

Enrolled, yet Absent Voices from South-West Delhi

Abstract

This paper attempts a micro-level understanding of the issue of absenteeism. It is based on a qualitative research study of the factors that adversely affect student attendance. The implications of student absenteeism and the possible ways of addressing the issue are discussed.

Introduction

It was my personal experience as a teacher that led me to realise how grave the issue of student absenteeism is. Absenteeism was a persistent problem that hindered the learning and development of the students not only in my class, but in the entire school. I realised that it was a loop that children could not get out of as it would become their habit to be absent on a regular basis even without reason despite their tremendous potential to do well not only in academics but extracurricular activities as well. In my experience, the children most absent were usually the ones lagging behind the most in academics and were usually also the ones who did not conform to socially acceptable behaviour.¹

This first-hand, grass-root level experience made me curious about the situations, relationships, mind-sets and values that influence the regularity with which a child attends school. While I had some idea of the factors that result in absenteeism, I undertook primary and secondary research

¹ Socially acceptable behaviour is the values and norms individuals are expected to abide by in their everyday life. What is considered socially acceptable may vary across geographical locations and may be determined by culture, religion, caste, or class, for example.

on this issue for a deeper understanding of its multiple aspects.

In section 2 of the paper, I define absenteeism, and lay out the importance of studying it. Section 3 includes the method of study. Section 4 entails the key findings of the study i.e. the reasons behind student absenteeism and the implications of such absence. Section 5 sums up the article with some recommendations to address this issue.

What is Absenteeism?

Absenteeism is absence from school, with or without a valid reason (Akbaş, Şahin, & Yılmaz, 2017). It is the “temporary cessation of the student, when his presence is expected”. The percentage of attendance is the number of days the student attended the school, multiplied by 100 and divided by the number of days the school worked. The percentage of absence is the percentage of attendance subtracted from 100 (Rama, Anitha, & Reddy, 2014).

The term ‘absenteeism’ must be distinguished from the term ‘truancy’. Truancy is when a student deliberately stays away from school without permission.²

² ‘Skipping’, ‘mitching’, ‘dodging’, ‘skiving’, ‘bunking’, ‘going missing’ are some other terms for truancy (Akbaş, Şahin, & Yılmaz, 2017).

Absenteeism, on the other hand, may or may not be deliberate. Thus, truancy comes under the umbrella term of absenteeism.

Why Talk About Absenteeism?

Absence from school can become a habit for children if not checked in the early stages. There is, therefore, a direct relationship between prolonged absence and dropping out. Chronically absent children are likely to slip out of the education system.

Recurrent absenteeism is a key forecaster of non-success in school and possibly in higher education too. Better and regular school attendance is linked to higher academic performance of children of all backgrounds (Bonface, 2017).

Reavis and Pierce (1953) note that "(a) child must be physically present in school if he is to derive maximum benefit". Absence is the preliminary step that leads to wastage and stagnation (Rama, Anitha, & Reddy, 2014). It leads to the child being exposed to limited opportunities, both during and after schooling; this results in their potential being untapped and their capabilities being underutilised.

In India, the Right to Education Act, 2009 mandates "free and compulsory education to all children of the age of six to fourteen years." As per Section 8 of the Act, "compulsory education" means to "ensure compulsory admission, attendance and completion of elementary education by every child of the age of six to fourteen years." A child's absence, whether continuous or intermittent, is a sign of attendance being treated as an option instead of as compulsory. Section 24 subsection (e) of Act requires teachers to "hold regular meetings with parents and guardians and apprise them about the regularity in attendance, ability to learn, progress made in learning and any other relevant information about the child". This clearly shows that regular attendance is a crucial part of the right to education.

There is thus widespread acknowledgment that absenteeism comes in the way of an

effective educational experience. If any serious attempt is to be made to address the issue, it is crucial to understand the circumstances in the child's school, home or community, that lead to absenteeism.

