

Orbis scholae

VOL 16 / 2-3 / 2022

International Perspectives on the Recording, Reporting, and Use of School Attendance Data

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ISSN 1802-4637 (Print)

ISSN 2336-3177 (Online)

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From Attendance Data to Student Support: International Practices for Recording, Reporting, and Using Data on School Attendance and Absence

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Abstract: The recording, reporting, and use of data on school attendance and absence (DSAA) play a crucial role in understanding attendance and addressing absence in educational systems worldwide. However, a comprehensive grasp of the diverse approaches adopted across and within different countries has remained elusive. To address this knowledge gap, the International Network for School Attendance (INSA) facilitated this special issue providing an in-depth investigation into DSAA practices in 13 countries. This opening paper serves two purposes. First, it lays the conceptual groundwork for readers before they delve into the recording, reporting, and use of DSAA in different countries. Second, it presents key insights that emerge from the diverse array of contributions and a discussion of challenges and opportunities for the field. These include the substantial inconsistencies within and across countries; the pressing need for standardised best practices for recording, reporting, and using data; and the importance of embracing technological advancements to enhance the use of data. We envisage that the collective effort of the 40 authors involved in this special issue will enrich knowledge, enhance collaboration, and create real-world impact by enabling interested parties to develop, use, and evaluate data-driven strategies related to attendance and absence. By working together to address challenges and seize opportunities related to DSAA, we help young people access the education they rightfully deserve.

Keywords: school attendance, school absence, attendance data, school records, International Network for School Attendance (INSA)

Attending school offers numerous advantages for young individuals, such as enjoying time with friends, exploring stimulating topics, and receiving teacher support (Heyne & Brouwer-Borghuis, 2022). Moreover, schools provide an environment where social and emotional competencies can flourish, including relationship skills and decision-making abilities (Collie, 2020). Additionally, depending on the curriculum, school attendance can shape one's identity, passions, morals, and ethics (Eccles & Roeser, 2011). Positive health outcomes are believed to be associated with the roles young people assume at school (Bonell et al., 2019) and the social, emotional, and academic development they undergo there (Okano et al., 2019; Panayiotou et al., 2021). Exposure to instructional time contributes to intellectual development, academic achievement, and overall educational outcomes (Allensworth & Balanz, 2019; Ginsburg et al., 2014; Keppens & Spruyt, 2020).

6 The significance of regular attendance during the early years of schooling cannot be overlooked, as it correlates with higher academic achievement both in the early stages of education (Gershenson et al., 2017; Gottfried, 2009, 2014; Rhoad-Drogalis & Justice, 2018) and in secondary school (Ansari & Pianta, 2019). Moreover, young people with better attendance rates exhibit a greater likelihood of graduating from school (Schoeneberger, 2012; Smerillo et al., 2018), which in turn enhances their preparedness for social and economic participation in society (Zaff et al., 2017). Notably, Kearney et al. (2022) highlight that readiness for adulthood represents the primary long-term outcome associated with school attendance.

The International Network for School Attendance (INSA) endeavours to ensure that all young individuals have access to these far-reaching benefits provided by school attendance (www.insa.network). The current special issue of *Orbis Scholae* aligns with three key objectives of INSA: (1) facilitating access to the latest developments in the field, for all interested parties, (2) sharing research data and best practices, and (3) documenting the historical, current, and future discourse in the field of school attendance. Guided by these objectives, INSA, under the leadership of guest editors Gil Keppens and David Heyne, collaborated with *Orbis Scholae*'s Executive Editor Dominik Dvořák, to curate this special issue.

Although extensive literature exists on school attendance and absence, there remains a lack of knowledge on effective approaches for working with data on school attendance and absence (DSAA) at national, subnational, and school levels to support young individuals. (We use the term *subnational* to refer to levels such as districts, municipalities, counties, boroughs, provinces, states, and territories.) To bridge this knowledge gap, a call for papers was issued, inviting international contributors to address key questions about DSAA. The questions encompass the conceptualisation and categorisation of school attendance and absence (e.g., are absences categorised as excused and unexcused), the procedures for recording attendance and absence, the methods of reporting these data (e.g., what kind of mandatory reporting is there), and how schools and central authorities use this information.

The call yielded 10 illuminating papers that shed light on DSAA practices in 13 countries: Australia, Chile, Denmark, England, Finland, Germany, Japan, the Netherlands, Norway, Scotland, Spain, Sweden, and the United States of America. Some papers focus on an entire country, some delve into subnational levels within a country, and a few offer comparisons across countries. We are incredibly grateful for the valuable contributions of the 40 authors, who encompass educators, practitioners, policy-makers, project leaders, department heads, researchers, and academics. Their expertise and insights have been instrumental in shaping this ground-breaking special issue. The collaborative exchange of practices, experiences, and ideas plays a pivotal role in inspiring and supporting interested parties worldwide, propelling the field forward in its endeavours with DSAA. Ultimately, it is through the authors' contributions that collective knowledge advancement is achieved, paving the way for innovative approaches to DSAA and positively impacting young individuals.

This introductory paper serves two purposes. First, it sets the stage for the special issue by outlining the evolving significance of DSAA (Section 1) and providing explanations and examples of the processes related to recording attendance and absence, reporting data on attendance and absence, and using its potential to benefit young individuals (Section 2). Second, it highlights insights related to DSAA processes based on the diverse experiences detailed in the papers that cover different countries (Section 3), concluding with a brief discussion of challenges and opportunities related to DSAA (Section 4).

1 The Evolving Significance of Data on School Attendance and Absence

The field of DSAA has undergone significant transformations in purpose and importance over the years. Traditionally, DSAA primarily served administrative functions, such as enrolment tracking and funding allocation (Frydenlund, 2022; Gleeson, 1992). Additionally, it was used for enforcing compulsory education laws and disciplining absent students or their parents (Gleeson, 1992; McIntyre-Batty, 2008; Zhang, 2004). However, with the recognition of attendance as a critical factor influencing student engagement, educational outcomes, and school completion (Ansari & Gottfried, 2021; Ansari et al., 2020; Ansari & Pianta, 2019; Gershenson et al., 2017; Schoenberger, 2012), interested parties have come to realise the broader value of DSAA for monitoring and enhancing students' academic and psycho-social development.

The shift away from a punitive approach towards proactive and supportive approaches was spurred by the emergence of early warning systems in the 1990s and early 2000s. These included the Early Warning, Timely Response model (Dwyer et al., 1998) and the Check and Connect model (Anderson et al., 2004) in the US, and the Primary-Secondary Colour Coded scheme (Reid, 2003) in the UK. These systems use data to track attendance and identify students in need of targeted support, aiming to address underlying reasons for absence, such as academic difficulties, disengagement, social-emotional issues, or family hardships (Anderson et al., 2004; Reid, 2003). Prompt attention to attendance issues aims to re-engage students, improving their connection to school and preventing further disengagement or dropout.

The value of DSAA has been further amplified by the emergence of response-to-intervention models, such as the multidimensional multi-tiered system of supports model to promote school attendance and reduce school absenteeism (Kearney & Graczyk, 2014, 2020). These models, which are gaining increased attention in school settings (Karel et al., 2022), encourage close monitoring of DSAA to determine the effectiveness of school-wide approaches to promote attendance and prevent absence (Tier 1 in the model), to identify and support individual students and groups of students with acute/emerging/mild/moderate attendance problems or other risk for chronic/severe attendance problems (Tier 2 in the model), and to identify and support those displaying chronic/severe attendance problems (Tier 3 in the model).

8 In this way, appropriate levels and types of support are implemented in a timely manner, helping professionals in their efforts to ensure all young people have access to the benefits of education.

To further enhance understanding of the significance of DSAA, we draw from the data-information-knowledge-wisdom (DIKW) hierarchy, a model in information science (Rowley, 2007). Accordingly, we argue that data related to school attendance and absence have value when they translate into positive outcomes for young people, their families, schools, and the broader community. In line with the DIKW model, attendance and absence data hold significance when they are transformed into information and, subsequently, knowledge. This knowledge is instrumental in making wise decisions which help ensure every young person reaps the benefits of education.

2 The Recording, Reporting, and Use of Data on School Attendance and Absence

The processes of recording, reporting, and using DSAA might seem straightforward, leading to the misconception that schools within and across countries employ the same practices. However, close examination reveals substantial variations in the scope, approach, timing, and objectives of these activities. There is also variation in the terminology used to characterise these activities. Section 2 aims to dispel confusion by providing a clear guide to the specific activities associated with the terms “recording,” “reporting,” and “using” DSAA. To further clarify this process, Figure 1 presents an overview of working with DSAA.

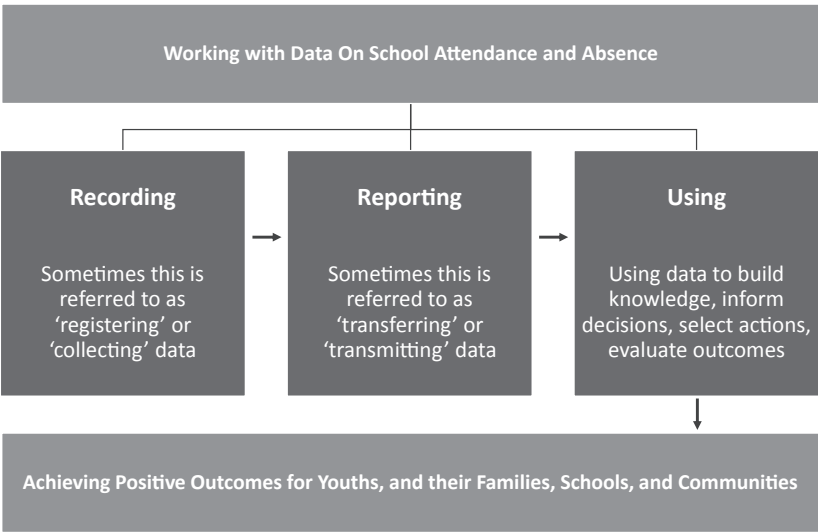


Figure 1 Working with Data on School Attendance and Absence to Achieve Positive Outcomes

2.1 Recording Data on Attendance and Absence

The following sections provide a conceptualisation of “recording” DSAA, along with examples of the data recorded and the processes employed in educational settings for capturing this data.

2.1.1 What Is Meant By “Recording”?

We use the term “recording” DSAA to refer to the act of documenting student presence or absence within educational institutions. (It is important to note that INSA is actively working to expand the understanding of attendance and absence beyond the traditional school setting, as outlined in Kearney et al. [submitted]). Terms like “roll marking,” “collecting,” “registering,” “tracking,” and “monitoring” are sometimes used interchangeably with “recording”. “Tracking” and “monitoring” are less suitable terms for “recording” because they may encompass the reporting and use of data as well.

2.1.2 What Is Recorded?

In most countries featured in this special issue, both attendance and absence are recorded. However, in some countries, only absences are recorded. There is often an effort to distinguish between excused and unexcused absences, which are also known as explained and unexplained absences, or authorised and unauthorised absences. Variations exist in recording attendance, including the use of special codes for instances where a student is not physically present at school but is engaged in an approved educational activity, such as work experience. Factors like late arrival might be taken into consideration, and sometimes precise arrival and departure times are recorded. It is worth noting that during the COVID-19 pandemic, new categories might have been introduced for recording attendance in online learning or hybrid situations, such as “participation in remote learning experiences.”

2.1.3 How Is It Recorded?

The process of recording attendance and absence can be carried out in different ways. It is sometimes done manually using class books, while oftentimes dedicated electronic registration systems are used, although there is variation in the type of electronic system used. The responsibility for recording attendance often rests with teachers, and sometimes administrative staff are involved. DSAA are typically recorded on a regular basis, with elementary schools often collecting data once or twice a day, while secondary schools tend to gather data multiple times a day, usually at the beginning of the day and for each class. In some locations, parents or guardians (hereafter referred to as parents) directly record absence or lateness in the school’s digital platform.

2.2 Reporting Data on Attendance and Absence

In the following sections, we provide a conceptualisation of “reporting” DSAA, along with examples of the parties responsible for reporting the data and the intended recipients.

2.2.1 What Is Meant By “Reporting”?

Terms such as “submitting,” “notifying,” “transferring,” and “transmitting” are sometimes used to describe the process of reporting DSAA. We use the term “reporting” to refer to the process of sharing recorded DSAA with intended recipients such as individuals and organisations who will use it. While the publication of reports can be a means of delivering data to users, we do not regard “reports” as synonymous with the broader process of reporting DSAA to facilitate the effective use of data. Furthermore, it is worth noting that the term “reporting” is sometimes used interchangeably with “recording,” such as when teachers “report” absences in an electronic registration system. However, we use “reporting” to refer to the broader concept of sharing DSAA.

2.2.2 Who Reports the Data, and To Whom?

There is substantial variation in the reporting of DSAA. Reporting can occur within the school to monitor the attendance of individual students and inform the need for support. For example, individual student absence data may be transferred to the next grade level, ensuring ongoing awareness of students’ absences among school staff. Further, there may be obligations to report absences to parents. Data are also reported to higher authorities, such as when an attendance officer reports a student’s habitual absences to an intake officer of the juvenile court. Often, school leaders are responsible for ensuring that data are shared with local education boards, municipalities or districts, states, or national bodies for monitoring and intervention purposes. Sharing also occurs between different levels of these higher authorities. For example, municipalities or state departments of education are responsible for reporting to national bodies as required. Ultimately, the reporting landscape encompasses a range of actors, from delegated personnel within schools to subnational and national authorities.

2.3 Using Data on Attendance and Absence

The next sections clarify the concept of “using” data in the context of DSAA and provide examples of the purposes for which data are used, by whom, and the benefits derived from using these data.

2.3.1 What Is Meant By “Using” Data?

We use the term “using” DSAA to refer to the multifaceted process of employing information about attendance and absence for interconnected purposes, as described in Section 2.3.2. “Using” DSAA can also be thought of as “harnessing” or “leveraging” the potential within the data.

2.3.2 For Which Purposes Are Data Used, and By Whom?

The use of DSAA is vital to achieve the ultimate goal of improving outcomes for young people. Data can be used in numerous ways to achieve this goal, including: (1) building knowledge based on the analysis and interpretation of data; (2) informing decision-making; (3) prompting action; and (4) evaluating the outcomes of decisions made and actions taken. Teachers, school administrators, school attendance teams, educational authorities, policymakers, researchers, and scholars can all gain valuable insights into attendance patterns to inform decision-making and guide actions. Some examples are provided below, and further instances can be found in the papers within this collection.

At the school level, a teacher who informs a parent about their child’s absence is “using” the data to encourage the parents to try to improve their child’s attendance. A school’s attendance team can use the school’s DSAA to identify trends and inform decision-making regarding interventions for individuals and student groups at risk of chronic absence. At the district and state levels, DSAA acts as an indicator of school effectiveness, providing insights into the capacity of schools to maintain satisfactory student attendance.

At other subnational levels and at the national level, DSAA serve the purpose of identifying attendance trends which can inform education policies and the practices of authorities such as education departments. At national and international levels, education authorities and researchers can use DSAA to comprehend the extent, patterns, and impact of school attendance and absence within and across countries. This understanding enables the development of relevant legislation, support systems, and resource allocation.

2.3.3 What Are the Benefits of Using Data?

The use of DSAA has become essential in promoting regular attendance and managing absence (Chu, 2021; Kearney & Childs, 2022; Keppens & Bach Johnsen, 2021). Interested parties, including school personnel and education departments, can use it to efficiently identify and respond to the needs of individual youths, schools, and communities (Heyne et al., 2023). Related, DSAA plays a crucial role in shaping policies at various levels, from schools to communities and nationally (Kearney & Graczyk, 2022), and informing best practices for education and school attendance (Kearney et al., 2022).

Research and scholarship also benefit substantially from the use of DSAA. Heyne et al. (2023) highlighted the prevalent use of data for exploring factors influencing attendance and absence, gauging the impact of attendance and absence on

- 12 outcomes like academic achievement, and evaluating interventions designed to promote attendance and reduce absence. Their paper provides an overview of recent exemplary studies using DSAA, including Purtell and Ansari's (2022) examination of associations between preschool absences and child, family, and centre factors, and Niemi et al.'s (2022) comparison of absenteeism in adolescents with and without ADHD. Bowen et al. (2022) employed machine learning techniques to uncover factors underlying absence in a specific school, Arbour et al. (2023) used publicly available databases to evaluate the effectiveness of an intervention, and LeBoeuf et al. (2023) investigated racial disparities in absenteeism across Montessori and non-Montessori schools. Studies such as these deepen our understanding of factors influencing attendance and offer insights for developing and implementing interventions.

In summary, working with DSAA empowers interested parties to respond efficiently and effectively based on informed decisions about conditions conducive to young people's attendance and their relationship with education. This, in turn, benefits families through fostering young people's routines and responsibility (Heyne et al., 2020) while avoiding challenges like parent frustration (Dannow et al., 2018) and work disruptions (Johnsen, 2020). Schools benefit because teachers can maintain a consistent pace of instruction for students (Gottfried, 2019) and communities gain because school completion enhances young people's readiness for societal participation (Zaff et al., 2017) and reduces early reliance on financial support from the government (Collingwood et al., 2023; Myhr et al., 2018).

3 Insights About Data on School Attendance and Absence

In this section, we synthesise insights drawn from the other 10 papers included in this collection. Our approach involves a focused exploration, rather than a systematic review of the papers, concentrating on key points emerging in response to the four topics authors were invited to address: (1) definitional issues, addressing how attendance and absence are conceptualised, including problematic absence, (2) recording procedures, (3) reporting procedures, and (4) the use of data on attendance and absence. The insights drawn from the 10 papers have been instrumental in shaping the additional insights presented within this section. For readers seeking comparative studies across specific countries, we refer to the works by Giménez-Miralles et al. (2022; exploring Scotland and Spain), Sandhaug et al. (2022; covering Sweden, Finland, Denmark, and Norway), and Kreitz-Sandberg et al. (2022; covering Sweden, Germany, England, and Japan).

3.1 Insights About Definitions and Criteria for Considering Absence as Problematic

The papers in the collection shed light on the lack of common definitions within and across countries, for attendance, absence, and the criteria for considering absence as problematic. We present examples illustrating the lack of clarity.

In Australia, as White (2022) notes, there is a lack of a distinct definition of attendance in both the National Standards for Student Attendance and the majority of subnational policies. White suggests that the definition of attendance can be inferred from the various attendance and absence codes used, as well as the guidance provided for addressing absences. He notes that students are considered to be in attendance if they “(a) attend the school site while the school is open for instruction, (b) participate in a school approved activity or (c) participate in an offsite flexible learning pathway / program approved by the principal” (p. 5).

In Spain, there is no centralised and standardised approach to defining absence, as highlighted by Giménez-Miralles et al. (2022). Instead, each autonomous community has its own protocols and regulations. In the Netherlands, as Karel et al. (2022) note, the Compulsory Education Act permits schools to categorise “worrisome authorised absences” as “other absenteeism.” However, defining and identifying authorised absences that are worrisome pose challenges for school personnel and attendance officers. According to Karel et al., this lack of clarity may lead to under-recording and under-reporting of these absences, potentially delaying intervention. In Japan, the Ministry conducts an annual survey on absenteeism but as Maeda (2022) notes, the criteria used by schools to classify absences may differ, resulting in varied interpretations and classifications of absence, hindering a clear understanding of the scope of absenteeism.

In the United States, as described by Graczyk et al. (2022), the National Forum on Education Statistics (NFES) provided operational definitions for excused and unexcused absences in 2009. These definitions serve as a foundation for understanding absence and its categories. The NFES also developed a taxonomy of 16 mutually exclusive attendance and absence codes, organised under “Present/Attending” and “Absent/Not Attending.” Connecticut and Indiana, the states highlighted in Graczyk et al.’s (2022) paper, use these codes to classify student absences. While both states employ many NFES codes, they differ in how they define certain absence types. For example, Connecticut distinguishes between unexcused absences and those due to disciplinary actions by the school, while Indiana lacks such differentiation.

The papers in this special issue also showcase the lack of consensus regarding the definition of problematic absence. Kreitz-Sandberg et al. (2022) highlight variations across four countries: Japan, England, Germany, and Sweden. In Japan, problematic absence, referred to as “futôkô,” is defined as 30 days of absence per year, equivalent to 15% of the total possible school days. In England, persistent absence is defined as missing 10% or more of half-day sessions in a term or year, roughly equivalent to 19 school days in a school year. Germany demonstrates significant variation

- 14 in the definition of persistent absence across its federal states. For instance, in Thuringia, the critical level is set at 10 days per year, indicating a lower threshold compared to Japan and England. Conversely, in Berlin, the threshold is set at 20 days per term, which is four times higher than that of Thuringia. In Sweden, there is no official definition for what constitutes problematic absence, and the term “längre och upprepad frånvaro” is used, referring to longer and repeated absence, but it lacks a clear definition.

The comparative paper by Sandhaug et al. (2022) across Sweden, Finland, Denmark, and Norway uncovers the lack of clear benchmarks for signalling the need to address absenteeism. While schools are required to investigate and respond to unexplained, repeated, or prolonged absences, the education acts in these countries lack specific guidelines for taking action. Consequently, each municipality or school independently decides when absence warrants intervention, resulting in diverse models and strategies.

The inconsistency within and across countries poses challenges for comparing DSAA among schools, subnational bodies, and countries. Moreover, the lack of standardised definitions can complicate the efficient resolution of attendance issues. At the same time, certain papers in the collection offer more specific conceptualisations regarding when to respond. For instance, in Chile, four categories are employed: outstanding attendance (97% or more), normal attendance (between 90% and 97%), repeated absenteeism (attendance between 85% and 90%), and serious absenteeism (less than 85% attendance) (Soto Uribe et al., 2022). Moreover, late arrivals are defined by students arriving 15 minutes after the start of the school day module, with specific rules for arrivals beyond 30 minutes late. Likewise, in the United States, the Department of Education, as well as the states of Connecticut and Indiana, define chronic absenteeism as a student being absent from school for 10% or more of the time (Graczyk et al., 2022). This definition covers all absence types – unexcused, excused, or due to a school’s disciplinary actions. Graczyk et al. (2022) emphasise the importance of this inclusive definition, highlighting that all absences can hinder a student’s ability to fully benefit from the educational, social, and language enrichment opportunities available in school.

3.2 Insights About Recording Data

The recording of DSAA varies across schools, leading to inconsistencies. For example, White (2022) highlights the diversity in Australia, where some schools record the proportion of the school day missed while others consider any absence exceeding two hours as a part-day missed. In Finland, Palmu et al. (2022) note that despite legal obligations, discrepancies in teachers’ recording exist due to differing definitions of absence, such as considering a 15-minute late arrival as an absence in some schools but not others. Diversity in recording practices makes it hard to compare DSAA metrics reliably, complicating the identification of meaningful trends.

Conversely, some papers in this issue provide examples of relatively clear guidelines for recording DSAA. In the United States, for example, Graczyk et al. (2022) discuss how the U.S. Department of Education and state education departments like those in Connecticut and Indiana provide frameworks for recording attendance and absence. By way of illustration, Connecticut, through the Public School Information System (PSIS), provides specific guidelines for recording various types of attendance, including online learning activities and time spent on assignments outside of school hours. Griffiths et al. (2022) observe that England maintains consistent attendance and absence recording using codes specified by the Department for Education. These codes cover various scenarios, like attending an approved educational activity outside of school, each assigned a unique code, or being unable to attend due to exceptional circumstances such as weather conditions and transport issues. There are no legal requirements to use these codes, but Griffiths et al. note that the codes are commonly used nationwide.

A challenge for the field involves the trade-off between the complexity of the system for recording DSAA (i.e., the use of numerous codes for variations in attendance and absence), the information this provides, and the workload for those responsible for recording students' attendance and absence (see, for example, Karel et al., 2022).

3.3 Insights About Reporting Data

The papers in this issue reveal considerable variation across localities regarding the reporting of DSAA. These variations encompass numerous crucial aspects of reporting, including: (1) the obligation to report and the reporting process, (2) the types of data that must, may, and may not be reported, (3) the frequency of reporting, (4) the requirements for reporting categories such as persistent or chronic absence, (5) the thresholds for reporting individual cases, and (6) the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on reporting practices. In this section, we provide examples that illustrate these aspects of reporting and then examine their implications for our collective work in the field of school attendance.

First, in many but not all locations, there are explicit expectations and frameworks governing schools' reporting of DSAA to authorities. For example, in Australia, efforts have been made to align reporting throughout its states and territories through the implementation of National Standards for Student Attendance Data Reporting (White, 2022), a framework that established agreed definitions and reporting schedules. Schools report DSAA to educational authorities at the regional/district level to identify broader attendance patterns, and data are also reported to education departments at the state/territory level. In Chile, schools report data through the General Student Information System digital platform, used by the Ministry of Education to integrate student data (Soto Uribe et al., 2022). In Denmark, schools are mandated to report data to the municipality and there is systematic reporting to a national databank (Sandhaug et al., 2022). The Netherlands also imposes reporting

16 obligations on schools, monitored by the Inspectorate of Education (Karel et al., 2022). Other countries, such as Finland, have more flexible approaches without obligations or clear structures for schools to report data to the municipal level (Palmu et al., 2022). Reporting in Spain is fragmented due to the country's decentralisation; each autonomous community has its own reporting practices and protocols (Giménez-Miralles et al., 2022).

Second, there is variation in the reported data, influenced by differences in which data must be reported, may be reported, and may not be reported. Some countries oblige the reporting of specific rates of *absence*, like England (Griffiths et al., 2022), while others report specific rates of *attendance*, such as Australia (White, 2022). Meanwhile, some countries mandate reporting of both absence and attendance, like the United States (Graczyk et al., 2022). Moreover, the reporting of authorised and/or unauthorised absence varies across locations. For instance, Kreitz-Sandberg et al. (2022) note that in most of the countries and subnational levels they described, authorised absence does not need to be reported to authorities. In the Netherlands, according to Karel et al. (2022), schools are not allowed to report authorised absence, such as absence due to illness. However, they do have the option to report worrisome authorised absence, when the duration or frequency of absence is concerning, but this is not mandatory.

There is also variation in reporting disaggregated data compared to aggregated data. Disaggregating data involves breaking down information into specific elements, like individual students, grade levels, gender, or race/ethnicity, while aggregated data provide information in a combined form, often at higher levels like school or district-wide averages. In Chile, data are reported at the individual and grade levels, as well as at the school level (Soto Uribe et al., 2022). In Australia, reported data are split across six cohort groups for each year level: male students, female students, gender X students, Indigenous male students, Indigenous female students, and Indigenous X gender students (White, 2022). In the United States, data on chronic absence are disaggregated for student groups based on variables such as race and disability status (Graczyk et al., 2022). Similarly, schools in England report persistent absence disaggregated according to specific groups, such as year group, gender, ethnicity, and special educational needs (Griffiths et al., 2022).

In some countries, there are unique aspects related to (un)reported data that seem to be specific to those countries. For instance, in Australia, state and territory legislation requires reporting of data from Kindergarten to Year 12, while national reporting only covers students in Years 1 to 10, resulting in the lack of a national report for youths in the first year of compulsory education (White, 2022). In the Netherlands, municipalities are required to report efforts taken to address absenteeism during the year (Karel et al., 2022).

Third, the frequency of reporting varies considerably across countries and subnational levels. For instance, Chilean schools submit monthly reports (Soto Uribe et al., 2022), while in England, the Department for Education extracts data from all schools for the Spring, Summer, and Autumn terms (Griffiths et al., 2022). In

Australia, data are reported twice a year, covering Semester 1 (Term 1 and 2) and Term 3 (White, 2022). Similarly, Germany's Berlin region reports absence data twice a year (Kreitz-Sandberg et al., 2022). In some locations, like Connecticut and Indiana in the United States of America, the Netherlands, and Japan, mandated data such as chronic absence or unauthorised absence are reported annually (Graczyk et al., 2022; Karel et al., 2022; Maeda, 2022).

Fourth, there are varying requirements for reporting categories of DSAA. For example, in England, schools report the rate of "persistent absence," defined as the proportion of students missing 10% or more of school sessions due to authorised or unauthorised absence (Griffiths et al., 2022). Similarly, in the United States of America, data on "chronic absence" are reported, based on absences of 10% or more, whether excused or unexcused (Graczyk et al., 2022). However, the state of Connecticut also mandates the reporting of "truancy" based on a student's unexcused absence four times in a month or ten times in a year (Graczyk et al., 2022). The state of Indiana requires reporting of "persistent attendance," based on students attending at least 96% of the time, and schools also report "improved attendance" when there is an increase of three or more percentage points compared to the student's attendance in the previous year. In Australia, reporting includes the proportion of students whose attendance is 90% or higher (White, 2022).

Fifth, there are different thresholds that trigger reporting obligations. For instance, in the Netherlands, schools must report unauthorised absences of 16 hours or more in four consecutive weeks (Karel et al., 2022). In Denmark, school principals must inform social authorities when a student accumulates 15% or more unexcused absences within three months (Sandhaug et al., 2022). England requires schools to notify the Local Authority when students accumulate 10 or more days of unauthorised absence (Griffiths et al., 2022). In the Valencian autonomous community in Spain, prolonged absences are reported (length not specified), triggering an education inspection (Giménez-Miralles et al., 2022). In Japan, principals must notify local education boards when students are away from school for seven days without authorisation, although noncompliance by principals and boards is noteworthy (Maeda, 2022).

Sixth, during the COVID-19 pandemic, reporting saw significant changes, with some countries suspending national reporting due to diverse schooling arrangements (e.g., White, 2022). In contrast, other locations adapted their reporting methods, such as in Indiana (USA), where new codes were established for recording and reporting (Graczyk et al., 2022). Similarly, after the initial lockdown, schools in the Netherlands had to report unauthorised absence during online classes (Karel et al., 2022).

In conclusion, the variations in reporting as described in this section pose significant challenges in the field of school attendance. One key issue is the difficulty in comparing data across subnational levels and across countries, hindering the accumulation of vital information about areas of greatest need and impeding knowledge advancement on best practices. Additionally, the lack of standardised reporting

- 18** of data may create incentives for data manipulation in some cases. Moreover, in some locations, the absence of mandated reporting of authorised absence makes it difficult to obtain accurate estimates of illness-related and overall absence rates, despite the prevalence and potential negative impact of illness-related absences (Pijl et al., 2021).

3.4 Insights About Using Data

The recording and reporting of DSAA hold value when the data are effectively used. Within the special issue, readers will discover a diverse range of practices highlighting the use of DSAA. The current section presents insights from some noteworthy examples and concludes with a discussion of key challenges related to DSAA use.

White's (2022) paper on the Australian context highlights the pivotal role of data in policy development, evaluation, and addressing attendance issues. Policymakers rely on reported attendance rates and patterns to identify at-risk students, inform policies, allocate resources, and assess the effectiveness of interventions, all with the overarching aim of improving attendance and preventing negative educational outcomes. Schools also use DSAA to assess the impact of interventions over time, making necessary adjustments as needed. Additionally, the Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority, responsible for reporting DSAA, launched the My School website. This initiative promotes transparency by providing public access to and comparison of attendance rates across schools.

Giménez-Miralles et al. (2022) demonstrate how DSAA collected by the Scottish Government is used to examine attendance rates across distinct levels – national, local authority, and school. This analysis identifies patterns and trends, particularly regarding student characteristics such as school stage, ethnicity, and socioeconomic deprivation. Moreover, the data aid in distinguishing between non-COVID-19 and COVID-19-related reasons for absence, providing valuable insights into the pandemic's impact on school attendance.

Graczyk et al. (2022) highlight the diverse role of DSAA in schools and districts of the USA. It is used to monitor student attendance, identify patterns, and implement interventions to improve attendance. Individual student attendance is tracked, and targeted support is offered to those with high absence, following a multi-tiered system of supports framework. State education departments play a crucial role in analysing data on a broader scale to detect trends and disparities, offering guidance and resources aimed to enhance attendance practices and address chronic absence effectively.

