
MOTIVATIONAL/SOLUTION-FOCUSED INTERVENTION FOR REDUCING SCHOOL TRUANCY AMONG ADOLESCENTS

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Abstract

The objective of this study was to assess the efficiency of a package of motivational stimulation techniques in reducing school truancy rates among adolescents. The program was carried out between March and June 2007 and it comprised 8 group counseling sessions per week, each session lasting one hour. The techniques used combined intrinsic motivational stimulation strategies, motivational interviewing and solution-focused counseling, with strategies focusing on extrinsic methods, such as successive approximation of behavior, behavior contracts and reinforcement techniques. Participants were adolescents, aged 16-17 years, divided into two groups, 19 students in the experimental group, and 19 in the control group. Our data indicated a 61% decrease in truancy rates for the experimental group, a significant difference compared to the control group, where no drops in truancy rates were observed. The results of this non-randomized pilot study suggest that group interventions such as the one described here can prove to be useful in reducing adolescent truancy, and deserve further investigation in controlled randomized studies.

Keywords: truancy, adolescent, motivational interview, solution-focused counseling

Truancy is one of the major problematic issues in education in many countries and, more recently, in Romania too. It is a major problem since it can entail school abandonment, it can lead to criminal activities and it is an opportunity for students to get involved in delinquent actions related to violence, alcohol and drugs.

Research shows that, at an individual level, truancy is associated to emotional problems (Reid, 1984), substance abuse (Miller & Plant, 1999) and a high rate of adolescent pregnancy (Hibbett & Fogelman, 1990). In addition, truancy is associated with family problems including abuse and neglect, physical

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and mental health disorders, financial difficulties (Elizondo, Feske, Edgull, & Walsh, 2003). At the community level, chronic truancy has been associated with delinquent behavior ranging from vandalism to criminal violence (Kaplan, Peck, & Kaplan, 1994; Miller & Plant, 1999; U.S. Department of Education, 1996).

The American literature focusing on interventions to reduce truancy shows an evolution from unidimensional to multidimensional castigation models (Fantuzzo, Grim, & Hazan, 2005). Among measures used for preventing truancy, in the United States we mention:

- In New York, Court of Justice action is the first intervention measure (Walls, 2003);
- In Georgia, there are alternative school for truants (McGiboney, 2001);
- In some states, the driving license is conditioned by school grades;
- Some schools offer to ensure waking up measures, and one school actually distributed alarm clocks;
- In some schools there is a person in charge of contacting the parents and the Youth Court;
- In Minnesota, the Truancy Intervention Program comprises 3 stages (Walls, 2003): (1) an informative session about the laws and the legal consequences of truancy; (2) the signing of a legal attendance contract involving the student, the parents and school representatives (including the counselor); (3) submission of the contract to the Youth Court.

In several states, the parents of truant students are liable to jail in the absence of a noticeable improvement in their child's behavior (Pascopella, 2003) since they are considered to bear the main responsibility for their child's school attendance. It was nevertheless observed that sending parents or students into detention was not very productive, since such measures are traumatizing for families, they entail high costs and they often keep children away from school (ABA, 2001; Garry, 1996; Mogulescu & Segal, 2002;).

The question is: "when can we talk about truancy?" In the USA, the conditions to be fulfilled differ from one state to another. For example, in Arizona, a student is truant if he/she skips at least one class a day without having a good reason, or at least 5 days during the entire school year. In California, a student is considered to be truant if he/she is absent for 3 entire days during a school year, and in Colorado, for 4 unexplained absences during a month, or 10 unjustified absences during a school year (Christie, 2006).

In Romania, a vast study carried out by the "Alternative Sociale" (Social Alternatives) association revealed that, seeing how their parents make their money, the children of Romanians who go to work in other countries no longer understand the role of education. The June 14, 2006 issue of the daily newspaper "Ziarul de Iași" published an article showing that in Iași County, the parents of 11 000 children were working abroad, and one third of these children had truancy problems and bad school results. The lack of parental surveillance led to the

increase in the number of delinquent children, approximately 30% of them coming from families where parents were working abroad.

Some of the main causes of truancy in Romania are:

1. *Family* – parents working abroad, lack of parental surveillance even when the parents are at home, different opinions on education;
2. *School* – school environment (teachers' and students' attitude), admission despite low grades, admission on the basis of the results obtained in high school; excessive use of expository teaching methods, lack of equipment;
3. *Economic* – students that work, single parent families, absence of transportation means;
4. *The student* – absence of assertiveness skills, which help the student face the truant colleagues group, alcohol abuse, physical and emotional disorders.
5. *Social* – lack of positive models in the academic environment, low correlation between academic achievements and social fulfillment (financial reward).

