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Truancy and well-being among secondary school pupils in England

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The paper considers two problematic aspects of the lives of young people: the long-standing issues of truancy from school and more recent concerns about the extent of mental well-being. It uses data from a large-scale survey, the Longitudinal Study of Young People in England (LSYPE). LSYPE provides a very large sample which allows for robust analysis of sub-groups within the population, data from families as well as the young people themselves and a panel design, so that characteristics of the young people at one point in time can be related to later outcomes. The results show the extent of truancy among year-10 pupils with well over one in five reporting truanting but high levels of truancy much less common. The reasons given for truancy mostly revolved around dislike of aspects of school. Truancy, even at low levels, was associated with more negative outcomes such as poor examination results and later unemployment. Data on mental well-being, based on the General Health Questionnaire, showed the extent of feelings of distress and inability to cope with everyday life with more serious levels affecting perhaps one in five of the young people. Young women were more likely to report problems of mental well-being than young men and truancy was strongly associated with poorer levels of well-being. The contrast between the way that most truants said that it was important to them to do well at school but also that disliking school was given as a reason for truancy suggests the possibility of school interventions.

Keywords: truancy; well-being; attitudes to school; attainment; socio-economic status

Introduction

A number of papers in this issue of *Educational Studies* have discussed the issue of truancy and strategies for reducing truancy levels in schools. They have also made it clear how stubborn is the problem of unauthorised absence from school and its resistance to strategies to reduce it. In a recent book on school attendance, Reid draws on wide-ranging evidence to conclude that, "... improving school attendance and reducing truancy can be very difficult to achieve and, according to some reports, has remained little changed over the past thirty or more years" (2014, 3). He also demonstrates that this is not just a UK phenomenon but is repeated in other developed countries, especially the USA. In an earlier article (Attwood and Croll 2006), we quoted a report by the National Audit Office (2005) showing that the very

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substantial sums of money spent by the UK government on initiatives to reduce truancy had not resulted in any reduction in rates of unauthorised absence.

In our earlier study (Attwood and Croll 2006), we used large-scale survey data from the British Household Panel Survey (BHPS) to study various aspects of truancy based on interviews with a national sample of young people and their parents. This analysis provided extensive evidence on the prevalence of self-reported truanting behaviour and its association with personal characteristics of the young people and various aspects of their experiences of and attitudes to school. Because parents were also interviewed, truancy could also be related to family characteristics such as parental monitoring of the child's education and the socio-economic status (SES) of the family based on occupation. And because the BHPS is a panel study, it was also possible to relate levels of truancy to later outcomes such as examination results, participation in post-compulsory education and employment.

The results showed a steady increase in rates of self-reported truancy through the years of compulsory secondary education. Children reporting truancy at either several times or often increased from just over 1% in year 7 (the first year of secondary school) to just under 10% in year 11 (the last year of compulsory schooling). It was also noticeable that the biggest jump in truancy levels occurred between years 9 and 10. Girls and boys reported similar levels of truanting behaviour. The longitudinal nature of the BHPS study made it possible to look at the association of truancy with later outcomes. These showed a uniform picture of increasing levels of truancy being associated with increasing levels of negative outcomes. At the extremes, the comparison of those reporting never truanting and those reporting often truanting showed that the truants were three times less likely to stay in education post 16, were three times more likely to have no good GCSE passes and were ten times more likely to be unemployed six months after leaving education.

The study also showed a number of personal and family characteristics that were predictors of truancy. Children from families in lower socio-economic groups, children of parents who did not monitor homework, children who had poor relationships with their teachers and children who did not put a high value on school were all more likely to truant than other children. But unlike the results of some other studies (e.g. Kinder, Wakefield, and Wilkin 1996; Reid 1999), concerns over bullying were not associated with truancy. Although these patterns of association were consistent and statistically significant, it was also the case that they were not particularly strong. For example, not monitoring homework was associated with truancy but nevertheless most truants were from families where homework was monitored and over half the children whose homework was not monitored did not truant. Similar patterns of weak association were also apparent for SES and attitudes to teachers and school. These relatively weak associations were in marked contrast to the associations of truancy with later education and employment outcomes. Truancy was a very strong predictor of negative outcomes but background factors associated with truancy were much less good predictors of truanting behaviour.