Karel et al. (2022) outline the newly promoted use of DSAA in the Netherlands for goal setting and outcome monitoring. Schools are prompted to set attendance goals and evaluate their effectiveness through a data-driven approach at various levels, including the individual, classroom, and school levels. This comprehensive evaluation enhances the understanding of attendance patterns, enabling schools to identify

groups that may need additional support. Consequently, targeted interventions can be implemented to address school absenteeism effectively.

Soto Uribe et al. (2022) illuminate the various applications of DSAA in Chile. Data play a crucial role in shaping decisions on grade promotion, evaluating school performance, and influencing funding allocation. By leveraging this information, Chilean educators and policymakers make informed choices to create a more supportive and effective educational system, ultimately driving positive educational outcomes.

The contributions in this collection also shed light on challenges and potential solutions related to the effective use of DSAA for research, policy, and practice. A key challenge, acknowledged by the authors of numerous papers, stems from inconsistencies in defining, recording, and reporting DSAA, alongside disparities in the use of data, all of which limit comparisons at subnational, national, and international levels. Several themes emerge across the reports of these authors. First, consistent recording and reporting of data are crucial for research (Sandhaug et al., 2022) and for strengthening investigations capable of dispelling damaging assumptions about absence among equity groups (White, 2022). Second, shared definitions and consistent recording facilitate policy writing, timely policy changes, and the targeting of support for reforms (Griffiths et al., 2022; Palmu et al., 2022; Sandhaug et al., 2022). Third, consistent recording and usage enable prompt identification and effective intervention (Graczyk et al., 2022; Karel et al., 2022), benchmarking, and timely changes in practice (Griffiths et al., 2022), as well as global problem-solving (Kreitz-Sandberg et al., 2022). These themes collectively emphasise the need for standardised DSAA practices to maximise its potential in addressing challenges related to school attendance and absence on both local and global scales.

Lastly, DSAA are also used for school and district accountability, as emphasised by Graczyk et al. (2022) in the United States. However, it remains unclear whether using DSAA for accountability purposes aligns fully with its role in supporting young people's engagement with education. For instance, using DSAA for school accountability may lead to intentional distortions of records, potentially compromising their validity for research or intervention (Muller, 2018).

4 Discussion

The role of DSAA has evolved beyond administrative functions to become a tool to proactively support students. This evolution aligns with the DIKW hierarchy, emphasising that the value of DSAA extends beyond information and knowledge generation to guiding well-informed decisions, ultimately ensuring educational benefits for all young people.

4.1 Challenges and Opportunities

This paper introduces the collection of papers in this special issue, constituting the most extensive overview to date on practices related to recording, reporting, and using DSAA. In tandem with the papers in the issue, this introductory paper sheds light on challenges and opportunities linked to the recording, reporting, and use of DSAA, highlighting inconsistencies across locations. It underscores the urgent necessity to establish and implement standardised best practices for DSAA to facilitate decision-making at subnational, national, and global levels, and thus to help ensure a meaningful educational journey for all young people. Achieving these best practices necessitates collaboration among educators, researchers, policymakers, administrators, and individuals with lived experiences, within and across countries. Sharing knowledge, experiences, and expertise, and learning from each other's accomplishments and limitations, is crucial for advancing policies and practices.

In the context of recording DSAA, the ultimate usefulness of data heavily depends on the quality and comprehensiveness of the recorded data (Kearney & Childs, 2022). It is vital to align data collection systems with the requirements of decision-makers. This paper underlines the significance of adopting a more systematic approach, both within and across countries, to ensure uniformity in measuring attendance and absence. Addressing subjectivity issues in distinguishing authorised (excused) and unauthorised (unexcused) absences, as well as recording reasons for both absence and attendance, is critical for developing accurate data that can inform effective interventions.

Regarding the reporting of DSAA, uniform practices are imperative for a better understanding and response to school attendance issues. We emphasise the need for greater uniformity in data disaggregation by key variables such as year level, gender, race/ethnicity, social class, and special educational needs to facilitate evidence-based decision-making about areas of need, targeted interventions, and the cultivation of equitable and inclusive educational settings.

The use of DSAA becomes a valuable resource for schools and authorities, empowering them to analyse attendance patterns, make informed decisions, and develop strategies to improve attendance and address the underlying causes of absence. At the student level, using DSAA at regular intervals, such as weekly, is a proactive approach for timely identification and tailored support for students facing challenges that affect their attendance and engagement. Additionally, data-driven decisions facilitate planning and evidence-based policy-making at broader institutional or systemic levels. Policies based on data-driven insights are more likely to foster inclusive learning environments and improve attendance rates. Furthermore, data about social and demographic factors that impact attendance, such as transportation issues, health concerns, and community circumstances (Gentle-Genitty et al., 2020; Kearney & Childs, 2022), can promote collaboration between schools, families, communities, and relevant agencies working to address attendance barriers and foster positive and inclusive learning environments.

To move forward effectively, we must overcome challenges related to recording, reporting, and using DSAA. These challenges include inconsistent data recording, delayed data collection and reporting, privacy concerns, resource limitations, and the analytical complexities faced by some schools and educational institutions when interpreting recorded DSAA. Enhancing the utility of attendance data requires the implementation of standardised data collection practices, improved data sharing systems, investments in data analytical capacities, and strategic resource allocation to address attendance and absence-related needs.

Additionally, navigating the political nature and privacy concerns surrounding DSAA is essential to foster greater acceptance and usage of this information, valuable for enhancing young people's lives. Striking a balance between privacy considerations and the need for disaggregated data to support targeted interventions is important for promoting equitable educational opportunities.

Moreover, embracing technological advancements offers exciting prospects for efficiently collecting DSAA (Ishak & Bibi, n.d.), and thus for the analysis and use of DSAA. By implementing technological solutions for attendance tracking, early warning systems, and data analysis, we can enhance decision-making and support evidence-based practices within the field of school attendance (Kearney & Childs, 2023). While these innovative approaches open new avenues for understanding attendance patterns and implementing effective strategies to improve student outcomes, challenges such as data security need to be addressed (Ishak & Bibi, n.d.).

Understanding DSAA in the broader context of datafication, where social and natural worlds are rendered in machine-readable digital format, is crucial (Williamson et al., 2020). The digitalisation and datafication of education, coupled with the rise of big data and artificial intelligence, promise a revolutionary shift in the social sciences. This not only introduces new research methodologies but also offers novel research questions and applications in practice. However, concerns arise about potential negative consequences. For instance, when attendance and absence metrics become a basis for evaluating schools, there is a risk that schools intentionally exclude students with high absences. The transparent publication of school-level data could contribute to a stigmatisation of schools working with at-risk student groups (Muller, 2018). Additionally, the trend of platformisation implies a dependence on corporate providers for hardware infrastructure and software solutions in DSAA recording, reporting and use in public education (Rivas, 2021; Williamson et al., 2023).

4.2 Limitations and Future Research

Diverse limitations of the current paper are noteworthy. Firstly, the lack of representation from low-income countries, which face unique challenges in data management, including DSAA (Musa & Jacob, 2021), is notable. Additionally, our focus primarily revolves around students enrolled in schools, overlooking the 250 million globally who are out-of-school (i.e., not enrolled; UNESCO, 2023 a, b). Furthermore, expanding our scope to encompass middle- and high-income countries from regions

22 beyond those addressed in this special issue could yield more comprehensive insights into the recording, reporting, and use of DSAA. Secondly, the focus is primarily on attendance and absence data. INSA is actively working to broaden the focus beyond attendance and absence in traditional school settings, by developing a measure that includes constructs like engagement with learning and achievement, *regardless* of the learning environment (Kearney et al., submitted). Thirdly, the discussion of terminology mainly revolves around English-language terms, potentially overlooking the specific connotations in different national systems. Fourthly, variations in education systems across countries will affect the generalisability of the presented solutions. Finally, we acknowledge that this paper predominantly focuses on the practices of recording, reporting, and using DSAA, with less emphasis on research in these areas.

In the future, it is crucial to delve more deeply into the perspectives of all interested parties, including principals, teachers, student groups, parents, counsellors, and health professionals. Their perspectives, behaviours, and concerns regarding the recording, reporting, and use of DSAA should be explored (cf. Selwyn et al., 2021). A second area of future research lies in examining the specifics of different education levels (e.g., from pre-primary / early childhood to post-compulsory, tertiary, and adult education) and types of schools (e.g., academic versus vocational programs), because these are potential sources of variability in practices related to DSAA. Third, future research could benefit from explicit comparison of contextual factors to understand reasons for variations across countries in the recording, reporting, and use of DSAA. Such variations are likely due to differences in educational traditions, philosophies, government structures, and degrees of (de)centralisation of decision-making in a country's education system.

4.3 Conclusion

DSAA plays a pivotal role in promoting student success and ensuring equitable education. This paper provides broad insights into DSAA practices, challenges, and opportunities across the countries featured in this issue. The amalgamation of diverse experiences and perspectives within this collection enriches our understanding of DSAA practices in numerous countries. Looking forward, our focus should be on building consensus, prioritising data quality, embracing technology, and delving into broader variables beyond classroom time to amplify the transformative impact of data on student outcomes worldwide.

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An Analysis of the Recording, Reporting, and Use of School Attendance Data in Australia

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Abstract: Despite the growing body of literature on school attendance, there is relatively little known about the different approaches that are used to define, record, and report school attendance across countries. This paper seeks to fill this literature gap by providing a policy analysis of how attendance and absenteeism are defined, measured and reported in Australia. This paper explores how school attendance is conceptualised in Australia, with a specific focus on New South Wales where the author resides. The analysis examines what indicators of absence are recorded and how schools along with education authorities make use of this data. The national setting of goals to improve the educational outcomes of all Australian young people has been a driver behind the collection and public reporting of attendance data. This policy analysis highlights the multilateral achievement of the Commonwealth, state and territory governments in Australia to nationally align the collecting and reporting of school attendance data. This has elevated the importance of attendance beyond an administrative task to its current position as a key performance indicator of school effectiveness.

Keywords: attendance, measurement, reporting, Australia

It is well supported that the recording and reporting of attendance data is but one piece of the puzzle towards universal engagement of young people in education (Heyne et al., 2020; Kearney & Graczyk, 2020). The importance of recording and reporting student attendance is multifaceted. Schools recording daily attendance safeguards young people by ensuring schools are aware of the whereabouts of the students that they are accountable for each day. Attendance issues are not exclusively owned by schools. Whilst schools do have a role in fostering safe and supportive environments for young people, risk factors associated with attendance problems pervade families, communities and society as a whole (Childs & Grooms, 2018). Therefore, government, education jurisdictions, schools, inter-community agencies (e.g., allied health, social services & police) and families all have important roles to play in supporting attendance (Cobb-Clark et al., 2021). Furthermore, researchers and policy makers require accurate data to make informed policy decisions regarding initiatives to support the health, wellbeing and academic engagement of young people (Purdie & Buckley, 2010). Therefore, to actively engage in a collective responsibility, it is essential that attendance data is available in a clear and consistent manner.

Despite the growing literature base on school attendance, there is relatively little known about the different approaches that are used to define, record, and report

<https://doi.org/10.14712/23363177.2022.10>
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- 28 school attendance across countries. This research gap is a major limiting factor for research collaboration across countries, for policy alignment, and for identifying best practices. This paper explores how school attendance is conceptualised in Australia, with a specific focus on practice in New South Wales where the author resides. To support this conceptualisation, a brief policy narrative is provided to situate the collection, reporting and ways jurisdictions make use of the attendance data. The intent of this paper is that stakeholders can draw upon this analysis when making decisions regarding the collection, reporting and use of attendance data.

1 Setting the Scene

There have been considerable developments in Australian school attendance data collection and reporting over the past ten years. Prior to 2014, it was very difficult for Australian policy makers and researchers to make use of attendance data. The differences in collection methodologies between states and territories and also school sectors prohibited making comparisons. It also made reporting of a national attendance rate impossible. The multilateral push for the national consistent reporting of attendance data has shifted the paradigm of attendance in Australia. Attendance, previously seen as an administrative function in schools, is now an integral key performance indicator of curriculum engagement and wellbeing (Gonski et al., 2018). This paradigm change did not come about overnight. It emerged as Australia sought to pursue a set of national goals towards advancing the educational outcomes of all students.

As Australia has developed its national goals towards education, attendance has increasingly been recognised as a key performance measurement for student engagement. In 1989, Commonwealth, state and territory education ministers agreed on the first set of National Goals for Education in Australia (the *Hobart Declaration*, MCEETYA, 1989). The inclusion of student attendance as an indicator of student engagement represented a significant shift in educational thinking. The importance of attendance moved beyond schools and became a national priority. According to Hancock et al. (2013) the shift in value placed on attendance was based on the tenet that the more often students attend school, the more learning opportunities they experience, which in turn, increases the potential for improved educational and social outcomes (Baxter & Meyers, 2019). This shift in perspective towards the importance of attendance on student outcomes played a critical role in establishing demand for the national consistent collection of attendance data in Australia.

The *Adelaide Declaration* (MCEETYA, 1999) was the first update of the National Goals for Education. A significant outcome of the *Adelaide Declaration* was the Ministerial Council on Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs (MCEETYA) endorsement of *The Measurement Framework for National Key Performance Measures* (MCEETYA, 2008; ACARA, 2020a). The Framework set out agreed definitions of

key schooling performance measures (including attendance) and provided a schedule for reporting progress.

It was not until 2007 that state, territory and non-government schools began to report attendance against the National Measurement Framework definition for attendance (i.e. attendance rate) (MCEETYA, 2008, p. 13). However, the variance of technology systems, processes and periods in which attendance was collected meant that a national attendance rate could not be calculated, nor could comparisons between education jurisdictions be made with fidelity (ACARA, 2020b, p. 2). Instead, from 2007 to 2018 each jurisdiction reported attendance with explanatory notes detailing the methods used to collect and report attendance data (see MCEETYA, 2009, pp. 131–135).

In part, to meet the demands created by the new national requirement to collect and report on education goals, the Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA) was established. ACARA took carriage of coordinating and reporting attendance data from 2009 onwards. Perhaps most significant for ACARA in achieving greater transparency of attendance data, was the launch of the MySchool website in 2010 (ACARA, 2014). The MySchool website publicly reports attendance (along with a range of school data) annually for each individual school in Australia. In addition, the MySchool website makes use of an Index of Community Socio-Educational Advantage (ICSEA) scale so that attendance, socio-economic and academic comparisons can be made between schools (ACARA, 2020d).

To counter the differing methods and periods in which attendance data was collected across jurisdictions, in 2012 all Australian State and Territory Education Ministers agreed on a set of *National Standards for Student Attendance Data Reporting* (National Standards for Student Attendance) (ACARA, 2020b). The National Standards for Student Attendance have been progressively revised to disaggregate data and further improve collection processes. In 2013, the National Standards for Student Attendance were updated to include a consistent reference period of semester one in each school year for the collection of attendance data. To further improve transparency, it was agreed in 2014 that attendance data would be disaggregated to include the attendance of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students. In 2015, a new national key performance measure was added to the National Standards for Student Attendance to record the *attendance level* (the proportion of students attending more than 90% of the time). It was also agreed to add an additional reference period so that attendance data is updated twice yearly, for semester one and for Term 3 on the My School Website (ACARA, 2020b, p.3).

1.1 The Australian Education System

In 2020, there were 9,542 schools in Australia (6,249 primary, 1,433 secondary, 1,363 combined and 497 special schools). The nine and a half thousand schools provided education for just over four million seven thousand young people. The majority of schools in Australia are operated by state and territory governments (70%,

30 6,675 schools). New South Wales has the greatest proportion of schools followed by Victoria, Queensland, Western Australia, Tasmania, Australian Capital Territory and Northern Territory (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2021).

All schools in Australia come under the shared responsibility of the Australian Commonwealth Government and their individual state and territory governments. Each state and territory have their own legislation governing the attendance of students at school. Across all states and territories, it is compulsory for all children to start school by the time they have turned six years of age unless an exemption is granted. Most children undertake a foundation year and then attend primary school until they are 11 or 12 years of age (i.e. Kindergarten to Year 6). Adolescents from the age of 13 to 18 attend a Secondary school (Year 7 to 12). In January 2010, the National Youth Participation Requirement came into effect across all states and territories. This made mandatory a requirement for all young people to participate in schooling until they complete Year 10 and to participate full time in education, training or employment, or a combination of these activities, until the age of 17 (ACARA, 2012, p. 36). Grade retention does occur across Australian schools. Most students progress to the next grade irrespective of their academic performance or attendance rate. Grade retention generally takes place on the request of parents for academic or social reasons (Romanes & Hunter, 2015). Whilst state and territory legislation require the collection and reporting of attendance from Kindergarten to Year 12, the national reporting of attendance only requires data from Years 1 to 10.

All education jurisdictions both government and non-government offer alternative education provisions for students with disability. Across NSW many of the alternate education provisions are specific purpose classes situated in schools. In 2021 there were 509 special schools across Australia (336 government and 173 non-government) (ABS, 2021). Special schools and specific purpose classes are required to collect and maintain attendance in accordance with their state or territories legislation. For national data collection purposes students in special schools may be classified as ungraded.

2 Methodology and Data Collection

An exploratory case study methodology was employed to investigate the approaches used to define, record, and report school attendance in NSW Australia. Rigorous qualitative case studies afford researchers opportunities to explore phenomenon in context using a wide variety of data sources (de Vries, 2020). To facilitate the formation of a case study the author undertook an extensive public document analysis. The search and catalogue of public documents was initiated through the ACARA and NSW Department of Education websites using the search terms ‘attendance’, ‘attendance data’ ‘reporting attendance’, ‘absence’, ‘roll marking’, ‘attendance procedures’.

Throughout the review, documents were catalogued in an Excel spreadsheet and downloaded for further analysis. A total of 138 public documents were analysed.

An ethnographic approach was adopted to gather data that could not be collected through documentary analysis. Within ethnography the researcher seeks to understand the phenomena through immersion and close relationship within the setting and the participants (Atkinson & Hammersley, 1998). The researcher gathered data through participant observation, working in a role that required the development and maintenance of procedure for attendance data collection and reporting for a system of non-government schools in NSW Australia. The researcher was also able to draw insight from previous employment in NSW government education public policy.

3 Recording and Reporting of School Attendance and Absenteeism

For national data reporting purposes all education jurisdictions in Australia follow a dichotomous conceptualisation of attendance as either a student being present (i.e. in-attendance) or absent. There is not one clear definition of attendance (i.e. what it means to be present) in the National Standards for Student Attendance or within most jurisdictions policies. However, it can be inferred from the guidance on treatment of absences and the jurisdictions variations to attendance/absence codes that – a student is considered to be in attendance at school in Australia when they: (a) attend the school site while the school is open for instruction, (b) participate in a school approved activity or (c) participate in an offsite flexible learning pathway/program approved by the principal.

The National Standards for Student Attendance outline that any absence less than or equal to two hours should be marked as a whole day attending. Any student day where the absence recorded is greater than two hours is to be reported as a part day attended (0.5). However, some jurisdictions and schools record and report the proportion of the school day absent (ACARA, 2020b, p. 12). This does present some statistical challenges when data from a jurisdiction is aggregated. For example, in NSW many schools using an electronic student registration system will record the exact arrival time or departure of a student whereby a partial or whole day absence from school will then be calculated.

For statistical reporting purposes, attendance or absence are recorded across *possible school days* (ACARA, 2020b, p. 5). Possible school days are defined as the number of days that a student is expected to attend school over the reference period. Should the school be closed due to a school decision, industrial action, natural disaster or health orders (e.g., temporary COVID-19 closure) then these days are not included as possible days in attendance rate or level calculations (see section below on reporting issues) (ACARA, 2020b, pp. 15–18). A student attending school on a possible day is defined as an *actual day*. Actual days (or part-days) in attendance

32 are defined as the number of days that a student actually attends school over the reference period, on a possible school day (ACARA, 2020b, p. 5).

Within the dichotomy of attendance, each state and territory provide attendance register codes to record variations to in-attendance or absence. In 2010, the NSW Minister for Education approved a common set of attendance register codes, to be used for all NSW schools from 2012 onwards (NSW DEC, 2015b) (Table 1). The common attendance register codes were updated in 2015 to reflect the changes implement through the National Standards for Student Attendance. A notable change to the attendance codes was the revision of principal’s leave. Prior to 2015 the principal could provide a student with a certificate of exemption for 15 days of leave to attend a family holiday outside of school vacation dates. This was removed and all leave irrespective of its length is now counted as an absence. Whilst the attendance codes drive the instances of attendance or absence they are not reported nationally. Instead, they are generally used for internal attendance data monitoring (e.g. examining reasons for absence).

Table 1 NSW Attendance Register Codes

Variations to Absence		Variation to Attendance	
The student’s absence is unexplained or unjustified.	A	The student was exempted from attending school.	M
The student’s absence is due to sickness or as the result of a medical or paramedical appointment.	S	The student is participating in a flexible timetable and not present because they are not required to be at school.	F
An explanation of the absence is provided which has been accepted by the principal.	L	The student is absent from the school on official school business.	B
The student was suspended from school.	E	The student is enrolled in a school and is required or approved to be attending an alternative educational setting on a sessional or full-time basis.	H

Note: For a full description of each NSW Register Codes see NSW DEC, 2015b

In NSW, there are four codes to record a variation to attendance (i.e., student absent from school site yet still counted as present or exempt) and four codes to record variations to absence (i.e., student is counted as absent irrespective if it is explained, unexplained or unjustified) (See NSW DEC, 2020a, pp. 1–2) (Table 1). The *NSW Department of Education Student Attendance Procedures 2015* require schools to follow up all absences on the same day of the absence (NSW DEC, 2015a, p. 4). Many schools have automated this process with electronic SMS services that send a text to parents informing them that their son/daughter was absent, and an explanation is required. Within the author’s setting many schools are adding parent portals to their electronic attendance registers. In the case of an absence the parent is sent a notification and can provide an explanation via the parent portal.

The NSW Department of Education attendance procedures outline that if a parent does not provide an explanation of absence within 7 days the absence is marked as unexplained (NSW, DEC, 2015b, p. 1). Should an explanation for absence not be accepted by the principal it is marked as unjustified. Students who have been suspended are marked with a code E are also counted as absent from school.

Technology systems have made the collection and analysis of attendance data much easier. However, the complex configuration of these systems has the potential to create disparities in the reporting of data. To provide one illustration, there are some time-based electronic registers that record accumulated time late and calculate an absence rate based on the proportion of time the student was present at school over the reference period. The author has observed errors in systems where a student may not have missed a day, but an accumulation of late arrivals could impact upon his/her attendance rate.

The recent school closures, due to the global pandemic, have made salient the challenge of recording attendance beyond the physical presence of a student at school (ACARA, 2020c). In 2020, national attendance data was not reported due to inconsistencies as a result of the varying schooling arrangements in response to the COVID-19 pandemic (ACARA, 2020e). To illustrate, in NSW advice was provided to schools on how to record attendance during the period of remote learning. However, many schools found it hard to adapt. The issue for many schools was the variation in measures used to determine student engagement in learning and thus attendance. Some schools required students to attend each class remotely whilst others only required students to submit set work at the end of the week. Data gathered showed great discrepancy between schools. In addition, attendance levels plateaued or increased during the pandemic when the prevailing trend was a decline (CESE, 2021).

3.1 Reporting Attendance Data

The reporting of student attendance data for Years 1–10 is a requirement of all schools under the Australian Education Regulation 2013 (Commonwealth). All jurisdictions are required to report attendance data over two prescribed time periods. The first time period is semester 1 (usually, Term 1 and 2). This is defined as the period between the first school day of the year and the last school day of Semester 1. The second time period is Term 3. Term 3 is the period between the first day of Term 3 and the last day of Term 3. There is clear evidence that the time period that attendance is collected impacts upon the reported rates and levels. For example, Semester 1 rates and levels are generally higher than Term 3 (Australian Government, 2021, pp. 4–5).

All schools in Australia report their data against their school identification code, the Australian Government Education Client Identifier number (AGEID). Schools are required to provide disaggregated cohort data against each Year level. Each Year level is split across six possible cohorts of students (Australian Government, 2021, p. 6):

- 34
- All male students (including Indigenous students)
 - All female students (including Indigenous students)
 - All gender X students (including Indigenous students)
 - Indigenous male students only
 - Indigenous female students only
 - Indigenous gender X students only

Each school must determine and provide the number of possible school days in the reference period for each Year level. It is possible for Year groups to have differing numbers of possible school days where there has been staggered starts or ends to the reference period for a Year group. The school also must calculate actual school days for each full-time student enrolled during the reference period for the cohort. This number can be different for each student depending on how many days they were enrolled during the reference period. The attendance record for each student is used to calculate the actual attendance days for all full-time students in each cohort during the reference period. As detailed previously, where a student is recorded absent for more than two hours it is deemed a partial attendance. Lastly, the combined number of actual attendance days for all full-time students in each cohort must be provided.

With the data, the school must calculate each full-time student’s attendance rate. The student attendance rate is calculated as the number of actual full-time days attended as a percentage of the total number of possible school days over the prescribed reporting period (Table 2). The school attendance rate measures how many students are present at school on any given day for all students enrolled. It is calculated as the number of actual full-time equivalent student-days attended by full-time students as a percentage of the total number of possible student-days.

This attendance rate for each student is used to determine an attendance level for each cohort. The attendance level measures how many students come to school

Table 2 The Attendance Rate Measures

Rate	Definition	Formula
Student Attendance Rate	The number of actual full-time days attended as a percentage of the total number of possible school days attended over a period	$100 * \frac{\text{Actual days in attendance}}{\text{Possible school days}}$
School Attendance Rate	The number of actual full-time equivalent student-days attended by full-time students as a percentage of the total number of possible student-days over a period	$100 * \frac{\text{Actual student days in attendance}}{\text{Total possible student days for all students}}$
School Attendance Level	The proportion of students whose attendance rate is greater than or equal to 90% over a period	$100 * \frac{\text{Sum of school days for students attending } \geq 90\%}{\text{Total possible student days for all students}}$

regularly (i.e. the proportion of full-time students whose attendance rate is greater than or equal to 90%) (see Table 2).

The inclusion of a requirement to report a school attendance level increases transparency and reveals variations in individual student attendance (i.e. the proportion of students at school who attend school regularly). According to the National Standards for Attendance, the reporting of attendance levels also solves two problems. Firstly, it addresses the issue of discrepancy of possible days for students enrolled at multiple schools during the reference period (i.e. possible days counted twice). Secondly, it overcomes the issue of students enrolled at a school for only part of the reference period who will report a lower attendance rate, in turn adversely impacting on the school's attendance level (ACARA, 2020b, p. 7).

The national reporting of attendance only includes full-time students enrolled at a school in Year 1 through to Year 10. A full-time student can include a student who attends part time across two different schools (e.g. attendance in specialist setting and regular school). The collection also includes all students who are not assigned a grade (e.g. ungraded generally in a specialist setting) who are in the age group for students in Years 1 to 10. Students enrolling or leaving partway through the reference period must be included. If a student attends multiple schools during the reference period, then the school where they are enrolled and attend the most is responsible for reporting their attendance. Thus, their possible days and attendance are counted from the first day of enrolment to the last day of enrolment in the reference period.

There are a number of instances where the attendance of students is not included in the national data collection. These include any enrolled student who did not attend at all during the reference period; students who have been expelled; students who have been provided an exemption (e.g. apprenticeship, elite sport or arts) (see NSW DEC, 2015c) or any students no longer enrolled in the school. All schools in Australia are legally bound to record the attendance of all students who are enrolled. However, kindergarten and senior students (Year 11 and 12) are not included in the national data collection. It is speculated that the decision not to include these cohorts of students was made due to the focus on the national compulsory years of schooling.

A major challenge faced by the Australian Government in collecting attendance data has been the many different data collection systems employed across each jurisdiction. To address some of these issues, in 2020 the collection of school attendance data moved to using the National Schools Interoperability Program (NSIP) Systems Interoperability Framework (SIF). The purpose of SIF is to provide a consistent data technical standard across jurisdictions for the sharing of data. For example, data is submitted electronically using standard fields within the XML file format (Australian Government, 2021, p. 2). In NSW, Department schools may use a range of electronic student information systems (e.g. Sentral Education, Compass Education, Millennium Schools, Momentum Cloud). All data is transferred to the NSW Department of Education or for non-government systems of schools one central data repository. Across most school systems the collection and reporting of

- 36** attendance data has been almost entirely automated. The electronic register will be programmed to determine possible school days. The students' attendance will be recorded, and actual school days will be calculated. Most electronic attendance registers will allow the school or system to generate a report following the specification required for national reporting.

3.2 How Schools, Systems and the Australian Government Make Use of Attendance Data

Many schools and systems make use of business data analytics software to aggregate and display attendance data for analysis (e.g. <https://education.nsw.gov.au/about-us/educational-data/scout/scout-overview/apps-and-reports/attendance-and-engagement/cohort-attendance-summary>). Teachers and school leaders have access to system, school and student level dashboards that display attendance rates, levels, absences and also growth. They are able to compare students' and schools' attendance levels over time and across cohorts. This enables schools to be agile in identifying patterns and providing supports to particular cohorts or sub-groups of students when attendance issues present themselves. The data also facilitates rich discussion enabling data-based decision making within multi-tiered systems of support frameworks.

It must be noted that there is a dearth of research in Australia on how schools make use of their attendance data. From the authors perspective, schools make use of their data to identify and provide support for students who present with attendance concerns. In secondary schools, a member of the wellbeing team or a Year Coordinator may be tasked with attendance data monitoring. Work has begun in the author's system to embed multi-tiered systems of support in school (Kearney & Graczyk, 2020). Within this data driven framework, schools make use of attendance data to screen for developing attendance problems. Those students who are identified as at risk are afforded supports that are applied in gradual increasing of intensity (e.g. social work, counselling, educational and psycho-assessments, intensive case management, agreement on compulsory school undertakings).

In NSW, where supportive approaches have not been successful a compulsory schooling order can be obtained through the Children's Court. The Children's Court may require a parent and/or a child to attend a conference to determine issues leading to the attendance problem, identify services to support and/or propose recommendations to the Children's Court for compulsory undertakings or orders. A breach of compulsory schooling orders made by the Children's Court can be taken to the Local Court where penalties of up to A\$11,000 can apply (Judicial Commission of New South Wales, 2018).

At a system level (i.e. across multiple schools) attendance data is reported and analysed across schools. When attendance data dashboards were first developed for the author's context, a framework of attendance targets was established for schools based on school attendance levels. A target of 90% was set as the benchmark. The setting of a benchmark enabled a guide for the resourcing of schools with significant

attendance need. For example, an attendance family liaison officer program was established in identified schools. The program, now in its third year, proved highly successful in some schools in establishing systems of support and extending the reach of the school. However, the detrimental effect of setting one attendance target across a broad range of school community contexts was that some schools, despite their growth, were always classified as languishing. This has prompted a focus on schools developing annual attendance action plans so that they may set goals specific to their schools' context.

At a national level, student attendance data is reported each year at a state, territory and sector level (e.g. independent & Catholic schools). The data is reported across a range of operational, strategic and accountability reports. Whilst each report draws from the national data collection, the perspective on attendance of each report does slightly differ as detailed below in Table 3. National attendance data is used to influence and track governments' education policies and practices. For example, the Remote Schools Attendance Strategy operating in 84 schools across New South Wales, South Australia, Western Australia, Queensland and the Northern Territory draws on attendance data annually (Australian Government, 2018; O'Brien Rich Research Group, 2016).

Table 3 National Reporting on Attendance

Report	Details
National Report on Schooling in Australia (NRSA)	The NRSA publicly reports progress made towards the most current national goals for education – i.e. <i>Alice Springs (Mparntwe) Education Declaration</i> . It reports against <i>The Measurement Framework for National Key Performance Measures</i> for student participation, achievement, and attainment.
National School Reform Agreement (NSRA) progress reporting	The <i>National School Reform Agreement</i> (NSRA) (2019) replaced the <i>National Education Agreement</i> (2009) and the <i>National Education Reform Agreement</i> (2013). In relation to attendance, the NSRA seeks to achieve the outcome that “all students are engaged in their schooling”. Therefore, the NRSA reports annually the national attendance level.
National Agreement on Closing the Gap (2020)	The <i>National Agreement on Closing the Gap 2020</i> replaced the <i>National Indigenous Reform Agreement</i> (NIRA). The NIRA reported on progress towards the goal “close the gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous school attendance within five years (by 2018). The <i>National Agreement on Closing the Gap 2020</i> does not specifically include a target to close the attendance gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous students. Instead, the outcome Socio Economic Outcome Area 5 “Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students achieve their full learning potential”, is measured by the proportion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people (age 20–24) attaining year 12 or equivalent qualification.