The Need for Qualitative Research on Absenteeism

A report by the U.S. Department of Education in 2013-14 defines student absence of 15 or more days in a school year as chronic absence and lays out its causes and remedial measures. India, however, does not yet have a set procedure to identify, track and deal with cases wherein students are absent for even as long as half the academic year, i.e. approximately a 100 days a year. There has been much discussion in India on school dropouts, but not much on absenteeism, in particular, student absenteeism. Thus there is no official document which specifies the minimum percentage of days a student is required to be present in school, barring class 10th and 12th that require minimum 75 percent attendance in an academic year. The highly cited Probe Report (Public Report on Basic Education in India, 1999) mentions teacher absenteeism eight times but it mentions student absenteeism only once. There have been some measures taken to deal with absenteeism such as the Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan, but the rates of absence are still alarmingly high. In India, continuous absence can lead to children being considered drop outs, and their names being struck off the rolls. However, what period of time is considered continuous absence varies from state to state. For instance, in Gujarat, it is 90 continuous days and, in stark contrast, it is 7 continuous days in Karnataka. One must note that sporadic and irregular absence does not lead to striking names off the rolls; only continuous absence is considered. Therefore, in Karnataka, absence of even, say, 90 days a year does not lead to termination of admission, as long as it is not continuous. Irregular or sporadic attendance is a major problem that is not recorded or

reflected in official figures (Bhatty, Saraf, & Gupta, 2017).

In a review of the literature, I found that a majority of existing studies focus primarily on school drop-outs, and some only touch upon absenteeism. A few studies that go into absenteeism have predominantly been quantitative studies. To address these gaps in the literature, I undertook a qualitative research study on student absenteeism.

Method of Study

In this section I discuss the location, participants, methodology and tools employed in the study.

Location of the Study

Students from two schools in Mehrauli, Southwest Delhi, participated in the study. One school was as an all-girls school, and the majority of its students reside in Mehrauli. The other school, was an all-boys school. Its students come from Mehrauli as well as Lado Sarai, Saidulajab and other neighbouring areas. Thus, the research was undertaken in the areas of Mehrauli and Lado Sarai in Southwest Delhi.

Sampling

Purposive and convenience sampling were the sampling methods chosen for the study. I had easy access to the schools chosen, and the attendance information of its students, and thus the criteria in choosing the school was convenience sampling. I thought it would be best to understand the issue of absenteeism from those most affected by it, so the students from those two schools, who did not meet the minimum attendance requirement of 75 percent in the previous academic year 2017-18, were narrowed down on. In this way, the other sampling technique was purposive sampling.

Methodology and Tools

The design of the study was qualitative, in order to allow an in-depth study of the causal factors of absenteeism and their effects from the point of view of the core stakeholders. The primary tool used in data collection was the semi-structured and in-depth interview. Three different sets of interview guides were prepared, one each for the students, the parents/guardians, and the teachers. The questions were open-ended, with plenty of scope for the interviewer and interviewee to delve into aspects crucial to absenteeism, its causes, implications, and possible solutions. The study was conducted without any reference to the religion, caste, or birthplace of the interviewees.

Non-participant observation was another tool used to gain deeper insight. I closely observed the homes, schools, communities of the children, the body language, and the routine interactions of all the interviewees, to get the complete picture (beyond what was verbally communicated). Field notes were kept, and any observation or detail thought important for the research was noted down.

Informal unstructured conversation was the third tool. At times, the interviewee and I engaged in discussions. This created an environment where the interviewees added details that they were holding back till then, by making them feel more comfortable and at ease. An environment was created wherein everyone present in the room could give inputs at any point of time resulting in rich insights into their interpersonal relations, daily routine and the general atmosphere of the home.

I conducted a total of 20 interviews. The respondents were a set of ten students in classes 7th and 8th (i.e. upper primary grades), with attendance less than 75 percent in the academic year 2017-18 (as per attendance records), their parents, other family members and teachers from their school.