In the present paper, we use the data from another large-scale panel survey, the Longitudinal Study of Young People in England (LSYPE) to extend our previous analysis in a number of ways. First of all, it enables us to replicate the analysis using a much larger sample size than was available for the BHPS. As well as being a replication it also allows some analyses which were not possible in the earlier paper because the relatively limited sample meant that there were too few young people in certain categories, for example, persistent truants from high SES backgrounds. It is

also possible to conduct a more extended analysis of the relation of truancy to academic attainment as the LSYPE data-set can be linked to the National Pupil Database. It should be noted that although we are describing the study as a replication, the way that truancy questions were asked differed slightly across the two studies. However, in both studies, self-reports of truancy could be placed in three categories: none, low level and high level. Obviously, the none category is identical across the studies. But in the earlier study, the low level was a response of “once or twice” and the high category “several times” or “often” to a question about truancy in the previous year. In the current study, the low category was a response of “particular lessons” or “just the odd day or lesson” and the high category a response of “several days at a time” or “weeks at a time”.

A further focus of the current study which was not present in the earlier analysis is that of pupil well-being and its relationship to truancy. A concern with well-being and with personal happiness, both among children and in the population more generally, has informed a variety of policy initiatives and academic studies. The government Green Paper, *Every Child Matters* (Department for Education 2003) drew attention to a wide range of problems associated with childhood and stressed the role of schools in promoting well-being. Recently, the Department for Education supported an initiative in three local authorities using an intervention to improve young people’s resilience and mental health. This had mixed results and limited long-term impact (Department for Education 2011a). The concern with well-being has been informed by the results of a UNICEF (2007) study which suggested that children in the UK had the lowest levels of personal well-being of 20 advanced societies in the OECD. Further evidence comes from a recent academic study of well-being and young people which refers to the, “... widespread perception that the social and emotional well-being of young people has been in decline ...” (Gray et al. 2011, 1). There has been a growth of interest in and studies of subjective measures of happiness and personal satisfaction both in populations generally and specifically in young people, especially associated with the work of the economist Richard Layard. Layard points to the paradox that, “... as Western societies have got richer, their people have become no happier.” (2006, 3) and argues for the importance of studying happiness and well-being alongside other more conventional social and economic indicators. The LSYPE data-set includes measures of young people’s subjective feelings about themselves which give an indication of mental well-being as described below. These measures make it possible to consider truancy in a wider context of a more general sense of well-being, alongside the other social and educational factors we have described.

Methods: the LSYPE data-set

The research reported here is based on a secondary analysis of the LSYPE (Department for Education 2011b). This is a large-scale government-funded panel survey of young people and their families. The aim of the survey was to support the development and evaluation of education policy, in particular, policies concerned with the transition from education to employment. The survey began in 2004, when the young people were 13/14 and has been repeated every year up to 2010. Information was gathered by means of face-to-face personal interviews which included self-completion of some sensitive items. In addition to the young person’s interview, the parent identified as the parent most concerned with the young person’s education and designated as the “main

parent” was interviewed. In most cases, a “second parent” was also interviewed. Data were collected on the socio-economic and educational background of parents, on many aspects of the attitudes, behaviour and educational intentions of the young person and information was also collected about the school they attended. Young people were sampled through their schools in both the maintained and independent sector. The final sample was of approximately 21,000 young people born between September 1989 and August 1990 and 15,770 of these were successfully interviewed in Wave 1, a response rate of 74%. As with all longitudinal surveys, cumulative attrition means that the final response rate is lower than that at any particular wave and the 8682 Wave-7 interviews represented just 41% of the original sample of 21,000. Weights have been calculated for the sample at each wave to allow for the survey design and for survey attrition. This means that the demographic characteristics of sample used for the analysis, for example, the proportion in different socio-economic categories, is identical across the various waves. The data used in this article come from the young people interviewed at both Wave 2 and Wave 7. LSYPE data can be linked to administrative data such as the National Pupil Database. This means that robust attainment data in NPD can be used in an analysis along with family background data and data on young people’s own perspectives and intentions.

The analysis for this paper uses data collected at Wave 2 of the survey when the young people were 14 or 15 and Wave 7 of the survey when they were 20 or 21. Key variables are their answer to the question of whether they had truanted in the last year and, if so, how frequently and for what reasons. The young people were also asked a variety of questions about school: how much they valued school, how they got on with their teachers and whether they had been bullied. Data on parental occupations come from the parent interviews at Wave 2 and these have been used for the classification of socio-economic background. Information on levels of educational attainment come from National Pupil Database. Attainment measures used in this paper are the GCSE examination taken when the young people were aged about 16 and the Key Stage-2 assessments at the age of 11. The Wave-7 interviews, when the young people were aged about 20, provide measures of outcomes such as educational attainment and participation, employment and life satisfaction which can be related to the earlier Wave-2 data.

