

Factors Affecting Student Absenteeism in Rural Elementary Schools of Kalahandi District of Odisha

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Abstract

This study attempts to understand student absenteeism by exploring its related factors in rural elementary schools of migration-prone Golamunda block in Kalahandi district. The study also aims to assess the measures taken by the stakeholders to address this issue. A mixed-method approach with an explanatory-sequential design was followed. The students, parents, teachers, and headmasters of elementary schools constituted the population of the study. Cluster and purposive sampling techniques were followed for the quantitative and qualitative phase of data collection respectively. Student enrolment and retention data sheets, structured and semi-structured interview schedules were used as the tools for data collection. The quantitative data were analyzed through frequency and percentage analysis, while the qualitative data were sorted, coded, categorised and analyzed thematically. After analyzing the data, four overarching themes were generated. They were weak economic condition of families, lack of aspiration towards education and career among students, casual attitude of parents towards children's education, and inadequate community participation. By incorporating the perspectives of various stakeholders, attempts were made to comprehend the nuances of absenteeism that can help parents, educators, educational administrators, and policymakers to gain a deeper understanding of the nature of absenteeism. Proper planning and interventions would result in better school attendance, retention, adjustment, and high educational achievements of students.

Keywords: Elementary Education, Primary Education, Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA), School Education, Student Absenteeism, Student Retention, School Dropout, Universalization of Elementary Education (UEE)

Introduction

Education, the most vital asset to human beings, not only empowers individuals but also strengthens society. Education in its general sense is a form of learning in which the knowledge, skills, and habits are transferred through teaching, training, or research. Any experience that has a formative effect on how one thinks, feels, or acts may be considered educational (Tyagi, 2021). Elementary education is the first step towards the entire educational journey. The education that children receive at this stage lays down the foundation for their

physical, intellectual, social, emotional, and moral development. Realizing its value, the Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG 4) of the United Nations (UN) aims to ensure that all the girls and boys complete free, equitable, and quality primary and secondary education leading to relevant and effective learning outcomes by 2030.

Across the world, 155 countries provide elementary education on a compulsory basis (UNESCO, 2020). In India, by the 86th amendment of the Indian Constitution in 2002, a new Article, i.e., Article-21(A) was introduced that brought elementary education under the purview of the

Fundamental Rights. It guarantees free and compulsory education to all the children in the age group between 6 and 14 years. Despite that, the goals of Universalization of Elementary Education (UEE), i.e., universal access, enrolment, retention, quality education, equity, and achievement are yet far from realization (Govinda and Mathew, 2018). In most of the rural and backward areas of India, education at the elementary level witnesses the problems of large-scale absenteeism and dropout. The highest priority in education should be to ensure that not only all children start schooling but also remain there long enough regularly to acquire literacy, numeracy, and basic attitudes and skills which will help them to improve the quality of their life (Bisht, 2015).

Absenteeism is a common problem in most of the rural elementary schools and is essential to deal with. Presently, absenteeism is widespread but usually remains unacknowledged, especially in rural and underdeveloped areas. As per the UNICEF global database, in developing nations across the globe, nearly 90 per cent of children attended primary school in 2021, of which eight per cent were unable to complete their schooling (UNICEF, 2021). The Annual Status of Education Report (ASER) identified student absenteeism rate at 28 per cent across all states in rural India (ASER, 2019).

Several causes behind student absenteeism have been revealed by a number of studies. These studies, exploring both Indian and foreign contexts, have identified various factors related to absenteeism including geographical location of schools, classroom atmosphere, personal attitude of students, economic set-up of families, teacher, and home-related factors (Daka, et al., 2021; Ghosh, 2021; Mafa, 2018). Bullying, excessive use of internet and gaming, reduced family involvement, suicide attempts, and existential hopelessness were also reported as crucial factors behind student absenteeism (Haque,

et al., 2024). Furthermore, educational and community factors, such as lack of connection between classroom teaching and real-life situations, lack of communication between parents and schools were also identified as contributing factors towards student absenteeism (Assefa, 2018; Cook & Ezenne, 2010). Absenteeism in school adversely impacted the teaching-learning process resulting in poor performance, inability to comprehend concepts, improper socio-emotional development of students, and fostered indiscipline (Akkus & Cinkir, 2022; Santibanez & Guarino, 2021; Kabanga & Mulauzi, 2020).

