



Critical Analysis of the Attendance Policy Implementation on Students' Achievement in a Government School in Fujairah

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Abstract

The attendance policy implementation and its influence on students' academic and social-emotional competency achievement have always had a firm footing in education and policy-making fields. However, there is either a dearth of research that particularly examines attendance and these two aspects, or each element is examined separately. Thus, this paper investigates how students' academic and social-emotional competencies are influenced by the implementation of attendance policies. Data was collected from many pertinent publications. The influence of attendance on children's academic and social-emotional development has been found to be both beneficial and negative. While high absenteeism rates are detrimental, high attendance rates are beneficial. Because the multi-systemic approach adopts a holistic strategy including the school, parents, community initiatives, peer influence, governmental organisations, and teachers, this research adopted it. The results indicate that in order to reduce absence rates, schools should adopt preventative measures and put them into practice. The use of home-based, community-based, or school-based interventions is also emphasised.

Keywords: Academic achievement, attendance policy, implementation strategies, influence, social-emotional competencies

Introduction

Background

For students to grow academically, socially, and emotionally, attendance in school is essential. Increased rates of student attendance have been shown to positively impact academic achievement and social-emotional competencies inside and outside the classroom environments (Borowski, 2018). Over the past decade, there has been a growing trend of incorporating Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) programs in schools. This has become a primary objective for educators and professionals, and for valid reasons, as shown by research (Bridgeland, Bruce, & Hariharan, 2013; Oberle, Domitrovich, Meyers, & Weissberg, 2016). Social-emotional competence (SEC) is essential for constructing the basis for both healthy continuous growth and successful results in the educational setting (Domitrovich et al., 2017; Durlak et al., 2011; Sklad et al., 2012). According to Oberle et al. (2016), these competencies support productive peer and teacher interactions and communication. Additionally, students who possess these competencies collaborate, negotiate, and cooperate more effectively, which improves their school integration and increases their ability to concentrate on academic work (Elias & Haynes, 2008). Additional studies have supported the idea that student attendance records might act as clear indicators of the quality of a school (Coutts, 1998). Other studies have regarded attendance as a significant component to be evaluated as an academic outcome (King, 2000; Lehr, Sinclair, & Christenson, 2004; Phillips, 1997; Sheldon, 2007) in Roby (2004), implying that increased attendance is a direct indication, rather than a determining factor, of academic achievement. Moreover, higher exam scores are associated with student attendance (Balfanz & Byrnes, 2006; Lamdin, 1996; Nichols, 2003). Unfortunately, attendance is a variable that is often disregarded or overlooked as a useless statistic. Still, historical perceptions suggest that regular attendance has a stronger effect on academic attainment (Johnston, 2000, Lamdin, 1996). One factor

influencing academic success, according to King (2000), is attendance. Both academic and social-emotional learning (SEL) outcomes can be negatively impacted as a result of absences, according to Santibanez & Guarino (2021). Literature has shown a correlation between academic achievements and SEL qualities such as growth mindset, self-management, and self-efficacy (e.g., Claro et al., 2016; Usher & Pajares, 2009; West, Buckley, et al., 2018).

Rationale

Various research papers have investigated the correlation between attendance and students' academic and social-emotional competency achievement. Nevertheless, each aspect is either considered individually, or there is a lack of research that specifically investigates attendance and these two aspects. Therefore, this study will examine the influence of attendance policy implementation on students' academic and social-emotional competency achievement. Given the gap, this paper will explore this particular area.

Research Aim

This paper aims to critically analyze the attendance policy implementation in a government school in Fujairah to determine its influence on students' academic and social-emotional achievement.

Research Objectives

- To understand the attendance policy and the implementation strategies.
- To determine the influence of the policy on students' achievement.
- To propose best practices for implementation.

Overview of the context

The school is located in Fujairah, UAE. It is a semi-government elementary school.

Literature Review

The review of the literature includes research on attendance, academic achievement, social-emotional skills, and strategies for implementing attendance policies. The development domain that each study discovery specifically reached is listed below.

