, provision and practice in low and medium income countries tend to be focused on reducing levels of educational corruption and improving teacher job satisfaction (Michaelowa 2002). Some of the literature betrays mutual borrowings of ideas and so the following list has global relevance, given of course, the exceptions that the most effective strategies for reducing teacher absenteeism depend significantly on the particular geographical, cultural and social, economic and political contexts. Thus many initiatives work in some localities/regions/countries, but have not been proven to do so in others.

9.3 The more generally effective strategies appear to include routine and dutiful monitoring linked to pay incentives (Duflo *et al* 2007). In this study which depended

on a daily photograph as evidence of a teacher's attendance at school and financial incentives for attendance, the rate of absenteeism was reduced from 42% to 21%. In addition, selective school closures can help in funeral situations where closely related communities might result in multiple teacher absence. Closures can, however, be avoided where schools have a generous teacher establishment and where a model of 'team-teaching' is operated. Covering for absent colleagues is that much more feasible. Making attendance a requisite of job tenure can also be effective.

9.4 The author is unrepentant in providing a Herculean summary of the many encouraging strategies and actions that appear in the literature and that can make a marked difference to levels of teacher absenteeism. These includes: clear and widely accepted rules on attendance and recognised and consistently implemented sanctions for non-compliance; the adoption of a professional code of conduct/ethics and for this to include measures to be in direct tension with the development of a school/district/authority 'culture of absenteeism'; routine and regular system of school inspections with published official reports; the democratic management of schools with high levels of teacher participation in policy (including curriculum), educational philosophy and school ethos; effective administrative monitoring, recording and reporting of attendance data linked to individuals, schools, districts, regions and countries; greater accountability of administrative structures and personnel and requirements for the efficient implementation of existing policies; effective and functional lines of administrative communications between ministries of education and local educational authorities; moral political and professional leadership at all levels as markers for role model emulation by those lower in hierarchies; civil service reforms which ensure strong ethical dimensions thus eradicating collusion with the phenomenon of so called 'ghost' teachers; improved financial management of education spending; anti-absenteeism publicity campaigns; direct notification of 'sickness' to the principal/head teacher; sick and leave pay structures and arrangements that foster staff attendance by representing financial incentives; attendance policies to offer professional enhancement and awards (Teacher of the Year recognition); beneficiary and parental/community empowerment and active participation in the life and work of the school; improved in-service training strategies; improved educational infrastructures/facilities/teaching and learning resources; improved quality of school education to secure greater pupil/student and teacher attendance at school (raising demand for quality services); enhance the status and rewards of teachers together with systems of effective and participatory appraisal; constructively involving civil society players; and develop partnerships with local businesses that can reward teachers for attendance (Pitkoff 2003; Clotfelter *et al* 2007; Chaudhury *et al* 2005; Uehara 1999; Patrinos and Kagia 2007; Hubbell 2008; Chapman 2002; Rosenblatt and Shirom 2004; Miller *et al* 2007; Castro *et al* 2007; Banerjee and Duflo 2006; and Duflo *et al* 2007).

10. General observations

10.1 While this review opened with the claim that the search for relevant material had been comprehensive, it is now possible with hindsight to list a small number of identifiable gaps in both research activity and sources and that would merit further investigation.

10.2 It is a relatively easy task to list the many possible reasons for teacher absenteeism and much of the research activity devotes considerable time and energy to assessing the impact and devising research strategies for establishing causal relationships. A possible causal factor that would seem to have received only passing attention is linked to teacher's attitudes and 'feelings' towards the socio-economic, ethnic and or religious backgrounds of their pupils/students. Evidence is given which suggests that higher teacher absenteeism may be expected in areas where the pupils/students are from disadvantaged communities and in some cases, deprived rural communities. Although a few references conclude that most disadvantaged communities in the U.S.A., for example, will have significant numbers of minority ethnic children, there is no clearly established link between these two factors. It may well be that teachers will see poor communities as less likely to complain about their absence from the classroom and so their exercising of discretion may err towards personal selfishness rather than contractual duty. The author was unable to secure any research material that linked, and or confirmed, teacher absenteeism as directly or indirectly related to the level of public esteem awarded by the teachers' to the client group(s). Equally infertile was the search for any investigation findings that focused on the relationship between teacher absenteeism and situations of educational segregation.