Absenteeism is a tendency, which is psycho-social in nature. The cause of such behaviour may relate to school, home, or personal areas. Although researchers have investigated the problem before, further exploration is required to identify the crucial factors, particularly in rural settings of underdeveloped districts like Kalahandi where absenteeism is witnessed at large scale. This study explores the enrolment and retention status as well as the factors behind student absenteeism in rural elementary schools of Golamunda block of Kalahandi district through a mixed-method approach. The findings can be helpful for parents, educators, educational administrators, and policymakers to gain a deeper understanding of the nature of absenteeism and to plan future modalities accordingly. Proper interventions would result in better school attendance, retention, adjustment, and high educational achievements of students.

Concept of Student Absenteeism

Absenteeism means the absence of a student from class when she/he is scheduled to be present. Student absenteeism can be conceptualized as the temporary cessation of students when their presence is expected or absence of students from class during the regular working hours of the school.

Methodology

Design

A mixed-methods approach with an explanatory-sequential design: participant selection model (Creswell & Clark, 2007) was followed in this study. It was a two-phase mixed methods design that started with the collection and analysis of quantitative data. Based on the result of the first phase, the subsequent collection and analysis of qualitative data was carried out.

Sample and Sampling Techniques

The various stakeholders who participated in this study were the students, parents, teachers, and headmasters of elementary schools of Golamunda block. Seven Gram Panchayats from Golamunda block – Golamunda, Khaliakani, Manjhari, Chapria, Brundabahal, Kegaon, and Chichia – were selected for data collection. These panchayats were selected because large scale absenteeism had been reported from these areas. As most of the inhabitants from these panchayats are marginal farmers and daily-wage labourers, they adopt seasonal migration as a major livelihood strategy. They usually prefer not to leave their school-going children behind in the village as the duration of migration is too long, spanning around six to eight months. Most of the children migrate along with their parents, which results into large scale absenteeism in schools of these areas.

Data Collection

A total of 1772 absentees were identified from 22 elementary schools across the selected panchayats and 440 absentees were selected through cluster sampling for the quantitative phase of the study. Due permission from the headmasters of concerned schools was taken before data collection. Data regarding enrolment status, retention status, and causes for absenteeism

were collected through data sheets and structured interview schedules. After the analysis of these quantitative data, the second phase data collection was carried out. For the second (qualitative) phase, 23 students, 18 parents, 16 teachers, and 4 headmasters were selected purposively. They were briefed about nature of the study and the interview process. Consents were obtained from the participants and from the parents of the absentees. After receiving consent for interview and recording, in-depth interviews were conducted through semi-structured interview schedules to identify the causes behind absenteeism and the measures taken to deal with them. The interviews lasted for 37 to 65 minutes (Mean = 48 minutes). Recordings of the interviews were transcribed manually by the researchers.

Data Analysis

The data regarding enrolment and retention obtained from school admission registers and attendance registers, and the data regarding various causes of absenteeism obtained from the absentees through structured interview schedules were analyzed quantitatively through frequency and percentage analysis. The responses obtained from various stakeholders through semi-structured interview schedules regarding the causes and measures taken to address absenteeism were transcribed to textual forms. The investigators went through the transcribed texts several times to get familiarized with the data. Initial codes were created to see the meaning and patterns in these data. Important excerpts were identified and appropriate codes were finalized after several rounds of discussion with fellow researchers and experts. Codes were collated with supporting data and grouped into themes. These themes were then evaluated and revised. Final narratives were written with supporting quotes to back up the points.