The interviews were conducted in the months of April and May 2018, outside the

school premises and during non-teaching hours, in order to avoid interruptions in schooling. The interviews were audio-recorded with the consent of the interviewees. The interviews were primarily in Hindi; some interviews were in English, in part. Wherever required, there was a slight deviation from the pre-decided questions, based on the flow of the conversations. Most of the interviews were conducted one-on-one. Wherever possible, two or more family members were interviewed simultaneously for greater understanding of the issue of absenteeism. Transcripts were made translating all the interviews into English, with an attempt to make it as precise as possible. In total, approximately 7 hours and 38 minutes of recording was done.

Findings

The analysis yielded insights into factors that facilitate schooling and factors that discourage schooling. This paper mainly addresses the factors that discourage schooling i.e. the reasons for student absenteeism.

These factors can be at the household- or community-level, school-level, or policy- or system-level. There are also some factors that are individual-specific. These factors are not mutually exclusive but interdependent, as different aspects of a child's world do not exist in isolation from each other.

Factors that Discourage Schooling

Household-level factors include economic instability, illiteracy and pessimistic attitude of parents, and parental indifference towards education and schooling of their child. Illness of the child or a close family member, duty of looking after younger siblings, death of a relative, and so on, may all lead to a child being absent from school. Some children may even have to be absent from school to assist in household work or with the occupation of

their parents.

For instance, Sonu's parents passed away a few years ago one after the other. Sonu took up the responsibility of managing his father's shop after his death. Earlier he used to be more regular in going to school. He feels added pressure on himself now. He does not get time off from the shop even if he wants time to study. He does not even get time to play with his friends. In fact, he had to take admission in the school he currently is in because of problems at home after the untimely demise of his parents. He is absent from school when he spends the entire day at the shop, and also on days when he gets late in opening the shop.

Community-level factors include unsafe and violent neighbourhoods, poor hygiene and sanitation levels, prevalent drugs or alcohol abuse and unsupportive social and cultural traditions. During my visits to these communities,³ I noticed mosquitoes and flies all around the area, which explains the extremely high number of mosquito-related diseases (malaria, dengue and chikungunya) and water-borne diseases (typhoid and cholera) reported from these communities year after year. Health issues are a predominant reason behind the absence of children from school. Most teachers stressed that the good health of children is a prerequisite to their coming to school regularly. A senior teacher, Ms. Richa, noted that there are "*do-chaarbacche*", though not many, in every class who are always unwell and skip school.

School-level factors include poor or inaccessible infrastructure, lack of security in school, unaccountable school leadership, discouraging school environment, monotonous and uninspired teaching style. The school environment which includes

³ Unplanned growth over the years has turned the area into an over-crowded and congested neighbourhood, with approximately two and a half lakh people in Mehrauli occupying a limited land area (Shrangi, 2016). A large number of buildings have economic activity on the ground floor (small shops selling goods or services) and residential housing in the floors above.

the general discipline and order, the infrastructure and facilities available, the level of sanitation and hygiene, the safety and security mechanisms, the attitude of the teachers and the culture of learning deeply affect every child's schooling experience. Their interaction with their friends and peers is also a major component. All these factors determine the regularity with which children wish to attend school.

Rahul has multiple health issues including Autism and Attention-Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD). Rahul's parents talked to me about how noise disturbs their child. Noise confuses him, and affects his concentration. Any disturbance or inconsistency in his environment deeply affects him. Order and discipline helps the child keep calm. If this child acts up in school as a result of noise, his mother, who stays with him throughout the school hours, either steps out of the class with the child or requests the teacher to reduce the noise level.

System-level factors include poor implementation of child labour laws, an education system that encourages rote-learning and an education curriculum that does not take into account the varying abilities and interests of students who come from extremely diverse backgrounds. For instance, Abhay is very interested in dance and goes to a dance academy near his house every day. He prefers his dance class to school. When he had fever recently he did not go to school but still went to the academy. His attendance percentage at school was below 50 percent in the previous academic year. I learnt from another child that Abhay may have passed his 7th class because the school must have given him extra attendance. His mother agrees that because the child focuses on dance classes, his concentration in studies and academics performance suffers. At the instance of a teacher, the mother tried to stop the dance classes; he started crying, promised to go to school every day and requested them to not stop his dance classes. His school attendance has improved since then, though

he is still sporadically absent. The mother added that the dance academy teacher is very fond of the children, and celebrates the birthdays of every child in the academy and prepares food for everyone. Once when the mother had not paid the academy fees for two months, the teacher called the child up and told him he will teach him regardless of fee payment; that he should not stop training as he was doing well and would do well in the future. This case suggests that there is a sense of belongingness that the child feels at his dance academy that he does not feel in school. Moreover, the school curriculum does not encourage or add value to the child's interest in dance. In fact, the child is made to feel that he needs to choose between studies and his passion for dance. There is no integration of his passion into academics. Due to this, the child's desire to attend school diminishes.

