

Innovative Approaches to Improving Attendance Management in General Secondary Schools

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Abstract: This article examines innovative approaches to the improvement of attendance management in general secondary schools. The study proceeds from the thesis that absence is a single observable terminus of several distinct generating processes, so that an attendance rate is a sum over heterogeneous phenomena and any measure keyed to the aggregate is mis-specified for most of what the aggregate contains. The innovation that matters is accordingly not improved detection but disaggregation prior to response. Two further propositions are substantiated: that absence functions in some cases as a cause of educational loss and in others as an indicator of prior disengagement, and that restoring presence without addressing disengagement yields attendance without participation, improving the measure while the condition persists; and that once the attendance rate becomes a criterion by which schools are judged it is subject to predictable distortion, so that the decisive innovation lies in the architecture of incentives rather than in technology. The controversy between M. Gottfried and C. Kearney is subjected to critical examination.

Keywords: Attendance management, absenteeism, general secondary school, disaggregation of absence, functional classification, chronic absence, participation, indicator distortion, educational management, innovation.

Introduction: Attendance occupies an unusual position among the objects of school management. It is the most completely recorded of school phenomena, registered daily for every pupil throughout compulsory education, and simultaneously among the least analysed. The completeness of the record has had a paradoxical effect: because absence is counted exactly, it is treated as a single thing, and management proceeds upon the figure rather than upon what produced it. The present article argues that this is the central defect of prevailing practice, and that the innovations most worth pursuing follow from its correction rather than from any further improvement in the recording itself. The defect may be stated precisely. Absence is not a phenomenon but the common observable terminus of several processes that have almost nothing in common. A pupil may be absent because he is ill, because the household requires his

labour or his care for a younger child, because the journey has become impossible, because he is avoided or threatened by others at school, because he has concluded that nothing he does there can affect his result, or because his family does not regard the next stage of schooling as relevant to his future. These are not variants of one condition. They differ in duration, in reversibility, in whose decision produces them and in what would alter them. Yet each is recorded by the same mark in the same register and enters the same quotient. From this follows what may be termed the aggregation fallacy of attendance management. An attendance rate is a sum over heterogeneous generating processes; a measure addressed to the rate is therefore addressed to no process in particular. Such a measure can succeed only for whichever of the constituent processes it happens to match, and since the processes are differently distributed across schools

and districts, the same measure will appear effective in one place and inert in another without anyone being able to say why. The literature of attendance interventions is largely a record of this pattern, and its characteristic finding, that results are inconsistent across settings, is not a weakness of the evidence but a consequence of mis-specification. The innovation that answers this is not technological. Biometric registration, automated notification and attendance dashboards improve the speed and accuracy with which the aggregate is produced; they do not alter its composition, and a faster wrong number is not an improvement. What is required is disaggregation prior to response: a classification of absence by generating process, maintained at the level of the individual pupil, with a distinct response attached to each class. The practical form of such a classification is already available in the functional analysis of absenteeism, which asks not what category a case belongs to but what the absence accomplishes for the child who produces it. A second proposition concerns the status of absence within the causal account. In some cases it is itself a cause: lessons missed are instruction not received, and the loss accumulates. In others absence is an indicator: the pupil had already withdrawn from the work of the lesson, and his bodily departure merely made visible a disengagement that preceded it. The two call for opposite responses. Where absence is the cause, restoring presence is the remedy. Where it is an indicator, restoring presence without addressing the disengagement produces attendance without participation: the pupil is in the room and absent from the lesson, the register improves, attainment does not, and the system has optimised its indicator rather than its object. A third proposition concerns what happens when the attendance rate is used not only to describe schools but to judge them. An indicator employed for evaluation attracts pressure proportional to the consequences attached to it, and the pressure is relieved along whatever path is cheapest. The paths here are well defined: the reclassification of absence from unauthorised to authorised, the solicitation of documentation converting one category into another, the recording of presence at registration rather than throughout the day, and, where enrolment is discretionary, reluctance to admit pupils whose attendance is expected to be poor. None of these