Report	Details
Overcoming Indigenous Disadvantage: Key Indicators	The <i>Overcoming Indigenous Disadvantage Report</i> measures the wellbeing of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. Attendance rates and levels are included within the report under the Council of Australian Government high level social and economic outcomes.
Report on Government Services (ROGS)	The annual <i>Report on Government Services</i> provides information on the equity, effectiveness and efficiency of Commonwealth Government services in Australia. Attendance reporting is included in Part B – Child care, education and training. Student attendance is reported as a measure of equity and effectiveness of education services provided across Australia.
MySchool website	In 2010, ACARA launched the <i>MySchool website</i> . The website reports data on every school in Australia. Data reported on the My School website including school demographic and financial profiles, school attendance data, National Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN) performance and senior secondary outcomes. To support the comparison of schools the website uses the Index of Community Socio-Educational Advantage (ICSEA), developed specifically for the purpose of identifying schools serving similar student populations. Thus, any member of the public can access the My school website and make comparisons between similar schools on attendance rates and levels.

4 Discussion

Despite the growing body of literature on attendance and attendance problems there is still relatively limited literature discussing approaches used to define, record and report school attendance. This current analysis was undertaken through study of Australian education policy documents, government guides, progress reports and attendance reporting guidelines. It was also necessary to draw on the author’s own participant observation supporting attendance in a non-government Catholic systemic school system.

The availability of student attendance data in Australian has enabled researchers to explore with increasing accuracy policy and research questions. The focus of much research on attendance has been on linkages between school attendance and the academic, health and social outcomes of young people (Hancock et al., 2013, 2018). Hancock et al. (2013) found a clear link between attendance and the performance of Western Australian students in standardised testing. In other studies, attendance problems have become the ‘litmus-test’ for broader social and community issues. For example, Australian researchers have examined areas such as the prevalence and impact of mental health on student attendance (Lawrence et al., 2019). Orr et al. (2022) found that lower attendance and suspension was more prevalent among young people who had been exposure to family and domestic violence. Hafekost et al.’s

(2017) study found that maternal alcohol use disorder was associated with a significantly increased chance of poor school attendance for both Indigenous and non-Indigenous children. The linkage of attendance data with social and health outcomes of young people highlight that attendance problems extend beyond schools and pervade families, communities and society as a whole.

Australian researchers have been able to challenge attendance policy assumptions of Aboriginal students and students from lower socio-economic backgrounds (Clarke & Wildy, 2011; Guenther, 2013; Hancock et al., 2017; Purdie & Buckley, 2010). To illustrate, both Ladwig and Luke (2014) and Baxter and Meyers (2019) analysed attendance and achievement data to challenge assumptions regarding attendance of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students and their achievement on standardised tests. The attendance-achievement assumption for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students has in the past driven withholding payments from those parents whose children reportedly are not attending school (Ladwig & Luke, 2014). Hancock et al. (2017) were able to draw on attendance data of students from low socioeconomic background in Western Australia to challenge the assumption that poor attendance had a greater impact on the achievement of students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds. It is evident that the availability of consistent national attendance data will only strengthen investigations that dispel potentially damaging assumptions.

There is limited research on how schools use their daily attendance data to identify and respond to attendance concerns. It is clear that schools are responsible for collecting attendance data and following up on attendance concerns (ACARA, 2020b; NSW DEC, 2015a). All government schools in NSW and many non-government schools have access to data analytic dashboards that highlight students who present with attendance concerns. The concept and use of Multi-Tiered Systems of Support to make data-based decisions regarding wellbeing supports in schools is gaining traction (Marsh & Mathur, 2020). However, further research is needed to investigate how schools in Australia make use of daily attendance data to respond to attendance concerns.

Australia's education goals, the Alice Springs (Mparntwe) Education Declaration (Australian Government, 2019), makes repeated reference to *all* students. Attendance data is collected to determine equity of access and performance across the education system. However, there is a large collective cohort of students who are not included in the data due to the collection specifications. These include mobile populations of students who are not enrolled full time at a school (Prout et al., 2017), students in small cohorts (e.g. special schools, behaviour schools), students who are home schooled (7,808 students 2020–21) (NESA, 2021) or students have been expelled from school (NSW DEC, 2021b, p. 11). In many cases these are the students who are most at risk of marginalisation. It is valid that their attendance data is excluded from national reporting at a cohort level due to privacy reasons. However, excluding them from the national data hides the attendance of this group of students from public attention.

The exclusion of kindergarten from the national data collection means there is no national report on student attendance in the first year of compulsory schooling. There is overwhelming evidence pointing to the importance of children's experience in early years in education (Cash et al., 2019; Jordan et al., 2009; Nelson, 2005). Research has shown that attendance problems generally appear when children start school and progressively become chronic as they enter into secondary school (Cook et al., 2017; Ehrlich et al., 2018; Kearney & Graczyk, 2020). All education jurisdictions have a legislated mandatory starting age. This starting age begins a year before students enter into Year 1. It is reasonable to speculate that the staggered starts of some kindergarten students and classes may make the comparison of this data difficult. However, kindergarten attendance levels could potentially be a valuable tool for policy makers and service providers.

5 Conclusion

This analysis highlights the monumental policy achievement by the Commonwealth, state and territory governments in Australia to nationally align the collecting and reporting of attendance data. The considerable effort invested towards defining, collecting, and reporting attendance points to the value that Australia places on attendance. The use of attendance data by Australian researchers and policy makers points to attendance being the litmus test for much broader health, social and wellbeing challenges faced by young people. The national collection and public reporting of the data has also driven its value as an indicator of school effectiveness. Attendance is no longer just an administrative task. However, the public reporting of attendance data make it clear that attendance is no longer the sole responsibility of schools. It is clear that the ever-changing landscape and complexity of recording attendance creates challenges. As we move into a post-COVID-19 education landscape, attendance has already adopted broader definitions beyond the physical presence of a student at school. Thus, attendance data collection and reporting work now must focus on systems that are agile enough to ensure fidelity with the ever-present change.

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Chile: Universal Collection, Open Access, and Innovation in the Use of Attendance and Absenteeism Data

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Abstract: In Chile, attendance is recognized as an important component of school quality and educational equity. The Chilean education system has clear, standardized definitions that apply country-wide, and a good registration system for school attendance that compiles national databases containing student-level, daily attendance, absences, and withdrawals for all children attending public schools. Moreover, these data are publicly available via open access, which allows the entire education community and the Ministry of Education access to all schools' data in an organized, centralized manner. These data contribute to ongoing scholarship about the impacts of attendance and absenteeism on education outcomes. In practice, schools use attendance data to monitor progress toward goals. The Ministry of Education uses data to calculate and pay school subsidies that are linked directly to average monthly attendance in accordance with Chilean law, and to classify schools into categories of education quality. Chilean Fundación Educacional Oportunidad uses attendance data and continuous quality improvement methods to promote attendance and prevent chronic absenteeism with more than 150 schools via a regional Learning Network. Meanwhile, the Learning Network fills an important gap by repurposing the nationally reported data to calculate and focus on individual-level attendance and by creating opportunities for practitioners to learn together how to promote attendance and prevent chronic absenteeism. This paper describes the context of Chile and its educational system; the definition, recording, reporting and use of attendance data; and the methods, outcomes and lessons learned by the regional Learning Network.

Keywords: absenteeism, Chile, attendance data, preschool education, quality improvement

In Chile, school attendance and absenteeism are part of national conversations about educational equity: absenteeism rates are high, and chronic absenteeism has been shown to diminish the impacts of interventions that improve classroom quality. For students matriculated in public schools from preschool through secondary education, teachers record attendance daily, and schools submit data monthly to the Ministry of Education (Ministerio de Educación, MINEDUC). MINEDUC compiles and publishes on its website national databases that contain student-level, daily attendance, absences, and withdrawals for all children attending public schools. MINEDUC uses attendance data as a performance metric tied to school financing. Chilean Fundación Educacional Oportunidad uses attendance data and continuous quality improvement (CQI) methods to promote attendance and prevent chronic absenteeism with more than 150 schools via a regional Learning Network. This paper will describe the Chilean context, the definition, recording, reporting and use of attendance data, and the methods, outcomes and lessons learned by the regional Learning Network.

<https://doi.org/10.14712/23363177.2023.2>
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1 Study Setting

Chile is a country in the western part of South America with a population of approximately 17.5 million people and a mixed education system that includes public and private schools at all levels, from early childhood education (ECE) through higher education. Educational quality in Chile, although higher than other Latin American countries, is similar to low or average levels when compared to the other 36 member countries of the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) (Adlerstein et al., 2016; Leyva et al., 2015; Schady et al., 2015). Thus, for Chile, improving the quality of education is the main challenge.

With the purpose of contributing to improving the quality of education, in the year 2007, Fundación Educacional Oportunidad (FEO) created Un Buen Comienzo (UBC), a two-year professional development program for teachers, teachers' aides and school leaders that supports schools to improve pedagogical and leadership practices so that children achieve better socio-emotional and language development. An experimental study of an initial version of UBC in 64 schools showed moderate to large positive impacts in preschool classroom quality, null average effects on the targeted child language and literacy skills on average for the full sample (Yoshikawa et al., 2015), and a positive impact on two of the four language outcomes among the children who most frequently attended school (Arbour et al., 2016).

In addition to finding that high levels of absenteeism diminished the effects of the UBC program's positive impact, the UBC experimental evaluation also revealed, for the first time, the prevalence of absenteeism. Chilean children enrolled in UBC preschools were absent for 23% of preschool days, on average, and 65% of children missed more than 10% of school days in the preschool year, a threshold defined as "chronic absenteeism," which is associated with poorer language and math development in 1st and 5th grades and a higher probability of long-term drop-out (Chang & Romero, 2008). Subsequently, an evaluation of attendance data from the 2018 school year demonstrated that among the more than 3 million students enrolled in K-12 public schools, 28.7% were absent for more than 10% of school days (Ministerio de Educación, n.d.). A separate analysis of MINEDUC's data from 2011-2017 showed that preschool students were absent 14.2% of school days, on average, and that 52.1% of them were absent for more than 10% of school days (Arbour et al., 2021).

This document presents the context of the Chilean education system and its approach to school attendance. It describes how school attendance in Chile is conceptualized, recorded, and reported to the MINEDUC, how attendance data is used by schools and by MINEDUC, and how attendance data reporting and use changed during the COVID-19 pandemic. In addition, it describes innovations in attendance data collection and use by the UBC Improvement Network, through which FEO has prioritized and pioneered work promoting regular school attendance and decreasing chronic absenteeism since 2012.

1.1 Context of the Chilean Education System

The Chilean education system is structured in four levels: ECE, elementary school, high school, and higher education. It is regulated by the Political Constitution of the Republic of Chile (1980) and Ley 20.370 (2009), which established the General Law on Education in 2009.

Early childhood education serves children from birth to six years of age and is divided into six grades according to their age (Subsecretaría de Educación Parvularia, 2018). Completion of the last grade – labeled “kinder” – is not currently a requirement for admittance into elementary school. Even so, ECE coverage for four-year-olds grew from 42% to 86% between 2005 and 2016, placing Chile as the country with third highest coverage for four-year-olds in Latin America (OECD, 2017).

Elementary school is the second level of formal education. It is comprised of eight years divided into two cycles and eight grades. It is mandatory and serves children from six to fourteen years of age. Its completion is a prerequisite for advancing to high school.

High school, the third level, includes four grades serving children from fourteen to eighteen years of age; it is mandatory. This level offers common instruction as well as differentiated training (humanist-scientific, technical-professional, artistic) during the last educational years (11th and 12th grade).

The fourth education level is higher education, which is aimed at students who have completed high school and wish to obtain a higher-level technical degree, professional degree, or academic degree. This level is not mandatory.

In addition, the General Law on Education establishes a mixed education system. All levels from ECE through higher education are financed by resources from the public sector, such as the central government and municipalities, and the private sector, i.e., families or corporate donations (Ley 20.370, 2009).

The public sector contains three types of schools. *Municipal schools* are managed by municipalities or by a municipal corporation and receive State subsidies and contributions from municipalities. *Schools under delegated management* are non-profits owned by the State, managed by legal persons, and financed with public resources. *Schools managed by the Local Public Education Services* are State entities with their own legal personality and assets; these are financed with public resources.

In the private sector there are two types of schools. *Subsidized private schools* are owned by a private natural or legal person and receive State subsidies and family contributions. *Private schools* are privately owned, do not receive public subsidies, but operate on family contributions and donations from private institutions.

Regardless of the school type, attendance is a key condition for children to progress. In Chile, school attendance policies are defined and prioritized by three laws and regulations aiming to deliver quality education to all students. The laws, regulations and measures described below apply equally to all schools in Chile.

The first law, 1998 Law-Ranking Decree No. 2, establishes attendance as an important determinant of school financing through the State subsidy of schools (via

48 grants) to improve educational quality and equity. The national government provides funding to schools via monthly subsidies via two mechanisms. The first mechanism – grants for educational offer – is not affected by attendance. These fixed subsidies account for 20% of school grants and are used for salaries, infrastructure improvement, and equipment, for example. The second grant mechanism – grants for educational demand – pays per-student subsidies based on school characteristics (e.g., rural or urban schools), student characteristics (e.g., proportion of students designated as “priority students” based on a calculated family vulnerability index that takes into account household size, assets and income under the Preferential School Subsidy), and average daily attendance (percent of matriculated students that attend daily, on average in the month) multiplied by an Educational Subsidy Unit (*Unidad de Subvención Educacional*, USE, unit of measure for each education level and teaching modality). The grants for educational demand, which account for 80% of school subsidies, are intended to improve the quality and equity of education. Each year, each school’s leadership team must write and execute an Education Improvement Plan that allocates funding to support the school’s educational endeavors (e.g., infrastructure improvement, school textbooks).

The second regulation, the Ministry of Education’s Norms for Evaluation and Promotion, states that a child’s promotion from one level to another is determined by two fundamental concepts: the achievement of the learning objectives set forth in the curriculum modules, and attendance equal to or greater than 85% of days.

Finally, the third law, Law on Educational Quality Assurance, established the Agency of Quality that assesses school quality and provides schools with reports and guidance to improve quality. The agency constructs an initial performance index that incorporates multiple indicators including standardized achievement test scores (*SIMCE*), distribution of students by grade, and social and personal development indicators that incorporate student attendance (calculated as the child-days attended among the total child-days in the schoolyear). Each school’s performance index is then classified as high, medium, low-medium, or insufficient. The performance category is intended to guide schools through their institutional and pedagogical endeavors. It is also publicly available information intended to guide parents’ and caregivers’ school choices.

2 Data and Methods

To answer the research question, the authors searched scientific journals and on the Chilean government’s official education websites, including the digital platforms of the Library of the National Congress, Ministry of Education of Chile, Undersecretary of Early Childhood Education, and the Superintendence of School Education. Keywords used were “school attendance,” “early education,” “Chilean educational system,” and “collaborative work.” In addition, authors reviewed research published by the Centro de Medición at the Pontifical Catholic University of Chile, a leading

education evaluator in Chile. The search yielded a total of 40 documents that were reviewed; 13 of those were included because they met at least one of the following inclusion criteria: describing a) how attendance is recorded, b) how the government works with school attendance in Chile, or c) how schools record and/or study school attendance data.

3 Attendance Data Collection and Reporting

Like the laws and regulations above, how the government conceptualizes, defines, and measures absenteeism applies equally to all schools Chile.

3.1 How Does the Government Conceptualize and Define Attendance and Absenteeism?

School attendance is understood as the number of days a student attends classes, in relation to the total number of school days (annual school days) (Ministerio de Educación, 2018). Students are divided into four attendance categories (Figure 1): *outstanding attendance*, which includes children who attend equal to or greater than 97% of the total school days; *normal attendance*, achieved by children attending between 90% and 97% of the total number of school days; *repeated absenteeism*, which corresponds to an attendance between 85% and 90% of annual school days; and *serious absenteeism*, children who attend less than 85% of the total days.

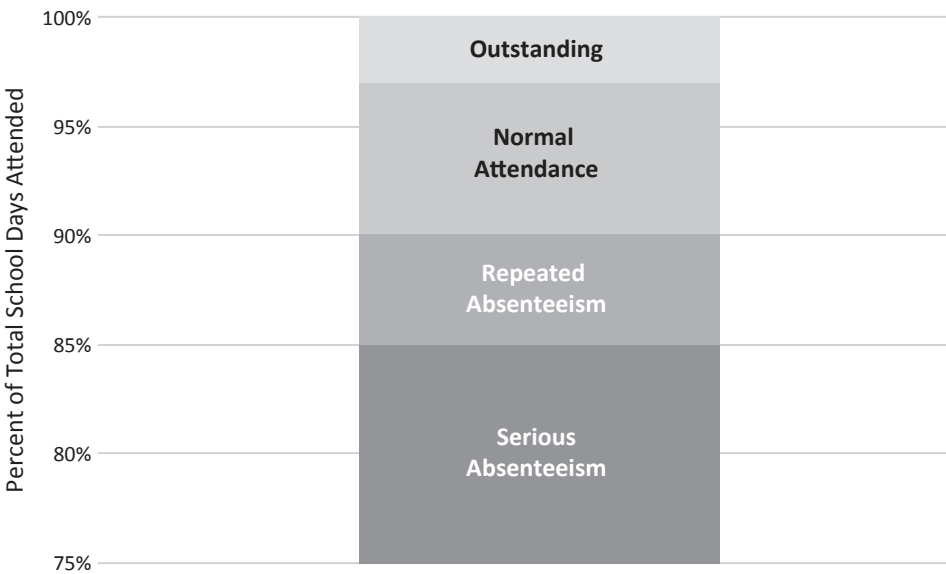


Figure 1 Attendance Categories by Percent of Total School Days Attended

The Chilean education system defines absence as any excused or unexcused absence of a student from class (Ministerio de Educación, 2014). Excused absences are school days not attended or partially attended with the permission from parents, guardians, or teachers. Unexcused absences correspond to school days not attended or partially attended without authorization of the student’s parents, guardians, or teachers (Superintendencia De Educación Escolar, 2014).

In Chile, any failure by a student to attend classes, extending one or more hours, must be justified by the parent and/or guardian to the school, with a maximum delay of one day. If a student is absent for more than two days without justification, the school activates the school-defined attendance protocol, typically by telephoning his/her guardian. If there is no answer and the absence continues for up to five to ten days, a typical protocol would summon the guardian to a meeting to provide justification. If the situation persists for more than ten days, the school would then inform the authorities so that they may enforce legal compliance with the law, which requires parents to cooperate, according to the provisions in Circular No. 1 and Circular No. 30 of the Superintendence of School Education and MINEDUC (Table 1) (Ministerio de Educación, 2019; Superintendencia De Educación Escolar, 2014, 2021).

Late arrivals or tardiness is defined as an arrival 15 minutes after the beginning of the first school day module. The student who arrives after those 15 minutes may enter the school, registering the late arrival at the principal’s office. If he/she

Table 1 Example of Typical Actions Taken in Response to Student Tardiness and Absence, Defined by Schools’ Internal Regulations and Protocols

Duration of student tardiness/absence	Action taken
Tardy – 15 to 29 min	Student must register the late arrival at the principal’s office.
Tardy – 30 min or more	Student must enter school with their guardian, who must justify the reason for the late arrival.
Absent – 1 to 2 days	Student’s guardian must justify the absence to the school, with a maximum delay of one day.
Absent – 3 to 5 days (without justification)	School calls the student’s guardian to justify the absence.
Absent – 5 to 10 days (without justification)	School calls the student’s guardian twice to invite them to an in-person meeting.
Absent – 5 to 10 days (without justification) and guardian does not respond to invitation for in person interview	School informs the authorities so that they may enforce guardians’ legal compliance with the law.
OR	
Absent – 10 or more days (without justification)	

arrives 30-minutes or more after the beginning of the first school day module, he/she may enter with his/her guardian, who must provide a reason for the late arrival, according to the procedural rules set forth by each school (Table 1).

3.2 Attendance Data Recording and Reporting

In every public classroom in Chile, teachers are responsible for recording attendance in a class book every day before 9:30 a.m., as specified in the Circular No. 1 and Circular No. 30 of the Superintendence of School Education (Superintendencia De Educación Escolar, 2014, 2021). The class book is the official document that must exist for all levels within the school; it contains a numbered list of all students enrolled in the class. Teachers enter into the class book information on students' general background, daily attendance, the content covered in each module, academic and behavioral details, as well as any summons issued to their guardians. Every day, teachers note for each student whether he/she is present, absent, or tardy. In addition, the teacher calculates and notes the total number of students present that day and lists the individual identifying numbers of absent students.

According to law, attendance data collected by teachers in the class book should be submitted to MINEDUC once a week via the General Student Information System (*Sistema de Información General de Estudiante*, SIGE), an online digital system that that MINEDUC uses to integrate information in a single place (enrollment, attendance, academic performance, and student retention) (Ministerio de Educación, 2011). All Chilean schools (municipal, subsidized, private, and delegated management) can use SIGE, which allows for uniformity of records, systematization of data, and timely presentation of school attendance reports. Via this portal, each month the school attendance officer or the school's General Inspector must disclose and certify monthly attendance for school subsidy and financing control purposes. He or she must verify that students' attendance data for each day and each grade level in the class book matches SIGE, and then print the attendance statement certificate. Ultimately, MINEDUC holds the school director responsible for reliability of attendance data.

3.2.1 Limitations of Attendance Data Recording and Reporting

One major limitation to attendance data in Chile is that the SIGE platform used to collect the data includes only three options when entering attendance data: "present," "absent," or "withdrawn." It is not possible to record partial attendance (i.e., late arrivals or early departures), nor whether absences are excused or unexcused. Thus, although Chilean policy and regulations clearly define attendance, tardiness, excused and unexcused absences, in practice, students who attend part of the day or have excused absences may be registered in the online platform as "present."

A second limitation to Chile's attendance data is that SIGE's attendance statement generates classroom-level data which is used to calculate the MINEDUC subsidy:

- 52 the average percent of enrolled children that attend each day. This masks individual attendance patterns that could enable schools to identify students with repeated absences, investigate associated causes, and intervene.

3.2.2 How Has the Attendance/Absence Data Recording and Reporting Changed Due to the COVID-19 Pandemic?

During 2020, Chilean schools operated most of the year remotely because of the COVID-19 pandemic. This change revealed the education system's multiple deficiencies and inequalities. For example, compared to Chile's more vulnerable districts, well-resourced districts managed remote education more efficiently, since students had better internet access, individual computers, and parental support (Quiroz Reyes, 2020). To respond to needs that emerged with remote education, the Chilean government made various efforts to record students' remote attendance and avoid school dropout.

First, an exceptional provision was passed regarding the 1998 Law Ranking Decree No. 2 that changed how schools' monthly government subsidy was calculated. For any school that returned to in-person classes (as of July 1st, 2020) and complied with attendance reporting, the subsidy calculation would use the best pre-pandemic attendance reported through SIGE during March, April and May of 2019 (Ley 21.294 de Subvenciones En El Contexto de La Pandemia Por COVID 19, 2020).

Second, in 2020, the Education Superintendence relaxed some of the regulations around the use of the Preferential School Subsidy to improve connectivity between students and teachers during the pandemic. This change allows schools to use subsidies to contract digital platforms, internet access, and acquire or modify infrastructure and equipment to promote children's virtual attendance and retention in school.

Lastly, in August 2020, under the decree that regulates evaluation, grading, and criteria for student promotion from one grade to the next, MINEDUC granted flexibility to the educational community to define "achievement of learning objectives" and "classroom attendance within the context of the pandemic." Regarding attendance, MINEDUC established that schools should follow usual procedures for students' in-person participation (i.e., recording individual-level student attendance in the class book and SIGE). For students participating in remote learning, schools were advised to keep logs separate from SIGE of students' participation in synchronous and asynchronous activities, (*Criterios de Evaluación, Calificación y Promoción*, 2020). Each school determined how to collect the data. In 2022, MINEDUC proposed the use of a digital class book that permits schools to record all students' attendance (present, absent, tardy), as well as whether their participation is in-person, synchronous or asynchronous.

Fundación Educacional Oportunidad proposed a different concept to respond to the new needs stemming from the pandemic and to avoid school dropout: *participation*, which addresses student attendance in remote learning. *Participation* is understood as the frequent contact of students with school, through in-person,

synchronous, or asynchronous involvement in learning experiences. Schools of the UBC Improvement Network work to ensure that pre-kindergarten and kindergarten children participate at least three days a week with at least one learning experience each day.

The Network has a registration system that includes a form to record child participation in the three types of teaching modalities (in person, asynchronous, synchronous) and produces a report with clear visualization of the percentage of children meeting the target, the percentage of those who have not participated during the week, and participation percentages for each type of interaction. This registry aims to support schools to make data-based decisions and timely interventions regarding students' participation.

4 Attendance/Absence Data Usage

School attendance is tied to different policies and regulations in Chile's education system. It is most closely linked to school financing and to determine whether students advance to the next grade. To a lesser extent, it also relates with the Law on Educational Quality Assurance, the Early Warning System, and the monthly monetary benefit granted to the country's poorest families. These are described below.

First, the main funding mechanism for schools are attendance-based subsidies. The law that regulates State education subsidies demands that schools meet certain requirements to receive subsidies, such as being officially recognized, having classes with a minimum and a maximum number of students, and having internal policies in place, among others. Meeting all requirements allows schools to receive attendance-based subsidies that are calculated by multiplying a per-student amount (USE value defined for each grade level and teaching modality) by the average attendance registered for each grade in the three months preceding payment (Decreto Con Fuerza de Ley 2, 1998).

Second, the regulation on grade promotion and repetition considers two fundamental factors: achievement of the learning objectives for the various subjects and/or curriculum modules, and attendance. Students from 1st to 12th grade are promoted if they pass all subjects in the study curriculum and their attendance is equal to or greater than 85% of the school days in the year. If a student fails to attend 85% of schooldays but their absences are excused and they attend 70% or more, the school leadership and classroom teams analyze the case and may promote the student, in accordance with the school's policy.

Third, the Law on Educational Quality Assurance aims to guarantee education quality by assessing schools and classifying their performance as high, medium, medium-low, or insufficient. Attendance contributes 3.3% to the school's performance category. The attendance indicator considers only students who completed the *SIMCE* national aptitude test, using the ratio between the number of days that each student attended and the total number of official school days in one year,

54 distributing the students in four categories: outstanding attendance (97% or greater), normal (90%–96%), repeated absenteeism (85%–89%), and severe absenteeism (less than 85%).

Fourth, the Early Warning System aims to identify students at risk of dropout as well as the root causes of that risk. This tool, available to school leaders since September 2020, identifies 10% of 7th to 12th grade students most likely to discontinue schooling, using information from previous years – attendance, repetition, academic performance, socioeconomic status, and social and family environment. This information allows the headmaster to plan and execute improvement actions with students at high risk of dropout.

Finally, the Chilean government allocates a school-attendance benefit to the 30% of Chilean families that receive financial support from the state via the Family Ethical Income. Thus, families in extreme poverty with children aged 6 to 18 receive a monthly voucher equal to USD\$7.50 for a maximum period of 24 months, provided their children attend 85% of schooldays or more in a school recognized by the Chilean State.

4.1 Data Access

Data on Chile's education system is publicly available via MINEDUC Studies Center's open data platform or by applying the provisions of Law No. 20,285, which regulates access to public information. MINEDUC's Studies Center generates official databases on school attendance and other topics pertaining to the Chilean education system (enrollment, attendance, academic performance, priority students, teacher evaluations, etc.). Through the platform and under the law, school attendance data of all Chilean students are available to researchers, external organizations, and local authorities.

Attendance databases are released on the Study Center's website via the "open data" tab (*Asistencia Declarada Mensual – Datos Abiertos*, n.d.). They are easy to understand, envisaged for the entire educational community. The attendance databases are organized by school year and month and include individual information for each student (unique encrypted identifier number, date of birth, grade, school name, and classroom in which the student is enrolled), characteristics of the student's school (name, region, municipality, type of administration, teaching modality, rurality), and individual attendance information (for every day of the schoolyear, data on whether the student was present, absent or withdrawn; and for each school, the average monthly attendance – i.e., average number of children present among those enrolled in that month).

In addition to open access databases, the Study Center responds to requests for information via e-mail (estadisticas@mineduc.cl). This communication path facilitates interaction between users and the Study Center, offering greater flexibility in the access to information, as intended under the law on transparent access to public information.

When the Study Center does not have the requested information, it redirects the application to other entities, such as the Evaluation, Measurement and Educational Registration Department, the Educational Quality Agency, or the Higher Education Information Service, among others. When publicly unavailable data is requested, the research community and general public may access it by invoking Law No. 20,285, which broadly regulates the right to information pertaining to State-managed entities (ministries, municipalities, etc.), the procedures to exercise this right, and information on exceptions to data access.

4.2 Using Attendance Data to Monitor School Goals and Intervene for Students With Repeated Absences

Regarding goal achievement, MINEDUC developed a guiding framework for the evaluation of education management processes: the Indicative Performance Standards, under which the headmaster is responsible for generating evaluations through analyzing data pertaining to the school. As part of this process, the headmasters and their school leadership teams study the information on average attendance for each grade, as well as at the school level, to verify whether they are meeting the required 85% for the Education Improvement Plan, performance evaluation and the monthly subsidy payment. If the targets are not met, school leadership teams are expected to implement strategies to improve and achieve those goals.

Educational teams use the class book to monitor student attendance and intervene when students exhibit repeated absences. In these cases, teams apply the protocol contained in the Internal Regulations and School Behavioral Manual (IRSBM), which consists of guidelines created by each school that address conflict situations with strategies agreed upon jointly with the education community. The IRSBM must abide to proportionality and non-discrimination principles, and usually includes interventions such as the following:

- Requesting medical letters or documentation to excuse absences.
- Contacting the guardian to identify the type of absenteeism and generate actionable commitments.
- Informing parents of the compulsory nature of schooling and their duty to comply.
- Making home visits.
- Forwarding the situation to Family Courts or the police, for possible infringements on the child's right to education, if a risky situation is detected regarding a student, or if the absenteeism persists.

4.3 How do Schools in the Un Buen Comienzo Improvement Network Use Their Attendance/Absence Data?

UBC's experimental evaluation concluded that high levels of absenteeism diminished the program's effects on socio-emotional and language development, despite its positive impact on classroom quality. FEO thus prioritized promoting regular

school attendance. Simultaneously, FEO expanded UBC, which led to the creation of the UBC Improvement Network. FEO adopted CQI methodology, which facilitates data-driven decision-making and peer-to-peer learning in order to generate and disseminate practical knowledge to improve teaching and learning processes.

The Network developed and provides participating schools with an innovative data system that accepts the same data schools submit to SIGE, quantifies aggregate and individual attendance data, and highlights children at risk of or already displaying chronic absenteeism. The platform allows for the daily upload of new attendance data; thus, classroom teams, school leadership teams, school authorities, and even guardians can use data to make real-time decisions to improve.

4.3.1 How do Schools in the Un Buen Comienzo Improvement Network Work to Reduce Chronic Absenteeism?

Although there are strong school attendance policies and regulations in Chile's education system, most of them focus on average classroom attendance in elementary and high school. The UBC Improvement Network is innovative because it focuses on the pre-kinder and kinder levels, uses individual-level attendance, and deploys CQI methodology to realize aims. More than 150 schools in Chile's VI Region participate in the Improvement Network, each with a team comprised of early childhood teachers and teacher aides, technical pedagogy leaders, school principals and other members of school leadership, school authorities, and families.