Wave 2 of the survey also included the 12-item version of the General Health Questionnaire (GHQ), a widely used measure of mental well-being which was discussed earlier. The GHQ was developed by Goldberg and colleagues as a measure of current mental health (Goldberg and Hillier 1979). Despite its title, it is specifically concerned with psychological well-being rather than health more generally and asks people to describe their ability to carry out normal functions and the extent of distressing experiences. Items include self-descriptions of concentration, worry, strain, decision-making and so on. The items used in the present study are listed in Table 5. The original scale consisted of 60 items and there are 30-item, 28-item and 12-item versions. All versions of the scale have high levels of reliability and have been widely validated (Goldberg and Huxley 1980) including validation for use with young people (Banks 1983).

Results

Self-reported truancy: extent and motivation

The young people were asked whether they had played truant in the past year and, if so, how frequently and for what reason. The results of these questions are

presented in Table 1 for all pupils and separately for males and females. As the figures in Table 1 show, some degree of truancy was widespread in year 10. Between a fifth and a quarter of the young people said that they had truanted with males and females having very similar levels. However, most of this truanting behaviour was fairly limited. Two-thirds of truants said that their truancy was limited to the odd day or lesson and another fifth said it was limited to particular lessons. These two categories accounted for almost nine-tenths of truanting behaviour. More serious truancy was limited to just over 10% of truants: 7.3% said their truancy involved several days at a time and 4.3% said that it involved weeks at a time. This means that for the whole sample, just two-and-a-half per cent reported truanting for more than the odd day or lesson and the most serious truancy, involving weeks, was limited to just under 1% of the sample. As with truancy overall, there were no gender differences with regard to the more extreme end of truancy.

The main reasons the young people gave for their truanting behaviour are also presented in Table 1. Nearly all of the young people, about 90%, gave a reason to explain their behaviour. For half of the young people, the reason was a specific dislike of some aspect of schools, teachers or lessons. The most common response was a dislike of a lesson or lessons (22.1%), followed by a general dislike of school (14.2%) and a dislike of a teacher or teachers (12.7%). A further 20.2% said that they truanted because they were bored, and about 70% of the sample identified some aspect of school that they disliked or that bored them as a reason for missing school. However, a specific dislike of a teacher or teachers was less common than a dislike of a lesson or lessons or school more generally. Only about one in twenty of the truants said that it was bullying that was the reason for absence. The relatively minor role of bullying matches the results of our earlier analysis of BHPS data (Attwood and Croll 2006) although, as reported above and described by Reid (1999), other authors have found bullying to be related to truancy. The reasons given for truancy varied very little between male and female pupils.

Table 1. Self-reported truancy in year-10 pupils in England.

		Males	Female	All
Whether truanted in past year	Yes	893 (22.1%)	943 (23.5%)	1836 (22.8%)
	<i>N</i>	4041	4012	8053
Frequency of truancy	Weeks at a time	33 (4.0%)	40 (4.6%)	73 (4.3%)
	Several days at a time	69 (8.3%)	56 (6.4%)	125 (7.3%)
	Particular lessons	157 (18.9%)	189 (21.6%)	346 (20.3%)
	Just the odd day or lesson	571 (68.8%)	589 (67.4%)	1160 (68.1%)
	<i>N</i>	830	874	1704
Main reason for truancy	Bullying	35 (3.9%)	64 (6.8%)	99 (5.4%)
	Boredom	201 (22.5%)	169 (17.9%)	370 (20.2%)
	Dislike school	125 (14.0%)	135 (14.3%)	260 (14.2%)
	Dislike teacher(s)	129 (14.4%)	104 (11.0%)	233 (12.7%)
	Dislike lesson(s)	177 (19.8%)	228 (24.2%)	405 (22.1%)
	Other	80 (8.9%)	93 (9.9%)	173 (9.4%)
	<i>N</i>	893	943	1836

Truancy and later outcomes

Of the many reasons to be concerned about truancy, one is the likely effect that missing school will have on educational and, possibly, other outcomes. The panel structure of LSYPE makes it possible to match the earlier data on the young people with data collected when they are older. For the present analysis, we shall relate the Wave-2 data from year 10 to the Wave-7 data when the young people were about 20. In Table 2, truancy in year 10 is related to four types of outcome: failing to gain any GCSE passes at grade C or better, being unemployed at the time of Wave-7 data collection, being in full-time education at Wave 7 and responding negatively to a question on life satisfaction. These outcomes are compared across three groups of young people: those who said that they did not truant, those with lower levels of truancy (the odd day or lesson) and those with higher levels of truancy (several days or several weeks at a time).

