

Characteristics of the Work of Attendance Officers in Israel National Survey

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Abstract

Background

School adjustment difficulties pose a major challenge to Israel's Ministry of Education as they may lead to disengagement or dropout. In this context, attendance officers (AOs) play a key preventive role. Employed by a local authority, they are authorized to ensure that the Compulsory Education Law is upheld and that students remain in school. In recent years, the Ministry and JDC-Ashalim have endeavored to promote the professional development and practice of attendance officers.

Goals

The goals of the study were to learn the main issues characteristic of AO work, to examine their perceptions and perceived needs, and to provide policymakers with the tools to understand the AO role for its continued development. This study follows up on a comprehensive analysis of administrative data from the files of the AO database (*kabas-net*) (Baruj-Kovarsky, Konstantinov & Ben Rabi, 2018). It is part of "Klila" – a comprehensive initiative by the Attendance Officers Department for the Prevention of School Disengagement, Division A for the Education of Children and Youth at Risk, the Ministry of Education, in partnership with the Area of School System Challenges at JDC-Israel Ashalim, to strengthen effective AO praxis and develop a systematic theory of intervention to prevent dropout and promote mobility in the functioning of disengaged students¹.

¹ The Klila initiative concerns the development of effective AO praxis and professionalism in localities, in-service training, and academe. The development of praxis is based on the inclusive Psycho-Social Educational Approach (PSEA - Mor, 2003; Mor & Bar Shalom, 2007) to develop individual-systemic intervention models focusing on children referred to AOs, and systemic intervention models including the ongoing construction and maintenance of AO networking with professionals and bodies in schools, the Ministry of Education, the local authority, and the community. For the preliminary conceptualization and structuring of the individual-systemic model and the systemic model of AO praxis, see: Mor, P. (2020, forthcoming). *Attendance Officer: Professional, enlisted praxis to prevent disengagement. From disengagement to integration*. Ministry of Education, Youth and Society Administration, Jerusalem (Hebrew).

Method

The study consisted of a national survey conducted in March-June 2018 of all AOs in Israel. The respondents totaled 636 AOs who were on duty during this period (with a 94% response rate). The study questionnaire contained seven sections based on the research questions: the personal characteristics of AOs and their jobs; their professional background and qualifications for the work; the main problems characterizing the students handled by AOs; the main activities of AOs; the various partners in their work and the characteristics of the cooperative efforts; the attitudes of AOs to their work; and their satisfaction with various aspects of the work.

SPSS was used to analyze the questionnaire. Once the items were analyzed, summary indicators were constructed according to the results of the factor analysis and the internal reliability test for the questions (Cronbach's alpha). To learn of correlations between the different variables, all the dependent variables were standardized (denoted by Z), reflecting the distance of the observation from the average in terms of standard deviations. These measures were standardized and served as a basis for a multivariate linear regression analysis to identify the independent variables that predict key areas of AO work, and to portray key indicators that make up the AO work and are able to point to best practice. For purposes of the regression analysis, six indicators were portrayed for a broad range of dependent variables: professional identity, general AO satisfaction with the work, AO satisfaction with the extent of their impact, average rate of performance of their activities, AO assessment of their qualifications for the job, and of the extent of their cooperation with the schools.

Findings

Seventy-five percent of the officers were women and nearly all were college-educated (98% had an academic degree, mainly in therapeutic-educational fields, 97% had a teachers certificate and 10 years seniority as teachers). On average, every OA handled 107 (disengaged or dropout) students during a school year, mainly from junior high school or high school. Most of these students (67%) were characterized by scholastic or emotional functional problems.

OAs worked with four parties – students, parents, the school, and various officials in the locality – in three circles of activity: 1) activities of a therapeutic-educational nature; 2) integrated activities affecting the students and system-wide work reflecting the AO's role as information coordinator; 3) emotional support of students and parents, (predominantly active) identification of target students, and measures

undertaken with parents to enforce the law. The school staff were their main, but not only, partner; 37% of the AOs reported cooperation – including joint thinking and practice – with at least six different parties in a locality, reflecting the complexity of their work.

As regards job satisfaction, the categories of working conditions and salaries scored low (5%-38% expressed high satisfaction); work relations and professional support scored higher (76%-92%), as did their sense that the work impacted on the students (77%), the school (59%), and the locality (47%).

A small percentage of AOs expressed very great satisfaction with their salaries (5%), with the possibility of professional advancement (17%), the opportunity to develop personally and professionally (32%), the status of the profession (38%), and even more so with the work relations and professional support (76%-92% expressed very great satisfaction), as well as their sense that the work had an impact (77%) on the school (59%), and on the community (47%).

To depict the AOs' patterns of activity and perceptions, we identified six key indicators, which formed the basis of the multivariate regression analyses: a positive attitude to their professional identity, high satisfaction with the impact of their work, high general satisfaction with the work, an assessment of their qualifications as adequate for the job, a high average rate of work-related activities, and an assessment of good cooperation with the schools. Four main variables were found to coordinate significantly with the above variables and potentially represent enhanced best practice: a position with more hours, greater seniority, greater teaching seniority prior to the AO work, as well as participation in training for the professional development of new or veteran officers. Apart from the variables promoting best practice, two variables were found to inhibit it: a higher school measure of disadvantaged students and a higher average rate of students with problems. The AOs evidently felt difficulty with certain aspects of the work, for instance, with weaker schools or with a high rate of students suffering from multiple problems; they felt that they had fewer tools to work with schools and students requiring a larger share of their assistance.

Conclusion

The position of AO is complex, involving various areas of activity and consisting of diverse job characteristics, all of which warrant attention in the construction of the practice. This study made it possible, for the first time, to examine in depth the components of the job, the partners to the work and characteristics of cooperation, the AOs' assessments and perceptions of the different elements of their work, and their job satisfaction. The survey shed light on the characteristics of the AOs and of the work; attention was paid to aspects that are deemed to affect best practice and help identify suitable components to emphasize in the development of the position. At the same time, more in-depth understanding is needed of the difficulties that emerge in the work with weaker schools or with a population of students suffering from multiple problems. In the latter case, the AO work should be strengthened to offer schools and students a suitable response, be it through specific training for the purpose or ongoing support in the course of the work. If we look at the diverse aspects of the AO professional identity and status, it is clear that despite the great sense of mission and general satisfaction reported by AOs, there are aspects – particularly with respect to the status and prestige of the profession – that score low in satisfaction. A focus on these would improve the position in the eyes of the AOs themselves. The main arena of AO work is the school, and school staff are the main partners. The main component of AO work is therapeutic-educational and concentrates on students referred to them. The main tool of the work is talk and the ability to establish an active alliance and cooperation. Note, however, that this survey focused solely on information received from the AOs themselves. A complementary aspect, addressing the perceptions of the officials with whom AOs work will be covered in a follow-up study that began this year (2019).