10.3 Some of the extensive published material concerned with the educational policy, provision and practice for Roma communities was looked at but this search failed to turn up any serious research findings on the impact specifically of teacher absenteeism on the educational fortunes of these communities. If such material exists or if the proposed research by the Roma Education Fund is executed, it would perhaps be important to look at the absenteeism records of both teachers and other supportive adults in the schools including Learning/Teacher Support Assistants.

10.4 Given that teachers appear to be more vulnerable to absenteeism when employed in schools in poor, (and in some cases in rural) areas, there are two further aspects of teachers' behavioural patterns which may have significance when set against assessments of pupil/student attendance and levels of attainment. These are records of teacher lateness and premature departure on school days, and the frequency of teacher job mobility.

10.5 Few of the scrutinized research texts made any reference to the impact of teacher absenteeism on the extra curricular life of a school. This again could be a major issue of equity. Many children who come from underprivileged or minority backgrounds can rely heavily on 'out of school' time (including before, lunch and after school time) for basic skills catch-up work, for support with first language maintenance; minority cultural/religious studies/celebration, homework clubs; supplements to diet (e.g. breakfast club); after-school extended day childcare; and a wide range of sporting and recreational activities. The loss of some of these extra services to children and their families on account of absenteeism could not only undermine pupil attendance and achievement levels, but also have health and safety and, indeed, child safeguarding implications.

10.6 The topic of teacher absenteeism occupies a high level of interest by the mass media. In addition to its political sensitivity, it is also a high profile issue for governments; local authorities and, not least, professional associations and trade

unions. This reality needs to be taken into account by those contemplating further research activities in this realm of education.

10.7 A further seeming gap in the focuses of research into teacher absenteeism is that linked to an assessment of the impact on children with special educational needs. For many of these children the quality of relationships can be a key ingredient of motivation, good behaviour and happy and successful learning. Significant levels of absenteeism would be in direct tension with the maintenance of quality relationships.

10.8 Counties described as having transitional and or 'middle income' economies did not feature very significantly in the research. Corruption was certainly seen as an issue in some countries, but the data was relatively thin. The variable factors in these countries may well be significant including whether educational funding is sufficient to pay for teacher-substitutes to cover for absent teachers.

11. Conclusions

11.1 Despite only modest research interest in teacher absenteeism within the context of the history of public education, there is now evidence of much recent professional research activity. The focus has been on identifying the key questions surrounding causal factors, measuring the incident and extent of teacher absenteeism, assessing the direct impact on children's education together with the indirect impact on economic development, and finally, on the good practice policies that are effective in its reduction.

11.2 The research evidence provides many examples of effective methodological strategies for confidently answering many of the inherent questions posed in 11.1 above.

11.3 The summative findings indicate firstly that teacher absenteeism is damaging to children's education and levels of individual attainment. Secondly, that irrespective of the percentage level or the country, it is very costly and damaging to educational budgets. Thirdly, teacher absenteeism does not reveal a uniform pattern of teacher illness levels. The recorded evidence is that irrespective of genuine illness, teachers everywhere are sometimes deciding not to go to school and the extent of this practice ranges from between 3.5% and 42%. Fourthly, there are multifarious reasons that explain why teachers are absent from school and these fall within a continuum from 'justifiable' to 'corrupt practice'. Finally, there is very encouraging research evidence to suggest that teacher absenteeism can be drastically reduced in both impact and extent by well structured and wise policy decisions.

Bibliography

Adeyemi, Kola and Akpotu, Ejiro “Cost Analysis of Teacher Absenteeism in Nigerian Secondary Schools”, *Journal of Social Sciences*, 2009

Auditor General, “Get Better Soon: the management of sickness absence in W.A. Public Sector”, Perth, Office of the Auditor General, 1997.