Table 2 Key Driver Diagram to Decrease Chronic Absenteeism (CA) and Promote Attendance in Pre-Kinder and Kindergarten Classes

Objective	Drivers	Strategies
85% of children in the UBC Improvement Network will attend 90% of school days or more (i.e., fewer than 15% of children exhibit chronic absenteeism at the end of the school year)	Universal interventions (for all children)	Attendance panel with incentives
		Visits and videos by <i>Super Asistencia</i>
	Individual interventions (for children at risk* for chronic absenteeism)	Universal education with parents and guardians in meetings
		Videos of the <i>Sinforoso</i> character and the Health Corner
		Attendance Committee and strategies focused on the causes of chronic absenteeism:
		– Success Plans – interviews with school principal – social worker home visits etc.
Indicators		
– % of children who are *missing 10% or more of school days as of this date (i.e., those at risk for chronic absenteeism at the end of the year)		
– % of children attending 90% or more of school days in the school year		

The Network facilitates a “learning collaborative,” in which school-based teams participate in three large group meetings called “learning sessions,” during a one-year period. In these sessions, Network schools learn a key driver diagram – a theory of change that outlines a shared attendance aim, drivers needed to achieve that aim, intervention strategies, and indicators for process and outcome measures (Table 2). Between the learning sessions, schools test attendance-promoting strategies through Plan-Do-Study-Act cycles. They generate hypotheses about how certain strategies could impact attendance, *plan* the implementation of the strategy(ies), *do* what they have planned, *study* the data collected, and finally, *act* on how to move forward with the strategy(ies) to improve the obtained results. Throughout, teams share data, lessons, and best practices to improve collectively. The intervention strategies, implementation approach and results of this Learning Network have been described in detail elsewhere (Arbour et al., 2023).

5 Discussion

In Chile, attendance is recognized as an important component of school quality and educational equity.

5.1 Strengths of the Attendance Process in the Chilean Education System

The Chilean education system has clear, standardized definitions that apply country-wide, and a good registration system for school attendance (class book, SIGE) that allows the entire education community and MINEDUC access to all schools’ data in an organized, centralized manner. Moreover, these data are publicly available via open access, which contributes to ongoing scholarship about the impacts of attendance and absenteeism on education outcomes (Arbour et al., 2020; González & Kluttig, 2019).

In practice, schools use attendance data to monitor progress toward goals. MINEDUC uses SIGE data to monitor compliance with the average attendance percentage, calculate and pay subsidies to schools in accordance with Chilean law, and classify schools into categories of education quality. In addition, MINEDUC’s Educational Quality Agency provides schools with a report titled *Performance Category* that includes a school attendance indicator and is intended to support schools to identify strengths and weaknesses. Schools are expected to reflect on the report results to design their Educational Improvement Plan.

FEO led a public campaign on the importance of attendance (FundacionOportunidad, 2015), sponsored national seminars to disseminate local and international research on early chronic absenteeism, and convened a workgroup with more than ten public and private institutions to generate solutions to chronic absenteeism in ECE in Chile. Its UBC Improvement Network fills an important gap by focusing on

- 58** individual-level attendance and creating opportunities for practitioners to learn together how to promote attendance and prevent chronic absenteeism.

5.2 Weaknesses of the Attendance Process in the Chilean Education System

There are several ways that Chile's notably strong approach to school attendance could be improved. First, the direct link between monthly school attendance reporting and the government subsidies has had repercussions. There are reports of discrepancies between what is recorded in the class book and what is reported in SIGE. Some hypothesize that attendance-based subsidies cause untenable economic uncertainty for the schools and leads to misreporting information. If misreporting occurs frequently, the data's utility could be questioned. Assessing how frequently such inconsistencies occur and their effects on data quality is not practical, given the complexity of monitoring attendance in all schools in the country. Furthermore, this economic uncertainty may disproportionately impact schools in unfavorable contexts – for example, rural schools tend to have more seasonal variation in attendance (González & Kluttig, 2019), with larger increases in winter absences attributed to weather, large distances between home and school, and possibly higher incidence of or families' concerns about winter illnesses. Lastly, the government does not stipulate that schools use a portion of their attendance-based subsidies to improve school attendance.

Second, both the government and the schools focus on aggregated data rather than individual-level data. This does not allow schools to see patterns of attendance and absenteeism for each student – i.e., the “dose” of education each student experiences or loses – nor identify root causes of absences and appropriate interventions. Thus, although individual-level data is collected and submitted, some of the most useful information remains hidden under the total attendance averages portrayed for each grade or school.

Third, MINEDUC's digital platform (SIGE) is not designed to enable teachers or school-based teams to use the data. By granting only one password to one designated individual per institution, SIGE prevents school-based teams from looking at the data. One suggestion is to create read-only access pages so that any member of the school community could study the data.

Fourth, MINEDUC policies do not specify clearly how to enter a student with an excused absence, and SIGE's only reporting options are “present,” “absent,” or “withdrawn.” Without the option to report students as “absent – excused,” or “partially present (late arrival or early departure),” it is likely, given the subsidy incentive, that these students are reported as present. This may mask absenteeism patterns related to excused tardiness or absences, which can be associated with chronic or ongoing physical or mental illnesses (Boundy & Cortiella, 2018).

Finally, regarding the weaknesses of the UBC Network attendance work, FEO's innovative digital platform is currently limited in scope: it is available only to schools

participating in the UBC Network, and only for the ECE level. However, some State agencies that provide ECE have agreed to use this platform, increasing the scope of institutions learning to use data to promote attendance and decrease chronic absenteeism.

5.3 Suggestions to Consider when Performing a Comparison

In Chile, attendance data is collected at the student level and the databases are freely accessible. However, the majority this data's use and analysis occurs in connection to average classroom attendance. Hence, we suggest that anyone interested in comparing Chilean data to other data analyze the individual-level databases, from which aggregate measures can be derived, if desired. Second, when comparing Chilean attendance data with data from other parts of the world where excused, unexcused, and partial absences are reported separately, it may be helpful to conduct sensitivity analyses to account for the fact that excused and partial absences may be recorded in Chilean databases as "present" or may be inconsistently reported.

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What Does School Attendance Mean in Japanese Compulsory Education Schools? Analysing the National Annual Report

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Abstract: School absenteeism in Japan has become a serious psychosocial issue over the past few decades. According to the national survey conducted annually by the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology – Japan (MEXT), the number of students with school attendance problems (futoko) in compulsory education schools has been the highest since the government introduced the current data collection format in 1991. All Japanese compulsory education schools collect data on attendance and absence each day. The obtained data in each school are collected by MEXT via local education boards, which are eventually reported as annual national data. However, in recent years, data classification and interpretation of school attendance and absenteeism have become more complicated, which may constitute a limiting factor for appropriate measures for school absenteeism in Japan. The current study showed the situation of school absenteeism in Japanese compulsory education schools using the annual data reported by MEXT, and it examined matters of data classification and interpretation. The author proposed that two main categories of attendance/absence be used, namely: (a) class attendance in mainstream schools, and (b) class nonattendance in mainstream schools.

Keywords: school absenteeism, Japanese compulsory education schools, school attendance, school attendance data

School absenteeism in Japan has become a serious psychosocial issue over the past few decades. The Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology – Japan (MEXT) defines school attendance problems (futoko) as being absent from or unable to attend school for more than 30 days a year due to physical, psychological, social, and/or emotional factors, with exceptions permitted for medical and economic reasons (MEXT, 2021). According to the national survey conducted annually by MEXT (2021), the number of students with school attendance problems in 2020 reached 63,350 in elementary schools (1.0% of all students in elementary schools) and 132,777 in lower secondary schools (4.0% of all students in lower secondary schools). This is the highest level since the government introduced the current data collection format in 1991.

The Japanese education system is composed of four phases: 1. elementary school, 2. lower secondary school, 3. upper secondary school, and 4. junior college or university. Compulsory education refers to six years of elementary school (7–12 years old) and three years of lower secondary school (13–15 years old) (MEXT, 2013). Thereafter, 97% of students voluntarily attend three years of upper secondary school (16–18 years old) (MEXT, 2021).

<https://doi.org/10.14712/23363177.2023.4>
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All Japanese students are automatically enrolled in elementary school at the age of six and de-enrolled at the age of 15, by the local government. In Japanese compulsory education schools, each class (approximately 30–35 students in one class) has a homeroom teacher and a fixed classroom where the students take most of their lessons, except for special subjects such as physical education or science experiments. The homeroom teacher, classmates, and classroom are consistent for one school year. In elementary school, a homeroom teacher covers most subjects in his/her class, and in lower secondary school, classes are taught by specialised teachers in each subject. Moreover, teachers in compulsory education schools conduct five or six classes (45–50 minutes each) every day. In public lower secondary school, 1,015 classes (approximately 200 days) are set in one school year (MEXT, 2017). All schools have homeroom times (10–15 minutes) before the first lesson and after the last session each day.

The OECD (2014) reports that Japan is one of two countries where no students repeated a grade during compulsory education schooling compared with an average of 12% across OECD countries. The Japanese government has employed an automatic promotion system (MEXT, 2014) since the Revised Elementary School Order was officially announced in 1900 (Saito, 2003), during the Meiji Era. Students in compulsory education schools can receive automatic promotion to the next year level (Saito, 2003) and receive diplomas at the end of elementary and lower secondary school (grade 9) regardless of their school attendance record (Karuta, 2020; Sasaki, 2008) or individual academic achievement (Ichikawa, 1992; Karuta, 2020). Regarding individual academic achievement, a credit-based system for each subject is not employed in public compulsory education schools, and there is no national standardised evaluation test for academic achievement at the end of elementary or lower secondary school (Suzuki, 2017).

1 Recording and Reporting of School Attendance and Absenteeism

1.1 Japan's Annual National Report of School Attendance and Absenteeism

All Japanese compulsory education schools collect data on attendance and absence each day (details about the recording and reporting of attendance data are presented in Section 1.7). The obtained data in each school are collected by MEXT via local education boards, which are eventually reported as annual national data. However, in recent years, data classification and interpretation of school attendance and absenteeism have become more complicated, which may constitute a limiting factor for appropriate measures for school absenteeism in Japan. The current study shows the situation of school absenteeism in Japanese compulsory education schools using the annual data reported by MEXT and examines matters of data classification and interpretation.

1.2 Various Forms of Official School Attendance (shusseki atsukai)

In Japanese compulsory education schools, various forms of school attendance are officially authorised by MEXT (e.g., MEXT, 2021). Apart from regular classroom attendance, school attendance is categorised into the following three types: (a) separate room attendance within enrolled schools (e.g., school nurse office, special education room or school counselling office); (b) attendance in support services outside of enrolled schools (e.g., public childcare centre, adaptation class provided by local education board, medical institutions, and private free schools); and (c) home-schooling using Internet technology (MEXT, 2021). Attendance at private free schools, which was not authorised until 2016, has officially been authorised since 2017. MEXT (2021) reported that 92,626 students in compulsory education schools (1.0% of students) are in category (a), 24,260 (0.3% of students) are in category (b), and 2,626 (0.03% of students) are in category (c).

1.3 Definition of Official Absence (koketsu/shuttei/kibiki)

In Japan, the category ‘Official absence’ officially allows exemption from school attendance (not counted as absence but virtually counted as authorised school attendance on paper). ‘Official absence’ includes ‘Suspension of attendance due to infectious diseases’, ‘Bereavement leave’, ‘Natural disasters’, and ‘Outside school events as representing school’ (sports, art, and music, among others). MEXT (2021) has notified each compulsory education school that absence from school due to the side effects of COVID-19 vaccination can be regarded as official school absence and recorded in the ‘Suspension of attendance due to infectious diseases’ category.

1.4 Definition of Prolonged School Absenteeism (choki kesseki)

Prolonged school absenteeism in Japan is defined as being absent for over 30 days in one school year, which is then categorised into ‘Sickness’ (physical or mental disorder or injury that needs either hospitalisation, doctor visits, or recuperation at home), ‘Economic reasons’ (financially struggling family where students need to work for a living), ‘School attendance problems (futoko)’ (being absent from or being unable to attend school for over 30 days a year due to physical, psychological, social, and/or emotional factors, with exceptions made for medical and economic reasons), and ‘Others’ (MEXT, 2020). Additionally, the ‘Avoiding from COVID-19 infection’ category was added in 2020 (MEXT, 2021), which was supposed to be a temporary category until the control of COVID-19 was achieved. In each school, school staff in charge (classroom teacher, school nurse, and student guidance teacher, among others) categorise absent students into the above categories after assessing the notice of absence from the parents as their routine work.

In 2020, the number of students with prolonged absenteeism reached 287,747 students in compulsory education schools (3.0% of students in compulsory education schools; more specifically, 113,746 or 1.8% of students in elementary school, and 174,001 or 5.3% of students in lower secondary school), in which 68.2% were classified as ‘School attendance problems’, 15.4% as ‘Sickness’, 7.3% as ‘Avoiding from COVID-19 infection’, 0% as ‘Economic reasons’, and 9.1% as ‘Others’ (MEXT, 2021). Figure 1 shows the prevalence of prolonged school absenteeism in 2020.

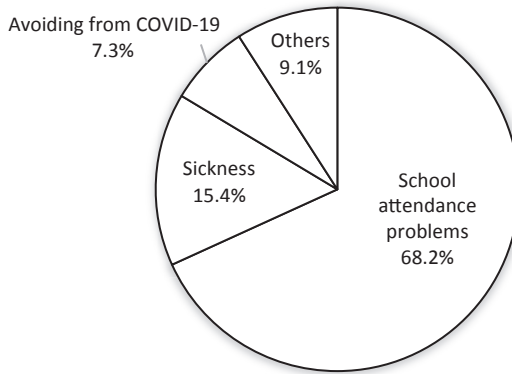


Figure 1. Prevalence of prolonged school absenteeism in 2020

1.5 School Attendance Problems (futoko) in Japan

In prolonged school absenteeism (i.e., over 30 days in one school year), the category ‘School attendance problems (futoko)’ has the highest prevalence and is a serious psychosocial issue in compulsory education schools. As mentioned earlier, school attendance problems are defined as being absent from or unable to attend school for more than 30 days a year due to physical, psychological, social, and/or emotional factors, with exceptions permitted for medical and economic reasons (MEXT, 2021).

MEXT (2021) categorises the cause of ‘School attendance problems’ into the following three main factors: ‘School-based factors’, ‘Family-based factors’, and ‘Individual-based factors’, which are then divided into 13 subcategories. School-based subcategories include the following: (a) Bullying issues, (b) Trouble with friends, except for bullying issues, (c) Relationship issues with teachers, (d) Academic underachievement, (e) Anxiety about further studies, (f) Maladaptation in extracurricular activities at school, (g) Maladaptation at the time of school entry, and (h) Maladaptation at the time of promotion and school transfer. Family-based subcategories involve the following: (i) Rapid change in family environment, (j) Interaction issues between parent(s) and child, and (k) Domestic discord. Individual-based subcategories include the following: (l) Delinquency or truancy and (m) Apathy or anxiety (MEXT, 2021).

Of the 13 subcategories, (m) Apathy or anxiety (46.9%) accounted for most ‘School attendance problems’, followed by (l) Delinquency or truancy (12.0%), and (b) Troubles with friends, except for bullying issues (10.6%), with (a) Bullying issues (0.2%) being the least prevalent in compulsory education schools in 2020 (MEXT, 2021). Recent national surveys have indicated that school attendance problems among Japanese students is closely associated with the individual-based factors of apathy or anxiety (Yamasaki, 2022).

1.6 Making Judgements About Absences Reportedly Stemming from Sickness

In terms of sickness, MEXT (2021) states that although doctors are primarily responsible to determine whether a student who is ill should recuperate at home, family and others who care for the child are also allowed to provide their own independent judgement. Hence, when parents are willing to let their child stay at home due to sickness regardless of whether they have a physical or mental disorder, they are not required by school authorities to produce a medical certificate. Instead, parents must simply report to school authorities that their child will not be attending school due to sickness. In this case, if a student misses school for many days owing to a family holiday but the parents erroneously inform the school that their child is unable to attend due to being sick or having a fever, then in many schools the absence will be automatically classified as due to ‘Sickness’ rather than ‘School attendance problems’.

1.7 The Process of Recording and Reporting Attendance and Absence

In Japanese compulsory education schools, each homeroom teacher routinely checks student attendance or absence in homeroom hours in the morning. During school hours, some teachers record the arrival time of late (‘tardy’) students and departure time of students who leave early from school. These data are shared with the school administrative staff via the school nurse.

The school absence data collected in each school is transferred to MEXT (national government) via 47 local education boards, once a year. The data of tardiness and early leaving are generally regarded as authorised attendance and not reported as partial absence. Based on these data, MEXT officially issues the number and rate of students with prolonged absenteeism, including school attendance problems, as the result of an annual survey. In addition, the School Education Act stipulates that the principals of compulsory education schools must report to the local education boards about students who do not attend school for seven days without any authorised reason. Local education boards are then expected to require that the parents of those students send their children to school. Nevertheless, this law has become ‘a dead letter’ because it is not adhered to by the school principals and local education boards (e.g., Ono, 2015).

2 Using School Absence Data

2.1 Individual Level

Individual student absence data are kept by each compulsory education school for five years and transferred to the next grade when students move on to the next grade. The staff of each compulsory education school are thus kept informed of students' absences whenever necessary over a certain period of time. The data are provided to the senior secondary school of the student's choice as a part of the student's record when they apply for it at grade nine, the final year in compulsory education schools.

2.2 National and Academic Level

The data on school absenteeism in the annual report has had a significant impact on education and community service responses to students with prolonged absenteeism and school attendance problems, contributing to the development of public support systems for them, such as official deployment of school counsellors in 1995 and school social workers in 2008, as well as the enactment of relevant laws (e.g., Act To Guarantee Access To Supplementary Learning To Insufficient Compulsory Education Due To Absenteeism And What Not in 2016). That is, the national annual data provided by MEXT is imperative in understanding the situation of school absenteeism in Japan. However, the data have not currently been used to evaluate school policy or determine school funding.

Many researchers who study school absenteeism in Japan have utilised the annual data in their studies (e.g., Aruga, 2020; Hong et al., 2019; Matsuura et al., 2020; Ochi et al., 2020). The data can be analysed from various perspectives because the MEXT annual report provides much data on school absenteeism. However, as mentioned previously, the data classification of absenteeism is based on the judgement of each school, and without defined universal criteria, there can be various interpretations of the data that has been analysed.

3 Discussion

3.1 Ambiguous Criteria for School Attendance Problems

The data related to school attendance problems in Japan are generally emphasised and utilised in the government, media, education board, and schools. School attendance problems are a category of prolonged absenteeism, which excludes medical and economic reasons. In this regard, one can have little confidence in the data about absence due to medical reasons because they include the poor physical condition

reported by parents. If the parents of students with prolonged absenteeism report that the student feels unwell, then each school must make the decision to categorise this incident as either 'Sickness' or 'Other' based simply on the parent's report. In fact, several public schools in which the author worked as a school counsellor determined that parent reports of 'feeling unwell', 'headache' or 'stomach-ache' in the morning would be classified as 'Sickness' (authorised absence). Additionally, if the students do not attend school for more than 30 days due to these symptoms, then they will not be categorised as 'School attendance problems'. As long as parents are not officially required to obtain a medical certificate for health or mental health symptoms, then students with school attendance problems, especially school refusal, are likely to be included in the 'Sickness' category and therefore might miss receiving school-based effective support to enable return to school.

3.2 Extending the Interpretation of Authorised School Attendance

In Japan, with the increase of prolonged absenteeism and school attendance problems, MEXT has extended the interpretation of authorised school attendance. The law 'Act To Guarantee Access To Supplementary Learning To Insufficient Compulsory Education Due To Absenteeism And What Not' was enacted in 2016, and it officially acknowledges the significance of learning at free private schools (Kurosaki, 2022). The law assumes that students with school attendance problems should be provided with appropriate places of learning outside public compulsory education schools. Under this law, attendance at private free schools is regarded as an authorised school attendance, regardless of the educational curriculum of the free school. Nevertheless, in reality, the number of students with school attendance problems is the highest on record since the Act was enacted in 2016 (e.g., MEXT, 2021). This implies that most students with prolonged school absenteeism, including school attendance problems, are not attending either mainstream or alternative education schools.

Home-schooling is another option of alternative education. MEXT has officially recognised this as authorised school attendance under certain conditions, since the 2005 notification titled 'Dealing With Students With Refusal To Go To School Who Perform Learning Activities Through Information Technology At Home'. Authorised home-schooling attendance for students with school attendance problems, using information and communication technology, was uncommon in Japan. However, the numbers have rapidly increased since the spread of COVID-19 in 2020, growing four-fold compared with that in 2019 (from 608 to 2,626; MEXT, 2020, 2021). This increase is likely to continue, given the current categorisation of school attendance problems and MEXT policy towards prolonged school absenteeism, which is to provide students with absenteeism appropriate places of learning outside public compulsory education schools. Nevertheless, as Havik and Ingul (2021) assert, it is difficult to implement home-schooling for students with school attendance problems who

68 lack motivation, making it unlikely to be an effective strategy for many Japanese students with school attendance problems, about half of whom are categorised as having ‘Apathy or anxiety’ problems (MEXT, 2021).

The national annual data on school absenteeism in compulsory education schools reported by MEXT is crucial for stakeholders in the field of school attendance. However, understanding the data is difficult, due to the complexity of categories, the definitions for which change every few years. Recently, the definition of authorised school attendance has been extended to include home-schooling under certain conditions. Despite this, the number of students with prolonged absenteeism and school attendance problems has increased rather than declined. The effectiveness of the long-standing MEXT policy that has been providing an alternative learning option for students unwilling to attend school should be questioned because it has not been evaluated. This policy is challenged by the findings of numerous studies confirming that school environments provide the most significant opportunities for youth to develop their abilities and skills, such as academic skills, social and emotional skills, social competence and relationship skills, persistence, problem-solving skills, the ability to work with others, and stress tolerance (e.g., Heyne et al., 2019; Kearney & Graczyk, 2014; Maeda & Inoue, 2021). Once students are isolated from the school environment due to their absenteeism, they experience difficulties in acquiring these skills and abilities. The school environment is a society for all children of school age, where they can participate in psychosocial experiences that promote their future development, well-being, and potential.

3.3 Missing Days Versus Missing Classes

Although the number of absent days is regarded as a crucial criterion for prolonged school absenteeism in Japanese compulsory education schools, the time spent in school or attending classes is not regarded as a valued criterion for determining the presence or absence of a school attendance problem. As noted earlier, there is a range of authorised attendance that would not normally be counted as attendance in other international contexts. For example, a student who attends full classes for three days and has two full-day absences (two days of absence out of the last five school days) will receive a higher rate of prolonged absenteeism than another student who attends school to have a chat with school teachers for a few minutes every day without attending any class (five days of authorised school attendance). This situation is possible because of the flexible interpretation of authorised school attendance entrusted to each school principal. Nakahara and Ito (2008) criticise this practice where students who only partially attend school (without participating in any classes) are registered with an authorised school attendance record and thus are not recognised as having school attendance problems. For as long as this situation exists, a focus on increasing the recorded number of days of ‘apparent’ school attendance will not contribute to solving school attendance problems.

3.4 Thresholds and Attendance

Because prolonged school absenteeism is defined as over 30 days of absence in one school year (i.e., 15% absence), this means that missing nearly 150 classes in a year is within the acceptable range in lower secondary school. While around 7% of students in lower secondary schools (i.e., approximately 220,000 students) do not attend 150 classes or more due to prolonged absenteeism, the progressive educational attainment of these students is unknown because there are no standardised criteria for measuring progress at each grade. From the perspective of guaranteeing minimum academic achievement in compulsory education schools, it is suggested that MEXT should establish criteria for minimum academic achievement at each grade, and administer learning progress assessments for all students (e.g., *Chicago Public Schools Policy Manual*, 2009), which may stimulate students with absenteeism to attend some classes.

3.5 Sanctions

Parents have a duty to educate their children in the Constitution of Japan (Article 26), and parents who violate the law are liable to a fine of up to 100,000 yen (The School Education Law Article 144). The law has been applied in only two cases, in 1959 and 1976 (Hazama et al., 2011) although there has been a large number of serious cases of school attendance problems associated with parental child-rearing attitudes. Principals in each school must report students absent from school for seven days to local education boards, except for those cases where the parents have authorised reasons. If the local education boards receive these reports from schools, then they must urge the parents to get their children to attend school (Enforcement Order of the School Education Act Article 20, 21).

Imposing legal sanctions against parents who do not get their children to school is virtually impossible for school authorities in Japan (Shinohara & Shojima, 2008). This is because school attendance problems are broadly interpreted as being an authorised reason for not attending school (Sasaki, 2017; Shinohara & Shojima, 2008), and thus, students with school attendance problems and their parents are exempted from legal liability (Shinohara & Shojima, 2008). In this case, if the student expresses his/her intention not to attend school for any reason, the parents will be exempted from the responsibility of sending their child to school. Therefore, there is a need to develop clear criteria for authorised reasons for being absent from school, to correctly interpret the large amount of data relating to absenteeism in compulsory education schools.

4 Conclusion

In sum, the annual national survey conducted by MEXT provides the public with data and information about school attendance and absence in Japan. However, the

70 following improvements are required to make more effective use of the data. First, the definition of authorised school attendance should be made clear. In Japan, the curriculum content of classes in mainstream schools differs substantially from that of alternative education schools or programmes. Hence, the data pertaining to these various forms of school attendance should not be treated in the same manner as data pertaining to authorised school attendance. In particular, a record of the number of students missing classes in mainstream schools should be collected, and students who miss more than 150 classes in one school year could be identified as having a ‘School attendance problem’ regardless of the reasons for absence from class. This suggestion is critical not only for the measure of school attendance problems, but also for the development of a policy that guarantees at least a minimum level of academic achievement and the opportunity for progress in compulsory education.

Second, parent-reported student absences due to poor physical condition for more than three consecutive days without a doctor’s certificate should be categorised as being a ‘School attendance problem’. Kobayashi (2007) indicated that the average number of absent days per student per school year due to sickness was four days, and highlighted that consecutive school absence for more than three days should be addressed as a possible ‘School attendance problem’. Feeling unwell or somatic complaints is seen in many cases of school refusal, some of which are not diagnosed with any physical or mental health disorders (e.g., Maeda & Heyne, 2019). However, if schools treat these symptoms as sickness (i.e., authorised school absence), then students with these symptoms are often excluded from school or family-based interventions, and this probably contributes to the problem of prolonged school absenteeism in Japan. It follows that for the criterion of ‘Sickness’, a doctor’s certificate, which stipulates the required period of recuperation at home, should be required for more than three days of absence.

Recently, evidence-based approaches have been highlighted for school attendance problems (e.g., Eklund et al., 2020; Heyne et al., 2020; Kearney & Graczyk, 2020). In this context, it is necessary for researchers to access quality attendance data to help build evidence for the effectiveness of interventions. However, the importance of data classification and interpretation is occasionally overlooked in Japan, which may contribute to the application of ineffective responses and interventions for school absenteeism. Indeed, as mentioned in this paper, some definitions of absence categories in the MEXT annual report are quite ambiguous, such as the difference between the definition of prolonged school absenteeism and school attendance problems. Therefore, from a fundamental perspective, stakeholders should simplify the definition of school absenteeism, reducing the room for variable interpretation as much as possible. To achieve this, the author recommends that the classification of school absenteeism data be simplified into two main categories: (a) class attendance in mainstream schools, and (b) class nonattendance in mainstream schools. When students miss classes in mainstream schools (i.e., more than 15%), this should be categorised as due to ‘School attendance problems’ regardless

of the reason. Subsequently, each student with school attendance problems should be provided appropriate support, depending on their specific difficulties.

At the moment, MEXT does not report the data in these categories, but it can be estimated on the basis of published data. According to the report of MEXT in 2021, the number of students with prolonged absenteeism in compulsory education schools accounts for 287,747 cases, which would increase to approximately 387,000 cases for this new recommended category. This is because the approximately 100,000 students whose school attendance is officially accepted in other forms of education (e.g., alternative education classes, private free school, or home-schooling) in the absence of being in class in a mainstream school, will be categorised as students with ‘School attendance problems’.

It may be a challenge for MEXT and education authorities to accept that some of their existing measures for school attendance problems are ineffective. In conclusion, if MEXT, education authorities, and each school agree to collect attendance and absence data based on the simplified definitions stated above, to avoid misinterpretation, then it will allow for the development of more meaningful measures for school attendance problems and their effective management in Japan.

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Searching for Consistency in Attendance Data Recording, Reporting, and Utilization in the USA

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Abstract: According to the United States Department of Education (USDOE), 16% or over eight million kindergarten through twelfth grade students in the US missed 10% or more school days during the 2017–2018 school year. This is approximately 18 of 180 days required. We know this because schools are mandated to report their attendance data to their respective states and to the USDOE. There are concerns around accuracy and consistency because each state is allowed to compile data in their own way and report only select metrics to the USDOE to comply with federal guidelines. The consistency on federal metrics, nonetheless, allows for similar analyses at the federal and state levels and comparisons across states. To best understand what is reported, we report on data compiled by the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) housed in the Institute of Education Sciences, the science branch of the USDOE, and describe how attendance data are collected, reported, and used at the national level. We share similar findings for two representative US states – Connecticut and Indiana – to highlight similarities and differences between them, and their “best practices.” Key results from these multiple levels of analyses are then discussed, with the goal of informing research, practice, and policy related to school attendance, so that students of all ages and from all backgrounds are provided the opportunity to obtain optimal benefits from schooling throughout their school careers.

Keywords: school attendance, chronic absenteeism, truancy, multi-level analyses, case study, National Center for Education Statistics, education policy

For decades, countries have been in search of consistency in data collection to enable effective comparisons, and the United States is no different (National Forum on Education Statistics, 2009). Consistency in the collection of educational data, specifically kindergarten through 12th grade, is also no exception. In all fifty U.S. states, common and different data related to school attendance are collected in various forms and used for a myriad of purposes – from monitoring attendance and moving up or out of a grade to receiving a driver’s license or committing a status offense.

When thousands of schools closed during the pandemic, all stakeholders worried about students’ absence from school (Gross & Opalka, 2020; UNESCO, 2021). This

<https://doi.org/10.14712/23363177.2023.6>

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76 worry is legitimate because we know students are successful when they are active in learning environments with effective teachers. Teacher effectiveness is the strongest predictor of academic success, and teacher-student interactions are not possible when students are absent (Adelman, 2006). Absenteeism is particularly impactful for students who require additional support for disability or other individualized educational plans (Van Dintner et al., 2011). Nestled in the support and worry for students, schools in the United States continue to collect droves of student data to meet their federal and compliance requirements.

To provide a national perspective, we focus our review on data collected within the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) that is housed within the U.S. Department of Education's (USDOE) Institute of Education Sciences (IES), the scientific branch of the USDOE. Within the NCES, the body that reports on national data is the National Forum on Education Statistics (NFES, 2018a). The Forum was established to produce and maintain, with the cooperation of states, comparable and uniform educational information and data on early childhood, elementary, and secondary schools which could be useful for policymaking at the federal, state, and local levels. State departments of education have the responsibility of ensuring that educational data are recorded, reported, and used at the state and local levels and reported to the USDOE as required. Although comparisons across all 50 U.S. states are beyond the scope of this paper, we chose to highlight the states of Connecticut and Indiana as case studies because they are in geographically different parts of the United States and can provide a glimpse into the similarities and differences which exist across states. Thus, our methodology included case and secondary analyses of national and state data.