It is apparent from Table 2 that truancy is associated with less-favourable later outcomes. This association holds for both higher and lower levels of truancy and outcomes are worse for high-level truants than low-level truants. Some of the associations with outcomes are very strong. As would be expected, the strongest patterns of association are with directly educational outcomes. In the GCSE examination taken at the age of about 16, a grade C is generally regarded as a satisfactory outcome for a subject. For pupils who had not tranted, about one in eight had failed to reach this level in any subject. However, this level was almost double for those who had lower levels of truancy and was more than four times higher for those with higher levels of truancy. Well over half of the higher level truants failed to get even one grade C. It is perhaps not surprising that serious truancy is associated with poor examination outcomes but it is striking that even truanting for the odd day or lesson is associated with much poor outcomes than those of the non-truants. Truanting at age 14 or 15 is also strongly associated with not participating in education at age 20. As Table 2 shows, while nearly a half of the non-truants were still in education at this age, just over a quarter of the lower level truants and only one in eight of the higher level truants were still participating in education.

The LSYPE data also make it possible to look at the association of truancy with non-educational outcomes at a later date, in this case, unemployment and life

Table 2. Truancy and later outcomes.

	No truancy	Low level truancy	High level truancy
No GCSEs grade C N	821 (13.2%) 6159	338 (22.8%) 1484	106 (55.8%) 190
Unemployed at age 20 N	394 (6.3%) 6217	179 (11.9%) 1506	49 (24.6%) 199
In full-time education at age 20 N	2941 (47.3%) 6159	406 (27.0%) 1506	25 (12.6%) 199
Very or fairly dissatisfied with life so far at age 20 N	417 (6.8%) 6158	201 (13.4%) 1500	31 (16.0%) 194

Table 3(a). Truancy, later outcomes and socio-economic background: No GCSEs at grade C.

Socio-economic status	No truancy	Low-level truancy	High-level truancy
Professional and managerial <i>N</i>	120 (4.8%) 2513	60 (11.8%) 507	20 (48.8%) 41
Intermediate <i>N</i>	235 (14.7%) 1601	83 (20.2%) 410	16 (44.4%) 36
Routine and unemployed <i>N</i>	366 (25.2%) 1451	170 (39.4%) 431	57 (67.9%) 84

Table 3(b). Truancy, later outcomes and socio-economic background: Unemployed at 20.

Socio-economic status	No truancy	Low-level truancy	High-level truancy
Professional and managerial <i>N</i>	91 (3.6%) 2531	44 (8.6%) 511	6 (13.0%) 46
Intermediate <i>N</i>	111 (6.9%) 1616	30 (7.2%) 416	6 (17.1%) 35
Routine and unemployed <i>N</i>	394 (26.8%) 1469	87 (19.2%) 454	33 (35.1%) 94

satisfaction. As with the education data, truancy was consistently associated with less-satisfactory outcomes. Table 2 shows that low-level truants were twice as likely to be unemployed at age 20 than non-truants and that high-level truants were four times as likely to be unemployed. The young people in the survey were also asked to say how satisfied they were with their life so far. Only a minority said that they were “very” or “fairly” dissatisfied but the figures for low-level truants were twice as high as those for non-truants and those for high-level truants, more than twice as high. It should be emphasised that most truants were not unemployed and were not dissatisfied with their lives so it is nowhere near the case that truancy always leads to these negative outcomes. But the patterns of association are strong and truants are very much more at risk of such outcomes than other young people.

