

School Absenteeism among Children

Reflection on Schooling from Rural India

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Abstract

School absenteeism is one of those close factors which hamper the process of child's smooth schooling and educational development in the country. The ambit of school absenteeism is a broad one which includes school phobia, school refusal, post registration absence and psychological absence, etc. However, any form of school absenteeism directly or indirectly pushes the child towards downward mobility in the educational ladder of the society. And this phenomenon persists in many of the government schools in the rural pockets of India. Thus, the whole idea or notion of access to education as a fundamental right for these children comes as a major challenge due to the persistence of the high rate of absenteeism in the schools of the country sides. Then what absenteeism really means and how it is interwoven with child schooling along with other associated factors, this present micro study was an attempt to explore the nature, magnitude and complexity of school absenteeism and its impact on schooling in the rural India.

Introduction

Educational success and achievement of children is the greatest embarkment of schooling process in the democratic country where education is considered as a fundamental right of children at the early stage of human life. The recent enactment of Right to Education Act, 2009 guarantees all the children in the age group of 6-14 years to have free and compulsory education to complete the elementary cycle of education in a

child friendly school atmosphere. This type of historic enactment with the help of government's vigour and strong political commitment to its national development indicates as one of the major stepping stones in achieving the goal of universalisation of elementary education (UEE) as well as *Education for All*. However, school absenteeism on the part of children jeopardises the aforesaid goals of national development. School absenteeism in

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large scale hampers the process of not only good schooling but it also poses a major challenge to the children to successfully complete the basic cycle of elementary education. The tendency of school absenteeism among the children is one of the important factors strongly associated with early dropout from the schools. Further, the tendency of long absenteeism in school is considered a major predictor of dropping out in many instances. It is realised that the persistence of long absenteeism among the children often tends them to do poor performance and repeating the grade and put them in the failure category of students and finally compel them to leave the schools. The research indicates that irregular attendance and temporary withdrawals can both be precursors to dropping out (Grant and Hallman, 2006; the PROBE Team, 1999 cited in Hunt, 2008). The child seems to be not attending school regularly due to many reasons i.g., emotional difficulties, lack of interest in education, ill-health, labour requirements, distance to school, bad company; dissatisfaction with school, home circumstances, etc. It is also observed that the incidence of absenteeism or rate of absenteeism among students varies across social groups depending upon their school and home factors.

The context and the study area

The present study was located in the state of Chattisgarh which is one of the backward states in respect to educational indicators and exhibits high infant mortality rate in India next to Madhya Pradesh and Odisha.

Dongargaon block of Rajnandgaon was taken as a site of the present study. The study was carried out in a cluster of 11 villages of Dongargaon block comprising 23 schools in this area. Majority of schools in this area are situated within the villages where every child can get access to schooling and these schools are well connected with the pucca roads of the National Highway. The socio-demographic picture of Rajnandgaon as well as Dongargaon block indicates that majority of children belonged to other backward classes (OBC) category.

Research Methods and Design of the Study

The research design for the present study is analytical in nature. The method of Survey was used for this study. Data collection was done through structured questionnaire, informal discussions, school roster data which includes fields like name, age, grade, caste, father's name, caste, economic status of family, presence in the school on the day of visit, attendance and absent more than seven days of the previous month of the data collection and their classroom performance etc.

The sample consists of 223 children who remained absent for more than 7 days in a month (previous month of data collection of study) from 23 selected government schools of sample area. Out of these, 135 were male and 88 were female children. The coverage area of the present study and sample schools in this study were the same as taken for Consortium for Research on Educational Access, Transitions and Equity (CREATE)

Project of NUEPA. The major objective of the present study was to analyse the magnitude of absenteeism among the elementary government school children of Rajnandgaon district of Chattisgarh and their schooling pattern in their rural context. No doubt, an attempt was made to address the phenomenon of absenteeism in government schools in the present context particularly, in rural parts of India through this small micro study.

Nature of Absenteeism and Children Schooling: a Glimpse from the Study Area

The perspective of appropriate schooling behaviour describes that children should be regular and attentive very much in their physical presence in the schools, take active participation in classroom activities and perform well in the school's assessment scales and existing norms. Thus, regular schooling takes an important place in the lives of those children who are consistently attending schools without any long break or gap from the schools. The long break or absence from the schools make these children vulnerable to complete the particular cycle of schooling and put them at risk. Many research studies have established the fact that long

absenteeism is positively correlated with the failure of the child in school. For instance in one of the study the results show that higher attendance is related to high achievement and low attendance to low achievement for children of all backgrounds (Epstein and Sheldon, 2002). The phenomenon of school absenteeism is a regular feature in most of our government schools in the rural pockets. A large scale study carried out in Indian context revealed that only about 65 per cent of the enrolled students at the elementary stage in rural areas attended school regularly with about 28 per cent attending irregularly and 7 per cent attending only occasionally. According to the study, the proportion of irregularly and occasionally attending students is a matter of great concern in the rural parts of India (Jha and Jhingran, 2002).