The purpose of this paper is to share *what* attendance data are collected, *how* they are reported, and how they are *used* at the national and state level. To understand the data, it is necessary to first understand the context in which the data are recorded, reported, and used. We, therefore, start by providing an overview of the U.S. educational system, including its structure and its laws and statutes related to school attendance. Next, we discuss how data are recorded, reported, and used at the national level. We follow a similar format for reporting information from Connecticut and Indiana and minimize redundancy in our case studies by not repeating what is already specified as the educational context in the United States and mandatory requirements by the USDOE. Instead, our case studies focus on specific information relevant to each state. Our focus at all three levels also is primarily on public school education, kindergarten through 12th grade, to facilitate comparisons. We convey our findings to illustrate and draw similarities, differences, and, where possible, "best practices" across and between them. We highlight key findings from these multiple levels of analyses to aid in informing research, practice, and policy relative to consistent attendance data collection and usage to serve the best interests of all children. Searching for consistency has been a long-standing goal for researchers in truancy and absenteeism, too (Gentle-Genitty et al., 2015; Heyne et al., 2019).

1 Overview of the U.S. Educational Context

Diversity is interwoven throughout the U.S. educational context. First, the U.S. student population is diverse. As of fall 2020, there were 22.6 million (45.7%) White students, 13.8 million (27.9%) Hispanic students, 7.4 million (15%) Black students, 2.7 million (5.5%) Asian students, 2.2 million (4.5%) students of two or more races, 0.5 million (1%) American Indian/Alaska Native students, and 0.2 million (0.4%) Pacific Islander students (National Center for Education Statistics, 2020a). In the 2019–2020 school year, 7.3 million students ages 3–21 or 14% of the public school population received special education services (National Center for Education Statistics, 2020a). As of fall 2018, five million or 10.2% of public school students were English language learners (National Center for Education Statistics, 2020a).

Diversity also is evident in the U.S. educational system. In addition to public schools, there also are private, charter, and alternative Career and Technical Education schools. Over one-third of schools (i.e., approximately 32,461) are private elementary and secondary schools (National Center for Education Statistics, 2020a). In addition, homeschooling is allowed in the United States, and as of 2016 approximately 1.7 million (3.3%) K-12 students were homeschooled (National Center for Education Statistics, 2020b). Diversity is accentuated further by the fact that the United States has a decentralized education system in which education is considered the primary responsibility of states (UNESCO-IBE, 2007). However, to receive annual federal funding, states must provide certain information to the federal government.

Within each state, school districts operate public elementary and secondary schools within their boundaries and are administered and financed by their local communities and their respective state department of education. Districts are typically governed by locally elected school boards and headed by superintendents (Stevenson & Lee, 1995). School boards oversee the operations and the funding of schools. Superintendents are charged with overseeing the implementation of educational policies and practices. Although considerable local control is allowed, nonetheless, districts and schools are bound to comply with federal and state laws and state policies and procedures related to the recording, reporting, and utilization of data, including attendance and absenteeism data.

1.1 Relevant Laws and Mandates at the National Level

Thousands of laws and statutes govern U.S. education practices, many of which are tracked by the NCES. However, for the scope of this manuscript, we present an overview of the federal laws and statutes of most relevance to the recording, reporting, and usage of attendance data.

Department of Education Organization Act (1979)

This act authorizes the Office for Civil Rights (OCR) in the USDOE to ensure that schools comply with all civil rights laws under its jurisdiction, i.e., those that prohibit

78 discrimination in programs or activities that receive federal financial assistance from the USDOE. The OCR collects data directly from districts on a biennial basis (<https://ocrdata.ed.gov>).

Starting with the 2013–2014 school year, the OCR required all state educational agencies and schools serving kindergarten through 12th grade students to report the percentage of students who were chronically absent (CA). Prior to this time, there were no national data on CA, and most states were not collecting or reporting CA data.

For both the 2013–2014 and 2015–2016 data collection periods, the OCR defined CA as missing 15 or more days in a school year. As of the 2017–2018 school year, collection of CA data shifted to the USDOE’s EDEFACTS initiative where data are collected from state departments of education that have greater responsibility for quality control, and the definition of CA was changed from missing 15 or more days to missing 10% of more of school days (Attendance Works and Everyone Graduates Center, 2021). Under both definitions, CA counts include all absences: excused absences, unexcused absences, and absences due to disciplinary actions taken by the school. When CA rates are disaggregated by racial/ethnic groups, special education status, and SES status, disproportionalities are found that suggest some student groups are at a much higher risk of experiencing the negative outcomes associated with poor attendance than are others. Disproportionality in current CA rates will be presented in later sections.

The Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965 and Its Reauthorizations

The Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) of 1965 and its reauthorizations are also relevant because they represent the principal laws governing students in kindergarten through high school. The most recent reauthorizations of the ESEA Act include the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) of 2001 and the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) of 2015. Both NCLB and ESSA re-affirmed local control and expanded parental options (e.g., charter schools, private schools, home-schooling). Both also affirmed the need for schools to implement practices based on scientific research evidence and required accountability for results.

NCLB also stipulated that all states and territories must provide compulsory free and appropriate public education from the age of 6 or 7 to the age of 16 years. All 50 states comply with the NCLB requirements for compulsory education or go beyond them. For example, public education is free up to the age of 17 in Alabama and up to age 26 in Tennessee (National Center for Education Statistics, n.d.). NCLB also established the Institute of Education Sciences (IES) in the USDOE. In addition, NCLB included two provisions that had a strong influence on attendance policy and practice. First, NCLB was the first reauthorization of the ESEA Act that required states to report their truancy rates (albeit still allowing for states to determine their own definitions of truancy) even though most U.S. states had compulsory education laws and sanctions related to truancy over 100 years earlier (Katz, 1976). Second, in 2010

NCLB required each state to institute longitudinal student data systems. This requirement led to states, districts, and schools establishing electronic data systems that allowed them to calculate chronic absenteeism and other attendance-related metrics.

ESSA gives states the authority to develop a school accountability framework based on their unique contexts that could best result in college- and career-readiness outcomes for their students. ESSA requires schools to report on four indicators in their accountability frameworks, namely academic achievement, student growth, graduation rates, and the progress of English learners. In addition, ESSA leaves the “fifth indicator,” known as the School Quality/Student Success (SQSS) indicator, to the discretion of each state. Any chosen SQSS indicator must: (a) apply to every student, (b) be valid and reliable, (c) identify meaningful differences across schools, (d) be comparable and applicable across the state, (e) be measured and reported for all students and disaggregated by student sub-group, and (f) have a proven impact on achievement.

With the passage of ESSA, chronic absenteeism (CA) rates came to the forefront as an example of a quality indicator, along with measures of student engagement, discipline rates, and postsecondary readiness. Table 1 provides a summary of the arguments in support of CA as an SQSS indicator (Attendance Works, 2016). Thirty-six states, including Connecticut and Indiana, and the District of Columbia chose to include CA in their accountability frameworks (Jordan & Miller, 2017). Both Connecticut and Indiana define CA as absent 10% or more of a school year regardless of the reason for the absence.

Table 1 Every Student Succeeds Act Criteria for a School Quality/Student Success (SQSS) Indicator and Justifications for Chronic Absenteeism (CA) to Serve as an SQSS Indicator

ESSA Criteria for SQSS Indicators	Justification for CA as an SQSS Indicator
Must be reliable and valid	Attendance and CA data are measured repeatedly; CA measures the amount of school students miss
Must identify meaningful differences across schools	CA rates vary across schools in a non-random way & highlight meaningful differences in student engagement (Jordan & Miller, 2017)
Must be comparable and applicable across the entire state	Schools must report CA rates to the Office of Civil Rights (OCR) in the U.S. Department of Education; CA is defined as missing 10% or more of school
Must be measured and reported for all students and disaggregated by student sub-group	Every student is included in attendance counts; CA data can be reported by student sub-groups within each school, district, and state; schools are required to do so to meet OCR data reporting requirements
Must have a proven impact on achievement	Numerous studies link CA to lower student achievement (e.g., Kearney & Graczyk, 2020)

Note: Table adapted from Attendance Works (2016)

Congressional Mandate: Report on the Condition of Education

In addition, the U.S. Congress mandated that the NCES produce an annual report, titled the *Report on the Condition of Education*, to summarize the latest data on education in the United States. The most current report (Irwin et al., 2021) includes 86 indicators with data compiled from multiple sources. Examples of indicators most relevant to school attendance include enrollment rates, school crime and safety, children's internet access at home, dropout rates, and high school graduation rates.

Taken together, the preceding overview of the organization of schooling in the U.S. and federal laws and policies relevant to school attendance can now serve as a backdrop for a discussion of how attendance and absenteeism data are recorded, reported, and used at both the national and state levels.

2 Attendance/Absenteeism Data Recording, Reporting, and Usage at the National Level

As mentioned earlier, the NCLB Act prompted the establishment of the IES that houses the NCES and the NFES. Improving the quality, collection, reporting and usage of school attendance data is one of the priorities of the NFES. As a result, it has produced several guides that focus on school attendance data (e.g., National Forum on Education Statistics, 2009; 2018a, b; 2021). We will be sharing information from these guides in the sections that follow.

2.1 Attendance/Absenteeism Data Recording and Reporting at the National Level

In the United States, schools are required to record and report metrics related to both attendance and absences. Elementary schools have traditionally collected and recorded school attendance and absenteeism data once or twice a day. Secondary schools have traditionally collected attendance and absenteeism data multiple times a day, typically at the start of the day and for each class. However, the ways in which attendance and absenteeism data are collected and recorded can vary. In both elementary and secondary schools, classroom teachers are often responsible for collecting and recording student attendance and absences. In some schools, absences reported by parents or caregivers, such as through a dedicated absence-reporting hotline, are collected by office staff who then transfer the information to an electronic data system. In other schools, reported absences are entered directly into an electronic data system.

As noted earlier, states and school districts must provide certain information to the federal government to receive federal funding, including school attendance and absenteeism data. The reporting of school attendance and absenteeism data typically flows from individual schools to their respective district, from districts to their respective state department of education, and from the state departments

of education to the USDOE. Reported data often are recorded in the Common Core of Data (CCD), the USDOE’s primary database on public elementary and secondary education (<https://nces.ed.gov/ccd/>). In addition to attendance and absenteeism data, states are required to report other related data such as established compulsory attendance age, instructional days, minimum instructional hours, and kindergarten attendance (National Center for Education Statistics, 2020a).

To aid in the recording and reporting of absenteeism data, the NFES has provided definitions of excused and unexcused absences (National Forum on Education Statistics, p. 15, 2009). These definitions are as follows:

Excused Absence: A student is not present at school or at a school-endorsed or sponsored activity, but is temporarily excused from attendance because he or she: 1. is ill and attendance in school would endanger his or her health or the health of others; 2. has an immediate family member who is seriously ill or has died; 3. is observing a recognized religious holiday of his or her faith; or 4. is otherwise excused from school in accordance with board policies.

Unexcused Absence: A student is not present at school or at a school-endorsed or sponsored activity without acceptable cause or authorization.

Table 2 Taxonomy of Attendance Codes by Category in the US (National Forum on Educational Statistics, 2018)

Category 1: Present	Category 2: Not-Attending/Absent
1. Present-In school, regular instructional program	1. Absent-Non-instructional activity recognized by state, district, or school (e.g., jury duty)
2. Present-Out of school, school-approved extracurricular or co-curricular activity (e.g., athletic competition)	2. Absent-Religious observation
3. Present-Nontraditional school setting, regular instructional program (e.g., off-campus distance education)	3. Absent-Illness, injury, health treatment, or examination
4. Present-Out of school, regular instructional program activity (e.g., field trip)	4. Absent-Family emergency or bereavement
5. Present-Disciplinary action, receiving instruction (e.g., in-school suspension)	5. Absent-Disciplinary action, not receiving instruction (e.g., out-of-school suspension)
	6. Absent-Legal or judicial requirement (e.g., participating on an election board)
	7. Absent-Family activity (e.g., family vacation)
	8. Absent-Student employment
	9. Absent-Transportation not available
	10. Absent-Student is skipping school (without parent or school approval)
	11. Absent-Situation unknown

82 In addition, the NFES (2018a) published a *Forum Guide to Collecting and Using Attendance Data* to help states, districts, and schools improve their collection, reporting, and usage of attendance data to boost school and student outcomes. The guide provides a taxonomy designed to be exhaustive that includes 16 mutually exclusive attendance and absenteeism codes organized under two categories, “Present/Attending” and “Absent/Not Attending.” Table 2 contains the 16 taxonomy codes. Although states and districts are not required to use these definitions or the taxonomy, in practice there is considerable consistency between the NFES definitions and guidelines and those used by states and districts, as will be seen in the two case studies.

The initial response in the United States to the COVID-19 pandemic in March 2020 was to cancel all in-person instruction for the remainder of the 2019–20 school year; since then, U.S. schools have had to implement a variety of learning models, i.e., remote, synchronous, asynchronous, hybrid, and in-person (Nickerson & Sulkowski, 2021).

The National Forum on Education Statistics (2021) responded by publishing a companion guide to their 2018 guide. The purpose of the 2021 guide is to provide guidance on best practices for the collection, reporting and usage of attendance data when virtual education is being conducted. The 2021 guide describes a movement away from a narrow focus on the traditional “seat time” conceptualization of attendance relevant to in-person learning to a broader focus that considers attendance, participation, and engagement that could be relevant to a variety of learning models. The guide also provided examples of operational definitions of these constructs as they are being used at state and local levels to monitor student “attendance” data during the pandemic. Examples of these additional metrics include tracking participation or engagement rather than traditional attendance; expanding the definition of “checking in” to include online-meeting attendance, turning in work, and telephone calls with school staff; and expanding attendance/absenteeism codes to include such reasons as risk avoidance, quarantine, or preference for remote learning. In practice, many U.S. schools have expanded their attendance tracking during the pandemic to include measures of engagement and participation as the case studies will demonstrate.

Prior to the pandemic, the average daily attendance (ADA) rates in U.S. schools, defined as the average percent of enrolled students in attendance during the prior year, were approximately 95% for elementary schools, 92% for secondary schools, and 94% for elementary and secondary schools combined (National Center for Education Statistics, 2019a). In the fall 2020 ADA rates were 92% for elementary school students, 90% for middle school students, and 89% for high school students (Carmignucci et al., 2021), reflecting the impact of the pandemic.

State plans for accountability, which must be submitted to the USDOE on an annual basis, also capture the ways in which states propose to increase active engagement with students and how support services are provided. In these plans, many schools are using a tiered approach, such as a Multi-Tiered System of Supports (MTSS)

framework, to address student absenteeism and provide services to students who are chronically absent (National Association of School Psychologists [NASP], 2022). Several state departments of education (Connecticut, Illinois, Louisiana, New Jersey, New Mexico, Tennessee, and Washington) endorse the use of a tiered system of supports and provide resources on their websites to support schools in its implementation (e.g., Connecticut State Department of Education, 2017).

The most recent OCR biennial publicly available CA data were collected during the 2017–2018 school year, prior to the pandemic. The data are noteworthy in several ways. First, the data revealed that over eight million students in the United States were CA. In addition, while the overall CA rate in the United States was 16%, CA rates were highest for students who were Native American (29%), Black (23%), with disabilities (23%), and Hispanic (17%). The data also revealed that 27% of schools had extremely high ($\geq 30\%$) or high (20–29%) CA rates and over 50% of students who were CA attended those schools (Attendance Works and Everyone Graduates Center, February 2021). Taken together, these data reveal that CA in the United States persists at an elevated level, is *not* equally distributed across student groups or schools, and a greater percentage of students in certain groups and attending certain schools are at disproportionately greater risk of experiencing CA and the negative outcomes associated with it.

Although national data are not currently available, data from several diverse states (i.e., Connecticut, Michigan, Ohio, Virginia, and California) indicate that CA rates for the 2021–2022 school year have at least doubled compared to pre-pandemic levels (Chang et al., 2022). Although the elevated CA rates reported at all levels (i.e., national, state, district, and school) since the start of the pandemic include absences due to COVID-related illness and quarantine and an unprecedented mix of remote learning, in-person learning, and hybrid (i.e., combinations of remote and in-person) learning, it's also the case that the collection and reporting of data, including chronic absenteeism rates, were disrupted (U.S. Department of Education, n.d.). These factors need to be considered in interpreting results.

2.2 Attendance/Absenteeism Data Usage at the National Level

As mentioned earlier, the OCR uses CA and related data (e.g., truancy, suspensions, and expulsions) to determine and redress any civil rights violations that the data reveal. Also as mentioned earlier, since the passage of ESSA, CA data are used in most U.S. states as a fifth indicator of school quality. In addition to their usage by the OCR and as ESSA indicators, these data are used by other DOE offices. For example, the Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services (OSERS) in the USDOE monitors these indicators specifically as they apply to students with disabilities.

Attendance data are utilized to calculate various other metrics such as average daily attendance. Absenteeism data also are subsequently used to calculate various metrics, such as chronic absenteeism rates and truancy rates, the latter being defined as the number of days or percent of unexcused/unauthorized absences.

84 The USDOE makes collected data publicly available in numerous ways, such as providing access to data sets, data tables, reports such as the annual *Report on the Condition of Education*, reader’s guides, glossaries, publications such as *At-A-Glance* and *Data Point*, guides to additional resources, and websites such as *Ed Data Express* (<https://eddataexpress.ed.gov>). As a result, the data are frequently used by policy-makers, researchers, state departments of education, media outlets, regional offices

Table 3 Examples of U.S. Attendance/Absenteeism and Related Data Recorded, Reported and Used at the National Level*

Category	Type of Data Collected
School & District Characteristics	Total number of students enrolled in school*
Attendance	Chronic student absenteeism rates, including excused and unexcused absences* Average daily attendance rates
Discipline	K-12 students who received one or more suspensions*(in-school suspensions; out-of-school suspensions) Preschool and K-12 students expelled*
Harassment and Bullying	Number of reported allegations of harassment or bullying of K-12 students based on sex, race, color, or national origin; disability; sexual orientation; religion Number of K-12 students reported as harassed or bullied based on sex, race, color, or national origin; disability* Whether a local education agency (LEA) has a written policy or policies prohibiting harassment or bullying of students based on all the following: sex, race, color, national origin, or disability
Pathways to College and Career	High school graduation rates* High school drop-out rates* Number of students ages 16–19 years who participated in LEA-operated high school equivalency exam preparation program* Number of K-12 students retained by grade* Whether the school is connected to the Internet through fiber-optic connection Whether the school has wi-fi access in every classroom Whether the school allows students to take home school-issued devices that can be used to access the Internet for student learning Whether the school allows students to bring to school student-owned devices that can be used to access the Internet for student learning Number of wi-fi enabled devices provided by the school to students for student learning use
Teachers and other personnel (funded with federal, state, and/or local funds)	Number of FTE counselors Number of FTE psychologists Number of FTE social workers Number of FTE nurses

Notes: Source – Office of Civil Rights Data Collection and EDFacts Initiative; * = disaggregated by race, sex, disability status, English learner status

of education, school districts, local schools, other organizations, and the public. Publicly available data allow for secondary analyses by external organizations, such as grade level comparisons of student attendance by instructional model (Carminucci et al., 2021); comparisons of CA rates by state, district, school, or student subgroup (Hamilton Project, 2021); and nationwide CA levels by school concentration of poverty (Attendance Works and Everyone Graduates Center, 2021). In summary, the data collected by the USDOE are utilized in a variety of ways, both internally by multiple departments within the USDOE as well as externally by multiple entities. Table 3 includes a listing of attendance/absenteeism and related data that are recorded, reported, and used at the national level in the United States.

With the national perspective serving as a foundation, we now provide case studies for two states – Connecticut and Indiana – in our search for consistency in attendance data recording, reporting, and utilization.

3 Case Study I: Connecticut

Connecticut is a state in the northeastern part of the United States with a population of approximately 3.6 million people (U.S. Census Bureau, 2021). Connecticut has a four-year high school graduation rate of 88.4%, compared to the national graduation rate of 85.3% (U.S. News & World Report, 2021). As of School Year (SY) 2022, Connecticut's student body consists of a variety of racial/ethnic groups with 48.6% White, 29.0% Hispanic/Latino, 12.6% Black, 5.1% Asian, and 4.3% 2 or more races (Connecticut State Board of Education, n.d.). Approximately 16.7% of students receive special education support, 8.8% are English learners, and approximately 40.6% are eligible for free or reduced lunch. According to U.S. News & World Report (2021), Connecticut ranks third out of the 50 states for its pre-kindergarten to 12th grade educational system, with the ranking based on student enrollment in pre-kindergarten, public school graduation rates, and standardized test scores.

3.1 Connecticut's Educational Context

As of SY 2021, Connecticut has 205 school districts with 1,507 schools and educational programs that serve 513,079 students in pre-kindergarten through 12th grade. Under Connecticut law, children between the ages of five and eighteen are required to attend school. Although Connecticut requires school attendance, it does not require public school attendance.

3.2 Attendance/Absenteeism Data Recording and Reporting in Connecticut

Definitions. In 2008 the Connecticut State Board of Education adopted the attendance definitions specified below for “In Attendance” and “Absent.” In 2012, the State Board further specified the excused and unexcused absence categories (Connecticut State Department of Education, 2013). It is important to note that these definitions do not preclude districts from establishing their own definitions for local use such as for the purposes of grading or determining eligibility for extracurricular activities. However, when reporting student attendance to the Connecticut State Department of Education, districts must adhere to the following definitions (Connecticut State Department of Education, 2008):

In Attendance: A student is considered to be “in attendance” if present at his/her assigned school, or an activity sponsored by the school (e.g., field trip), for at least half of the regular school day. Students who are tardy but are present for at least half of the regular school day, are considered in attendance.

Absent: A student who does not meet the definition for in attendance is deemed to be absent.

In the Connecticut general statutes, a child is identified as truant if the accumulation of unexcused absences reaches one of two thresholds: the child has four unexcused absences in a month (30 consecutive calendar days) or 10 unexcused absences in a school year (chapter 168, section 10–198a). A child is identified as chronically absent (CA), when a child is enrolled in school and their total number of absences at any time during the school year is equal to or greater than 10% of the total number of days that the student has been enrolled in that school for that school year (chapter 168, section 10–198c).

Connecticut’s CA rate includes excused absences, unexcused absences, and out-of-school suspensions (Connecticut State Department of Education, 2017). The state’s CA rate for SY 2022 was 24.9% compared to the 2018–19 school year, the last full pre-pandemic year for which the CA rate was 10.4%. The 14.5% difference represents an approximately 134% increase in the CA rate associated with the pandemic. Rates higher than the overall average rate were reported for students who are homeless (57.4%), free meal eligible (39.6%), students with disabilities (35.3%), students with high needs (34.9%), English learners (34.0%), and reduced-price meal eligible (26%) (Connecticut State Department of Education, 2022).

Board policy delineates two levels of excused absences (described below) for which school staff must receive or generate documentation for each instance of absence. The absence levels correspond with the total number of days absent within the school year.

Absent (Excused – Level 1): A parent or guardian may excuse the first nine absences in a school year *for any reason they approve*. The school must collect a note, or docu-

mentation of a live or technology mediated in-person explanation or conversation with the school nurse, which includes the absence dates, reason for absences and signature, from the parent or guardian and staff member receiving the excuse.

Absent (Excused – Level 2): Upon the 10th and any subsequent absence, Level 2 criteria apply for what may be considered an excused absence. The parent must provide a note and, in some cases, additional documentation for the following reasons:

- Student illness. (Note: to be deemed excused, an appropriately licensed medical professional must verify all student illness absences, regardless of the absence’s length.)
- Student’s observance of a religious holiday.
- Death in the student’s family or other emergency beyond the control of the student’s family.
- Mandated court appearances (additional documentation required).
- The lack of transportation that is normally provided by a district other than the one the student attends (parental documentation is not required for this reason).
- Extraordinary educational opportunities pre-approved by district administrators. (Opportunities must meet certain criteria.)

The Connecticut guidelines for excused and unexcused absences (2013) also explain how Level 1 and 2 absences could be applied to family holidays taken during the school year when school is in session. If, for example, the family holiday involved days 8–13 of a student’s absences, days 8 and 9 would be considered Level 1 absences and counted as excused. However, days 10–13 would be Level 2 absences and counted as unexcused. In other words, the criteria for Level 2 excused absences are more stringent, and family holidays during the school year that involve a 10th day or more of absences during a school year would not meet Level 2 criteria.

In addition to excused absences, Board policy specifies unexcused absences and disciplinary absences. They are defined as follows:

Absent (Unexcused): An absence is considered unexcused unless it either meets the definition for an excused absence or the absence meets the definition of a disciplinary absence.

Absent (Disciplinary): Students who are absent because of school or district disciplinary action (out-of-school suspensions or expulsions) are considered absent.

During the 2021 legislative session, Connecticut passed Public Act 21–46, An Act Concerning Social Equity and the Health Safety and Education of Children. Starting in the 2021–2022 school year, this law allows for students in grades kindergarten through 12th grade to take up to two non-consecutive mental health wellness days to attend to their own “emotional and psychological well-being in lieu of attending school.” The mental health wellness days are considered excused absences regardless of Level 1 or Level 2 status if appropriate parental permission for the absences is provided.

In addition to the creation of mental health wellness days, Public Act 21–46 required that the State Board of Education amend the definitions of excused and unexcused absences to include student engagement during virtual learning. Connecticut’s approach to amending these definitions was grounded in the state’s 2008 policy that considered a student “in attendance” if the student was in school or an

88 activity sponsored by their school for at least half of the regular school day. Thus, the state adapted this policy to specify that a student working remotely could be considered “in attendance” on a particular day if the total time spent on specified activities equaled at least half the school day (Connecticut State Department of Education, 2021). These activities include synchronous virtual classes, synchronous virtual meetings, time logged into electronic systems, and assignment submission/completion. Further, since students could demonstrate presence through asynchronous methods (e.g., assignment submission/completion) at any time during the day, including after school hours, and given that some students may not be able to participate in synchronous virtual classes, the Connecticut State Department of Education strongly recommends that attendance on remote days be recorded on the following day, so all students have a chance to submit/complete work. When all schools are expected to provide full-time, in-person learning for all students, virtual learning may be used in instances related to COVID-19 (i.e., isolation, quarantine, local outbreaks, individual elevated risk).

During the 2020–2021 school year, the Connecticut State Department of Education started to require districts to submit monthly attendance data on a temporary basis to allow for more timely data-based decision-making due to the pandemic. For example, as of October 2022, the year-to-date CA rate for all students was 22.7%, with the highest rates indicated for students who experience homelessness (49%), students who are free meal eligible (31.4%), and students with disabilities (30.3%) (Connecticut State Department of Education, Monthly Attendance Report). The Connecticut State Department of Education officially tracks attendance and absenteeism data statewide at the end of each school year. At that time, schools are required to report per student the number of days of membership within the district, the number of days in attendance, and whether the student met the criteria to be considered truant during the school year.

3.3 Attendance/Absenteeism Data Usage in Connecticut

In Connecticut attendance/absenteeism data are primarily used for district and school reporting, accountability systems, and development or maintenance of attendance teams. District attendance reports include disaggregated attendance data by several key variables: race/ethnicity, gender, special education status, free/reduced price meal eligibility, English learner status, grade level, and school. Attendance data also are displayed longitudinally by school year and by town. Although the primary purpose of this reporting is to identify schools needing additional support for chronic absenteeism challenges, a secondary purpose is to highlight schools successfully addressing chronic absenteeism who can serve as exemplars to others.

Connecticut law also requires schools to have policies and procedures in place to address truancy. Once a student becomes truant, the school is required to meet with the student’s parents within 10 school days. During the meeting, school staff are to work with the parents and students to develop a plan for the student’s successful

return to school. If there are barriers that exist “beyond the school walls,” then the school is expected to work with community agencies through the community’s Youth Service Bureau to provide the necessary supports to the student and their family. Particularly noteworthy for its discontinuation of a widespread practice in response to truancy, the Connecticut legislature passed Public Act (P.A.) 16–147, An Act Concerning the Recommendations of the Juvenile Justice Policy and Oversight Committee, in January of 2017 that forbids students to be referred to the juvenile court system due to defiance of school rules or truancy. The law became effective in August 2017. Furthermore, Section 9 of P.A. 16–147 also required the Connecticut State DOE to identify effective truancy interventions for implementation by local and regional boards of education. These interventions were compiled and are available on the Connecticut State DOE website in the catalog titled *Catalog of Truancy Intervention Models* (2018).

Data at the state, district, and school levels are also reported on an annual basis in publications referred to as “report cards.” Report cards can be accessed on the Connecticut state website (<https://edsight.ct.gov>) and on district and school websites. These report cards summarize a wealth of educational data, including the percentage of students chronically absent and the suspension/expulsion rates for the previous five years. Attendance data are further disaggregated by demographic subgroups.

More importantly from a prevention perspective, all these data are used to guide the work of Attendance Review Teams. According to An Act Concerning Chronic Absenteeism (2015), districts and schools are required to create and maintain district- or school-level attendance review teams to address CA under specific conditions. District attendance review teams must be created if the overall district CA rate is 10% or higher. A district attendance review team also may be created if the district has two or more schools with a school-wide CA rate of 15% or higher, even if the district-wide CA rate is under 10%; however, a school attendance review team may instead be created under this criterion. Last, each school within a district with a district CA rate of 15% or higher must have a school attendance review team at each of the schools. There are three main functions of the attendance review teams: (a) promote shared accountability and continuous improvement; (b) disaggregate, analyze, and use data to inform decision-making, and (c) generate a systemic response and improve policy and practice (Connecticut State Department of Education, 2017).

The attendance review teams use data to determine interventions within an MTSS framework that focuses on prevention (Tier 1) and early intervention (Tier 2) to minimize the number of students in need of intensive interventions (Tier 3) and to monitor student progress (Connecticut State Department of Education, 2017). In addition, local data are used beyond the context of schools. For example, the data provide a resource for district messaging about attendance to student caregivers. Attendance data are also used for outreach campaign efforts with community partners such as broad community messaging and opportunities to engage the community in addressing barriers to regular student attendance.

As mentioned earlier, Connecticut also uses their attendance data as part of their ESSA metrics for accountability (U.S. Department of Education, 2019). Indicator four in the state's ESSA plan states that the CA rate should not exceed 5% and points are awarded or rescinded based on deviance from that rate. Therefore, government authorities use attendance data for evaluating district and school performance as well as for educational funding.

As is true at the national level, Connecticut provides public access to a wealth of educational data. Pertinent to this paper, attendance, absenteeism, and other relevant data are accessible to researchers, policy makers, practitioners, external organizations, local authorities, and other interested individuals (see <https://edsight.ct.gov>).

4 Case Study II: Indiana

Indiana is a state in the Midwestern part of the United States with a population of approximately 6.8 million people (U. S. Census Bureau, 2021). Indiana has a four-year high school graduation rate of 88.1%, compared to the national graduation rate of 85.3% (U.S. News & World Report, 2021). Indiana's student body includes a variety of racial/ethnic groups with 66.1% White, 13.2% Hispanic, 12.5% Black/African American, 5.2% Multi-racial, 2.8% Asian, 0.2% Native American, and 0.1% Hawaiian or Pacific Islander (Indiana Department of Education). Approximately 45.9% of Indiana's students are economically disadvantaged, 15.5% receive special education support, and 6.6% are English learners. Indiana ranks ninth out of the fifty states in the United States with the ranking based on student enrollment in pre-kindergarten, public school graduation rates, and standardized test scores (U.S. News & World Report, 2021).

4.1 Indiana's Educational Context

As of October 2021, Indiana has approximately 1,870 schools in 403 school districts that serve 1,110,677 students in pre-kindergarten through 12th grade. Under Indiana Code (IC) § 20-33-2-6, children between the ages of 7–18 are required to attend school. In the state of Indiana attendance is taken seriously, and efforts are underway to improve and offer better options for school corporations, students, and stakeholders. In Indiana, the term “school corporation” refers to any corporation that has the authority by law to establish public schools and levy taxes for their maintenance.

Indiana Code §20-30-2 and 20-33-2 govern the requirements for attendance and its reporting. According to these codes, all schools – regardless of modality – have statutory obligations to respond to attendance, in particular chronic absenteeism and truancy, proactively and retroactively.

4.2 Attendance/Absenteeism Data Recording and Reporting in Indiana

In 2013 the Indiana state legislature passed IC 20-19-3-12.2 that directed the Indiana DOE to make reduction in absenteeism a priority and provided the currently used definitions of chronic absenteeism and habitual truancy in the state. The law also required that all schools with a “B-grade” or lower based on their accountability metrics to develop a plan to reduce CA as part of their school improvement plan. The definitions of CA and habitual truancy that follow are based on the 2013 legislation.