For each particular truancy case, the causes are multidimensional and may entail a combination of all these factors. The regulatory measures taken in the Romanian schools are: a decrease in “classroom behavior” grade by one point for every 10 unexcused absences; an annual average smaller than 7¹ entails expulsion or repeating the grade (in the case of compulsory education), or loss of the social scholarship for 20 unexcused absences. It is worth noticing that a student that already does not come to school is sanctioned by permanent expulsion. The approach is deficient because instead of helping students, they are being punished. When a student skips classes, his/her expulsion does not create problems and it can serve as an example for other students, but when half of the class is skipping classes, teachers realize the necessity of taking alternative and supplementary measures.

Motivational stimulation strategies

Our truancy reduction program involved a combination of intrinsic motivational stimulation strategies, such as motivational interviewing, objective and solution-oriented counseling, and extrinsic motivational stimulation, such as successive approximation of behavior, behavior contract and reinforcement strategies (see Table 1 and Table 2).

The *motivational interview* is a client-oriented, directive method for enhancing the intrinsic motivation towards change, by exploring and resolving ambivalence (Miller & Rollnic, 2005). A key concept of this method is that of *motivational ambivalence*, referring to the fact that people often want to drink, smoke, bet or skip classes and, at the same time, they don't want to do these

¹ On a scale of 1-10

things. The lack of motivation is interpreted as unresolved ambivalence, since at any time people usually feel motivated for something, but the ambivalent person experiences rival motivations due to the benefits and costs associated with getting/not getting involved in a behavior.

The principles of the motivational interviewing are: expressing empathy, developing discrepancy, rolling with resistance and supporting self-efficacy.

Empathy within motivational interviewing has the meaning described by Carl Rogers, where reflective listening is the fundamental therapeutic skill. The counselor does not criticize, does not judge and does not blame; instead he/she tries to understand the client's feelings and perspectives. Nevertheless, the accepting attitude does not entail complete convergence of the counselor and the client's opinions, and the counselor can express divergence. What matters the most is the respectful listening of the person with the express willingness to understand his/her opinions and perspectives.

Developing discrepancy refers to the general objective of motivational interviewing, specifically directed at opening up people, helping them get over ambivalence and fostering a positive attitude toward change. When the motivational interviewing is conducted appropriately, the client, and not the counselor, is the one to express the arguments for the change, self-efficacy and changing intentions (Miller & Rollnic, 2005).

Rolling with resistance includes the active involvement of the person in resolving his/her problems and it highlights the peculiarity of motivational interviewing, namely that the counselor does not fight the person's resistance but rolls with it.

Self-efficacy is an important element in the motivation for change, and a good predictor of treatment results.

The successive approximation of behavior takes into consideration the fact that people are not willing to radically change their behavior from one counseling session to another.

Behavior contracts are one of the most efficient strategies for gaining cooperation and commitment from the client (Tomşa, 2001). The contract is necessarily in a written form, specifies the actions agreed by the client for the achievement of the goal and contains a description of the conditions accompanying these actions. Practice in the field of counseling has shown that, in most cases, behavior contracts are more successful when accompanied by methods for reinforcing behavior. For the reinforcement to be efficient, it must immediately follow the desired behavior. During the learning phase of a new behavior, the reinforcement must be continuous, but once the new behavior has been incorporated into the client's repertoire, reinforcements should be programmed at certain time intervals (e.g, after the third or the fourth performance of the desired behavior).

In *solution-focused counseling* attention is centered on goals rather than on impediments and on resources rather than on weaknesses. The principles of

this approach are: positive, solution-oriented focus and, in the long run, it facilitates the change in the desired direction; exceptions suggest solutions; change manifests itself continuously; a small change leads to greater changes; cooperation is inevitable – there is no failure, there is feedback; people have the necessary resources to solve their problems (Dafinoiu & Vargha, 2005). Solution-focused methods have been introduced into motivational interviewing and client oriented therapy.

While solution-focused methods have been widely used in many countries, in individual or group therapy, in the treatment of drug and alcohol abuse, depression and juvenile delinquency, the use of motivational interviewing with adolescents is still rather new. Most studies published are small-scale pilot studies, and many of them did not involve control groups. Nevertheless, motivational interviewing seems particularly promising as an efficient intervention method with adolescents and young adults engaged in risk behaviors (Miller & Rollnick, 2005).