Attendance Policy and Academic Achievement

One of the most influential variables linked to children's development toward literacy in British schools was found to be school attendance (Tymms, 1996) in (Roby, 2004). Similarly, low average attendance rates are a variable contributing to poorer student test results compared to their peers, as established by Barrington and Hendricks (1989). Dekalb (1999) notes that absenteeism has a negative impact on student progress. Likewise, Santibanez & Guarino (2021) discovered that absenteeism had a considerable negative impact on all pupils. Due to the complexity of mathematical concepts, the expected rate of academic loss from absenteeism as it accumulates was higher in mathematics (Santibanez & Guarino, 2021). Moreover, the fact that the negative effects of skipping lessons may persist into subsequent grades because pupils are failing to acquire the necessary skills and primary elements of learning suggests that these effects may be long-lasting (Santibanez & Guarino, 2021). According to another research, absences had a greater impact on later grades than on early grades (Gershenson, Jackowitz, & Brannegan, 2017). Likewise, Santibanez & Guarino (2021) indicated that the probable effects of absenteeism on elementary pupils are far less pronounced, and in fact, slightly positive for this age group. This implies that teachers and parents have a better opportunity to compensate for the educational gaps in the early grades. According to Ford and

Sutphen (1996), it is more practical to focus on helping a child develop a good connection with the school system throughout the early grades, rather than trying to fix a poor relationship when the child reaches adolescence. However, Santibañez & Guarino (2020) argue that children who are subjected to frequent absences may experience conditions such as low motivation, insufficient sleep, difficulty with concentration, and other related issues which may have a negative effect on their performance. The research conducted by Roby (2004) found that the top three schools in each of the chosen districts, as determined by their proficiency test score averages, also had higher attendance averages. The proficiency test results and attendance statistics of the top three schools were considerably better than those of the lowest three schools. This suggests that a greater frequency of school attendance was associated with better scores on proficiency tests. Likewise, improving the attendance of students who often have a high percentage of absenteeism might potentially enhance their academic progress (Daugherty, 2008). Consistent school attendance correlates with a decreased likelihood of failing high-stakes exams (Kay, 2010). Therefore, Roby (2004) suggests that for educational institutions that have attendance issues and concerns, it is important to highlight and take into consideration the positive and outstanding student attendance initiatives.

Attendance Policy and Social-Emotional Competency Outcomes

Gottfried (2014) discovered that persistent absence has a negative impact on the educational and social engagement of children in kindergarten. According to West, Pier, et al. (2018), a study conducted utilizing two years of survey data from CORE districts revealed that children in Grades 4 to 12 who had poor scores in growth management, self-awareness, self-efficacy, and self-management tend to have higher rates of absenteeism. The most significant negative correlations are seen between absences and self-management and self-efficacy. The findings of research

by Besecker et al. (2020) indicate that the pandemic-induced disruptions in schools had an adverse impact on the academic and social-emotional growth of students, especially those in certain grades and vulnerable groups. It is apparent that those students need both academic and social-emotional assistance to compensate for the deficiencies they experienced (Santibanez & Guarino, 2021). In a study conducted by Borowski (2018), it was shown that there is a correlation between intrapersonal social and emotional competencies and favourable results among students. Significantly, the ability to self-manage, especially with regard to education, was strongly correlated with better results on math and reading achievement exams, as well as fewer absences. Furthermore, the level of self-awareness (self-concept) was positively correlated with increased attendance among Latino students, although no such relationship was seen among White students. This is because education or language competency may have an impact: parents might prioritize attendance as a fundamental behaviour to guarantee in their children, particularly given that they are unable to assist with school work due to language barriers or limited education. Subsequently, intrapersonal competencies hold a slightly higher significance for White students in terms of academics due to the focus on the internal and individual aspects of American/Eurocentric cultures. Conversely, these competencies are more crucial for Latino students in terms of attendance, as there is a cultural emphasis on community and being present for others.

Attendance Policy Implementation Strategies

Prior to introducing any changes or adopting new strategies to address absenteeism, it is crucial to thoroughly understand the underlying causes of it. In studies by Clement, Gwynne, & Younkin, (2001) and Wagstaff, Combs, & Jarvis, (2000), students reported the following reasons for not attending classes: pupils perceived classes as pointless, tedious, and a waste of time, and they lacked good relationships