Results and Discussion

Enrolment and Retention Status

As per the Odisha Primary Education Programme Authority (OPEPA), if a student remains absent in school for 30 consecutive days, she/he is regarded as dropout. Arrangements are made for her/his readmission if she/he comes to school again. In this study, students remaining absent in school for more than seven consecutive days without prior information, were

considered as absentees. Among the total 5248 students enrolled in the 22 selected schools, 1772 (33.76%) were identified as absentees. Among these absentees, 527 were identified as dropouts as they were absent for more than 30 consecutive days. Out of the total 2926 boys enrolled, 810 (27.68%) were identified as absentees, whereas among the 2322 girls, 962 (41.42%) were identified as absentees. The gender and category-wise enrolment and retention data in elementary schools for academic session 2023-24 are shown in Table 1 and Table 2, respectively.

Table-1. Gender and category-wise enrolment in elementary schools (2023-24)

Category	Boys	Percentage	Girls	Percentage	Total
General	343	6.53	419	7.98	762
OBC	1023	19.49	876	16.69	1899
ST	872	16.62	538	10.25	1410
SC	688	13.11	489	9.32	1177
Total	2926	55.76	2322	44.24	5248

Source: Secondary data from admission registers

Table-2. Gender and category-wise absentees in elementary schools (2023-24)

Category	Boys	Percentage	Girls	Percentage	Total
General	18	1.01	55	3.10	73
OBC	244	13.77	231	13.04	475
ST	302	17.04	347	19.58	649
SC	246	13.88	329	18.57	575
Total	810	45.71	962	54.29	1772

Source: Secondary data from attendance registers

The researchers came up with four overarching themes to describe the factors related to student absenteeism and intervention made by the stakeholders. These themes along with their subthemes have been discussed in detail as follows.

Theme 1: Weak economic condition of families

Kalahandi district, being the part of the Kalahandi-Balangir-Koraput (KBK) region, is considered as one of the most socio-economically underdeveloped areas in India (Banik, 2015). In Kalahandi, the economy of most families revolves around marginal

farming and agriculture related daily-wage labour. Families even struggle to earn their daily bread once the agriculture related earning ceases after the monsoon season. Stricken with acute poverty, families usually prioritize their financial needs and earning livelihoods overlooking the educational needs of their children.

Subtheme 1: Children engaged as earning hands

Varied responses were obtained from the absentees as well as their parents and teachers regarding causes for remaining absent from school. The gender-wise analysis of data revealed that the major reasons behind

absenteeism among girls were engagement in domestic chores (68.27%), agricultural works (18.64%), and taking care of younger siblings (32.33%). On the other hand, in the case of male absentees, the major reasons were found to be engagement in agricultural work (34.58%), domestic chores (12.35%), and farming work (11.87%).

As per the responses received from the parents, 83.33% of them could not send their wards regularly to school. Parents needed a full time member for domestic chores as they were busy at work for the whole day to earn for their family. The marginal farmers, who could not afford paid-workers for agricultural work, engaged their children in such work. One of the parents of an absentee student in Class VIII stated: "Mainly during the monsoon as the agricultural work is at peak, we need manpower in field. From ploughing to harvesting, we do everything manually. Nowadays, the cost for daily-wage labourers is very high and beyond our affordability. That is why, all the members of our family including the children have to work in the field."

Subtheme 2: Compulsion for seasonal migration

Seasonal migration was identified as one of the key reasons behind long-duration absenteeism. It accounted for 17.41% of female and 9.52% of male absentees. Seasonal migration acts as a livelihood strategy for most of the small and nominal farmers as well as the daily-wage labourers due to a lack of employment opportunities once the harvesting season is over. Some parents were found migrating to other states like Andhra Pradesh, Gujarat, Telangana, Tamil Nadu, and Karnataka. This cyclic migration of parents along with their children was found to interrupt schooling of the children for nearly six to eight months every year.

In 2001-02, the Department of School and Mass Education, Government of Odisha, had established seasonal hostels at the source of migration to address the issue of child migration. These hostels provided

free temporary accommodation, food, and healthcare facilities to students whose parents migrate seasonally. However, this facility had not been in operation in most of the migration-prone blocks including Golamunda, which forced school-going children to migrate along with their parents. Especially in the case of the adolescent girls, parents were reluctant to leave them behind in the village (with relatives or neighbours) in concern for their safety. Sharing her experience, the mother of a teenage Class VIII girl revealed: "Once we had left our daughter in the home of one of our relatives so that she could continue her schooling but they neither fed her properly nor did they take proper care during her illness. They engaged her in household work and cooking instead of sending her to school regularly. Moreover, it is not safe to leave the adolescent girls behind as they usually indulge in inappropriate activities at this age."