Definitions. Any individual who is at least seven (7) years of age and less than eighteen (18) years of age is bound by *compulsory attendance* requirements until the individual either graduates, becomes eighteen (18) years of age, or becomes at least sixteen (16) years of age and meets the requirements to withdraw from school before graduation. Indiana defines in attendance, habitual truancy, and chronic absenteeism as follows:

In Attendance: A student is in attendance when they are physically present and enrolled in a school or another location where the school’s educational program is being conducted during regular school hours on a day in which the educational programming is being offered.

Habitual Truancy: Any student who is enrolled at a public or nonpublic school and accumulates at least ten (10) unexcused absences during a school year is considered habitually truant.

Chronic Absenteeism: Any student who is absent from school for 10% or more of a school year for any reason is considered chronically absent.

When calculating attendance data, Indiana only includes students who spend most of the school year enrolled in the same school. For the 2020–2021 school year, the most recent year for which data are publicly available, Indiana’s overall CA rate was 18.5% (Indiana Department of Education, n.d.). Like the CA rates at the national level and in Connecticut, Indiana’s CA rates also vary across student groups. Student groups with higher CA rates than the overall average include Blacks at 38%, Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander at 28%, Hispanic at 25%, Multiracial at 25%, and American Indian at 22%.

The Indiana Department of Education (DOE) reviews school calendars to determine whether a school met the statutory requirement to provide at least 180 days of instruction during a school year. Indiana law also requires the following:

- Each governing body of a school corporation and charter school *must* have an *attendance policy* that outlines, at a minimum, the definitions and *conditions for excused and unexcused absences*. While this is not required for nonpublic schools, the Indiana Department of Education strongly recommends such schools have an attendance policy that aligns with these requirements.

- Each public and nonpublic school *must* maintain an accurate daily record of attendance for each student. There is an expectation that an accurate daily record of attendance includes an approach to accurately capture virtual attendance.
- Within 15 days of a new semester, each public high school principal must compile a list of names and last known addresses of students who did not graduate and are no longer enrolled at the school. The list must be made available to local community college and any training program for dropouts.

Beginning with the 2020–2021 school year, schools submit student-level information to the state through the Data Exchange system on an established cycle. There are options for data correction and updates made available to schools. From time to time, as during the pandemic, new codes for tracking and reporting via student information systems have been established.

Schools are expected to track daily student attendance from the beginning of the school year using the following eight codes, several of which were revised or added due to changes in instruction in response to the pandemic and are indicated as (NEW):

In Attendance: This code should be used when a student is considered “in attendance” at the physical school building, pursuant to the local attendance policy. This code should be used for non-virtual students. (NEW)

Virtual: This code should be used when a student is considered “in attendance” at the virtual program or virtual school, pursuant to the local attendance policy. This code should be used for virtual students. (NEW)

Virtual Due to COVID-19: This code should be used when a school must provide virtual instruction in lieu of in-person instruction due to COVID-19, and a student is considered “in attendance” pursuant to the local attendance policy. It refers to any activities in which a student is engaged in their educational instruction, such as packet pick-up, use of a one-to-one device, emailed instruction, etc. This code should be used for non-virtual students. (NEW)

Excused Absence: This code should be used when a student is not “in attendance” and such absence is deemed “excused,” pursuant to the local attendance policy. This code should be used for both virtual and non-virtual students.

Unexcused Absence: This code should be used when a student is not “in attendance,” and such absence is deemed “not excused,” pursuant to the local attendance policy. This code should be used for both virtual and non-virtual students.

Exempt: This code should be used when a student is not “in attendance” but is participating in one of the activities that is exempt by statute from consideration as an “absence.” This code should be used for both virtual and non-virtual students. (NEW)

Suspended: This code should be used when a student has been suspended pursuant to the local discipline policy. This code should be used for both virtual and non-virtual students. (NEW)

Expelled: This code should be used when a student has been expelled pursuant to the local discipline policy. This code should be used for both virtual and non-virtual students.

Indiana recently introduced a Model Attendance framework. According to this framework, students could be considered “model attendees” if they fulfill criteria for either “persistent attendance” or “improved attendance” (Indiana Department of Education, n.d.-a). *Persistent attendance* is defined as in attendance at least 96% of enrolled days during a school year. *Improved attendance* is defined as an increase of at least three percentage points from a student’s prior year’s attendance to the current school year. Indiana has set a long-term goal of having at least 90% of students achieving model attendee status. To achieve this goal, Indiana set interim targets each year for model attendance. These annual interim targets refer to expected progress needed to achieve the state’s long-term goal for model attendance. For 2021 the target was set at 76.3%, for 2022 the target is 79.7%, and for 2023 the target is 83.1%. The actual data, including the disaggregated data by student groups, can be accessed on the Indiana DOE website (Indiana Department of Education, n.d.-b).

Reporting for students who are habitually truant. Each superintendent or attendance officer must report a student who is habitually truant to an intake officer of the juvenile court or the Indiana Department of Child Services to proceed in accordance with Indiana Code § 31-30 through Indiana Code § 31-40. Any student between the ages of thirteen and fifteen who is habitually truant may *not* be issued an operator’s license or learner’s permit to drive a motor vehicle until the student is at least eighteen years of age. Each school or school corporation must report information to the Indiana Bureau of Motor Vehicles to indicate a student’s ineligibility for an operator’s license or learner’s permit due to the student’s habitual truancy. However, the school may periodically review the student’s eligibility.

Reporting for chronically absent students. Each superintendent or attendance officer must report a student that is habitually absent from school to an intake officer of the juvenile court or the Indiana Department of Child Services to proceed in accordance with Indiana Code § 31-30 through Indiana Code § 31-40. These legal requirements apply to schools, regardless of whether instruction and learning occurs in an on-site or off-site context.

4.3 Attendance/Absenteeism Data Usage in Indiana

In Indiana, the attendance/absenteeism data are used for funding purposes and the assessment of schools’ performance. The data are analyzed by the Indiana DOE’s Data Accountability team on an annual basis. Data are made publicly available, including trend data, to stimulate improvement and allow for comparisons. The data also are used to monitor rates of attendance/absence, to amend policies on school attendance and absence when needed, and, in some cases, to issue sanctions such as penalties for non-attendance. As mentioned earlier, such sanctions or penalties could include ineligibility for a driver’s license or learner’s permit for habitual truancy or a referral to juvenile court or to the Department of Child Services for habitual truancy or habitual absenteeism. With partnerships and collaboration, more of the

94 attendance and absenteeism data are being used to study practices and update evaluations, school policies, and programs.

As is true at the national level and for the state of Connecticut, Indiana also provides public access to a wealth of educational data, including the multiple types of attendance and absenteeism data described above. In addition, annual performance and progress reports on each school in Indiana, similar to Connecticut's report cards, are accessible through the Indiana Department of Education's website (<https://inview.doe.in.gov>) and the respective corporation's and school's websites. These reports also provide data disaggregated by student subgroups and include state averages for comparison purposes.

5 Discussion

Our quest for consistency in attendance data recording, reporting, and utilization in the United States led us to review educational policies and practices related to attendance data at the national level and for two representative U.S. states, Connecticut and Indiana. As can be seen in Table 4, states are complying with all national expectations. However, our in-depth case study analyses revealed inconsistencies in the ways in which attendance data are measured and used. This was a clear gap in the analysis for which future work is needed.

Highlights of major commonalities and differences are summarized in the next sections, followed by a discussion of their implications for research, policy, and practice.

5.1 Collection of Both Attendance and Absenteeism Data

Schools in the United States collect both attendance and absenteeism data. Collecting both types of data is important because a sole focus on absences limits the opportunity to explore such metrics as "persistent" or "satisfactory" attendance, and "improved" attendance. A frequently used heuristic for satisfactory attendance defines it as being in school at least 95% of the time (e.g., Attendance Works, 2016). Indiana defines persistent attendance, a similar construct, as in school at least 96% of the time. However, there currently is no gold standard for the definition of "persistent" or "satisfactory" attendance, providing an opportunity for researchers to systematically investigate various criteria for persistent or satisfactory attendance to determine which would be most strongly associated with positive student outcomes.

"Improved attendance" as a metric also is beneficial because it provides policy makers, practitioners, and researchers with opportunities to identify which students have improved their attendance over a specific time period. Indiana's criteria for improved attendance requires an increase of at least three percentage points from a student's prior year's attendance to the current school year, but we are unaware

Table 4 Cross-Case Analysis of U.S. Attendance Data to Record-Report-Use

Required	National			Connecticut			Indiana		
	Record	Report	Use	Record	Report	Use	Record	Report	Use
Attendance*	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Average Daily Attendance	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Absenteeism*	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Chronic absenteeism*	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Truancy (unexcused absences)*	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Suspensions*	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Expulsions*	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
High school graduation rates*	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
High school dropout rates*	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Excused absences	**	**	**	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Absent (Excused) – Level 1	—	—	—	✓	✓	✓	—	—	—
Absent (Excused) – Level 2	—	—	—	✓	✓	✓	—	—	—
Absences – Mental Health Days	—	—	—	✓	✓	✓	—	—	—
Model attendance	—	—	—	—	—	—	✓	✓	✓
Persistent attendance	—	—	—	—	—	—	✓	✓	✓
Improved attendance	—	—	—	—	—	—	✓	✓	✓

Notes: * = also disaggregated by student subgroups; ** = included in calculating chronic absenteeism; dashes in cell = not required

of any research that provides support for this criterion. A focus on improved attendance, however, would be helpful in monitoring student progress, regardless of the level of severity of student absenteeism at the start of the designated time span. Conversely, a metric such as “increased absenteeism” or “decreased attendance” could help identify the students whose attendance has deteriorated over a specific time period. To our knowledge, neither of these metrics is being used at the national level nor by the two states for which we conducted our case studies.

5.2 Chronic Absenteeism as a Metric

We also found consistency across the three cases in the definition of CA. The USDOE, Connecticut, and Indiana all define CA as being absent from school 10% or more of the time. The definition includes all absences: unexcused, excused, and absences due to the disciplinary actions of a school. The inclusive definition for CA is relevant because *all* absences, regardless of reason, limit a student’s ability to benefit from

96 the educational, social, and language enrichment opportunities available in school (Kearney & Graczyk, 2020).

There are, however, differences in the frequency of CA data collection. The Office of Civil Rights in the USDOE collects CA data on a biennial basis; Connecticut and Indiana collect CA data on an annual basis for accountability purposes. In addition, Connecticut is also temporarily tracking CA data monthly during the pandemic. Potential barriers to more frequent data collection would include the technology capabilities in schools to monitor attendance and absenteeism data and the interface of school level student information systems with systems used at the regional, state, and national levels. That said, Connecticut has found a way to overcome these barriers through EdSight, their interactive data portal for public school districts, schools, and programs.

5.3 Disaggregation of Chronic Absenteeism Data

All three entities disaggregate their CA data by student groups and the disaggregated data, described in a previous section, reveal significant discrepancies in CA rates across groups. According to national and state level data, students at greatest risk for CA include students who are Black, Hispanic, disabled, and living in poverty. In other words, across all three data sets, these student groups are at disproportionately greater risk for the negative outcomes associated with poor attendance.

Both Indiana and Connecticut have taken positive action to address chronic absenteeism and the disproportionality in their CA rates. Until the start of the pandemic, CA rates in Connecticut had been showing a steady decline since 2012. In addition, Connecticut law, as described earlier, requires that School Attendance Review Teams be established at district and/or school levels when CA rates reach certain thresholds. Both Connecticut and Indiana also have been providing guidance to schools on evidence-based prevention and intervention strategies to improve student attendance (Connecticut State Department of Education, 2017; Lochmiller, 2013). Connecticut has utilized an MTSS framework as an organizing structure for attendance review teams (Connecticut State Department of Education, 2017). At the national level, the Regional Educational Laboratory (REL) West, housed within the Institute of Education Sciences in the USDOE, provides a resource titled *Helpful Links about Multi-Tiered Attendance Interventions* to help schools and districts use a multi-tiered approach to school attendance (REL West, n. d). Other states using an MTSS framework for attendance include Illinois, Louisiana, New Jersey, New Mexico, Tennessee, and Washington.

5.4 Taxonomy of Attendance and Absenteeism Codes

As mentioned earlier, in 2009 the National Forum on Education Statistics (NFES) provided operational definitions for excused and unexcused absences. In 2018 the NFES also provided a taxonomy of 16 mutually exclusive attendance and absenteeism

codes organized under the categories of “Present/Attending” and “Absent/Not Attending.” We present those codes in Table 2.

Both Connecticut and Indiana use many, but not all, of the codes in the NFES taxonomy. There also are differences. While the definitions for excused and unexcused absences in Indiana are like the NFES definition, Connecticut differentiates between unexcused absences and absences due to disciplinary actions taken by the school. In addition, Connecticut categorizes excused absences by levels, depending on the number of days a student has been absent. Level 1 absences refer to the first nine absences in a school year and are considered “excused” regardless of the reason a parent provides for the absences. Level 2 absences, covering absences of ten or more days in a school year, require that more stringent criteria be met. Although we appreciate Connecticut’s efforts to intensify requirements for absences that go beyond the approximately 5% threshold that distinguishes Level 1 and Level 2 excused absences, we are not aware of any research that supports this practice.

Indiana does not differentiate levels in their absenteeism classifications. However, Indiana has gone beyond the categories used by the USDOE and Connecticut by tracking “Model Attendance” data that include “Persistent Attendance” and “Improved Attendance.”

The onset of the pandemic heightened the need to reflect and revise the way in which schools viewed attendance. Moving away from the “seat time” model of attendance most relevant to in-person learning, the USDOE recommended a broader focus that included attendance, participation, and engagement (National Forum on Education Statistics, 2021). Connecticut and Indiana modified their attendance codes to include codes for virtual (remote) learning that aligned with the USDOE recommendations. During virtual learning, Connecticut counts a variety of activities toward attendance, including synchronous classes, synchronous virtual meetings, time logged into electronic systems, assignment submission/completion, and asynchronous activities (e.g., time a student utilizes to complete assignments outside of school hours). Indiana’s codes are less specific, but during COVID-19 related virtual learning Indiana schools can count any activities in which a student is engaged in their educational instruction toward attendance. We believe that the inclusion of engagement metrics is beneficial whether students are in remote, in-person, or hybrid learning environments.

5.5 Defining and Responding to Truancy

In the United States, each state is responsible for defining truancy and procedures for schools to follow when a student’s truancy reaches a certain threshold. Both Connecticut and Indiana define truancy as unexcused absences, and both use a threshold of ten or more unexcused absences in a school year as a point at which schools must address a student’s truancy. In addition, Connecticut also requires schools to act when students have four or more unexcused absences in a month. Both states specify how schools are to respond. A difference between the two states is that Indiana

- 98** schools could refer students to the court system, while Connecticut law forbids court involvement. In our experience, when a referral to the juvenile justice system is an option, most school staff view it as a last resort.

5.6 National, State, District and School Annual Reports of Attendance and Absenteeism Metrics

The USDOE, Connecticut and Indiana provide publicly available data about education in a myriad of ways, as described in previous sections. These annual reports provide valuable information regarding a variety of attendance and absenteeism metrics. We believe that the data included in these reports and the multiple pathways to access the data are beneficial for several reasons. First, the reports provide meaningful information in an easy-to-read format for a variety of stakeholders. Second, having multiple pathways to the data allows for improved visibility and access to the data. Third, requiring schools, districts, and states to provide the data included in the reports also enhances accountability. In our experience, the information in these reports is widely used by a variety of stakeholders, including prospective home buyers in a school's catchment area.

5.7 Future Directions for Research, Policy, and Practice

Taken together, our investigation highlighted a variety of practices, procedures, and issues that are relevant to research, policy, and practice. Considering these, we make the following recommendations:

1. Researchers, policymakers, and practitioners should utilize measures of attendance and absenteeism in their work. In addition, as mentioned earlier, the onset of the pandemic required schools to restructure their view of attendance by moving away from the "seat time" model to one that focuses more heavily on engagement. Future research is needed to provide empirically supported operational definitions of constructs such as persistent or satisfactory attendance, improved attendance, engagement, and chronic absenteeism that are linked to short-term outcomes such as academic achievement and long-term outcomes such as college and career readiness. In addition, it would be important that future research take a bioecological perspective and one that considers other factors such as functional impairment (Kearney, 2022; Melvin et al., 2019).

2. Schools, districts, regions, states, and national departments of education should routinely disaggregate their absenteeism data to identify groups at heightened risk of school attendance problems. National and state level data in the United States clearly indicate that disproportionalities exist. States and national departments of education should hold schools accountable to redress identified disproportionalities, and policy makers at all levels need to ensure that educators have the professional learning opportunities, tools, and resources they need to do this work effectively.

3. A tiered framework, such as an MTSS framework, could serve as an organizing structure in which to embed evidence-based practices and policies to promote attendance for all students (e.g., Kearney & Graczyk, 2014, 2020). However, research is needed to determine the factors that influence implementation of the framework, such as fidelity, and how implementation of the framework influences student, family, and school level outcomes.

4. The NFES taxonomy with its 16 mutually exclusive categories could serve as a useful resource when development or refinement of an attendance and absenteeism coding system is warranted.

5. Although we found similarities in the definition of truancy used by Connecticut and Indiana, truancy is not defined consistently across the 50 U.S. states (Gentle-Genitty et al., 2015). Without a consistent definition of truancy, researchers, practitioners, and policy makers are constrained in their ability to conduct comparative analyses and in their efforts to prevent and intervene effectively to address truancy in the United States and internationally. It also is essential to note that truancy is a symptom of a much broader social problem and, as such, warrants interventions with an ecological perspective that incorporates a simultaneous focus on society, systems, schools, caregivers, and students (Gentle-Genitty & Taylor, 2021).

6. National, state, and local educational entities should provide the public with access to attendance and absenteeism data via multiple pathways and in a variety of forms. In the United States, for example, annual reports of school attendance and absenteeism data are available at the national, state, and local levels. Of particular relevance for the general public are publications such as Connecticut's school report cards and Indiana's school annual performance and progress reports that provide attendance, absenteeism, and other relevant data in easily digestible formats.

7. Schools need the technology that would allow them to access attendance data quickly so they can monitor and respond in a timely fashion to changes and trends in their data. Connecticut's system could serve as a model for the United States, other countries, regions, or states interested in pursuing technology that would allow for more frequent collection and utilization of attendance data.

5.8 Limitations

Although we searched extensively for information at the national and state levels to include in this paper, we acknowledge that we may have overlooked some relevant information to the purpose of this paper. Omissions could be due to our search procedures. Omissions also could be due to the challenges inherent in attempting to access specific elements from the multitudinous data sets, tables, and reports available. To help ensure accuracy in reporting, we did seek verification from representatives of the Connecticut State Department of Education and the Indiana Department of Education. At the national level we ensured accuracy by utilizing data compiled by the NCES and, when outside references were used, by verifying that the secondary analyses were conducted with data compiled by the NCES. In addition, we

100 reported on two out of the 50 U.S. states. The extent to which the results from these two states can be generalized to all 50 U.S. states limits external validity. However, reporting on all 50 states was well beyond the scope and space limitations of this article. As a result, we intentionally chose Connecticut and Indiana for our case studies because they represent states within different regions of the United States.

6 Conclusion

In the United States, the past decade has seen an upsurge in the recording, reporting, and usage of school attendance and related data at the national, state, and local levels. Multiple types of attendance and absenteeism data are publicly available and have helped to guide both policy and practice. We have attempted to highlight contributions at the national and state levels that could serve as springboards for international researchers, policymakers, practitioners, governmental and non-governmental organizations, and individuals in their efforts to improve attendance and address school attendance problems. Unfortunately, our review also revealed that disproportionalities across student groups stubbornly persist and must be redressed. Policies, research, and practice that focus on meaningful data utilization and effective preventative and strategic interventions across *all* student groups must be an explicit and critical focus at the international, national, regional, state, and local levels in the years to come.

Acknowledgement

State authorities and partners were instrumental in preparing the two state case studies included in this manuscript. On behalf of the state of Connecticut, special thanks are given to Kari Sullivan and Ajit Gopalakrishnan, and for Indiana, special thanks are given to James Taylor and Cathy Danyluk. No exchange of funds was received for this report.

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School Attendance and Absence in England: Working with Data to Inform Policy and Practice Beneficial to Young People

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Abstract: This paper presents a comprehensive overview of the recording, reporting, and use of data pertaining to school attendance and absence in England. To establish a foundation, we outline the educational context in England, alongside an explanation of the legal framework guiding the collection and use of attendance and absence data. Subsequently, we elucidate the definition and documentation of various types of absence in England, the methodologies employed for data collection and dissemination, as well as the utilisation of this data for benchmarking purposes. Notably, attendance serves as a key performance indicator for schools, Trusts, and Local Authorities, aiming to improve the educational outcomes of young people. Through a critical examination of the current policy and practice in England concerning data on school attendance and absence, we identify strengths and weaknesses. Based on our findings, we propose additional actions to improve the consistency of data collection and foster the effective reporting and use of data to support prompt responses as needed. Through these suggestions, our endeavour is to drive continuous improvement and optimise outcomes for young people in England.

Keywords: school attendance, school absence, school attendance data, reporting, England, policy, practice

There is a rich literature on attendance and absence in English schools (some recent examples being Burtonshaw & Dorrell, 2023; Education Endowment Foundation, 2022; HM Government, 2022e), but a clear gap exists regarding recording, reporting and utilising school attendance data. Our article contributes to filling this gap by (a) providing a comprehensive overview of the current landscape regarding data on school attendance and absence; and (b) offering recommendations for policy and practice. The content of this study primarily relies on governmental documents and the extensive experience of authors SG and VF with the educational context and legal framework in England. All three authors share a common mission: to promote the effective utilisation of school attendance data, ultimately aiming to improve access to education for all young people and, consequently, enhance outcomes for them.

To establish context, Section 1 presents an overview of the educational environment in England, and Section 2 presents the associated legal framework. Section 3 draws attention to the codes used to record attendance and absence, while Section 4 clarifies the methods of reporting data and the specific nature of the reported data. Section 5 delves into how this data is used at national, local, and school levels.

106 Additionally, Sections 3 to 5 address the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the recording, reporting, and use of data on attendance and absence. In Section 6, a critical reflection on the current systems and practices reveals both strengths and limitations, culminating in a range of policy and practice recommendations. Our overarching aim is for the power of data to be harnessed to create an environment in England that maximises educational opportunities for young people (i.e., school-aged children and adolescents).

1 The Educational Context in England

In the United Kingdom, which comprises England, Wales, Scotland, and Northern Ireland, there exist both similarities and differences concerning laws, regulations, policies, and practices related to school attendance. This paper focuses on England.

1.1 Compulsory Education

In England, it is mandatory for young people to receive a full-time education starting in the school term following their fifth birthday (Education Act, 1996). Prior to 2013, they were required to remain in education until the end of the summer term after turning 16. However, a change in the law in 2013 extended the mandatory education, employment, or training period until the age of 18 (Education and Skills Act, 2008).

The education system in England offers free education to young people between the ages of 3 and 18. Nursery school is available from the age of 3, followed by transition to primary school at the age of 4 or 5. Subsequently, young people move on to secondary school in the school year following their 11th birthday. To comply with the requirements of the Education and Skills Act (2008), education beyond the age of 16 is provided through secondary school or college. This provision may include work or volunteering (of at least twenty hours) alongside part-time education or training, leading to regulated qualifications or participation in an apprenticeship, traineeship, or supported internship.

Any institution that offers full-time education to five or more young people of compulsory school age must be registered with the Department for Education (DfE, 2018). Although there is currently no legal definition of full-time education, for the purposes of registration with the DfE, it is understood to mean the provision of the majority or entirety of a young person's education.

1.2 Types of Educational Provision

In England, education is primarily delivered through mainstream schools, where young people of all abilities are educated together, with additional support for those with identified learning needs. There is a strong emphasis on inclusion and equality, underpinned by legislation. Mainstream schools organise education based

on age-related year groups, and typically, young people progress through their compulsory education within their designated year group. It is uncommon for young people to be held back a year, as this practice is discouraged in England. While parents (meaning parents or carers) have the option to request that very young children repeat their first non-compulsory school year, this is not a common occurrence.

Special education school settings are available for young people who require a level of support that mainstream schools cannot provide, due to their high levels of need. There are also alternative education settings that serve as temporary education arrangement to support pupils with behavioural, physical, or mental health needs.

In addition, England maintains a selective grammar school system, where entry is based on an examination taken in the final year of primary school to assess academic ability. Some grammar schools are private fee-paying schools while others are not. However, it is important to note that this type of provision is not available throughout the entire country.

1.3 Changes in the Educational Landscape

In the past two decades, the educational landscape in England has undergone significant transformations. Governments, one after another, have not only encouraged but also, more recently, mandated schools to transition from being maintained by local government to become independent entities that still receive direct funding from the government.

Consequently, a diverse range of educational provision has emerged. While some schools continue to be maintained by the Local Authority, which is a local government administrative area, others have become Single Academy Trusts or have joined forces with other schools to establish Multi-Academy Trusts. These Single and Multi-Academy Trusts (hereafter referred to as Trusts) operate under the governance of a separate board, independent from the Local Authority.

It appears that the government increasingly expects schools to embrace this model of education delivery, driven by the underlying rationale of raising standards. According to the government's perspective, "We need a stronger and fairer system that will allow all children to feel the benefits of strong trusts if we are to deliver the ambitions set out in this white paper" (DfE, 2022d, p. 46).

2 The Legal Framework in England

The first legislation to enforce school attendance and eradicate child labour was the Education Act (1870). It mandated that young people between the ages of 5 and 10 attend school. Since then, England has established a comprehensive system of laws and regulations that have undergone amendments and updates over the years,

108 through a series of Acts of Parliament. These measures aim to enhance access to primary and secondary education.

The Department for Education (DfE) serves as the government department responsible for young people's services and education. Its purview includes early years, schools, higher and further education policy, apprenticeships, and broader skills. The DfE formulates policies, drafts laws, and develops regulations for parliamentary approval. The Secretary of State for Education, a minister within the UK government, oversees the department's activities.

Local Authorities assume the responsibility for administering the statutory duties related to education and required of local government (Education Act, 1996). These duties encompass ensuring sufficient educational provision, facilitating school transportation, fostering school improvement, monitoring school attendance, and initiating legal actions if necessary. While Local Authorities may have different levels of resources, for attendance monitoring purposes they are expected to review data, offer guidance and support, and ensure that every young person receives an education suitable for their age, abilities, and aptitude, whether at school or through education at home.

2.1 Statutes and Regulations

In this section, we will outline the statutes and regulations that were applicable as of April 2022. These legal provisions pertain to young people of compulsory school age. Schools, Trusts, and Local Authorities are obligated to adhere strictly to the statutory guidance issued by the DfE. The following is a selection of laws within the intricate legal framework that the authors consider to be the most significant regarding attendance.

In England, the school year consists of 39 weeks or 195 days, divided into three terms and six half terms, with school holidays occurring between each half term. The three terms take place between September and December, January and March or April (depending on the Easter date), and March or April through to July. The specific dates of these terms vary annually due to their alignment with public holidays. These dates are determined not at a national level, but by Trusts and Local Authorities. This variability can pose challenges for parents with children attending different schools or within different Local Authorities, potentially impacting attendance. The variability in dates can also impact the comparability of attendance and absence data from one year to the next.

There exist laws and regulations relating to various aspects, such as pupils with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) and those with Health Needs. These laws outline the requirements to support young people in accessing education and address issues of missed education (DfE, 2013). Additional laws govern child performance (acting and modelling) and child employment, including some outdated local bylaws. These provisions aim to safeguard a young person's education against any adverse effects caused by performing or employment obligations.

Furthermore, Local Authorities bear a legal responsibility to provide education after a young person's absence of fifteen days, particularly if health-related concerns are involved (DfE, 2013). When schools identify a need for provision, they will request Local Authorities to address the situation, but the decision-making process may vary due to different criteria applicable at the local level. Such provisions could involve remote learning, specialised support, or attendance at alternative educational or therapeutic facilities.

2.2 Duty Placed on Parents, School Attendance Orders, and Children Missing Education

Parents have a legal duty, as outlined in Section 7 of the Education Act (1996), to ensure that their child of compulsory school age receives a suitable education, either through regular attendance at school or otherwise. The definition of "regular attendance" was tested in the Supreme Court case of *Isle of Wight Council versus Platt*, where it was determined that regular attendance is defined "in accordance with the rules prescribed by the school" (*Isle of Wight Council, Appellant, v. Platt, Respondent*, 2017). Receiving an education "otherwise" refers to young people who are home-educated and therefore not registered at a school, a choice that parents have the right to make. Failure by parents to ensure their child receives a suitable education can result in penalties of up to £2,500 in fines, imprisonment for up to three months, and/or the imposition of a parenting order, which may include attending parenting classes or receiving one-on-one parenting support.

When a young person is not enrolled in school or receiving a deemed "suitable" education (suitable according to age, ability, and aptitude, according to the Education Act, 1996), the Local Authority can apply for a school attendance order. This order compels parents to register their child at a specified school, and failure to comply can lead to prosecution. Local Authorities are responsible for initiating prosecutions and must conduct their investigations in accordance with the standards outlined in the Police and Criminal Evidence Act (1984), which specifies standards for interviewing and evidence gathering.

Children missing education are the responsibility of the Local Authority. Under section 436A of the Education Act (1996), Local Authorities are legally obligated to make arrangements to identify, to the best of their ability, children who are missing education (DfE, 2013/2016). Statutory guidance must be followed, including the provision that schools cannot remove a young person from the school roll unless specific criteria for one of the 15 grounds for deletion from the school admission register are met (*The Education (Pupil Registration) (England) Regulations*, 2006).

If a Local Authority suspects that a young person of compulsory school age is not receiving a proper education, such as irregular attendance at school, they can seek an Education Supervision Order through a family court under Section 36 of *The Children Act* (1989). An appointed supervisor from the Local Authority provides guidance, assistance, and support to the young person and their parents to ensure proper

- 110** education is received. The Education Supervision Order typically lasts for twelve months but can be extended. Before deciding whether to proceed with a prosecution (as described earlier), an application for an Education Supervision Order must be considered.

2.3 Fines as a Legal Option ('Disposal')

The Anti-Social Behaviour Act (2003) and Education Penalty Notices Regulations (2007) provide schools with the option to request that the Local Authority issue penalty notices, commonly known as fines. These notices are primarily utilised for unauthorised holiday absences. In England, parents are advised against taking their children out of school during term time unless exceptional circumstances apply. Currently, the fine stands at £60 for each parent of a child (i.e., both parents in a two-parent family are fined) if paid within 21 days. If the fine is paid between 21 and 28 days after the notice is issued, the amount increases to £120. Failure to pay fines may result in prosecution.

A government consultation was conducted to explore the creation of a National Code of Conduct for all Local Authorities, which included discussions on the use of penalty notices (DfE, 2022h). The consultation concluded in July 2022, and at the time of writing, the results are pending.

3 Recording School Attendance and Absence

In England, national guidelines are in place to ensure consistency in data collection, which is important because the data informs practice. Schools are legally obligated to record attendance and absence twice per day, commonly known as 'registering', to indicate the physical presence of young people on school premises. The requirements for recording attendance and absence are specified in The Education (Pupil Registration) (England) Regulations (2006). It is important to note that attendance and absence are recorded on a session basis rather than a full day basis, with recording taking place at the start of the morning session and again during the afternoon session.

The timing of recording varies among schools, and each school must clearly communicate the applicable time to parents. For consistency, recording is conducted at the same time every day within a school, without variations for individual pupils. Typically, the register remains open for around 15 minutes after it has been opened, but it must not close more than either 30 minutes after the session commences or the duration of the first lesson during which recording occurs. If a pupil is not physically present when recording occurs, but arrives before the register is closed, they will receive a 'Late' mark, which does not count as an absence but allows tracking of the number of late arrivals. Schools may impose disciplinary measures for persistent lateness. In cases where pupils arrive after the register has closed, an 'unauthorised

absence' code is applied, unless the school acknowledges a valid reason for late arrival, in which case an alternative code can be used, as described next.