with both teachers and classmates. Due to frequent suspensions, students felt unsafe at school. They were also unable to maintain pace with their schoolwork or were experiencing academic failure, and there were no timely interventions. Some individuals discovered that the classes lacked sufficient challenges since the primary tasks consisted of worksheets and reading accompanied by lectures. Additionally, some students were able to skip classes for days and still get credit. Other students stated that the duration of school hours is too lengthy. Additional factors might include functional issues, such as lack of self-motivation, mental health problems, limited social skills, and lack of discipline. Although there are many more, the ones mentioned above are common. Once these reasons are understood, strategies for implementing attendance policies can be identified and developed to identify feasible strategies that would be advantageous to the students. According to Kay (2010), a multisystemic strategy that focuses on a student's issue area or areas of concern has the greatest influence on their attendance at school. The objective of this strategy is to proactively address and reduce attendance issues among all students. The main component of the strategy is the comprehensive intervention strategies, which focus on addressing the specific requirements of each pupil based on the underlying cause of their school absences (Kay, 2010). Hence, the staff of Linn Benton Lincoln Education Service District (Oregon) suggested conducting attendance audits, speaking with groups of pupils and those who are absent from school frequently and then recommending measures for implementation (Railsback, 2004). As well, extensive interviews should be conducted with staff members to find out their proposals for improving policies. Railsback (2004) proposed the creation of an attendance survey as it may serve as a valuable instrument for understanding students' perceptions of themselves, their communities, schools, families, and social circles. This survey can provide valuable insights for the development of preventative and intervention strategies.

Additionally, schools can develop a range of student support programs and building-level strategies (Railsback, 2004). Moreover, there should be rewarding or incentive programs in schools. According to Epstein and Sheldon (2002), providing rewards such as parties, gift vouchers, and recognition during assemblies to primary children for high attendance was shown to have a significant link with minimizing chronic absenteeism and boosting daily attendance rates. Roby (2004) proposes to find out whether there are any special initiatives or rewards for raising student attendance and get in touch with districts that are presently seeing high averages of attendance. Besides it is essential to have efficient reporting, documenting, and monitoring using diverse computerized attendance tracking solutions that are accessible. Policies should incorporate comprehensive family engagement, which entails informing parents and maintaining regular communication between home and school (Railsback, 2004). Additionally, policies should establish mutual agreements, in the form of contracts, between students, administrators, teachers, and families. These contracts should outline performance expectations for students, the services the school will offer, and any modifications the school intends to implement (Railsback, 2004). Scott Perry suggests that schools may only achieve sustained improvements if they possess a state of 'system readiness'. These elements consist of a unified team of employees, reliable and collaborative leadership, making decisions based on data, a team responsible for monitoring school improvements, a good environment, and the identification, evaluation, and assessment of the needs of both the school and its students (Railsback, 2004).

Summary of Literature Review

The above-mentioned research findings emphasize the necessity of an attendance policy to successfully foster a culture of consistent attendance, which is crucial for enhancing student achievement in academic, social, and emotional domains.

Additionally, it was stated that absence has an increased impact on later grades compared to early grades. Consequently, it is essential to implement early interventions and programs to address the deficiencies in these cases. However, to further understand the reasons underlying these frequent absences, schools might first audit student attendance, conduct surveys, and set up one-on-one sessions to get feedback directly from students. It was proposed to interview teachers in order to get their suggestions for improving policies. Thereafter, suitable intervention plans and strategies can be put in place.

This paper will take into consideration these different perspectives, alongside the reasons for absenteeism and the influence it has on students' academic and social-emotional achievement. It will adopt Railsback's (2004) and Kay' (2010) strategies since they involve research-proven programs and practices and are comprehensive.

Methodology

The chosen attendance policy is analysed vertically, focusing on the implementation part. The three approaches to policy analysis—structured interaction, social construction, and authoritative choice—are considered in this section as they relate to the implementation phase. This is because policy implementation needs three lenses (Colebatch, 2009). Prior to proceeding further with the description and analysis, it is crucial to understand the policy implementation and its characteristics. According to Colebatch (2009), policy involves a causal theory: if we engage in action 'A', it will lead to outcome 'B'. Implementation refers to the successful execution of policymakers' objectives, resulting in attaining the intended aim. Policy implementation encompasses a variety of methods, resources, and relationships that connect policies to the actual actions taken in a program (Mthethwa, 2012). To be specific, it refers to the act of performing, achieving, fulfilling, producing, or wrapping up a designated task. Hence, understanding the essence of policy

implementation is crucial since global observations suggest that policies, once approved, are not consistently executed as planned and may not achieve the desired outcomes (Mthethwa, 2012). The paper draws on evidence from existing research literature to analyse the implementation strategies in order to make conclusions of its potential to influence students' achievements.