Ballou, D. “The condition of urban school finance: efficient resource allocation in urban schools: National Centre for Education Statistics, 1996.

Banerjee, Abhijit and Duflo, Esther, “Addressing Absence”, *Journal of Economic Perspectives*, Vol. 20, No.1, 2006.

Bennell, P.; Hyde, K.; and Swainson, N. “The impact of HIV/AIDS epidemic on the education sector in sub-Saharan Africa: A synthesis of the findings and recommendations of three country studies”, Centre for International Education, University of Sussex, 2002.

Bowers, Tony, “Teacher Absenteeism and Ill Health retirement: a review”. *Cambridge Journal of Education*, Vol.31, No.2, 2001

Bray, M. “Adverse Effects of Private Supplementary Tutoring: Dimensions, Implications and Government Responses”, Paris, UNESCO/IIEP, 2003.

Bruno, J. “The Geographic Distribution of Teacher Absenteeism in Large Urban School District Settings: Implications for School Reform Efforts Aims at promoting Equity and Excellence in Education” *Education Policy Analysis* 1, 2002)

Cascio, J.W.F, “Managing Human Resource: Productivity, Quality of Work Life, Profits” 6th ed., McGraw-Hill, Boston, MA, 2003.

Castro, Vanessa; Duthilleul, Yael; and Caillods, Françoise, “Teacher absences in an HIV and AIDS context: evidence from nine schools in Kavango and Caprivi (Namibia), UNESCO and IIEP, 2007

Chapman, David, “Corruption and the Education Sector”, *Sectoral Perspectives on Corruption – Prepared by MSI and sponsored by USAID, DCHA/DG*, 2002.

Chaudhury, Nazmul; Hammer, Jeffrey; Kremer, Michael; Muralidharan, Karthik and Rogers, F. Halsey, “Teacher Absence in India: A Snapshot”, Submitted to *Journal of the European Economic Association*, 2004.

Chaudhury, Nazmul; Hammer, Jeffrey; Kremer, Michael; Muralidharan, Karthik and Rogers, F. Halsey, “Missing in Action: Teacher and Health Worker Absence in Developing Countries”, *Journal of Economic Perspectives*, 2005.

Clotfelter, Charles T; Ladd, Helen F; and Vigdor, Jacob L., “Are Teacher Absences Worth Worrying About in the US?“, National Bureau of Economic Research – Working Papers Series (13648), November 2007, p 2.

Corallo, Christopher; McDonald, Deborah, “What Works with Low-Performing Schools: A Review of Research Literature on Low -Performing Schools.” AEL with sponsorship from the Office of Educational Research and Improvement, U.S. Department of Education, 2001.

Duflo, Esther; Hanna, Rema and Ryan, Stephen “Monitoring Works: Getting Teachers to Come to School”,

Ehrenberg, G.R.; Ehrenberg, A.E.; Rees, D. I. and Ehrenberg, E.L. “School District Leave Policies, Teacher Absenteeism, and Student Achievement”, The Journal of Human resources, Vol. 26, No. 1 (Winter 1991) – University of Wisconsin Press.
Jacobson, S.L., and Gibson, R.O. “Toward a reconception of absence in the school workplace: teacher absenteeism as invention and social exchange.” Paper presented to the American Education Finance Association, ERIC Document 357 502, 1993.

Hallak, J. and Poisson, M. “Ethics and Corruption in Education”, Paris HEP - UNESCO, 2001 and “Ethics and Corruption in Education – an Overview”, Journal of Education for International Development, 2005 .

Hanushek, Eric A. and Wößmann, Ludger “Education Quality and Economic Growth” World Bank, Washington D.C. 2007.

Harrison, D.A. and Martocchio J.J. “Time for absenteeism: a 20 -year review of origins, offshoots and outcomes”, Journal of Management, Vol. 24 No.3, 1998.