The objective of this study was to assess the efficiency of a package of motivational stimulation techniques in reducing school truancy rates among adolescents. The intervention (independent variable with two modalities: counseling and control) involved the combination of intrinsic motivational stimulation strategies with strategies focused on extrinsic methods in order to support the students in getting through the problem. Truancy rate was the dependent variable.

Method

Participants

Participants were high-school students at “Ion Neculce” High School in Târgu Frumos, Iași, who turned to counseling at the school Counseling Office, in order get higher grades in “class behavior”. At the psychologist’s suggestion, the Teachers Council approved to grant one additional point in class behavior to students willing to participate in 4 sessions and 2 points to those who were willing to participate in 8 sessions. Initially, 24 students were interested in the counseling program, 2 students choosing individual sessions, and 22 students being enrolled in the experimental group.

The control group was selected according to similarities in gender, age and number of absences before beginning counseling. Students who chose to come to counseling knew that their presence there would bring them an additional point in class behavior grade, but they did not know anything about the activities within the program; therefore, those who thought that, by merely participating in conversations, they would be excused for having skipped classes, gave up after the first session when they received more information about the program. This was the case with the students enrolled for individual sessions and with three students from the experimental group.

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Nineteen participants remained in the experimental group, and 19 corresponding students were selected in the control group. The experimental group was formed by 4 experimental subgroups, non-homogeneous in terms of number and gender; all the members of a subgroup were from the same class.

Measures

The program started in March, approximately one month after the beginning of the second semester. In order to highlight intervention efficiency, truancy rates were recorded for all participants before the intervention (baseline) and during the counseling period.

The truancy rate was estimated by the following formula:

$$\frac{\text{no. of absences}}{\text{no. weeks} \times \text{no. classes per week}} \times 100$$

Aside from the quantitative data, qualitative data regarding truancy (e.g., reasons, preferred activities while skipping school) were collected by means of focus groups.

Procedure

Program description

Students that go to the psychologist are still ignorantly labeled as “crazy” by their colleagues. This is why, in order to convince them to overcome their reticence, an efficient motivational method had to be identified. Sending students to the School Counseling Office is usually perceived as some sort of punishment (coercive measure); within our program, asking the psychologist’s help by the students themselves was turned into a rewarded activity.

Frequency of the counseling sessions

Counseling sessions were carried out once a week, and each session lasted for one hour. In each session, a contract for the number of absences students were not allowed to exceed during the following week was negotiated. In order to receive their extra point in “Behavior” (the first of the two points promised as a reward for participating in the counseling program), during the first 4 sessions, participants had to negotiate each time a lower number of absences than in the previous session. In order to get the second point, it was established that the acceptable number of monthly absences for each student that wished to get the reward was 4; these absences could occur anytime during the 4 weeks.

Duration of the intervention

The duration of the intervention was variable. Although initially the idea was to have a 10-sessions intervention, the time left until the end of the semester did not allow for more than 8 sessions, distributed over 4 months of school activity. Some of the students gave up after finding out that the program was

aimed at reducing truancy, that the psychologist supported them, but that behavior change depended on their effort. Other participants saw the program as an opportunity to get their absences excused, and they were not consistent in coming to counseling. They would find various excuses in order to further skip classes: funerals and feasts, volunteer activities and anniversaries.

Organization and structure of the counseling sessions

Except for the first session, the others were typically structured as follows:

1. Analysis of absences during the previous week (compliance – non-compliance with the contract)
2. Using motivational strategies
3. Negotiation of a new contract for the following week.

Table 1. Motivational strategies focused on extrinsic methods

Approaches	Objectives	Specific techniques
Successive behavior approximation	Awareness of the necessity of a progressive, step by step change	Negotiation of the weekly number of absences Reframing the problem in step by step objectives
Behavior contracts and reinforcement strategies	Obtaining cooperation and engagement for making the change	Concluding the contract with the stipulation of conditions
	Conditioning behavior	Establishing rewards and sanctions for the achievement / non-achievement of the objectives. Reinforcement - the psychologist goes to class and praises the student because he/she complied with the contract) Sanction - the student is transferred from group counseling to individual counseling, followed by program exclusion.
Assertiveness training	Developing the abilities to cope under group pressure	Exercises, role play related to assertiveness and group pressure