requires dishonesty on anyone's part; each is a reasonable local response to an incentive. The consequence is that the figure improves while the condition it was meant to represent does not, and the decisive innovation therefore lies in the architecture of incentives rather than in the technology of measurement. The relevance of this to the general secondary school is direct. The institution already possesses a complete record and increasingly the means to transmit it instantly. What it lacks is a principle by which the record is partitioned before it is acted upon, a set of responses differentiated by that partition, and an incentive structure rewarding the resolution of causes rather than the improvement of a quotient. These three lacks are what innovation ought to designate here, and none is supplied by the instruments most often proposed under that name. The aim of the article is to establish the principles upon which attendance management may be improved, and to distinguish genuine innovation from the acceleration of existing practice. Its contribution lies in a relocation of the problem. The prevailing literature treats attendance as a quantity to be raised and asks which instruments raise it; the analysis offered here treats the aggregate as the obstacle and asks by what principle it must be decomposed before any instrument can be correctly chosen.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Uzbek scholarship supplies two premises on which the argument depends. Sh. Qurbonov and E. Seytxalilov, in their work on the management of educational quality, established that an indicator of quality is not identical with quality and acquires its meaning only within a system of indicators, so that a single figure extracted from such a system and made the object of management ceases to measure what it was constructed to measure. N. Saidahmedov, in his studies of new pedagogical technologies, demonstrated that the introduction of a technology alters outcomes only where it alters the relation between teacher and pupil, and that instruments which leave that relation untouched reproduce previous results at greater speed. The first premise licenses the critique of the aggregate; the second licenses the distinction between technological acceleration and genuine innovation. The value and institutional dimensions of the question are illuminated by contemporary research: S. Ergashbaev

demonstrates that stable orientations are formed through sustained continuous education rather than isolated influences, and in a further study singles out independent critical reflection as a central educational outcome, while M.M. Mirzaolimjon og'li and E. Shohbozbek disclose the institutional context of educational reform. Several international traditions bear upon the problem. K. Reid established absenteeism as a field of school management in its own right and documented the multiplicity of its causes together with the weak transferability of interventions between schools. M. Gottfried, working upon administrative data with designs intended to control for selection, reported a negative relation between days of absence and measured achievement, and argued that the relation is causal and graduated. C. Kearney advanced a functional analysis in which absenteeism is classified not by the categories of truancy and school refusal but by the function the absence serves for the child: the avoidance of situations provoking negative affect, escape from aversive social or evaluative situations, the pursuit of attention, and the pursuit of reinforcement obtainable outside school. R. Balfanz and V. Byrnes established chronic absence as the unit of analysis best predicting later disengagement, showing that a satisfactory average conceals a minority of pupils with severe and persistent absence. D. Campbell formulated the proposition that a quantitative social indicator becomes subject to corruption pressures in proportion to its use in social decision-making, and that its use distorts the process it is intended to monitor. What this body of work leaves unexamined is the relation between its own two halves. The quantitative tradition establishes that absence has effects and that its concentration matters; the functional tradition establishes that its generation is heterogeneous; neither draws the consequence that an aggregate constructed across functions cannot serve as the object of management. The gap addressed here is accordingly the absence of an account that makes disaggregation the condition of intervention and derives from this a criterion for distinguishing innovation from acceleration.

METHODOLOGY

The following methods were used in this article. Conceptual analysis was applied to the term absence in

order to establish that it denotes a terminus rather than a process, and to the term attendance rate in order to exhibit it as a sum over heterogeneous generating processes; upon both results the whole argument depends. The method of classification ordered the generating processes of absence by what would be required to alter each, this ground of division being the only one from which a differentiated response can be derived. Structural-functional analysis identified the functions attendance recording performs within the management of a school, and established which is impaired when the record is used for evaluation as well as description. The method of ascent from the abstract to the concrete governed the argument: the general proposition that an aggregate cannot be the object of a differentiated response was established first, and the failures of prevailing instruments were derived from it rather than collected as instances. The comparative method set technological and structural innovations side by side, holding the stated objective constant so that the difference in their effects might be attributed to what each alters. The method of the ideal type permitted construction of the limiting cases of absence as pure cause and as pure indicator, against which actual cases are located as intermediate. The hermeneutic method was applied to the sources, with attention to the question each author is answering, since the controversy examined below rests upon a difference of object rather than a conflict of findings. The method of the unity of the historical and the logical distinguished what belongs to compulsory schooling as such from what belongs to its present organisation. The systematic method exhibited the three propositions as a single account, the distortion of the indicator following from the use of the aggregate it criticises. Critical examination of the literature was applied to the opposition between the quantitative and the functional treatments of absenteeism. The principle of objectivity was observed in the refusal to attribute absence to a defect of family or pupil where a structural explanation is available, and the principle of historical concreteness governed the instruments discussed.

