AN EXPLORATORY STUDY OF ABSENTEEISM IN A SCHOOL IN AN URBAN AREA IN NEW DELHI*

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Children of today are the citizens of tomorrow. The future of the nation and existence and growth of our young democracy depend upon them. It is imperative, therefore, that special attention should be given to the problems affecting children in general and particularly those in school. Absenteeism is one such important and continuing one.

Educational facilities in the form of school buildings and number of teachers provided on the basis of total number of children attending the school remain the same whether all children on the rolls attend or not. The number of children absent on any particular day, therefore, not only represents a financial loss but also an educational waste which if calculated for the whole of the country assumes a tremendous magnitude.

A number of studies (Talyor 1924, National Committee for School Health Research 1948, Metropolitan Life Insurance Company 1949, Mason Ralph 1953, Rogers et al. 1956), conducted on school children in developed countries have shown that 75-80% of absences were due to medical causes. By and large, the level of absenteeism in a school serves as a good yardstick for measurement of the level of health of children in general and school children in particular in those countries because of the universal attendance of school by children.

The virtual absence of a well-planned and conducted study on school children in India which could give an idea of the magnitude of educational waste in terms of absences and days lost, and the need to determine the extent to which the level of absenteeism could be utilized as an indicator of the health of children, led the investigator to con-

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duct an exploratory study of absenteeism in a school.

A number of methods for collection of data on absenteeism in school have been used by various workers. The methods of recording absences and their causes through teachers from the information provided by children themselves, by utilising the written statements of parents or by utilising data from household interviews at infrequent intervals suffer from obvious limitations. Similarly, the method of utilising data from medical examination of children at the time of readmission after absence and school nurses is not ideal either.

Home visiting by physicians or trained paramedical personnel which is the best method to get first-hand information at the proper time has been utilised in a study of absenteeism in schools in New Haven (Wilson et al. 1931). Because of the limitations of all other methods except home visiting just at the time of absence, the investigator selected the method of home visiting for the present study.

The present study was conducted for a period of one academic year from 1st May, 1964 to 30th April, 1965. The aims of the study were to determine (a) the magnitude of absenteeism and its relation to various epidemiologic factors like age, sex, class or standard, physical defects, causes of absence, socioeconomic status of parents, season and housing, (b) the relative importance of medical and non-medical causes, and (c) the extent to which the level of absenteeism can be used as a yardstick for measurement of the level of health of school children.

Material

The Municipal Board Co-educational Primary School No. 3, Kidwainagar, situated close to the Institute (AIIMS) was chosen as the venue of study. The school is administered by the New Delhi Municipal Committee (NDMC). Its close proximity to AIIMS, its intake of students from a fairly well-defined geographic area facilitating home visits and cooperation of teachers were major factors in the selection of this school for the present study. The location, site, structure, lighting arrangements, ventilation and sanitary conditions were fairly satisfactory. It is a co-educational school with 5 classes providing education for children in the age group 5-12 years. The Delhi Primary Education Act, 1960, is in force in Delhi.

Children attending the school were drawn mainly from Kidwainagar and other colonies within a radius of half a mile. Due to new admissions and drop-outs, the number of children in the school was always varying throughout the period of study. However, at any point of time, the average number of children on the rolls of the school was about 540.

Most of the families to which these children belong are families of central government employees, mostly Class IV and are covered for medical care under the Central Government Health Scheme, a health insurance scheme. The NDMC is responsible for the health of school children studying in schools under its control. However, during the academic year when this study was conducted, no visit was paid by any medical officer of NDMC.