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The objectives of the first counseling session were:

1. Developing a collaborative relationship with the students
2. Creating a climate favorable to change
3. Clarifying counseling objectives
4. Raising awareness of the motivational ambivalence
5. Identifying the perceived level of the importance of change and trust in the changing potential

The first session had the following structure:

1. Students were asked to talk about their expectancies concerning the counseling program
2. Explaining the program – reformulating the problem
3. Exploring ambivalence – discussing the pros and cons of truancy
4. Filling in an importance of change scale, building self-trust regarding goals achievement
5. Signing the contract – negotiation of the number of absences

Table 2. Motivational strategies focused on stimulating intrinsic motivation

Approaches	Objectives	Specific techniques
Motivational interviewing	<p>Phase 1 Developing motivation for change a) Exploring ambivalence b) Provoking and reinforcing the discourse on trust</p> <p>Phase 2 Reinforcing the engagement for the change</p>	<p>Pros and cons of truancy Scale of trust Evoking questions Revision of past achievements Strengths and sources of personal support Brainstorming Providing information and advice Reframing</p> <p>Summarizing the reasons for change Negotiating a plan for change</p>

Table 2. (continued)

Approaches	Objectives	Specific techniques
Solution-focused counseling	<p>Identifying hypothetical solutions - miracle question</p> <p>Identifying exceptions (identifying the resources students are not aware they have)</p> <p>Identifying objectives with the help of scaling</p> <p>Focus on success</p>	<p>“Imagine that one night, while you are asleep, a miracle happens and the problem disappears. Because you were sleeping, you are not aware of the miracle taking place. When you wake up, what are the first signs that tell you the miracle actually did happen? What is going to be different?”</p> <p>“When was the last time you managed to do this even for a short period? What could you do to make it happen again?”</p> <p>The question concerning adaptation</p> <p>“I can see that it is really hard for you, and still, you did something to manage to wake up in the morning and come to school in time. How did you do it?”</p> <p>“If 0 means you have no problems, and 10 means the worst thing that you could be facing, where do you see yourself right now? Where would you like to be next week, next year? What changed, even a little, from our last session? How confident are you that you can advance even one level? When you improve, what will be different in your life? When and how will the others know about this?”</p> <p>“What went well this week? What special skills helped you attend classes?”</p>

Building the counselor – student relationship

During motivational interviewing and solution-focused counseling, the counselor avoids an authoritative position, developing a collaborative relationship of partnership. At the same time, motivational interviewing is defined as a client-oriented type of counseling, but also a directive one. It is directive because it is consciously directed towards resolving ambivalence in order to facilitate change (Miller & Rollnick, 2005). Within this program it is clear that the change refers to reducing the number of absences. The question: “how reduced will truancy be at the end of the program?” was asked during the first session, in order to avoid the discrepancy between the goal of the counselor to eliminating student’s absences altogether, and the students’, possibly different, goal. The motivational interviewing was directed towards the goal the students felt ready for, willing and capable to achieve. Within this approach, the responsibility for change is left to the client, who is free to be, or not to be counseled. The general objective is to increase intrinsic motivation, so that the change can serve the client’s own goals and values. In this respect, students with a high truancy rate said from the very beginning that they “didn’t want to become geeks”, that is, to stop skipping classes altogether. All the counselor could do in this case was to adjust her goals to those of the participants who did not aim to get the highest possible grade (i.e., 10) in “class behavior”.

According to Carl Rogers (1959), the counselor has to ensure three essential conditions in order to pave the way to natural change: adequate empathy, non-possessive warmth, and authenticity. Adequate empathy implies reflective listening, clarifying and amplifying the client’s experience and significance, without imposing the counselor’s own material.

It has been known for a long time that the nonspecific factors, as well as the quality of the counselor-client relationship significantly contribute to treatment results (Simpson, 2001). The quality of counselor-client relationship in the first sessions was a good predictor for the students staying in the program and for the final result of the counseling process.

Overcoming resistance

Resistant behavior is a sign of disharmony in the counseling relationship. While the speech on change reflects the person’s orientation towards change, resistance is a predictor of change refusal. From the motivational interviewing perspective, resistance is characteristic and inherent to change (Miller & Rollnick, 2005). Among the categories of processes of resistant behavior, our group manifested denial, by blaming other persons for their problems and by their pessimism concerning their capacity to resist the temptation to skip classes. In their opinion teachers were guilty for not knowing how to make themselves agreeable and for not knowing how to attract them to school. Students were accusing the educational system for the excessive number of disciplines thought, with too much useless information, and truancy was presented as the sole solution

of avoiding the negative evaluations generated by their incapacity to cope with such exaggerated demands; they preferred an absence over a failing grade.