Theme 2: Lack of aspiration towards education and career among students

In some cases, lack of ambition among the students towards education and career was identified as a crucial factor behind absenteeism. 27.78% of the parents revealed that their adolescent children were addicted to such vices as to chewing tobacco, smoking, and consuming local alcohol along with the older dropout children. Parents often received complaints from the teachers and villagers regarding the involvement of their wards in stealing and street fighting. As a result, few parents voluntarily stopped sending their children to school. Instead, they engaged them in farming work like herding and taking care of the livestock.

Lack of personal aspiration accounted for approximately 8% of absenteeism. Most of the absentees, being the first-generation learners, lacked proper guidance and counselling for education and career related aspects. Neither the parents nor relatives were educated enough to help these children

in setting long-term goals that could have motivated them towards studies and attending school regularly.

Apart from that, around 4% of the absentees did not attend school because of lack of interest in study. The reasons behind their disinterest were inability to understand the lessons, frequent altercation with peers, and fear of punishment from teachers. The father of an absentee in Class VI mentioned: "My son is in Class VI but he cannot even read or write the Odia alphabets. Neither can he perform simple addition or subtraction. I quite often warn him to attend classes regularly till the last period but he always bunks classes after the lunch break to roam and play with his friends and few of his dropout seniors. Sometimes, he pretends to be ill and does not go to school at all. If we send him to school forcefully, he bunks from the first period itself. I scold and beat him frequently, but he is not at all interested to attend school. I reported it to the teachers and headmaster, but no significant action had been taken."

Theme 3: Casual attitude of parents towards children's education

Seriousness among parents towards education of their wards was found to have a significant impact on regularity among children in attending school. Illiteracy and lack of a positive attitude among parents triggered the magnitude of student absenteeism. Parents seldom came to school to attend any meeting or to inquire regarding academic progress of their children. According to 93.75% of teachers, only one or two parents attended the PTA and MTA meetings, that too on an irregular basis. Even

parents, who were the members of the School Management Committee (SMC), had never made any discussion regarding the progress of teaching-learning activities in school. 88.8% of the parents admitted that they had never attended any of the PTA meetings. Only 5.5% of the parents reported that they had approached the teachers and discussed such issues. 38.8% of them had occasionally advised their wards to be regular in school, while 16.6% of the guardians were found using corporal punishment for the same. According to one of the teachers: "Nowadays, the government is providing every facility for elementary level students. From mid-day-meal to free uniform and learning material, students are getting every benefit, but they are still unwilling to come to school. Most of the children come to school for the mid-day-meal only. Parents neither show any interest towards education of their children nor do they entertain any matter regarding this."

These children severely lacked a conducive home environment and parental support that could have motivated them to dream and achieve higher in life. Lack of family support and encouragement had further declined their interest in schooling. One of the absentees in Class VIII expressed: "Now, I am 14. As an earning member of the family, I have to migrate with my parents every year to work in the brick kilns. Previously, while my parents were migrating, I used to stay in my uncle's house for attending school. I was good at study and secured 67% in sixth grade. For the last two years, I have been migrating and seldom get any chance to go to school. My parents are happy that I am earning and taking responsibility. But nowadays, when I go to school, I cannot understand any lesson because of the long duration absence."