School personnel use specified codes outlined in DfE guidance (DfE, 2022g) to record the attendance or absence of young people. Various electronic systems are employed by schools to record this information and generate reports. While there is no legal requirement to use the prescribed codes, our observations suggest that they are commonly used nationwide. The determination of whether an absence is authorised or unauthorised lies with the school and is based on available information from diverse sources, as well as the school's understanding of a family's circumstances. The guidance undergoes periodic updates, typically occurring once every one or two years (HM Government, 2022a). The codes employed for recording attendance and absence fall into the following categories:

- *Present*. Pupils who arrive late to school but before the register has closed will also be counted as being present.
- *Attending an approved educational activity*. This includes, for example, work experience, an interview, a sporting activity agreed upon by the school, education off-site (agreed temporary attendance at another educational provision), and being on a residential trip. Statistically, these pupils will be considered 'present' even if they are not physically on the school site. Each approved activity is assigned a different code.
- *Absent: Authorised absence*. This includes pupils who are ill or have medical and dental appointments, pupils who are temporarily excluded for behavioural issues and have assigned work to complete at home (the timeframe for pupils subject to this arrangement is limited to five days, after which the pupil must return to school or alternative provision must be provided by the Local Authority), and those who have received authorised leave of absence from the school. Again, each reason for authorised absence is assigned a different code.
- *Absent: Unauthorised absence*. This category covers situations where absence has not been agreed upon, the school is dissatisfied with the reason provided, or no reason has been given. It also includes cases where a pupil arrives at school after the register has closed without providing an acceptable reason. The morning and afternoon closing times of the school register vary nationally, as schools are responsible for determining this themselves. However, the specific closing time must be specified in the school's attendance policy.
- *Absent: Unable to attend due to exceptional circumstances*. This category encompasses situations such as school closure due to severe transport issues, severe weather conditions, lack of heating, and so on. The code for these absences indicates that the pupil was not present on the school site, but the absence does not count statistically as an absence for the individual pupil or the entire school.

The responsibility for recording attendance and absence may fall on a class teacher, form tutor, or subject teacher. Typically, they record only the attendance itself without specifying the reason for absence. Subsequently, an administrator, designated attendance officer, or pastoral officer determines the appropriate code to

112 be used in cases of pupil absence. They accomplish this by directly contacting the parent through phone, text, or email to gather further information. Due to the legal and child protection implications associated with code usage, its application is limited to staff members who have received training in these areas. All staff members involved in school attendance are expected to uphold high standards of accuracy in the comprehensive analysis and recording of absence reason. It is important to note that only Head Teachers hold the legal authority to authorise a pupil's absence.

In secondary schools, attendance in subject lessons is also recorded. This enables the identification of pupils who were initially registered as present during the morning or afternoon session but are subsequently absent from one of more lessons. Efforts are made to locate these pupils, which may involve searching for them elsewhere on the school premises because they are avoiding a specific lesson or receiving instruction in a different part of the school. If the pupil cannot be located, the parent is notified, and if the young person is considered vulnerable, professionals or the police may be contacted. Therefore, recording attendance in subject lessons contributes to the safeguarding of pupils and assists in identifying any issues they may have with specific lessons.

Special arrangements were made during the COVID-19 pandemic regarding the recording of attendance and absence. At certain points, school attendance was not mandatory, and schools were only open to vulnerable pupils and children of key workers. When school attendance became mandatory again, schools could use additional attendance codes to indicate when a pupil was absent due to COVID-19-related reasons, such as the need to isolate or a positive COVID-19 test result. Sub-categories were introduced to existing absence codes to facilitate this process. This ensured clear documentation of individual pupils' absence reasons and prevented schools and pupils from facing penalties for low attendance. The DfE guidance document also outlined the expectation for schools to provide access to remote education for pupils absent under these circumstances, and to record their engagement with these activities. This recording did not necessarily have to be within the conventional attendance register. Based on the authors' experience, schools adopted various approaches to fulfil these requirements. Schools were also responsible for following up on absence from or non-engagement with remote learning, as a means to safeguard pupils and support their continuous learning (DfE, 2022e).

4 Reporting School Attendance and Absence

At the national level, the DfE has been collecting and publishing data since 2006 through a school census. This census involves extracting school-level attendance and absence data for the Spring, Summer, and Autumn terms from all schools. In this context, "school-level" means that individual pupils are not identified in the census. Instead, the focus is on the number of pupils present each day relative to the total number of enrolled pupils in the school. If a pupil changes school during the year,

they may be counted in two different school censuses, but their attendance and absence sessions will only be accounted for during the periods they attended each school. Each census corresponds to the preceding school term. For instance, the Spring census collects information on attendance and absence during the Autumn term. The census is conducted after the completion of the term to ensure that all attendance and absence data are included.

Annually, the DfE publishes this data through three National Statistics releases. The data covers the Autumn term (published in May of the following calendar year), the Autumn and Spring terms (published in October of the following academic year), and the entire academic year (published in March of the following calendar year). The data release for the whole academic year provides a definitive overview of pupil absence, as term-specific data can be influenced by the duration of the term. Therefore, term-based data serve only indicative purposes but can be utilised by schools, Trusts, and Local Authorities, for benchmarking and analysing trends within specific periods.

The data published by the DfE is not presented in a single report. Instead, different pages on the government website provide access to various sources of information and data. For example, one page describes the methodology used to create pupil absence statistics (HM Government, 2023a), another provides access to full-year statistics (HM Government, 2023b), and additional pages offer data related to each term. Users have the option to download the data and create tables according to their preferred analysis methods.

The available data includes two key measures of absence: the overall absence rate, and the rate of persistent absence (HM Government, 2023a). The overall absence rate refers to the total number of absence sessions (i.e., half days absent), for authorised and unauthorised absences, as a percentage of the total number of possible sessions, across all pupils. The rate of persistent absence indicates the proportion of pupils, out of the total pupil population, who have missed 10% or more of the possible sessions they could have attended at school. These two measures are presented for the overall pupil population in England, as well as for various sub-groups, including primary schools, secondary schools, special schools, pupil referral units, each year group within these types of education, reason for absence, gender, ethnicity, special educational needs, English as a first language, free school meals, length of absence within each setting, Local Authority, regional areas (e.g., south west, north east), and areas of deprivation.

In a noteworthy development, ad hoc data on the number of children being home-educated in England was first published in May 2023 (HM Government, 2023c). There is an ongoing consultation regarding the possibility of maintaining a register for these young people (Long & Danechi, 2023).

The national reporting of data has been significantly impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic. At the time of writing this paper, the most recent full-year publication of attendance and absence data was in March 2022, covering the academic year 2020–2021. The presented data was influenced by school closures, which limited

114 its broader applicability. As mentioned in Section 3, schools were closed for certain periods, and only a limited number of pupils could attend. Consequently, the number of possible attendance sessions per pupil was reduced, resulting in fewer overall sessions for calculating “persistently absent”. Subsequent reports on attendance and absence are available for the Autumn 2021 term (published in May 2022) and the Autumn and Spring terms across 2021 and 2022 (published in October 2022). In March 2023, a new full-year publication of attendance and absence data was released (HM Government, 2023b).

At the school level, it is mandatory for schools to regularly inform the Local Authority about pupils who exhibit regular absence, have irregular attendance, or have missed 10 or more school days without the school’s permission (DfE, 2013, updated 2016).

5 Using Data on School Attendance and Absence

The recording and reporting of data on attendance and absence would hold little value if the data were not used to inform policy and practices aimed at promoting attendance and reducing absenteeism. Therefore, we will now outline how data concerning school attendance and absence are used at the national level, within Local Authorities and Trusts, and at the school level.

5.1 National Level

Data on attendance and absence play a crucial role for various national bodies, including government and non-government organisations as listed on the UK Government’s website (HM Government, 2023a). Government organisations such as the DfE and the Office for Standards in Education, Children’s Services and Skills (Ofsted) use this data in their operations. For instance, Ofsted’s school inspection process, which aims to monitor and enhance standards of education in England, includes a specific focus on attendance. This involves analysing rates of absence and persistent absence, improvements among low-attendance pupils, instances of pupils being taken off the roll, and occurrences of exclusions and suspensions (Ofsted, 2019/2023). In another example, Ofsted’s (2022) report titled *Securing good attendance and tackling persistent absence* used national data to identify significant factors contributing to higher-than-normal absences following the COVID-19 pandemic. The government also links attendance and absence data to safeguarding young people and ensuring positive outcomes for the most vulnerable, including young people in the care of Local Authorities and those defined as in need under Section 17 of the Children’s Act (1989).

Moreover, data is used to address parliamentary questions and public inquiries. For instance, in January 2023, the Education Committee of the UK Parliament initiated an inquiry into persistent absence (i.e., missing at least 10% of school sessions), severe absence (i.e., missing more than 50% of school sessions), and support for

disadvantaged pupils (*MPs launch new inquiry...*, 2023). The inquiry involved sharing information regarding absence rates across different periods (i.e., the 2021 Autumn term compared to the 2018/2019 academic year) and sub-groups (such as pupils eligible for free meals or those receiving SEND support).

Non-government organisations also rely on attendance and absence data, including providers of analysis services to schools such as the Fischer Family Trust and Datalab (<https://ffteducationdatalab.org.uk/>) as well as think tank organisations such as the Education Policy Institute (<https://epi.org.uk/>). Research groups have worked with the DfE's National Pupil Database, which contains data on absence among all pupils in England who have received state education and were born since 1986. For example, Lereya et al. (2019) used the National Pupil Database to examine the associations between educational attainment, absenteeism, and mental health difficulties among more than 15,000 pupils from 97 mainstream schools in England. They found a positive link between specific mental health difficulties and absenteeism. In another study, Lereya et al. (2023) investigated how SEND acted as a risk factor for absenteeism among over 418,000 secondary school pupils from 151 Local Authorities in England. The research demonstrated that pupils with SEND were more likely to experience absence, both authorised and unauthorised, and the relationship between SEND and absenteeism varied substantially across different Local Authorities. Alabbad (2020) examined school attendance, exclusions, and academic attainment among more than 554,000 pupils from the National Pupil Database, revealing that eligibility for free school meals was a predictor of attendance, exclusions, and attainment.

5.2 Local Authority Level

National absence data is available to Local Authorities for comparison across Authorities and across schools within an Authority, enabling strategic planning at a local level. Local Authorities also collect data directly from schools in their area through a locally established data sharing protocol, although not all Local Authorities currently have this system in place. The shared data includes information such as the number of young people removed from the roll, the names of young people not in education, and those who are being educated at home. Authors VF and SG have observed various uses of this data. These uses include measuring exclusion rates to target behaviour improvement actions and tracking young people who are missing from school, have not attended for long periods, or are allowed to attend a reduced number of sessions at school.

The government also gathers data from Local Authorities regarding the number of penalty notices, prosecutions, and parenting orders implemented by each Local Authority, categorised by variables such as ethnicity and geographical area (DfE, 2021b). Authors SG and VF have observed the use of this data to commission research into the differential use of penalty notices, and to enhance the effective allocation of resources, such as when the government requests organisations to focus

116 their support work on specific areas of the country. A recent example of this is the successful bid made by Barnardo's, a charitable organisation, to provide targeted, responsive, one-to-one support for persistently and severely absent pupils in several designated Education Investment areas across England (DfE, 2022i). Schools refer young people based on their persistent absence and potential benefit from such support. This programme is currently in the pilot phase, and its success may lead to further expansion.

In recent reports by the Children's Commissioner for England (2022a; 2022b), data from all 151 Local Authorities, along with an in-depth analysis of 10 specific Local Authorities, was utilised to gain insights into young people who are missing from education. This attendance audit resulted in the formulation of six key ambitions "to ensure that every child supported to be in school every day, ready to learn, is receiving a fantastic education, and, critically, that we know where they are and that they are safe" (p. 4). The report includes policy recommendations aimed at achieving this goal.

5.3 School Level

School personnel use data pertaining to individual pupils, groups of pupils, and the entire school. Regarding individual pupils, the school's data on daily attendance and absence is intended to be used for identifying those who are not present, in order to take appropriate action. This assists schools in fulfilling their safeguarding duty by investigating any unexplained absences (DfE, 2023). In the experience of the authors, information about a pupil's absence is used during case discussions aimed at obtaining resources from other support agencies (e.g., a social worker; additional resources for pupils with special educational needs). Furthermore, attendance and absence data is used to plan school-led interventions staged according to the level of absence and concern, and both the details of the intervention and the level of absence and concern are shared with parents and the pupil.

Data reports generated through a school's information management system are to be used to monitor attendance and absence of all pupils *and* for specific groups, as outlined in the DfE guidance (DfE, 2022g). The guidance specifies that groups to be tracked include persistently absent pupils or those at risk of becoming persistently absent, as well as vulnerable young people. Schools are required to monitor the attendance of these pupils due to additional funding allocated for vulnerable young people, considering the well-documented educational disadvantages faced by this cohort (e.g., Butera et al., 2020; Fleming et al., 2017).

Analysis of whole school data is conducted to inform the school's attendance policy, guide school development, and identify areas that require additional resources (DfE, 2022g). For instance, this analysis may highlight the need to address punctuality or use pastoral staff to foster a welcoming and safe environment for pupils. The school's data is also reviewed during the inspection process, as described in Section 5.1.

6 Discussion

In this section, we critically analyse the strengths and shortcomings of the current systems and practices in England concerning the recording, reporting, and use of data on attendance and absence. Subsequently, we propose recommendations for policy and practice aimed at enhancing outcomes for young people by optimising their educational opportunities.

6.1 Strengths

The recording of attendance and absence is a statutory requirement, supported by clear guidance on coding absences and the expectation that schools adhere to government guidance. This facilitates timely and consistent recording, enabling local, regional, and national comparisons and benchmarking, as well as the monitoring of trends related to attendance, absence, and reasons for absence. This comprehensive data provides a basis for implementing necessary policy and practice changes in a timely manner.

Regarding data reporting, the government collects information from schools through their internal information management systems (Section 5.3) and the national census (Section 4), including data for specific groups such as pupils receiving free school meals. Encouragingly, there have been ongoing developments and improvements in systems for reporting attendance and absence. For instance, the government initiated a pilot programme in June 2022 to collect daily data directly from school electronic management systems, and at the time of writing, 83% of schools participate in this programme. This initiative will provide schools, Trusts, and Local Authorities with more up-to-date pupil-level data on attendance and absence, facilitating the identification of trends and prompt responses.

In England, attendance and absence data can benefit both individual pupils and the broader pupil population. At the individual level, schools, Trusts, and Local Authorities can effectively safeguard pupils by identifying and tracking those missing education. At a broader level, schools, Local Authorities, and the national government can adapt policies and practices to better support vulnerable pupils who face various challenges, such as physical or mental health issues, food insecurity, homelessness, exclusion from school, or living with parents with health problems. Schools can compare their absence rates and types of absence with other schools regionally and nationally, allowing them to identify areas for intervention if, for example, exclusion or illness rates are higher than regional or national averages. The authors believe that targeting support and resources to areas of greatest need represents a more effective use of public funds.

The publication of additional data during the COVID-19 pandemic has provided insights into attendance and absence rates within the context of the pandemic's impact. It has also strengthened the government's commitment to raising attendance levels above pre-pandemic levels, as evidenced by reports such as the 2023 report

118 from the Children's Commissioner (2023) and the inquiry launched in 2023 by the Education Committee of the UK Parliament (*MPs launch new inquiry...*, 2023). The government's intention to collaborate with schools, Trusts, and Local Authorities to improve attendance is also evident in the white paper *Opportunity for All* (DfE, 2022d) and the public consultation on measures to enhance the consistency of support available to families in England regarding school attendance (DfE, 2022f). The ongoing commitment to address attendance and absence is further demonstrated by the Schools Bill (HM Government, 2022b) which, although delayed beyond September 2023, maintains the expectations placed on all parties involved.

6.2 Areas Requiring Attention

While acknowledging the aforementioned strengths, there is significant room for improvement in how attendance and absence data are recorded, reported, and used in England. The authors believe that the quality and quantity of available data will shed light on areas of policy and practice that require attention. The following sections outline the most evident areas for improvement.

6.2.1 The Legal Framework

There are regional variations in the use of enforcement measures related to non-attendance. For instance, out of 155 Local Authorities, 27 were responsible for issuing over 50% of all penalty notices. Conversely, three Local Authorities issued no penalty notices, while nine issued less than 100 and six issued more than 5,000 (HM Government, 2022c). This highlights an inequitable system. Recent research has indicated that the use of legal sanctions for non-attendance disproportionately affects women, with many court cases involving young people with special educational needs (Restorative Justice, Coventry, 2019). In England and Wales in 2017, over 16,000 individuals were prosecuted for truancy, with 71% of them being women. Among the 12,000 convictions, 74% were against women. Furthermore, out of the 500 people who received a community order, 83% were women, and out of the 10 individuals sent to prison, 90% were women. The effectiveness of legal sanctions for non-attendance, both for young people with special educational needs and for all young people, is debatable. Restorative interventions that aim to foster positive relationships between school personnel, parents, and young people are considered to be more effective alternatives to punitive measures like fines, as the latter are believed to exacerbate absenteeism (Kearney et al., 2022). It is a prevailing perspective among professionals in the field that absence should prompt the provision of support rather than punitive consequences, and we share this standpoint.

6.2.2 Recording School Attendance and Absence

The accuracy of recording attendance and absence data has far-reaching implications for both practice and policy. Inaccuracies at the local level can hinder Local Authority teams from taking legal action regarding specific individuals, while at the

national level, the quality of data significantly influences well-informed policy decisions. To ensure accuracy in recording, clear guidelines and comprehensive training are essential.

Unfortunately, the existing DfE guidance does not offer definitive coverage for all codes, leaving room for subjective interpretation by school personnel. This ambiguity contributes to inconsistencies and compromises the overall quality of national data. However, addressing these issues locally can be accomplished through staff training and limiting the number of personnel authorised to assign codes within schools.

At the school level, differentiating between absences due to physical health and those related to mental health is important. This distinction enables a nuanced understanding of the underlying reasons for illness-related absences, facilitating the provision of appropriate support to young people and their families, including access to mental health services.

Moreover, school-level misuse of certain absence codes can obscure underlying issues. For instance, the improper use of the B code, which signifies attendance at another provision for a limited time, can conceal a pupil's absence since it does not register statistically as an absence. This practice, referred to as 'gaming,' raises concerns about whether pupils are receiving the expected level and quality of education and are safeguarded. Although school inspectors may inquire about education provision for pupils with a B code and challenge inappropriate use, there is currently no national oversight regarding the quantity or quality of learning for pupils registered at school but learning from home.

6.2.3 Reporting School Attendance and Absence

Schools use different information management systems for data on attendance and absence. This leads to a lack of consistency among schools at the local level when it comes to generating reports, which could hinder local benchmarking efforts. In order to improve reporting on pupils' attendance and absence, schools and Trusts are transitioning to new platforms. As noted in Section 6.1, 83% of schools have voluntarily participated in the DfE's pilot programme, which involves the daily collection of data through a portal established by Wonde (HM Government, 2022d). This bodes well for greater consistency in schools' attendance and absence reports. Moreover, we recommend making the new national data collection via Wonde mandatory for schools to ensure the most up to date and comprehensive data is available at both local and national levels.

6.2.4 Using Data on Attendance and Absence

At the school level, data ought to be used as a source of encouragement for both young people and parents. School personnel can use publicly available data to highlight the link between regular attendance and positive outcomes (e.g., HM Government, 2022e), along with evidence highlighting the positive impact of a pupil's own attendance, whether it be a positive impact for learning, socialising, or other

120 outcomes associated with attendance. Additionally, projects like the one launched in England to evaluate the impact on attendance of text message communication with parents can inform school personnel's use of data to encourage pupils and parents (Education Endowment Foundation, n.d.).

At the local level, there are inconsistencies across Local Authorities regarding the utilisation of data. Establishing protocols for data sharing between schools and Local Authorities, as well as guidelines for the effective utilisation of data, can ensure that comprehensive datasets are readily available for well-informed decision-making on resource allocation to address areas of greatest need. The frequency of data sharing also requires attention, as many Local Authorities do not have immediate access to complete and timely data within their own jurisdiction, leading to delays in taking appropriate actions. Improving the frequency of data sharing at local and national levels would enhance the understanding of current issues and facilitate prompt action. In our opinion, mandating all schools to provide data on a daily basis, without the current 10-day lag, would be ideal for the system.

At the national level, the historical collection and comparison of absence codes by the DfE have overlooked codes that do not statistically count as absences, despite the pupils not physically being present at the school site (e.g., "attending an approved educational activity" and "unable to attend due to exceptional circumstances" as discussed in Section 3). The absence of national data on these codes prevents schools and Local Authorities from benchmarking their use against others in terms of numbers or percentages. Having access to this data would better inform national policy and practice, enhance understanding of regional differences in types of absences, and guide potential changes in regulations and legislation.

The research outcomes derived from various groups using the DfE's National Pupil Database, as discussed in Section 5.1, also have significant implications for policy and practice. For instance, Lereya et al. (2019) highlight the necessity for enhanced collaboration between schools and mental health services, while Alabbad (2020) advocated for improved data on school exclusions. Integrating these research findings into policy and practice can facilitate the implementation of targeted interventions and support for young people, ultimately maximising their educational outcomes.

6.3 Conclusion

In England, the collection of absence data from all schools through a census has been in place since 2006. In the years since then, there have been notable advancements in the realm of school attendance and absence data. The current system showcases numerous strengths, including a statutory obligation to record attendance and absence, guidelines on coding absences, and comprehensive data collection that enables comparisons and trend monitoring. These strengths facilitate the identification of vulnerable pupils and aid in the development of effective policies. However, there is still room for improvement in the recording, reporting, and use of data on attendance and absence.

The legal framework for non-attendance enforcement measures shows regional variations, disproportionately affecting certain groups. Restorative interventions are considered more desirable than punitive measures. Clearer guidelines are needed to ensure accuracy in recording attendance and absence, including the need to differentiate between physical and mental health absences. The misuse of absence codes should be addressed to uncover underlying issues. Reporting on attendance lacks consistency due to different information management systems. Transitioning to new platforms shows promise for improving reporting consistency. Mandatory participation in national data collection would provide clearer oversight. Moreover, protocols for data sharing and use at the local level, along with improved frequency of data sharing, would support informed decision-making and prompt action.

Comprehensive attendance training for school personnel, including those in governance roles, is important. Released guidance emphasises integrating attendance training into professional development opportunities (DfE, 2022g). However, the lack of national accreditation raises concerns about variations in training quality.

Overall, addressing the identified areas for improvement will enhance the educational opportunities and outcomes for young people in England. By enhancing the recording, reporting, and use of attendance and absence data, policymakers and educators can better support vulnerable pupils, promote inclusive practices, and allocate resources to areas of greatest need, ultimately ensuring that every pupil receives the education they deserve.

Acknowledgements

The authors are grateful for the support of Dr Darren Moore (Senior Lecturer in the School of Education at the University of Exeter) who helped identify research making use of data from the National Pupil Database.

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Recording, Reporting and Utilising School Absenteeism Data in Finland: Work in Progress

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Abstract: School attendance problems (SAPs) among young people in compulsory education appear to be increasing in Finland. A recent report showed that, according to school personnel, there are at minimum 4 thousand (2–3%) lower secondary students with SAPs, and the problem is perceived to be growing. To tackle SAPs, local action plans have been developed, most commonly by schools or education providers. Going forward, a key issue for schools and education providers is the way in which data on school attendance/absence is gathered and used. This paper provides an overview of the current approaches to recording, reporting, and utilizing school absenteeism data in Finland. In addition, we present the recent development work initiated to respond to identified challenges in these areas. Current challenges concerning SAPs are: (a) creating shared definitions/categories of problematic school absenteeism, (b) updating and clarifying national guidelines concerning the recording and reporting of absenteeism, (c) creating a shared systematic data collection procedure to collect local and national statistics, and (d) developing the utilisation of evidence-based practices at school and municipal levels.

Keywords: school absenteeism data, data recording, data reporting, data utilising, Finland

Finland and its school system have been praised for positive PISA results, although the latest results have also shown the widest gender gap in reading and the growing role of family background in the educational performance of children (OECD, 2018). A substantial amount of research has been conducted on primary and lower-secondary-aged students' health and well-being (e.g., Halme et al., 2018; Salmela-Aro et al., 2021), school engagement (Virtanen et al., 2019), loneliness and ostracism (Junttila et al., 2009), and bullying (Salmivalli et al., 2011). Yet, problematic school absenteeism has been mostly a “grace note” or a covariate in these studies addressing compulsory education. Previous studies in Finland have focused on truancy (Aaltonen, 2011; Halme et al., 2018; Virtanen et al., 2014, 2022), but other types of SAPs are overlooked. During the past few years, school attendance problems (SAPs) have started to interest scholars as an educationally significant outcome variable (for example, Pelkonen et al., 2022). So far, there have been only a few attempts to gather national-level information about the prevalence and nature of problematic school absenteeism in Finland (Finnish Education Evaluation Centre [FEEC], 2022;

<https://doi.org/10.14712/23363177.2023.10>
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126 Määttä, et al., 2020). These attempts include samples that strive to provide a national representation, but still, the results are not as generalisable to the whole population as they would be if data collection involved systematic cluster sampling. The rough estimate based on these samples is that SAPs concern approximately 2–3% of 11 to 15-year-old students, which is in line with international evaluations (Havik et al., 2015; Heyne et al., 2019).

The report by Määttä et al. (2020) focused on school personnel ($n = 459$) views on SAPs among Finnish 7th–9th graders, and how the schools dealt with SAPs. Their proportional estimate is that there are at minimum 4 thousand (2–3%) lower secondary school students with SAPs. Regardless of their profession, the majority of the respondents (75%) agreed that students' SAPs have increased in recent years, and students with learning with special education needs were overrepresented (40%) among the students with SAPs. This result is in line with international studies (Havik et al., 2015; Naylor et al., 1994). Most often student absenteeism was intervened when there were 31–50 lessons missed regardless of the period during which the absences were monitored (Määttä et al., 2020). One of the most used methods to promote these students' academic progress was utilising grade-independent studies (30%). This is a form of differentiated instruction: regardless of the missing credits, the student gets to move on in the grade level with their peers and continues working with the lacking credits, as time is differentiated.

Before 2020, the only national-level data gathered on absenteeism was the School Health Questionnaire student report (Halme et al., 2018), where 3.7% of 8th and 9th-grade students reported being absent weekly due to illness, and 3.9% reported weekly unexcused absenteeism during the school year. National-level information about recording absences and the number of absences at the school level is collected bi-annually in the *Health and welfare promotion in comprehensive schools* survey (Finnish National Agency for Education and Finnish Institute for Health and Welfare [TEDBm], 2019). The data, collected from principals, show that only 65% of comprehensive schools (i.e., compulsory education, Grades 1–9) have collected the absence data systematically, even though it is obligatory. According to the data, students were absent, on average, for approximately 36 hours during a school year. The absence categories used were absence due to illness, other excused absences, and unexcused absences. However, these categories are not further defined, schools have a variety of categories from which they formed these numbers, and the data do not inform about the number of students with problematic absenteeism.

In 2021, the Ministry of Education and Culture granted 12.4 million euros in funding for education providers to facilitate students' school engagement. This nationwide development project, titled the Engaging School Community Work programme (SKY), was started due to the findings in the report on problematic school absenteeism (Määttä et al., 2020). It is executed through 24 pilot programmes organised by 126 education providers, aiming to promote school engagement through (a) socio-emotional skills training, (b) structuring the recording practices and (c) structuring the utilisation of absenteeism statistics. The objective is to produce a national

model for tackling SAPs including national-level definitions for SAPs, suggestions for recording and reporting absenteeism on the municipal and national levels and creating a three-tiered multidimensional model (dimensions of *Awareness and Competence*, *Well-Being*, *Learning and Cooperation*) focusing on school level preventive actions. The FEEC gathers information, evaluates, and reports the progress of the pilots. The first draft of the model was due in May 2022, and it is currently being tested. The updates required by the execution of the model will be included in the core curriculum and legislation for primary and lower secondary education. The Finnish National Agency for Education is responsible for implementing the model and utilising it in the in-service teacher training. The development work is in progress, but most of the changes are still ahead.

1 The Finnish Education System

The Finnish education system consists of early childhood education and care, pre-primary education (preschool), basic education (Grades 1–9), general upper secondary education, vocational education, and higher education. Pre-primary education begins in the year the child turns six. From the beginning of the year 2021, free compulsory education was extended to the age of 18 (Ministry of Education and Culture, 2021). Compulsory education consists of one year of pre-primary education for 6-year-olds, nine years of basic education for children aged 7 to 16, and secondary education (general upper secondary, vocational education, or dual qualification which is a combination of the latter two) (The Finnish National Agency for Education, 2018). Most of Finland's 2,085 comprehensive schools are public. Most often, education providers are municipalities (309) or alliances of municipalities (4). In addition, there are 66 private schools and 20 schools run by the government in Finland (Education Statistics Finland, 2020).

Finland has an individualised educational system (Keppens & Spruyt, 2018) in which all students are offered a common curriculum and students are not grouped, for example, by skill level. There are three levels of support for learning in pre-primary and basic education: general, intensified, and special support (the Finnish Basic Education Act 1998: 642/2010). In the autumn of 2021, 22.9% of students in compulsory education received intensified (13.5%) or special support (9.4%) (Statistics Finland, 2021). This support can target, for example, students' academic and behavioural support needs, and it is primarily provided as a collaboration between special education services and student welfare. Due to the flexible support and possibility of grade-independent studies, the utilisation of grade retention or repeating a grade is rare, and students get to move on with their age group even if all the objectives of their grade level are not met. However, the literature suggests that truancy rates are higher in individualised education system than, for example, in separated school systems (Keppens & Spruyt, 2018).

There are various aspects of the law and national regulations concerning school attendance in Finland: The Basic Education Act (1998), the National Core Curriculum, and the Pupil Welfare Act (2013). Children are required to complete compulsory education, but physical attendance is not required by law. Instead, children have the right to go to school. Children of compulsory school age must attend basic education or otherwise obtain knowledge corresponding to the basic education syllabus (Finnish Basic Education Act, 1998). If a child of compulsory school age does not participate in education provided under this Act, the local authority of the student's place of residence shall supervise their progress. The education provider (i.e., the municipality, whose representative in the school is the principal) is required to monitor the absences of a student, and schools are mandated to have a plan in their pupil welfare plan on how to respond to absenteeism (Finnish National Agency for Education, 2014). This plan requires that absenteeism is followed, responded to, and reported to a student's guardian, but the actions to be taken are not further clarified. If a student does not attend school regularly, the education provider must be in contact with the student's guardians. Yet, recent data has shown a lack of monitoring absenteeism by education providers, and information is mostly gathered at the school level (FEEC, 2022).

According to the latest reports (FEEC, 2022; Hietanen-Peltola et al., 2021), plans for monitoring, intervening in and following up on school absenteeism have already been drawn up quite comprehensively by education providers and schools. A national survey for pupil welfare professionals showed that 75% of schools had a common action plan for SAPs and that 86% of the respondents reported that school personnel followed these plans (Hietanen-Peltola et al., 2021). In the sample collected by the FEEC (2002, $n = 113$), 98% of education providers reported having such a plan. These action plans can be divided into three categories: stepwise models, models with one threshold and models without an hour-limit-based threshold for intervening in absenteeism. Most of the local action plans were stepwise models, and the threshold for intervening vary both between and within models. All in all, most education providers and schools have these action plans, but the way school personnel are engaged in implementation varies; the plans seem to lack the perspective of prevention and data on the effectiveness of these plans are yet to be collected (Hietanen-Peltola et al., 2021).