Results/Finding

The findings have three aspects that reflect the three research objectives:

1. The attendance policy and implementation strategies
2. The influence of the policy on students' achievement
3. Recommendations

The selected policy outlines the procedures and implementations, including responsibilities and commitments of both the school and stakeholders regarding attendance alongside other systems which are proved by the authority. It clearly communicates guidelines to all stakeholders involved—students, teachers, parents/guardians, and other staff members. It gives a comprehensive explanation of it, highlighting how crucial attendance is to student achievement. Here it is evident that the influence of excellent attendance on academic achievement is acknowledged, but its influence on social-emotional development is overlooked. Attwood & Croll (2006) state that identifying and preventing students from harassing or bullying one another, as well as providing opportunities for good teacher-student relationships, are examples of socially oriented processes that reduce attendance issues.

In addition, applicability of the attendance policy to all students is consistent as consistency is essential to equity and efficiency. This involves implementing the same consequences for tardiness and absences. Thus, absences are tracked as either authorized or unauthorized. Unauthorized absences are those that the school

considers unreasonable. This involves parents who keep their child home from school unnecessarily, truancy, and other unjustified absences. As for the flexibility, it is also permitted in certain circumstances, like the following: a medically documented illness, the death of a first- or second-degree family member, arranged medical visits, participation in an official community mission or event, like representing the UAE at a sporting event (backed by official documentation), a required appearance before a government agency (backed by evidence), and emergency family circumstances like travelling for treatment. Moreover, it has procedures in place for regularly tracking and monitoring attendance. To maintain accurate records of student attendance and tardiness, the school uses attendance software or systems. Examine attendance data regularly to spot patterns and quickly resolve any problems. For example, teachers are required to report absences for three consecutive days, and the attendance register officer has to contact the parents right away. Coutts (1998) states that student attendance should be recorded and tracked on a weekly basis since it serves as a reliable measure of the effectiveness of schools. Once pupils who exhibit frequent absences or tardiness are identified, the school takes proactive measures to address the issue by understanding the main reasons behind their attendance problems and provide assistance or resources if required. At this stage, parents take part in developing strategies to enhance attendance if necessary by creating action plans for these individual students. Furthermore, the school offers incentives and awards for outstanding attendance in addition to consequences for non-compliance. It acknowledges and honors students who maintain excellent attendance practices by requesting assistance from stakeholders for areas that need improvement, recognizing accomplishments, and providing weekly and termly attendance updates via newsletters, the honor board, and appreciation certificates. It also encourages students to take part in extracurricular activities organized by the school. According to Railsback (2004), in

order to minimize absenteeism, schools should use preventative strategies. Preventative programs start by providing incentives for exemplary attendance. Several curriculum-based preventive measures may be put into effect. One strategy to promote student success in school is to schedule them in higher-level classes, which encourages them to put in more effort (Kober, 2001). Additionally, these tactics need teachers to provide curriculums that build connections between the lessons and the actual world (Attwood & Croll, 2006; Revell & Wainwright, 2009) and provide vocational curricula (Beran & Violato, 2009). In addition, it is crucial to provide early interventions, particularly targeting elementary pupils and their families. There should be specific treatments to address chronic attendance issues in pupils, such as programs designed to reduce truancy, may be implemented both inside the school and in the community (Railsback, 2004).

When seen through the authoritative choice lens, it emphasizes the concept of decision-making, identifies the appropriate parties to include, and specifies the procedures to be followed (Colebatch, 2009). Although the implementation procedure has been adjusted to the needs of the school, the Ministry of Education and Headquarters have approved it, ensuring alignment with their guidelines.

Moreover, the implementation process showcases the involvement of different parties in cases of chronic absenteeism, including the school (admin staff, counsellors, registration officer, students' affairs, and teachers), parents, the Ministry of Education, and the Child Protection Unit. This procedure is mostly aligned with the six pillars of the multisystemic paradigm proposed in Kay, (2010): the school, parents, community efforts, peer influence, governmental agencies, and teachers. However, there is no emphasis on community efforts and peer influence. It is important to consider all pillars because the efficacy of the model hinges on the presence of policies, procedures, and support measures for each of these pillars, which are essential for maintaining the overall functionality of the system and

enhancing community attendance (Kay, 2010). Multisystemic treatment is necessary for the pupils who have the greatest challenges with attendance, according to Kearney (2008). Multisystemic treatment has been effective in raising attendance and academic performance, according to Barth et al. (2007). By treating the underlying issue(s), multisystemic treatment (MST) aims to change how youngsters engage socially with society. The core tenet of MST is that healthy adjustment and the mitigation of emotional and behavioural problems are achieved via altering the social ecology of children and families (Schoenwald et al., 2000). According to Brown et al. (1999), antisocial behaviour at several levels—individual, family, peer, school, and community—is addressed via multisystemic treatment, which entails an intensive, home- and community-based intervention. This paradigm is in line with the social construction approach which emphasizes developing interactions and negotiations with different parties.