Table 3. Various causes behind absenteeism among students

Cause of Absenteeism	Boys (in percentage)	Girls (in percentage)
Agricultural work	34.58	18.64
Domestic work	12.35	68.27
Taking care of siblings	5.76	32.33

Seasonal migration	9.52	17.41
Lack of aspiration	6.29	9.65
Farming	11.87	7.23
Lack of self-confidence	4.36	5.82
Illness	6.39	5.54
Lack of interest in study	4.76	3.29
Overprotection of family	2.53	3.16
Early marriage	0	2.31

Source: Primary data

Theme 4: Inadequate community participation

Despite the intervention made by some teachers, headmasters, and few education-conscious parents, lacunae existed in dealing with large-scale absenteeism. 87.5% of the teachers reported that they had discussed these issues with parents while 68.75% of them personally visited the homes of the absentees to create awareness among parents regarding the importance of elementary education. Convincing the parents through awareness campaigns posed as a major challenge for the teachers because of the prevailing illiteracy.

No significant action had been taken by the parents to mobilize their dropout or absentee children back to school. Moreover, their stereotypical mindset severely impacted the schooling pattern of children. According to one of the teachers: "We need to make the parents aware first and then only they can realize the value of education. They literally do nothing to motivate their children for schooling; instead, they are interested in engaging their adolescent children as labourers on a daily-wage basis. The situation of the teenage girls are even worse; they have to work like an elderly woman and take the whole responsibility of their family in the absence of their parents. Few parents even fix the marriage of their daughters before attaining the age of 18 and justify that training in household chores is more important than formal education."

All the school heads reported that they were frequently addressing the issue of

absenteeism in PTA, MTA meetings and seeking cooperation from the parents, SMC members as well as the local NGOs to sort it out. 75% of school heads revealed that they had enforced compulsory attendance but that too proved ineffective. The key problem encountered by the headmasters in mobilizing most of the absentees back to school was the seasonal migration. The teachers and the headmasters felt the need for frequent organization of awareness programmes for students as well as their parents and guardians. Emphasizing the role of awareness, one of the headmasters mentioned: "Some of the overprotective parents stopped sending their children to school after the COVID-19 pandemic fearing the infection although that had been completely controlled. It clearly indicates a lack of awareness. We have involved the local NGO Lokadrusti to organize awareness rallies. At present, we do not have seasonal hostel facility for the students who migrate, but our teacher association has approached the higher authority to operationalize seasonal hostels in this block."

Previously, the Lokadrusti NGO was active in organizing awareness rallies and providing care-giver system for the left-behind children. But due to lack of funding for the last two years, it curbed its functional purview. Informal interaction with the NGO workers also revealed that some of them were frequently threatened by the local contractors involved in illegal migration of labourers. These local contractors (known as Sardaar) got enraged because of the campaigns organized by the NGO against

illegal migration. Meager remuneration and threat towards life compelled most of the NGO workers to leave their jobs resulting in further decline of operations carried out by the NGO.

Conclusion

Despite the implementation of various programmes under the Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan, large-scale absenteeism is still witnessed at elementary level in rural and backward settings. This failure not only denies children their fundamental right to education but also hinders the nation's aspiration for Universalization of Elementary Education. These students, who remain outside the educational system, are at risk of further social exclusion and deprivation. Moreover, the lack of continuity in elementary-level schooling weakens the very foundation upon which secondary and higher education are built. If students miss out on the critical stage of early learning, the superstructure of advanced education becomes fragile, affecting their overall development and future opportunities.

For recognizing the central role of elementary education, it is essential to address the issue of absenteeism, a major contribution

to the education gap. Absenteeism disrupts students' learning processes, leaving them behind and widening the achievement gap. Therefore, a multi-pronged approach is needed, where parents, teachers, educational administrators, community members, and NGOs come together to take concrete steps to curb absenteeism. These stakeholders can play a vital role by ensuring consistent attendance, fostering a positive learning environment, and addressing the underlying socio-economic factors that cause students to miss school.

Additionally, active community engagement and innovative interventions such as remedial classes, mid-day meals, and school attendance monitoring systems can further encourage regular attendance. The inclusion of marginalized students into the mainstream educational system will require sustained and focused efforts. While it may not be possible to eliminate absenteeism completely, with collective determination and practical solutions, its negative impact can be significantly reduced. By addressing absenteeism, the foundation of elementary education can be strengthened, enabling students to pursue secondary and higher education with confidence and competence. In doing so, the aim of educational equity and empowerment for all can be realized.

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