During my visits to the communities, I realised that most, if not all, school-going boys in Lado Sarai were interested in cricket. Some seemed very passionate about the game. Many children, for instance Aman, not only plays cricket but watches it too (on television sets/mobile phones/computers). In the evenings, one could see children, mainly boys, swamping the narrow lanes, efficiently using whatever open space available to play cricket. In fact, Anmol skips school sometimes if a cricket match is being shown on television that day. If a test series is going on he chooses any of the five days of matches to be absent. He said that ODIs (One Day International cricket matches) and T20s (Twenty20 cricket matches) are shown only after school timings in the evening so he does not have to skip school to watch those.

Individual-specific factors include lack of friends in school, lack of motivation and interest in studies, lack of adequate sleep, poor health of the child and prolonged illness or injury. Children are discouraged from going to school if they are unable to understand the teaching in class or are insufficiently prepared for an exam. Children may not go to school the day they have not done their

homework for fear of being scolded, hit or embarrassed in front of others.

For instance, Bharat has a spine abnormality and as a result, has to miss school the day he has to visit the hospital. Simran who has a blood disorder, does not go to school the day she feels weak or has a headache, especially during summers when it is very hot. As she mentioned during our conversation “If I am sick, it is a very big challenge for me to go to school.” Her headaches last for three to four hours when she studies too much.

One factor which appears to be individual-specific, but needs to be systemically addressed for an entire group, is that of children with disabilities. For instance, the case of Rahul has been discussed above under school-level factors. The issue of absenteeism of children with disabilities will be discussed separately.

Implications of Absenteeism

School is seen as a means to a better standard of living, financial stability and independence and education is seen to be directly proportional to obtaining a good job. There can be both short-term and long-term implications of student absenteeism depending on the frequency and duration of the absences. In the short-term, children may be unable to do their homework, understand the chapter being taught in class or may not have the knowledge and skills required to give exams. In the long-run, the children may be under-confident with regard to their knowledge base and may be unable to interact with people unknown to them. It may also adversely impact their employment opportunities and, as a result, their future.

Conclusion

While parents/guardians, teachers and schools play a crucial role in limiting absence of children from school, many other steps

need to be undertaken by all the stakeholders involved at multiple levels in order to fully deal with the issue of absenteeism. On the basis of the study it is suggested that the following factors be focused on first and foremost as it is possible to address these immediately by the society as a whole.

Poor health of the children came out to be a common reason behind their absence from school. It also results in the children being lethargic and inattentive while in school resulting in low academic achievements. The most obvious and effective solution to this is better hygiene and sanitation levels in the households, schools and communities of the children. This would lead to greater energy levels and longer attention spans of the children.

Uninspired teaching and learning style was another cause behind the children finding studies boring and monotonous. More often than not, rote learning is encouraged in schools in India. There needs to be greater access to a wider pool of teaching and learning materials by both students and their teachers so that education can be tailored to each child's needs and learning styles. This would lead to a greater interest in studies and, thus, in schooling.

School leadership in schools in India, needs to be more accountable and responsible. This will address the issue of an unproductive and demotivating school environment to a large extent. Not only should there be suitable rules and regulations in place, but regular inspections and school visits should be made by the necessary authorities. This would lead to a school environment that is disciplined and in order.

To sum up, the ability of children to attend school is greatly determined by their school, home and community. Absenteeism, apart from impacting the academic performance of children in schools may be a sign that they might be in need of help. Thus, the sooner it is addressed, the minimal the adverse consequences.

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