These patterns of association do not in themselves prove that truancy is the cause of the later negative outcomes and other variables may well be involved. It is particularly important to consider the extent to which the associations reported here may be a reflection of the association of the variables being considered with the SES of the families of the young people. Many studies have shown how SES is associated with truancy; young people from less-advantaged backgrounds are more likely to be truant than those from more affluent backgrounds (e.g. Attwood and Croll 2006; Reid 2008, 2014). It is also well established that SES has a strong association with many educational- and employment-related outcomes (e.g. Croll 2008; Croll and Attwood 2013; Patterson and Iannelli 2005). It may, therefore, be the case that SES is influencing both truancy and later outcomes, and that the apparent association between truancy and these outcomes simply reflects their common association with SES. This possibility is investigated in Tables 3(a) and 3(b). First, in Table 3(a), the figures for failing to gain a grade C at GCSE are presented separately for truants

and non-truants within three broad socio-economic groupings. Then in Table 3(b), the same analysis is repeated for being unemployed at age 20. The same truancy categories are used as those in Table 2: non-truants, low-level truants and high-level truants. The SES groupings are based on the National Statistics Socio-economic Classification (Rose and Pevalin 2003) and are families in professional and managerial occupations (sometimes called the “service class”), families in intermediate occupations and families in routine occupations or who are unemployed.

The relationship of SES to outcomes can be most easily seen by looking at the first column of each of the two tables. This shows the outcomes among non-truants for children from different SES backgrounds. The figures show a clear gradient with children from professional and managerial families being very much less likely to have unfavourable outcomes than those from routine and unemployed families. For both poor GCSE results and unemployment, less than one in twenty of the children from most-advantaged backgrounds have negative outcomes while over a quarter of those from the least-advantaged backgrounds have such outcomes. In both tables, children from intermediate backgrounds have outcomes between these two extremes.

The situation with regard to the association between truancy and outcomes controlling for SES can be examined by making comparisons across the rows of the tables. This shows the outcomes associated with different truancy levels within socio-economic categories. These results show that there are associations between truancy and outcomes independent of the influence of SES but also show a more complex picture to that of the association of SES and outcomes. In almost all of the rows, the comparison shows that high-level truants had worse outcomes than low-level truants who in turn had worse outcomes than non-truants. This pattern was particularly clear for GCSE results and was especially marked in terms of the difference between high-level truants and other young people. Among the highest SES group, higher level truants were 10 times more likely than non-truants to have no good GCSE results and were twice as likely as non-truants from the lowest SES group to have no good GCSEs. So it is clear that socio-economic advantages cannot compensate for serious truancy levels with regard to examination outcomes at 16. But at less serious levels of truancy, there are indications that SES may be a more powerful influence. For example, occasional truants from high SES families had better outcomes than non-truants from both other groups and occasional truants from intermediate backgrounds had better outcomes than non-truants from routine occupational backgrounds.

The figures for unemployment in Table 3(b) also show an association with truancy within SES groupings but stronger associations with SES than with truancy are clearly apparent. Non-truants from high SES backgrounds are less likely to be unemployed than truants and the same is true for young people from intermediate SES backgrounds. However, among the least-advantaged SES backgrounds, although high-level truants have the highest unemployment levels, low-level truants are less likely to be unemployed than non-truants. Table 3(b) shows marked difference between the two higher SES groups and the young people from the least-advantaged families. All of the young people in the two higher groups, including those reporting more serious truancy, have better unemployment outcomes than any of the low SES group, including the non-truants. For example, high SES, high truancy young people have half the unemployment level of low SES non-truants. So although there remains an association between truancy and unemployment, it is

relatively weak compared with the association between socio-economic background and unemployment. As other studies have shown (Heath 1981; Croll 2008), young people from more-advantaged socio-economic backgrounds appear to have a kind of cushion effect in which they do not suffer the negative consequences of poor educational performance which affects those from less-advantaged families. Among more serious truants, this does not occur with regard to GCSE outcomes but is apparent with regard to later risk of unemployment.

Socio-economic and attitudinal factors associated with truancy

We referred at the beginning of this paper to the evidence on the relationship of truancy to various socio-economic, educational and attitudinal variables, and these factors were considered for the LSYPE data. It was evident in Table 1 that there were only very small differences between male and female pupils in truancy. In Table 4, we now consider differences between pupils at different levels of attainment, pupils from different socio-economic backgrounds, pupils who do and do not report being bullied and pupils with different attitudes to the value of school and to their relationships with their teachers.