The counselor's response to resistance was reflection followed by restatement, in order to maintain consonance in the relationship: "You are saying that the educational system in Romania has many weaknesses, and you're perfectly right about this; on the other hand, you've said that you intend to go to the university, but your admission depends on how well you manage to adapt to this system, since only students who get good results are admitted without having tuition fees". This restatement permits to "roll" with resistance by first agreeing and then slightly changing direction. It is often said that if you want to invite someone to join you, first you have to build the bridge. "Yes, you are right, but..." is a formula that maintains agreement, while still suggesting the idea of change.

Results

A preliminary analysis of the data indicated the necessity of using nonparametric statistical data analysis methods.

The U Mann-Whitney test emphasized the initial equivalence of the control group (N= 19; mean rank 19.79) with the experimental one (N= 19; mean rank 19.21) from the point of view of the truancy variable (U= 175, $p>.05$) and the significant effect of the intervention program on this variable (mean rank of control group = 26.47; mean rank of experimental group = 12.53; U=48, $p<.01$).

The efficiency of the intervention program is also demonstrated by the analysis of the evolution of truancy within the two groups, using the Wilcoxon test. In the experimental group there is a significant drop in truancy rates from pre- to post-intervention, ($z=3.82$, $p<.01$), while no difference was observed in the case of the control group ($z=.40$, $p>.05$). In terms of percentage, the truancy percentage decreased by 61% in the experimental group (i.e., from 13% at the beginning of the program to 5% at the end), while no change was observed in the control group (13% truancy at both times).

As mentioned in the Method section, we complemented our quantitative analysis with qualitative analyses strategies (i.e., focus-group) to find out more about the activities preferred over attending the classes. Among the answers we got were: "we go for walks"; "we get hungry and we go get some fast-food"; "we go out with our girlfriends/boyfriends"; "we go have a coffee or a juice"; "we play pool"; "we watch a movie". Other reasons mentioned for skipping classes were: "we don't like certain teachers"; "too many classes"; "we avoid tests and evaluations"; "we don't have a smoking area in our school, so we go somewhere else; "we leave because we know we are going to have a test or when we haven't done our homework"; "we relax", "we get rid of all this writing"; "classes are boring".

Discussion and conclusions

Our study is a non-randomized pilot study concerning the use of motivational interviewing and solution-focused counseling in managing truancy among adolescents. The results indicate a significant decrease in truancy rates in the experimental group compared to the control group following the intervention.

The practical importance of this research lies in the utility of such programs for professionals working in School Counseling Offices, who are interested in carrying out interventions to reduce truancy. In addition, such studies offer information regarding the reasons of skipping school and the activities students get involved in while they are not in class.

The range of activities preferred over attending classes reflects the adolescents' socialization needs (Neculau, 1977). Truancy motifs are linked, on the one hand, to factors related to the educational process, and, on the other hand, to poor time management skills. This emphasizes the necessity of a balanced program which could eliminate many school problems. It is usually more difficult to work on enhancing the perceived importance of change than on trust in the capacity to make the change when socio-economic factors tend to discourage learning, and solving ambivalence is more difficult with students that are used to skipping classes. These are factors that counseling programs aimed at reducing truancy should take into account.

The automatic selection of the participants for this intervention, the lack of parents' participation, the limited involvement of teachers, and the lack of intention to participate in the program of participants in the control group can be seen as limitations of this study. Future studies on this topic should emphasize:

- a greater involvement of parents, class teachers and teachers in the program;
- the selection of participants so as to have close scores on perceived importance and trust in changing potential;
- closed intervention groups
- involving the entire class in the cases where truancy is generalized in order to avoid peer pressure, which could diminish the perceived benefits of going to classes;
- the identification of the group leader;
- the quantification of excused absences.

On the whole our data suggest that group interventions by means of motivational interviewing and solution-focused counseling in order to reduce truancy among adolescents are worth further investigation in randomized controlled studies. It seems that students need immediate rewards in order to come to school, additional advantages stimulating them in their efforts to attend classes (also see Brooks, 2001).

The results of this program underline the necessity of identifying new ways to support and encourage students, rather than punish them.

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