RESULTS

The investigation yielded the following results. It was established that absence is the common terminus of several generating processes differing in duration,

reversibility, agency and remedy, and that these are nevertheless recorded by a single mark and enter a single quotient. It was demonstrated that an attendance rate is therefore a sum over heterogeneous phenomena and that any measure addressed to it is mis-specified for most of what it contains, succeeding only for whichever constituent process it happens to match; from this follows the inconsistency of intervention results across settings, a consequence of mis-specification rather than a weakness of evidence. It was shown that technological instruments — biometric registration, automated notification, dashboards — improve the speed and accuracy with which the aggregate is produced without altering its composition, so that they accelerate existing practice rather than innovate upon it, and that genuine innovation consists in disaggregation prior to response, maintained at the level of the individual pupil and coupled to a differentiated set of responses. It was established that absence operates in some cases as a cause of educational loss and in others as an indicator of a disengagement that preceded it, that the two require opposite responses, and that restoring presence where absence is an indicator produces attendance without participation, in which the register improves while attainment does not. It was found that the use of the rate as a criterion for judging schools subjects it to predictable distortion, the available paths being reclassification, the solicitation of documentation, the recording of presence at registration rather than throughout the day and, where enrolment is discretionary, reluctance to admit pupils whose attendance is expected to be poor, none of which requires dishonesty. It was determined that chronic absence concentrated in a minority of pupils is concealed by a satisfactory average, so that the distribution rather than the mean is the proper object of report. Finally, it was shown that the three lacks of prevailing practice — a principle of partition, a differentiated repertoire of responses, and an incentive structure rewarding the resolution of causes — constitute the proper field of innovation in attendance management.

DISCUSSION

The results require examination against a division that runs through the whole literature of absenteeism. M. Gottfried treats absence as a quantity. Working upon

large administrative datasets with designs intended to separate the effect of absence from the characteristics of those absent, he reports a graduated negative relation between days missed and measured achievement and concludes that it is causal. The practical corollary is that days are the thing to be reduced, and that any means of reducing them is to that extent a success. C. Kearney treats absence as a function. In his analysis the categories ordinarily used are unsatisfactory because they classify by the appearance of the conduct and by the party held responsible, whereas what determines whether an intervention will work is the function the absence performs for the child. The two positions are ordinarily treated as alternatives, one epidemiological and one clinical, and a school is advised to adopt whichever suits its capacities. So treated the dispute cannot be resolved, since neither party denies the other's evidence. Gottfried's finding is not disputed by Kearney, who does not claim that missed instruction is harmless. Kearney's classification is not disputed by Gottfried, who does not claim that the reasons for absence are uniform. The appearance of opposition arises because the two address different objects: Gottfried's object is a population and his question what absence does; Kearney's object is a case and his question what the absence is for. A system of management requires both answers, and the error of practice is not that it chose the wrong one but that it took an answer of the first kind as a specification for action of the second. The analysis advanced here shows what follows from combining them. If absence has graduated effects, days matter and the aggregate is a legitimate object of report. If absence is functionally heterogeneous, the aggregate cannot be the object of response, since no response is correct for more than one function. Report and response therefore require different objects, and the conflation of the two is the operative defect. A school that reports its rate and responds to its rate has collapsed a descriptive instrument into a prescriptive one. What emerges is a requirement that the same record be read twice under different principles: once summed, to know the magnitude of the problem, and once partitioned by function, to choose what to do about each part of it. Two practical consequences follow which run against prevailing institutional intuition. The first is that the

quality of attendance management is not measured by the attendance rate. A school which has correctly identified the functions of its absence and matched responses to them may show no short-term improvement in the rate at all, since several functions require the removal of conditions lying outside the school. The second concerns what the system is judged upon, and here D. Campbell's proposition is decisive: where the rate itself is the criterion, the paths of distortion enumerated above are cheaper than the resolution of causes and will be taken. The criterion must accordingly be the adequacy of the partition and the fit of response to function, which are inspectable, rather than the figure, which is manipulable. This conclusion also qualifies the functional tradition, for Kearney's classification was framed for clinical use and requires, if it is to serve the management of a school, a form that an attendance officer rather than a clinician can apply.

CONCLUSION

First, it was established that absence is the common terminus of several generating processes differing in duration, reversibility, agency and remedy, and that an attendance rate is accordingly a sum over heterogeneous phenomena which cannot serve as the object of a differentiated response. Second, technological instruments were shown to accelerate the production of the aggregate without altering its composition, genuine innovation consisting in disaggregation prior to response, maintained at the level of the individual pupil and coupled to a repertoire of responses differentiated by generating function. Third, two further propositions were substantiated: that absence operates in some cases as a cause of educational loss and in others as an indicator of prior disengagement, the latter requiring that participation rather than presence be restored if the register is not merely to improve while attainment does not; and that the use of the rate as a criterion for judging schools subjects it to predictable distortion along paths that require no dishonesty, so that the proper criterion is the adequacy of partition and the fit of response to function. Fourth, the examination of the controversy between the quantitative and the functional treatments of absenteeism established that the two are addressed to different objects, that a system of management requires both answers, and that the

operative defect of practice is the use of an answer about populations as a specification for action upon cases. The practical conclusion is that report and response must take different objects, the same record being read once summed and once partitioned. Further research might establish a partition of absence by generating function in a form applicable by school staff without clinical training.

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