The figures in Table 4 show that both attainment and SES are associated with levels of truancy, although these relationships are not particularly strong. The attainment figures are from Key Stage-2 assessments at the age of 11, well before the truanting behaviour reported here. The pupils have been placed in three attainment groupings based approximately on the quartiles of the overall KS2 score (with the middle two quartiles combined). Pupils in the highest quartile were less likely to truant than the other pupils and were much less likely to have high levels of truancy. Pupils in the lowest quartile were not more likely to truant than the middle group but were more likely to have high levels of truancy. So, attainment at the end of the primary school is a predictor of truancy in the fourth year of secondary school. But the association is not especially strong and most of the lower attainers do not truant while some of the higher attainers do. The figures for different socio-economic backgrounds show a similar pattern of weak association to those for attainment. In particular, young people from the least-advantaged family backgrounds have higher truancy levels than other young people but, nevertheless, 70% of them do not truant and less than one in twenty have high levels of truancy.

In the discussion of the reasons young people gave for truancy, bullying did not emerge as a major factor and only one in twenty said that it was the main reason for their truancy. The comparison of the truancy levels of those who do and do not say they had been bullied, presented in Table 4, may suggest a slightly greater role for bullying than the young people's own attributions. The figures show quite a widespread experience of bullying with 40% of the young people saying they had been bullied in the previous year. Those reporting bullying were about 12% points higher in reporting truancy and were more than twice as likely to report high levels. But, as with the attainment and SES figures, most of those who had been bullied did not truant.

Stronger patterns of association are apparent with regard to the attitudinal variables relating to the value of school and perceptions of teachers. The biggest difference to emerge in the table is between those young people who disagreed with the statement, "Doing well at school means a lot to me" and other pupils. Of those who did not value doing well at school, half reported truanting and one in ten reported

Table 4. Factors associated with truancy.

	Key Stage 2			SES		
	High	Medium	Low	High	Medium	Low
Non-truants	1805	2765	1648	2530	1617	1468
	83.6%	75.3%	74.2%	81.4%	77.0%	70.9%
Low-level truants	321	782	405	512	415	453
	14.9%	21.3%	18.2%	16.5%	19.8%	21.9%
High-level truants	17	84	98	43	36	96
	0.7%	2.3%	4.4%	1.4%	1.7%	4.6%
<i>N</i>	2158	3674	2222	3108	2100	2071
No answer frequency	15	43	71	23	32	53

	Bullied in past year		Matters to do well at school		How many teachers treat you unfairly		
	No	Yes	Yes	No	None or hardly any	Some	All or most
Non-truants	3842	2158	5792	285	5022	799	287
	82.5%	69.2%	80.2%	49.1%	82.1%	60.6%	59.9%
Low-level truants	704	766	1200	213	931	420	139
	15.1%	24.6%	16.6%	36.7%	15.2%	31.9%	29.0%
High-level truants	68	118	131	57	97	55	38
	1.5%	3.8%	1.8%	9.8%	1.6%	4.2%	7.9%
<i>N</i>	4655	3112	7219	580	6116	1318	479
No answer frequency	41	70	96	27	66	44	15

high levels of truancy. But it should also be noted that these are a small proportion of the sample; only 7.4% said that it was not important to them to do well at school. So, although not valuing school is a good predictor of truancy, it is also the case that the great majority of truants did think it important to do well at school. Most truants, well over 80%, and most of those with high-level truancy, about 70%, said it was important to do well at school. While not valuing school is associated with truancy, thinking that school is important does not necessarily stop young people from truanting.

A similar although somewhat less strong pattern of association occurs with perceptions of teachers, also presented in Table 4. The young people had been asked how many of their teachers they thought treated them unfairly. The responses have been grouped into a low category of “none” or “hardly any”, a medium category of “some” and a high category of “most” or “all”. More than three-quarters of the young people perceived very little, if any, unfairness from their teachers. But about one in six said that some teachers were unfair and 6% said that most or all teachers were unfair. Perceiving some or more teachers as unfair is associated with truancy, with more than twice as many of these pupils reporting truanting as other pupils. And seeing most teachers as unfair was particularly associated with high levels of truancy. But, as with the perceptions of the value of school, only a minority of pupils thought that teachers were unfair and most of those who truanted were positive about their teachers. More than six out of ten truants and half of high level truants said no teachers or hardly any teachers were unfair.

Mental well-being

The version of the GHQ used in LSYPE is a 12-item scale in which the young people were asked to respond to a series of questions about how they felt about themselves designed to measure mental well-being. The full list of items are given in Table 5. These include questions about concentration levels and losing sleep, questions about ability to cope with normal life and also feelings of happiness and worthlessness. For each question, the young people were asked to say whether they had felt more like this recently, about the same, less like this or much less like this. The questions include both negative and positive items, so for some items feeling less like it was negative, while for others feeling more like it or the same was negative. Previous studies have shown high reliability levels and this was repeated for the present data-set. The value of Cronbach's Alpha (a reliability measure based on split half reliability) was 0.86.