Additionally, there is a lack of frequent assessment and review of the attendance policy implementations to evaluate its effectiveness and make necessary adjustments. It is significant because evaluating the process of implementing policies allows for a deeper knowledge of the reasons behind the success or failure of programs, as well as the aspects that contribute to their success (Love, 2004). Colebatch (2009) indicated that policy implementation should be followed by an evaluation process. To elaborate, implementation as evolution, implying that policies did not evolve completely at the outset but rather evolved in reaction to the forces and stimuli applied, meaning that the actual implementation may change significantly from the initial plan (Pressman & Wildavsky, 1979) in Colebatch (2009). This may be seen from the perspective of the structured interaction approach. To improve policy implementations, it is important to get feedback from stakeholders, including students, parents/guardians, and staff. As stated in Colebatch (2009), developing the program involves creating an atmosphere of dedication

among the participants whose support is required, resulting in the program's ultimate structure reflecting the interests of the stakeholders who have joined. This implies that policy-makers are not only responsible for providing guidance to those in positions of authority, but also for engaging in negotiations with various stakeholders in order to reach a mutually agreeable resolution (Colebatch, 2009).

Discussion

Whilst other literature has examined the implementation of attendance policies and their impact on students' academic and social-emotional development from different perspectives, the discussion presented below aligns with the conclusions of previous research. It is widely agreed that attendance has a positive and negative impact on children's academic and social-emotional development. High absence rates have a negative influence, whereas good attendance rates have a favourable impact. Thus, for schools to reduce absenteeism rates, they should take preventive measures and implement the multisystemic strategy due to its holistic perspective that involves the school, parents, community efforts, peer influence, governmental agencies, and teachers. By putting this method into practice, schools may provide comprehensive intervention strategies that concentrate on meeting individual student's needs in light of the reasons behind their absences from school. Therefore, it is significant to understand the reasons underlying absences, whether is it due to academic, social or emotional factors. It is also evident that implementing measures and interventions during the early grades has a greater effect compared to implementing them in later grades. Accordingly, school-based, community-based, or home-based interventions may be taken into consideration by schools. The planning of school-based interventions might be based on the academic or social-emotional nature of the problem. If the issue relates to social or emotional issues, it can include consulting one-on-one sessions with the school counsellor; if it relates to academic factors, it

might involve the special education needs (SEN) and English language learning support (ELLS) departments. In terms of community-based intervention, it would be advantageous to communicate with organizations that provide workshops, events, and programs. If the issue is chronic, the child protection unit and MOE should interfere. Regarding the home-based intervention, after determining the nature of the issue, establish a routine or plan that the child can adhere to at home. This may be accomplished by monitoring attendance on a weekly basis, documenting statistics, generating reports, and communicating with the relevant stakeholders.

Conclusion

This paper investigated the attendance policy and how its implementation strategies influence students' academic and social-emotional achievement. Defining the motives for children's absence and adopting an attendance policy may be challenging. Nevertheless, the development of comprehensive strategies to address attendance issues stems from a well-functioning system consisting of educators and administrators who recognize the significance and interdependence of fostering a positive learning environment, cultivating meaningful relationships, providing stimulating and rigorous academic content and instruction, and implementing effective rules, policies, and procedures (Wagstaff, Combs & Jarvis, 2000).

Regarding the limitations of this review, it is clear that there is a lack of variety in the research settings. Some studies did not specify the age of the children and did not give sufficient consideration to young learners.

Moreover, this study puts up some recommendations based on the insights acquired from those investigations.

- It would be quite helpful for schools to conduct surveys to gather the perspectives of pupils, parents, and teachers on this matter, as well as provide workshops for both students and parents.

- As well, schools guarantee that all employees get training on the attendance policy and have the skills of implementing it with effectiveness. Give instruction on how to recognize and address problems with students' attendance as well as how to support them.
- Engage the broader school community, including local organizations and other resources, to assist in efforts to enhance student attendance. Collaborate with community partners to provide additional support services for pupils facing attendance challenges.

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