In the present study area, the persistence of long absenteeism among the elementary grades is widely observable across caste, class and gender. The nature of data collected from the children who remained absent for more than 7 days in the previous month of data collection from the field describes the extent and nature of absenteeism across all social denominators.

Table 1
Overall Rate of Long Absenteeism in Gender-wise in Study Area

	<i>Male</i>	<i>Female</i>	<i>Total</i>
Absenteeism > 7days	135 (16.01%)	88 (10.14%)	223 (13.04)
Total Students	843	867	1710

The Table 1 shows that overall children absent rate in the schools registers in all the sample schools was 13 per cent. It is also clearly visible from

the given table that male absentees accounted were higher than the female absentees in respect to absenteeism for more than 7 days.

Table 2
Rate of Long Absenteeism in School-wise

	<i>Male</i>	<i>Female</i>	<i>Grand Total</i>
Primary Schools*	91 (65%)	48 (35%)	139 (62%)
Upper Primary Schools**	44 (52%)	40 (48%)	84 (38%)
Total	135 (60%)	88 (40%)	223

* Include classes from I-V

** Include classes from VI-VIII

The table 2 clearly depicts that the persistence of long absenteeism in primary schools which was higher than the upper primary schools in Dongargaon block. Male children had accounted more than female children

within the primary schools in regards to long absenteeism. Similarly, at upper primary level, the same situation was found. The number of male children was more than female children who remained absent for more days in schools.

Table 3
Absenteeism in Social Category-wise

<i>Category</i>	<i>Male</i>	<i>Female</i>	<i>Total</i>
SC	59%	41%	7.62%
ST	41%	59%	13%
OBC	60%	40%	76.68%
General	67%	33%	2.69%

The nature of school absenteeism among children was found across all social groups starting from Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes, and Other Backward Classes to General category. However, the degree of absenteeism varies among these social groups. Among all the social groups the OBC children were the most vulnerable in respect to absenteeism in the study area (Table 3). And within this group,

male children who remained absent higher in classes than female children and as counted as more vulnerable group. Next to OBC, the ST and SC children remained absent more days in schools. The results also showed that the children in the general category were found to be less irregular in their schooling behaviour as compared to the children of other social groups within the survey locality.

The Socio-economic Contexts of Absentees

Considering the importance of children's household and socio-economic background such as the household incomes; parental education and the family environment

it was found that these factors play an important role in affecting their participation of schooling. Data was collected from the families of these absentees which threw light on the schooling behaviour.

Table 4
Economic Background of Absentees

<i>Economic Category</i>	<i>Male</i>	<i>Female</i>	<i>Total</i>
BPL	64%	36%	66.00%
Non-BPL	55%	45%	36%

In the analysis of absentees' economic context of the households, it was found that 64 per cent of children who remained absent for long times in school belonged to BPL households and only 36 per cent of children who remained absent for long in schools were from non-BPL category. Moreover, male children were accounted higher in number than female Below Poverty Line (BPL) list. This is clearly evident from the Table 4, which reveals that

majority of children in this area belonged to the BPL households and that might have affected their school participation. Even when the monthly incomes of households of these absentees were analysed it was found that almost all the absentees were from the family incomes of less than ₹ 3000 and a very few absentees were from the family incomes of more than ₹ 3000 per month.

Table 5
Parental Educational Background of Absentees

<i>Father Education</i>	<i>Mother Education</i>					
	<i>Illiterate</i>	<i>Primary</i>	<i>Upper Primary</i>	<i>High School</i>	<i>Hr. Secondary</i>	<i>Above +2</i>
Illiterate	18%	1%	2%			
Primary	19%	18%	1%			
Upper Primary	7%	8%	5%	1%		
High School	4%	4%	3%	1%		
Hr. Secondary	5%	1%	3%		5%	5%
Above +2		5%		5%		1%

The Table 5 describes the parental educational background

of absentees and its relation to the rate of absenteeism in the study

area. There was a strong correlation between parental education and the rate of absenteeism. The Table 5 demonstrates that the proportion of absentees declined substantially with the increase in the level of education of parents. The chances from long absenteeism decreased more for the children of parents whose qualification were more than 10th or 12th grades. Further it was noticeable that the children whose parents were with upper primary education accounted

for less proportion (8 per cent) to total absentee as compared to those with illiterate parents.