In Table 5, the percentages of the young people giving negative responses to each item are presented for the sample as a whole and also separately for male and female respondents. The table also shows the proportion of the sample grouped according to the numbers of negative responses: negative responses to no items, to one to three items, to four to six items and to more than six items.

As the figures in Table 5 show, although most young people have few if any negative feelings about themselves, a substantial minority express some negative feelings and, for a small proportion, the scale indicates a degree of distress and inability to cope with the challenges of everyday life. Almost half of the sample give entirely positive responses and report no negative feelings about themselves and their lives. A further third have negative responses to three or fewer of the items. But almost one in five of the young people reported negative feelings for four or more items and a minority of these, amounting to 7.5% of the total sample, reported negative feelings for half or more of the scale items. It is striking that young women in the sample are much more likely to report negative feelings than young men. The males in the sample were less likely to have negative responses at all and were much less likely to

Table 5. Mental well-being: the GHQ-negative responses.

	All %	Male %	Female %
Concentration levels	15.2	11.5	18.9
Lost sleep through worry	19.4	13.5	25.4
Feeling useful	9.5	7.9	11.4
Capable of making decisions	6.4	4.8	8.0
Constantly under strain	27.3	21.5	33.4
Couldn't overcome difficulties	20.4	15.4	25.6
Enjoy normal day-to-day activities	10.3	8.5	12.1
Able to face up to problems	8.5	5.8	11.3
Feeling unhappy and depressed	24.1	16.8	31.7
Losing confidence in yourself	19.0	13.2	25.0
Thinking of yourself as a worthless person	12.1	7.8	16.5
Feeling reasonably happy	11.1	8.4	13.9
No negative responses	48.4	55.2	41.5
1 to 3 negative responses	32.9	32.1	33.8
4 to 6 negative responses	11.2	8.2	14.4
6 or more negative responses	7.5	4.6	10.4
<i>N</i>	8162	4121	4041

report high levels of distress and inability to cope. Young people reporting four or more negative responses were twice as likely to be female as male, and the gender difference is even greater at the more extreme end of the scale with one in ten of the young women having negative feelings on half or more of the items.

Looking at the detailed results for each item on the scale in Table 5 shows that this gender difference is consistently the case for each item. The highest level of response was reporting feeling constantly under strain which was the case for more than a quarter of the total sample and a third of the young women. Other high levels of reported problems were feeling unhappy and depressed, feeling unable to overcome difficulties and losing sleep through worry. Lower levels of reported difficulties were feeling unable to make decisions, feeling able to face up to problems and feeling useful with under one in ten giving negative answers. What seems to be a worryingly extreme response of feeling “a worthless person” was reported by one in eight of the total sample and one in six of the young women. Overall, these results from a very substantial sample of young people support the views discussed above that we should be concerned with the mental well-being of young people. While most of the respondents reported few or no negative feelings about themselves, a minority experienced a number of aspects of their lives as distressing or as creating pressures they could not deal with.

Problems of mental well-being are gender related but do not relate to socio-economic background or attainment levels. The correlations between the GHQ score and measures of attainment at 11 and at 16 are effectively zero: a Pearson product moment coefficient of 0.03 with the overall KS2 score and of -0.01 with the overall GCSE points score. So, well-being or lack of it are evenly spread across different levels of attainment. They are also evenly spread across young people from different socio-economic backgrounds. In Table 6, figures are given for the average number of negative responses on the GHQ. Males and females differ substantially with a much higher average school for young women but pupils from different SES backgrounds are very similar. However, the figures for GHQ levels in Table 6 show considerable differences relating to the experiences of bullying and of truancy. Young people who report being bullied have well over twice the level of negative GHQ responses as those who do not. Similarly, truancy and levels of truancy are strongly related to the well-being measure. Young people who have not truanted have the

Table 6. Mean GHQ scores by gender, SES, experience of bullying and truancy.

		Mean GHQ	N
Gender	Male	1.28	4121
	Female	2.20	4041
SES	High	1.77	3145
	Medium	1.63	2189
	Low	1.75	2092
Bullying	Yes	2.68	3154
	No	1.10	4706
Truancy	None	1.52	6088
	Low	2.42	1467
	High	3.11	186

Table 7. Truancy and well-being by gender.