Hubbell, Craig “Reducing Teacher Absenteeism”, WASB Report (Wisconsin Association of School Boards) 2008.

Jacobs, Karen Dupre and Kritsonis, William Allan, “An Analysis of Teacher and Student Absenteeism in Urban Schools: What the Research says and recommendations for Educational Leaders”, The Lamar University Journal of Student Research, 2007.

Klitgaard, R. “International Cooperation against Corruption”, Finance and Development (March) 1998.

Kremer, Michael; Muralidharan, Karthik; Chaudhury, Nazmul; Hammer, Jeffrey; and Rogers, F. Halsey “Teacher Absence in India: A Snapshot, Submitted to Journal of the European Economic Association, 2004.

Madden, J.D. “Teacher Absences: Are there Implications for Educational Reconstructing?” South Carolina, 1991.

Michaelowa, Katharina, “Teacher Job Satisfaction, Student Achievement, and the Cost of Primary Education in Francophone Sub-Saharan Africa”, Hamburgisches Welt -

Wirtschafts-Archiv (HWWA) Discussion Paper 188, Hamburg Institute of International Economics, 2002.

Miller, Raegen T.; Murnane, Richard J. and Willett, John B., "Do teacher absences impact student achievement? Longitudinal evidence from one urban school district.", Working Paper 13356, National Bureau of Economic Research, 2007.

Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), "Creating Effective Teaching and Learning Environments" First Results From TALIS, OECD 2009.

Patinos, Harry Anthony and Kagia, Ruth, "Maximizing the Performance of education Systems – The Case of Teacher Absenteeism", chapter 2 within "The Many Faces of Corruption – Tracking Vulnerabilities at the Sector Level", Edited by Campos, J. Edgardo and Pradhan, Sanjay, The World Bank, Washington D.C. 2007.

Pennington, A.W. "The chronic absentee", Industrial Medicine, No.18, 1949.

Pitkoff, Evan "Teacher Absenteeism: what administrators can do", NASSP Bulletin 77(551) 1993.

Pitkoff, Evan "School district practices that encourage teacher absenteeism – Personnel Management", School Administrator 2003.

Podgursky, M. "Fringe benefits", Education Next (Summer), 1990.

Psacharopoulos, George and Patrinos, Harry A. "Returns to Investment in Education: A Further Update.", Education Economics 12, 2004.

Rentsch, J.R. and Steel, R.P. "What does unit -level absence mean? Issues for future unit-level research", Human Resource Management Review, Vol. 13, 2003.

Rosenblatt, Zehava and Shirom, Arie, "Predicting teacher absenteeism by personal background factors", Journal of Educational Administration, Vol. 43 No. 2, 2004. Emerald Group Publishing Ltd.

Schultz, T.P. "Assessing the Productive Benefits of Nutrition and Health: An Integrated Human Capital Approach", Journal of Economics 1997.

Simpson, J. "Stress, sickness absence and teachers", in: NASUWT (Ed.) Stress in schools (National Association of Schoolmasters and Union of Women Teachers) 1976.

Steers, R.M and Rhodes, S.R., "Major influences on employee attendance: a process model." Journal of Applied Psychology, Vol. 63, 1978.

Teasley, M. "Absenteeism and Truancy: Risk, protection and best practice implications for school social workers", Children and School 26, 2004.

Uehara, Denise L., “Where are the Teachers? A Policy Report on Teacher Attendance in the Pacific Region”, Pacific Resources for Education and Learning, 1999.

Uehara, Denise L., “A study of the risk factors among high school students in the Pacific region” Pacific Region Educational Laboratory, Honolulu 1995.

Venäläinen, Raisa, “What Do We Know About Instructional Time Use in Mali?” Assessing the Suitability of Classroom Observation Snapshot Instrument for Use in Developing Countries. HDNED World Bank, April 2008.

World Bank, “World Development Report – Making Services Work for poor People”, 2004, Washington D.C., U.S.A and Oxford University Press .

World Bank, “World Development Indicators”, Washington, D.C., U.S.A. 2006.