Schooling, Absenteeism and Self-esteem

Keeping the existing literature in view which depicts that there exist a strong relationship between behaviour pattern of school absenteeism and self-esteem, in the present study it was attempted to measure and analyse the effect of self esteem on their schooling behaviour among absentees.

Table 6
Relationship between Absenteeism and Self esteem

<i>Nature of Self Esteem</i>	<i>Long Absenteeism</i>
Low Self esteem	85%
High Self esteem	15%

In fact in order to assess the self esteem among absentees in the given area of study a standardised *Rosenberg*

Self-esteem Scale was used. In this scale 10 items were answered on a four point scale ranging from strongly

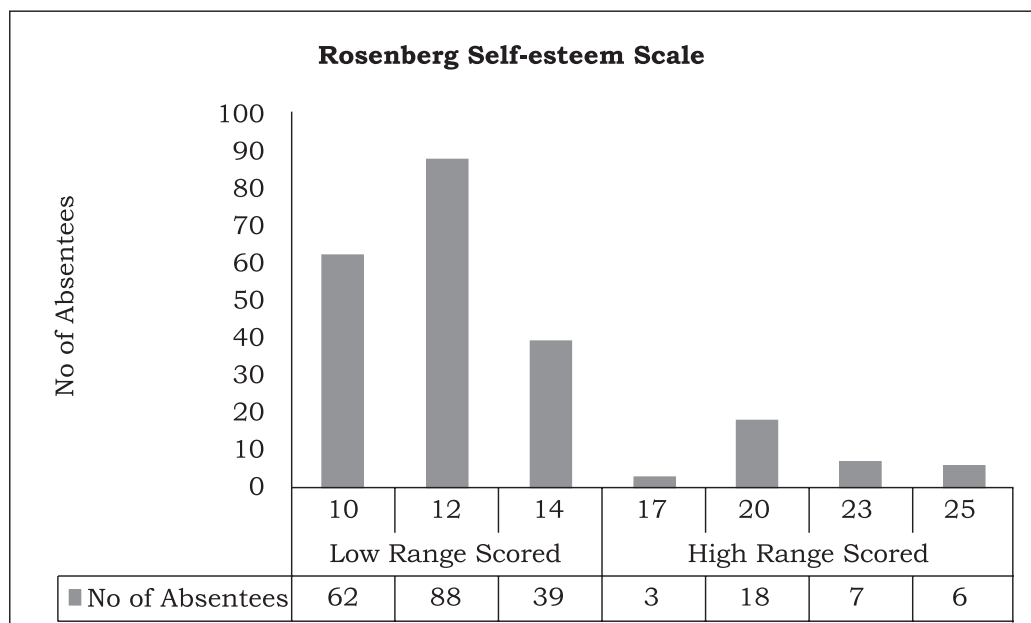


Fig. 1

agree to strongly disagree. The scale generally has high reliability: test-retest correlations are typically in the range of .82 to .88, and Cronbach's alpha for various samples are in the range of 0.77 to 0.88. The scale ranges from 0-30; with 30 being the highest score (each item ranges from 0-3). The higher the score, the higher was the level of self-esteem. Generally the score ranging in between 15-25 were within the normal range and scores below 15 suggested low self esteem.

The figure-1 shows that there were 62 absentees had scored 10, 88 scored 12, 39 scored 14, 3 scored 17, 18 scored 20, 7 scored 23 and 6 scored 25 on the Rosenberg's Self esteem Scale. The overall results shows that 188 absentees (85 per cent) had scored in the range between 10-14 on the scale had low self esteem and 34 absentees (15 per cent) scored in between the 17-25 on the same scale had high self-esteem. Thus majority of absentees had low self esteem and this might be considered as one of the strongest factors which deterred them from school participation for long periods of time.

Chain of Absenteeism, Poor Performance, and Self Esteem

It was found from the study that around 78 per cent of absentees showed their performances as very poor in the school of the last annual examination register. At the same time the results showed that only 22 per cent absentees scored or performed average in the previous annual examination. Also, majority of absentees having poor performance had low Self esteem

and only a few absentees had high Self esteem. Thus, the strong association between children absent behaviour with their poor performance along exhibited by low self esteem posits a chain of cyclical relationship of schooling which ultimately put them at in the category of permanent exclusion from the school. In simple terms, it can be concluded that that majority of absentees not only performed poorly but they are also having low Self-esteem which eventually pushed them to frustration and embarrassment in the class and promote emotional and physical withdrawal tendencies thereby putting them in vulnerable group of dropping out. Thus exhibiting the chain of cyclical relationship between children absenteeism, poor performance and their low self esteem it links the line of mediation between these risk factors and eventually put the absentees in the process of exclusion from the school. Further the studies also supported this finding which emphasises that in pursuant to academic failure, children's low Self-esteem is a central mediator of their inappropriate schooling behaviour, i.e. school absenteeism which ultimately puts them at risk and then leads to final withdrawal from the school system (Bernstein and Rulo, 1976).