GHQ level	Truancy level: males			Truancy level: females		
	None	Low	High	None	Low	High
0	1784 57.8%	339 47.6%	30 31.9%	1373 45.8%	212 28.1%	24 26.1%
1–3	970 31.4%	239 33.6%	41 43.6%	982 32.7%	276 36.6%	30 32.6%
4–6	223 7.2%	82 11.5%	12 12.8%	384 12.8%	145 19.2%	19 20.7%
6–12	110 3.6%	52 7.3%	11 11.7%	261 8.7%	122 16.2%	19 20.7%
<i>N</i>	3087	712	94	3000	755	92

lowest level of negative responses and those with high levels of truancy have more than twice the levels of negative response than the non-truants.

The relationship between truancy and well-being is explored in more detail in Table 7. Because of the gender differences in well-being, the cross-tabulation of truancy levels and well-being levels is given separately for males and females. The figures show the strong relationship between truancy and well-being which holds both for males and females. Well-being levels are higher for young men than for young women and higher for non-truants than truants, but the form of the relationship of truancy and well-being holds for both groups. Only just under a third of male high-level truants and just over a quarter of female high-level truants have no well-being issues on the GHQ. The well-being issues are at their highest for the high-level truants but it should be emphasised that even low levels of truancy are associated with lower levels of well-being. For example, this group of truants, both male and female, experience twice the level of the most serious well-being problems as equivalent non-truants.

Overview

The paper has used a major longitudinal data resource, the LSYPE to address the long-standing issue of truancy among school pupils and also the more recent concern with the well-being of young people. These data confirm the substantial prevalence of truanting behaviour with well over one in five of the year-10 pupils reporting truancy although only one in forty reported more serious levels of truancy. Most young people explained their truancy in terms of either a generalised dislike of school or a more specific dislike of particular lessons or teachers. Males and females reported similar truancy levels. Truancy was associated with SES and attainment, with those from less-advantaged backgrounds and those with lower attainment levels more likely to be truants. Reporting being bullied was also associated with higher levels of truancy although this was only given as a reason for truancy by a small proportion. But these patterns of association were not particularly strong and attitudinal variables such as not valuing school and thinking teachers unfair had stronger patterns of association with truancy. There is something of a paradox here arising from the fact that only a small proportion of the sample said that it was not important to them to do well at school or that most teachers were unfair. Seeing most teachers as unfair and, even more so, saying doing well at school was not important

were very good predictors of truancy. But nevertheless, the great majority of truants did value school and did think that most teachers were fair. The longitudinal nature of LSYPE made it possible to consider the association between truancy in year 10 and longer term outcomes such as GCSE results and employment status at age 20. Truancy, even at low levels, was strongly associated with less-favourable outcomes such as failing to get any good GCSE grades and being unemployed at 20. Coming from an advantaged SES background did not prevent the association of truancy with low GCSE results but did mitigate the association with unemployment. So, although truancy is related to negative outcomes for everyone, the relationship is particularly marked for the less socially and economically advantaged.

The other aspect of young people's lives considered in the paper is that of well-being: the extent to which the young people reported personal distress and inability to cope with ordinary aspects of life. As some of the authors referred to have argued, a minority of young people reported substantial problems of mental well-being. In contrast to truancy, issues of well-being were gender related, with females more likely to report difficulties. Again in contrast to truancy, well-being issues were not related to academic attainment or to family SES. However, truancy and well-being were clearly related to one another; truants were more likely than non-truants to have mental well-being issues and those with higher levels of reported well-being problems were more likely to be truant.

The results show that problems of truancy and mental well-being are both features of the lives of many young people, although neither is characteristic of a majority. But for those who are truant, there are serious risks in terms of longer term outcomes and the reported well-being issues are clearly distressing for those who suffer them. The strong association between truancy and well-being shows that for many young people these problems are cumulative. A noteworthy feature of the results reported here is that most truants say that it is important for them to do well at school, even though truancy is associated with not doing well at school, and most truants are not negative about their teachers. But alongside this belief in the value of school, is the dislike of aspects of school which was by far the most common reason given for truancy. This suggests that there may be school-based interventions to reduce truancy as argued by Reid (2014) and others. The results on well-being presented here also suggest that truancy needs to be seen in the context of the many difficulties facing young people and as part of wider issues of social adjustment.

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