School as a Structural Space and Rate of Absenteeism

The school as a structure of both physical and academic atmospheres strengthen the existing school management and school planning both in terms of academic inputs and outputs. Improvements due to existing physical infrastructure like

the provision of facilities such as toilets, nature of school building, and provision of drinking water, electricity, adequate number of classrooms, etc also directly or indirectly play a significant role in reducing the rate of absenteeism among children. It was found that there were a few schools in the study area where the rate of absenteeism was found very high. And when the analysis of these schools were done with certain parameters against the persistence of the phenomenon of high absenteeism among children, then it came to our knowledge that these schools did not have good buildings, toilets, provision of drinking water facilities and electricity and adequate number of classrooms, etc. However, majority of these of schools did have provision for proper academic facilities like they did have adequate teacher pupil ratio as per the existing school norms.

Discussion and Conclusion

The micro study was done in 23 government schools in Dogargaon block of Rajnandgaon district of Chhattisgarh. The study more explicitly described and explored the pattern, nature and degree of school absenteeism among the elementary grade children in the study area. The major objective of the study was to understand the actual schooling of children in government schools of rural India through the behaviour of school absenteeism.

From the analysis, it was found that the behaviour of school absenteeism was very high in all the government schools within the area of study irrespective of caste, class and gender.

The overall rate of absenteeism across these denominators in the study area was 13 per cent which is considered very high when we think at the present context the goals of UEE and RTE Act.2009 in regards to active participation of children in the school activities. In fact persistence of high rate of absenteeism in the government schools of rural areas pose a great challenge to our conceived notion of the massive development of elementary education of government schools in rural parts of India. The study also shows that both boys and girls are equally vulnerable to long absenteeism in these sample government schools.

Children enrolled in primary schools were affected more due to the persistence of the phenomenon of the absenteeism. Also the rate of long absenteeism was higher in primary grades than in the upper primary grades. Nevertheless, the conditions of upper primary schools were not much better off to primary ones. The situation is almost same and buildings are dilapidated in both types of schools.

Children from socially backward communities and economically deprived groups are easily trapped in or exhibited mostly the inappropriate school behaviour whether it is poor performance, school absenteeism or low self-esteem. No doubt, the nature of school absenteeism among children was found across all social groups. The OBC children were the most vulnerable in respect to absenteeism in the study area. And within this group, Male children remained absent higher than Female children. Next to OBC, the ST and SC children had remained absent more

days in schools. Majority of children almost 66 per cent in this area were belonged to the BPL households and that badly affect their school participation. Also parents' educational status plays a major factor of children schooling behaviours. And the analysis of parental educational background and its impact on children schooling behaviour of absenteeism clearly establishes the fact that there is a strong correlation found between these two. The proportion of absentees declined substantially with the increases in the level of education of parents and vice versa.

Moreover, children's behaviour of school absenteeism is more or less affected by their psychological well being. Because majority of absentees had low self esteem and this deter them from the school participation for long. Further, the results of the study, pointed out that majority of absentees having poor performance had low self esteem and only a few absentees who had high self esteem. Thus by creating a chain of cyclical relationship between children absenteeism, poor performance and their low self esteem it links the line of mediation between these risk factors and putting the absentees in the category of future dropouts. However, school's physical and academic infrastructure has also

contributed the extent and magnitude of absenteeism among children.

Some major steps need to be taken both at individual and institutional levels to combat the problem of school absenteeism among the children studying in the governments schools in the rural pockets of India. Some concrete strategies should be taken wholeheartedly to address this issue in a larger context of school education and children's right to schooling. Many strategies are planned out in government policies, documents or programmes even in the latest NCF-2005 and RTE Act, 2009 that how to create a child friendly, conducive and joyful atmosphere so that the children who are studying in the schools by themselves feel that they can actively participate in school activities wholeheartedly. However, just only chocking out the plans in these documents for child to take active participation in school activities and stay less number of time absent in school will not going to solve the problem of school absenteeism until we really implement these strategies. Then how effectively and accurately we can implement these strategies in practice depend upon our true commitments and genuine interests to children's future for their better tomorrow.

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