For this paper, three scholars and a current ministerial advisor convened a consensus meeting. An overview of the available data had already been produced in the previous collaborations of the group members (Määttä et al., 2020; Sandhaug et al., 2022). The group consisted of university scholars, education evaluators, and developers of the Finnish education system. Two of them had previous scientific publications and experience on teaching school attendance and absenteeism at a university. The aim of this paper was to provide a description about the current state of defining, recording, and reporting school attendance and absenteeism in Finland and give a brief overview of the ongoing development work.

2 Recording and Reporting School Attendance and Absenteeism

In this section, we describe current issues related to the definitions, recording and reporting school attendance and absenteeism, and using the absenteeism data.

2.1 Definitional Issues

Regarding school absenteeism, there is an evident lack of shared, standardized definitions in Finland: various governmental bodies, municipalities and schools operate with different definitions and varying ways of recording and reporting absenteeism (Lehtinen et al., 2012). Development of common categorisation for school absenteeism began over a decade ago (Ståhl et al., 2010), but it did not root in school cultures. Simultaneously, electronic databased used by the schools developed remarkably, and real-time monitoring and recording of absenteeism became easily accessible. However, these efforts did not solve the challenge, and practices remained eclectic. Although the monitoring of school absenteeism became more systematic, the definitions and recording practices vary, the data are not archived for later use and are not comparable even between schools. This is understandable, as the national guidelines still only mention unexcused absenteeism without further defining the concept (Finnish National Agency for Education, 2014). Yet, systematic practices stipulate common decisions on gathering the data, common categories or cut-off rates for problematic absenteeism and established recording procedures

This is also found in the fragmented national-level data that is gathered. In student self-reports, there are excused and unexcused absences (without further definitions), and the data gathered from schools add to the variation, with the addition of “absence due to illness”. Most education providers separate excused and unexcused absences in their plans to respond to absenteeism (FEEC, 2022), but in their electronic databases, there can be several markings for absenteeism from which the teacher chooses. According to the FEEC report (2022), there were over 60 different absenteeism categories used. In everyday school life, excused absenteeism can be seen as granted leave (the teacher can grant a few days and the school principal up to two weeks), absenteeism due to illness, or for having, for example, an appointment in the middle of a school day, and the guardian has notified the school about it. Unexcused absenteeism means that the student is absent without the permission of the guardians. Problems may arise when the student cannot or does not want to verbalise the reason for absenteeism, or a clear cause for a student’s school absenteeism cannot be identified. Yet, recognising the reasons behind the behaviour would be crucial (Havik et al., 2015), especially whether the root reasons for absenteeism are related to home and/or school life (Pelkonen & Virtanen, 2021).

2.2 Recording Issues

The education provider (most often the municipality) is required by law to monitor student absenteeism in basic education and contact the students' legal guardian or other legal representatives in cases of unexcused absenteeism (The Finnish Basic Education Act, 1998, § 26). Teachers must monitor student absence daily and register the data in electronic databases prescribed by the education provider. Thus, it is absence data that is being gathered. Yet how absenteeism is recorded at the class, school, or municipality levels varies greatly (FEEC, 2022). This is understandable because the definitions vary (for example, in some schools, showing up 15 minutes late can be marked as being absent), and there are no reporting responsibilities beyond the recording of absenteeism. Absence data related to individual students is gathered at least daily, and in most schools, the data are available on an individual, group and school level. Yet, the data is rarely used even on a school level, and definitions vary even between schools under the same education provider, so the data is not comparable (FEEC, 2022; Lehtinen et al., 2012). All in all, the recording of absenteeism depends on school and education provider guidelines. The case may be that the information is collected at the school level, but it is mostly utilised on the individual student level, and possibly not even at the school level in collective pupil welfare planning. The education providers are not obligated to report the data to anyone else, and national-level registers of attendance and absence are not being gathered.

For students in Grades 1–6, absence is usually monitored daily by classroom teachers. For students in Grades 7–9, absence is monitored by subject teachers during each lesson. The electronic database allows teachers to report excused and unexcused absences, and it can be programmed to collect more detailed information on absenteeism if desired (i.e., individual definitions at the school or municipal level), which is why the information gathered can vary even within municipalities. However, it is recommended by the service providers and the government, that data regarding physical health (i.e., absence due to illness) is not saved in these databases. In addition to teachers, students and guardians also have access to this database regarding their own information. In general, if a student is absent, the guardian is notified and is required to give a valid reason for the student's absence from school. No changes in recording absenteeism have been reported due to the COVID-19 situation. Due to quarantines during the pandemic, remote and hybrid teaching have presented a challenge to the ways attendance and absence are recorded, but no systematic changes to recording practices were introduced during the pandemic. The pandemic has, however, increased interest in the amount of absenteeism at school and regional levels.

2.3 Reporting Issues

There are no obligations or clear structures for reporting absence data from the school to the municipal level. At the government level, there is no additional

gathering, storing, or reporting of the data. According to the FEEC (2022), only 40% of the education providers (mostly municipalities) gather absence data. One reason for this may be that school absenteeism falls between two administrative fields (education and health), which are two different organisations, and neither of them has claimed the “ownership” of the issue, although the need for collaboration has been stated (Lehtinen et al., 2012).

2.4 Using the Absence Data

How individual schools or education providers utilise the absence data is decided by them. In general, absence data are used only on the individual student level (e.g., close monitoring of a certain student’s attendance) or sometimes on the school level (e.g., following up general school level absence rates). Schools are obligated to undertake certain action in the event of a certain number of absences if the thresholds are mentioned in the Pupil Welfare Plan. In the FEEC (2022) report, half (51%) of the respondents perceived that the current data collection and the quality of statistics on students’ absences do not meet the needs of education providers. This has raised conversation about utilising absence rates, for example, as an indicator of school wellbeing or in directing resources at the municipal level. For example, a local pilot project, *KouluKunnossa*, is developing the use of absence data as a resource for information-based management at school and regional levels (Perälä et al., 2022). Shared definitions, guidelines for data collection and intervention procedures would make planning, monitoring, and evaluating interventions more trustworthy.

Moreover, the lack of a national register, shared definitions, and cumulative statistics makes it difficult to evaluate whether SAPs are increasing and what kind of absenteeism is causing the challenges that school personnel describe as affecting their everyday work (Määttä et al., 2020). Lacking nationwide guidelines and definitions for recording and reporting school absences results in a wide variety of practices applied in municipalities and schools, which is a challenge for databased decision making. Importantly, different practices in collecting absence data lead to its underuse as the basis for tackling SAPs. Furthermore, accessing the data is difficult for researchers, and the data are rarely comparable across schools.

3 Discussion

A recent report (Määttä et al., 2020) acknowledged that SAPs are a prevalent problem in Finnish lower secondary schools. Consequently, many actions have been taken at the national and local levels to overcome the challenge (i.e., SKY). In addition, the challenges brought forth by the Covid-19 pandemic have kept SAPs and both student and school staff wellbeing at the very core of the nationwide discussion.

The challenges in recording, reporting, and utilising data on students’ school absences are entwined. In terms of recording, national guidelines, definitions, and

132 categories for data collection are needed to make the data collection at the school and education provider level more valid. In terms of reporting, the law already requires education providers to collect the data; but at the same time, many education providers (mostly municipalities) lack systematic procedures at the school level. This, for one, hampers the use of the data on municipal level. More detailed guidelines and shared data collection procedures could help education providers, which could also benefit both local decision-making and the preparation of a national register on absenteeism. If education providers were obliged to report the data to an institution gathering and using the data, a cumulative national register could be established. Currently, different ways of unifying and automating this procedure are being investigated by the Ministry of Education and Culture. Systematic recording and reporting procedures would make the data more usable and accessible for both decision makers and researchers. This would benefit research and practice, helping to develop preventive interventions and implement timely and effective SAP interventions as well as examine the effectiveness of the interventions.

3.1 Recording Absenteeism

The first task is finding a reliable way of differentiating problematic and non-problematic absenteeism and creating shared categories to follow in terms of absenteeism. This will most likely require changes and specifications in the national recommendations and guidelines. Considering the existing data, mainly three types of absenteeism are recognised in everyday school life: (a) absence due to illness, (a) unexcused absence and (a) excused absence. Still, there is a variety of reasons leading to SAPs (Heyne et al., 2019). This leaves us with the following question: When does absenteeism become problematic? Should we focus on the total amount of absenteeism regardless of the reasons or categories behind it or follow the attendance instead? Shared definitions would benefit both practice and research, for example, by making data collection more reliable and policy writing easier, allowing comparison across studies and countries, and allowing intervention studies to be more generalisable. National guidelines are being prepared now and will hopefully help to develop more shared practices among practitioners in schools and contribute to pre-service and in-service teacher education.

3.2 Reporting and Using Absenteeism Data

After establishing nationwide shared definitions for absenteeism (whether it is categories, hour limits or something else) there need to be more standardised reporting responsibilities for schools and data monitoring responsibilities at the level of the education provider and at the national level. This would make the data more reliable and comparable, benefiting the writing of intervention policies and research. For example, shared cut-off rates for determining the presence of a SAP could benefit intervention studies and comparison across studies. However, this also requires

changes in national recommendations concerning recording and reporting school attendance or absenteeism, and open discussion about how the legislation would be interpreted and applied.

While developing reporting practices, the action plans to be used by education providers and schools should also be improved, so that they are more systematic, addressing the gaps in the current plans. The future aspects of the plans should include promoting school engagement and attendance, systematic recording practices, use of attendance data in schools and municipalities, and early interventions for absenteeism, drawing on a multidimensional, multi-tiered system of support models (FEEC, 2022; Kearney & Graczyk, 2020), multidisciplinary collaboration models (including guardians), information, in-service teacher training, ensuring resources, and recognising that doing schoolwork – even when students find it difficult – still has an engaging function (Finn, 1989; Virtanen et al., 2019). These could be established by developing collective pupil welfare work towards including absence monitoring and interventions or forming school absenteeism teams, which could combine both pupil welfare work and learning and attendance support on all three levels and develop school and education-provider-level plans and interventions. For example, there are already some translated tools for working with students with SAPs available in Finnish, such as questionnaires for students (Inventory for School Attendance Problems, ISAP; Knollmann et al., 2019) and multi-informant questionnaires that include a student's guardians (SRAS-R – Kearney & Albano, 2007; SNACK – Heyne et al., 2019) to help professionals work in a structured manner. These instruments are still not widely used, and national-level evidence of their feasibility in Finnish settings is currently being studied. The development work has started, and scholars are working on validation and support for implementation.

Improvements in the use of absence data are entangled with recording and reporting improvements. With unified definitions and data collection procedures, the existence of municipal and national registers, and statistics, more evidence-based decision making will be possible. In the future, we will be facing questions related to the updating of legislation, the national core curriculum, and how old structures can be rearranged to better meet the current needs. One of the big questions is what and how to record and report, and how to use the data in development work at different decision-making levels. At a structural level, it is important to establish the responsibilities of different actors (e.g., school personnel, pupil welfare), develop sustainable forms of multi-professional collaboration at the school and municipal levels, and strengthen the participation of students and families.

3.3 Limitations

Currently, we lack reliable data on the national level due to shortcomings in definitions and shortcomings in local and national-level data collection procedures. The recent data sets collected on school absenteeism (School Health Questionnaire) and SAPs (FEEC, 2022; Määtä et al., 2020) are valuable, but they also have some

134 problems due to varying informants, definitions, and categories. For example, unexcused absenteeism at the individual level may seem lower than it actually is due to unclear instructions, teachers' interpretations, and features in electronic databases (i.e., records are guardian reports; if a guardian reports and checks 'unexcused absence', in some places it shows as excused). In addition, many of the students with severe absenteeism do not participate in school health questionnaires, because they are not at school at the time of the data collection. The prevalence calculated by Määttä et al. (2020) is a proportional median, calculated from a medium-sized sample, comprised of school personnel representing multiple professions (teachers, social workers, school administration, etc.). The prevalence may be underestimated, because teachers who most likely know most about students' SAPs have estimated that the prevalence of SAPs is higher than the reported 2–3%. Also, the data derived by the FEEC is only one example, and it may be skewed because the funding was specifically directed to addressing SAPs. Thus, the data is gathered from schools and municipalities already developing prevention and interventions for problematic absenteeism. This may not be the case elsewhere.

4 Conclusions

The issue of SAPs is well recognised, and actions are being taken at the national and local levels. The guidelines and structures regarding recording and intervening absenteeism are facing changes occurring at the political and national guideline levels. Yet, education providers and schools piloting and developing procedures in SKY are key actors on our path toward more systematic and effective ways of preventing and intervening with SAPs. Current challenges to overcome SAPs include creating a shared definition of problematic school absenteeism, updating national guidelines, creating a shared systematic data collection procedure to collect municipal and national-level statistics, and developing the utilisation of evidence-based practices.

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The Recording, Reporting, and Use of School Attendance Data by School Personnel in The Netherlands: Toe the Line or Take a New Path?

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Abstract: Research signals the importance of promptly identifying and responding to emerging absenteeism, to prevent severe and chronic absenteeism. Prompt identification and response relies upon a good system for recording, reporting, and using data related to students' school attendance and absence. The current article provides an overview of law, policy, and practice in the Netherlands regarding the recording, reporting, and use of school attendance data. We then consider the ways in which current law, policy, and practice help and hinder the work of school personnel as they endeavour to promote attendance and reduce absenteeism. Thereafter, we propose modifications to current policy and practice that could enhance the prompt identification and response to emerging absenteeism. When school personnel have easy access to reliable attendance data, and when they become accustomed to using the data to inform their work to promote attendance and respond to absenteeism, they are in a stronger position to support positive developmental outcomes among young people.

Keywords: school attendance data, school absenteeism, policy, practice, reporting, school personnel, The Netherlands

The importance of youths' engagement with schooling is supported by longitudinal studies conducted in the UK and USA which indicate that school attendance contributes to intellectual development and academic achievement (Carroll, 2010; Gottfried, 2011). Another study in the USA indicates that school attendance facilitates youths' social and emotional development (Gottfried, 2014). Moreover, attendance helps prepare youths for successful participation in society. For example, in the Netherlands as in other countries, citizenship education is an integral part of the curriculum (Ministry of Education, Culture and Science, 2021b).

Various negative consequences can arise when a young person's participation in education is reduced as a result of absenteeism, especially chronic absenteeism (i.e., 10% absence across a school term or year, Kearney & Graczyk, 2020). These consequences include poor health, decrease in educational and social engagement,

<https://doi.org/10.14712/23363177.2022.16>

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- 138** anxiety problems, depressive symptoms, reduced self-esteem, and increased isolation (Gottfried, 2014; Heyne et al., 2019; Kearney, 2008; Malcolm et al., 2003). Absenteeism may also have a negative impact on the family (e.g., Dannow et al., 2020), school peers (Gottfried & Hutt, 2019), school personnel (e.g., Finning et al., 2018), and the wider community (e.g., Allison & Attisha, 2019; Evans, 2000). As well as contributing to negative consequences, absence from school may be an indicator of underlying distress such as social anxiety or depression (Heyne et al., 2022).

1 Context

In the Netherlands, compulsory education applies to all young people from the age of 5 until the end of the school year in which they reach the age of 16, including asylum seekers and foreign nationals. Most children start education at the age of 4. Toddlers aged 2.5–4 years with (a risk of) educational disadvantage may attend preschool education to prevent or reduce their educational disadvantage (Ministry of Education, Culture and Science, n.d.).

Education commences with eight years of elementary school (pre-primary and primary grades), comprising 7,520 hours of education (Ministry of Education, Culture and Science, 2006). When a young person, due to academic deficiencies or social emotional reasons, cannot participate in regular elementary education, there is the possibility of continuing in special elementary education (SBO). When there are very serious learning problems and/or social-emotional challenges, a young person can attend special education (SO), for which a special admission statement is needed (Ministry of Education, Culture and Science, n.d.-h).

On average, youths enter secondary education at 12 years of age. There are four types of secondary education: practical education (PRO), preparatory secondary vocational education (VMBO), higher general secondary education (HAVO), and preparatory scientific education (VWO). Depending on the type of secondary education, the total number of education hours ranges from 1,000 (PRO) to 5,700 (VWO) (Ministry of Education, Culture and Science, 2021c).

Most Dutch schools for primary and secondary education are funded by the government, and there is a small group of schools providing non-government funded education. The non-government schools are not required to conform to all standards for government-funded education, but they are subject to specific laws and policies (e.g., obligation to employ qualified teachers and to apply the principles of education as described in the law). They are also required to report to the Education Inspectorate (Inspectie van het onderwijs, 2017). The number of primary and secondary students in non-government funded education has increased in recent years. For example, between 2015 and 2020 there was a 72.7% increase in non-government funded primary education (i.e., from 532 to 919 students – Inspectie van het onderwijs, 2021).

1.1 The Need for Accurate and Consistent School Attendance Data

A data-driven approach can be used to support youths' school attendance and thus ensure their optimal development (Chu, 2021; Keppens & Johnsen, 2021). In many countries, including the Netherlands, schools are required to monitor students' school attendance. By monitoring, we mean the act of recording and reporting students' attendance and/or absence. In the Netherlands, the requirement that schools monitor attendance is largely there to ensure that parents and young people comply with compulsory education (Witteveen-van Leenen et al., 2017). Importantly, the monitoring of school attendance also helps schools and communities identify youths and families needing support to prevent or remediate a school attendance problem (SAP).

The standard way for schools to monitor students' attendance is to record their absences in a monitoring system. This data must be accurate if it is to be used to draw conclusions about the needs of a young person or a group of young people (e.g., youths in a specific year level), and if researchers are going to use the data to study influences on attendance and absence. Nevertheless, Belgian research suggests that schools' recording of absences is not always accurate (Keppens et al., 2019). In addition to the need for accurate data, there is a need for consistency in the type of data that is recorded, to benefit comparison across schools, regions, and countries. Dutch research reveals little consistency across schools in the way absence data is recorded; variations include recording on an hourly basis, per half day, or daily (Roelofs et al., 2021). The lack of reliable data – data which is accurate and consistent – jeopardises the prompt identification of SAPs and the deployment of adequate interventions to prevent chronic absenteeism and subsequent early school leaving.

1.2 The Need to Use School Attendance Data to Inform School-Based Practice

Reliable attendance data is necessary but not sufficient for preventing and addressing SAPs. School personnel need to harness the potential in their attendance data by regularly analysing the data and using this analysis to select strategies that promote attendance and reduce absenteeism (Keppens et al., 2019). The analysis of attendance data can be done at an individual level, as well as at the level of the class, grade/year, and school. Relevant school personnel need to receive timely reports of students' absence in order to conduct this analysis.

The multi-dimensional multi-tiered system of supports model (MD-MTSS; Kearney & Graczyk, 2020) facilitates decision-making at multiple levels (e.g., school level, year level, class level) during the analysis of attendance data. It reinforces the use of broad preventive measures to promote school attendance and prevent absenteeism (Tier 1) and provides guidance on how to address emerging, mild, or

140 moderate absenteeism (Tier 2) as well as severe and chronic absenteeism (Tier 3). Attendance-based cut-off scores help demarcate movement from Tier 1 to Tier 2, and from Tier 2 to Tier 3. For example, when a student's absence surpasses 5%, this indicates the need to employ Tier 2 strategies to address emerging absenteeism, such as teacher mentoring or social skills training (Kearney, 2016). Absenteeism of 10% or more in a specified period signals the need to implement more intensive Tier 3 strategies such as the @school program (Heyne & Sauter, 2013), Back2School (Thastum et al., 2019), or an alternative education program (Brouwer-Borghuis et al., 2019). To date, there has been no research in the Netherlands on the use of the MD-MTSS model, but the authors are aware that the model is gaining increasing exposure among Dutch professionals in education and mental health.

1.3 Aim

In sum, prompt identification of absenteeism guards against the emergence of SAPs and thus the development of severe and chronic SAPs, and the MD-MTSS model supports the process of identifying and responding to SAPs. In effect, young people can benefit from the opportunities schooling provides for their academic and social-emotional development. The aim of the current paper is to advance the recording, reporting, and use of school attendance data in the Netherlands, in the interests of promoting school attendance and reducing SAPs. The following two questions were addressed: 1) What are the current laws and policies in the Netherlands with respect to recording, reporting, and using school attendance data? 2) In which ways do current laws and policies likely help and hinder school personnel as they use the MD-MTSS framework to promote attendance and reduce SAPs? To answer these questions, we drew upon the international literature on school attendance; Dutch laws and policies; and Dutch literature directly or indirectly addressing the recording, reporting, and/or use of school attendance data. Furthermore, we drew on the knowledge and experience of authors Rene Halberstadt and Marga de Weerd who work with Ingrado (the national branch association for compulsory education and early school leaving) and are expert on law, policies, and practices associated with school attendance in the Netherlands.

Following, in Section 2, we describe existing laws and policies and the way in which school personnel currently record, report, and use school attendance data. Thereafter, in Section 3, we reflect upon existing laws, policies, and current practice, and propose modifications that would help to pave a new path forward.

2 Current Law, Policy, and Practice Related to the Recording, Reporting, and Use of Attendance Data in the Netherlands

This section begins with an overview of Dutch law and policy pertaining to school attendance and absenteeism. It provides the context for understanding current practice related to school attendance data, described thereafter.

2.1 Current Law and Policy Regarding School Attendance

Every young person has a right to education. In the Netherlands, this right is guaranteed by the 1969 Compulsory Education Act (*Leerplichtwet 1969*, 2021). School attendance officers (*leerplichtambtenaren*) located in each municipality oversee compliance with the Compulsory Education Act and work to prevent school absenteeism and early school leaving. As noted above, compulsory education applies between 5 and 16 years of age. However, young people aged 16 to 18 years who have not obtained a basic qualification via their secondary education continue to be subject to compulsory education. The basic qualification is a diploma at higher general secondary education level, preparatory scientific education, or secondary vocational education (level 2 or higher). The basic qualification requirement is one of the measures instituted by the national government to prevent early school leaving, and it is intended to increase the chances of young people entering the labour market (Ministry of Education, Culture and Science, n.d.-c). Young people in non-diploma-oriented learning pathways in special education settings are not subject to the compulsory qualification.

The Compulsory Education Act allows for exemptions from school enrolment (article 5) and school attendance (article 11). The three types of exemption within these articles of law, as specified by the Ministry of Education, Culture and Science (n.d.-f), are:

- exemption for up to ten hours of education a week for children aged 5 to 6 years (article 11a);
- exemption from registration at a school because of (a) serious physical and/or psychological complaints (article 5 under a), (b) serious objections based on philosophy of life (article 5 under b), or because (c) young people are enrolled in a foreign school or do not live in one place (article 5 under c & part 5a); and authorised absenteeism (e.g., illness, suspension, funeral – article 11 a–g). Most of these exemptions are issued either by the school principal or the school attendance officer.

In 2014, the law on Appropriate Education (*Passend Onderwijs*) was introduced in the Netherlands. This law states that every young person subject to compulsory education should have an appropriate place in education where their educational needs can be met, and no student is deprived of education. In each region, schools

- 142 for regular and special education formed a so-called Collaboration (*Samenwerkingsverband*) to share responsibility for duty of care (*zorgplicht*). This implies that schools in the Collaboration cooperate in arranging the extra support that students need. The duty of care implies that a school may only deregister a student once the student has been enrolled in another suitable school (Ministry of Education, Culture and Science, n.d.-a, n.d.-e).

2.2 Current Practice Related to the Recording and Reporting of Attendance and Absenteeism

In the Netherlands, a distinction is made between two types of absenteeism: absolute absenteeism (*absoluut verzuim*) and relative absenteeism (*relatief verzuim*). Absolute absenteeism occurs when a young person subject to compulsory education and without a basic qualification is not enrolled in a school. Information about young people not enrolled in education is provided to schools and municipalities by the national government's Education Implementation Service (*Dienst Uitvoering Onderwijs, DUO*) (DUO, n.d.-a). Relative absenteeism occurs when a young person is enrolled in a school but is absent during class time. The policy resulting from the Compulsory Education Act distinguishes between relative absenteeism which is authorised (*geoorloofd*) and unauthorised (*ongeoorloofd*). This distinction determines whether a young person's absence falls under one of the legal exemptions from education as described in the Compulsory Education Act. For example, absence due to illness, suspension, religious beliefs, or attendance at a wedding or funeral is recorded by the school as authorised absence. Absence from school without a valid reason is classified as unauthorised absence, as in the case of truancy.

Schools are not allowed to report authorised absences to DUO. It is mandatory, however, to report unauthorised absence when a student is absent for 16 hours or more in 4 consecutive school weeks or when long-term relative unauthorised absenteeism (absence for 4 consecutive school weeks or more) is recorded. Schools have an option to report unauthorised absenteeism in two situations: luxury absence (vacation taken outside of the school vacations, without leave being granted by the school principal); and other unauthorised absenteeism, such as absence of less than 16 hours in 4 consecutive weeks, regular tardiness, or suspicion of unauthorised absence reported as illness (DUO, n.d.-a). In both situations, DUO will notify the school attendance officer in the relevant municipality. The school attendance officer then makes contact with the school to discuss the steps to be taken.

The government provides schools with rather few guidelines for recording and reporting unauthorised absence. Primary schools are to report 16 clock hours of unauthorised absence whereas secondary schools are to report 16 class hours if a class hour is less than or equal to 60 minutes. If a class hour is more than 60 minutes, it is converted to clock hours and reported as 16 clock hours (DUO, n.d.-a). In reality, however, absenteeism is often recorded by school personnel as half or whole days in primary education, and by class hour in secondary education (Roelofs et al., 2021).

Keeping track of students' attendance and absenteeism requires appropriate record keeping systems in schools. According to the 1969 Compulsory Education Act, the school principal is responsible for the accurate recording of absenteeism, along with the reporting of unauthorised absenteeism through the DUO absenteeism portal (DUO, n.d.-a; Witteman-van Leenen et al., 2017). However, schools may decide for themselves how to record absences, such as which software system to use and which subcategories are used to specify reasons for absence (e.g., doctor's visit, tardiness, or orthodontist visit). Since 2012, the Inspectorate of Education oversees whether schools keep accurate records of absenteeism, and it checks whether schools have reported unauthorised absenteeism (i.e., 16 hours or more in 4 consecutive school weeks) via the DUO absenteeism portal (Witteman-van Leenen et al., 2017).

Absence reports in the DUO portal are subsequently recorded, by DUO, in the Educational Participants Register (*Register Onderwijsdeelnemers*). This register contains data on students from all education sectors (e.g., primary and secondary education) for the purpose of, among other things, funding educational institutions, ministerial preparation of policy on absenteeism, and making reliable diploma information available. The data includes demographic data, exemption data, absenteeism data, diploma data, and national identification numbers of students (Wet register onderwijsdeelnemers, 2021).

2.2.1 School Personnel's Compliance with the Recording and Reporting of Absence

As noted, the Education Inspectorate supervises school principals' compliance with the Compulsory Education Act. In school year 2015–2016, the Education Inspectorate investigated the extent to which there was sufficient compliance with the Act, focusing on: absence administration, reports of unauthorised absence, the handling of leave requests, and schools' communication of their absence policy to families. A rating of 'unsatisfactory' was applied to 27 percent of the primary schools that were surveyed, 69 percent of special education schools surveyed, and 11 percent of secondary schools surveyed (Witteman-van Leenen et al., 2017). The most problematic areas were absence administration, reporting unauthorised absence, and granting leave. There was also room for improvement in school personnel's communication with families about the school's absence policies. Follow-up in school year 2016–2017 revealed substantial improvements by these schools (Witteman-van Leenen et al., 2017).

There may be differences in the way primary schools and secondary schools record and report absence. Roelofs et al. (2021) studied absence due to illness (authorised absence) and short-term unauthorised absence (less than 16 hours in 4 weeks) in primary, secondary, and special education schools in the Netherlands. They found that the average number of absences due to illness was three times lower in primary schools compared to secondary schools. The authors suggested that this may occur because absenteeism is recorded in a more systematic way in secondary

144 schools, resulting in higher reports of absence. They also suggested that school personnel in primary schools might be hesitant to officially report absenteeism, out of a concern that involving the school attendance officer might damage parents' trust in the school. According to Roelofs et al., the inclination of primary school staff to address absenteeism with the parents, rather than reporting it, could explain the lower rates of reported illness among youths in primary education.

2.2.2 Challenges for school personnel in Recording and Reporting Absence

For personnel in Dutch schools, the task of differentiating between authorised and unauthorised absence is not straightforward. This difficulty is also described in the international literature. Absences may be recorded as authorised because a parent writes a note stating that their child is ill, when in fact their child is not ill (Kearney, 2003). In effect, the recorded authorised absence camouflages an unauthorised absence. Moreover, school personnel (e.g., teachers, attendance coordinators) employ subjectivity when recording absences as authorised or unauthorised (Zhang, 2003). Indeed, Panayiotou et al. (2021) suggested that the conceptualisation and operationalisation of authorised and unauthorised absences vary according to the teacher, school, and circumstance, and that a student's high number of unauthorised absences may be interpreted by teachers as a sign of emotional disturbance, leading them to record subsequent absences as authorised. Other international researchers have similarly suggested that the validity of the assumptions of parents, young people, and school personnel, regarding authorised versus unauthorised absence, is weak (Birioukov, 2016; Keppens & Johnsen, 2021).

School personnel in the Netherlands are required to have good registration systems in place to record student absences (Ministry of Education, Culture and Science, 2020). The Compulsory Education Act does not mandate however, that authorised absences such as absence due to illness be reported to DUO. It is thus difficult to identify exact rates of absence due to illness on a national or even municipal level. Research suggests that absences due to illness account for a large proportion of total school absenteeism in primary education (Pijl et al., 2021; Roelofs et al., 2021). Nevertheless, there is sometimes less awareness of the impact of (authorised) illness-related absence on young people's well-being (Pijl et al., 2021).

The Compulsory Education Act does provide an option for school personnel to report worrisome authorised absence under the category of 'other absenteeism' (DUO, n.d.-a), but this is not mandatory. According to Roelofs et al. (2021), school personnel and school attendance officers have difficulty specifying authorised absences that are worrying. While there is no clear definition of worrisome authorised absence, school personnel in Roelofs and colleagues' study indicated that worrying authorised absenteeism is related to: the duration and frequency of absenteeism, the underlying issues for the young person (e.g., medical or social-emotional problems), and an overall sense that the absence is worrisome. The authors suggested that the lack of a clear definition for worrying authorised absenteeism poses a risk

for under-recording and under-reporting of absenteeism. This is likely to delay appropriate intervention, counter to the MD-MTSS model for promoting school attendance and reducing absenteeism.

Currently, there is a large teacher shortage in the Netherlands. The consequent high workload experienced by teachers is a major challenge and it impacts the quality of education and well-being of students (DUO, 2019; Inspectie van het onderwijs, 2022). One could speculate that the large teacher shortage also has a negative effect on the recording of absenteeism, due to insufficient time to routinely and accurately record students' attendance and absence.

The COVID-19 pandemic caused major disruptions to schooling, with ramifications for how absence was conceptualised, recorded, and reported. During the first lockdown in the Spring of 2020, schools in the Netherlands were not obliged to report absenteeism to DUO. School attendance officers mainly focused on supporting schools by getting in contact with young people who were absent from school, rather than simply enforcing the law surrounding absenteeism. This was an attempt to ensure that as many young people as possible remained 'in view'. After the first lockdown, schools were required to report unauthorised absenteeism from distance learning such as online classes. These 'distance learning absences' belonged to the same category as unauthorised absences during regular class time in school. DUO and the school attendance officers encouraged schools to report absences that are worrying even before absence reached the statutory threshold of 16 hours in 4 weeks (DUO, n.d.-b; Ministry of Education, Culture and Science, 2021a).

2.3 Current Practice Related to the Use of Attendance Data

The careful recording and diligent reporting of school attendance data can improve educational and social-emotional outcomes for young people when that data is used to inform decisions about which young people and families need attendance support.

2.3.1 Using Attendance Data for School-Based Intervention

There are two commonly used protocols in the Netherlands that provide guidance regarding the use of attendance data. These protocols are Medical Advice for Sick-Reported Students (MAZL –*Medische Advisering van de Ziekgemelde Leerling*) and Methodical Approach to School Absenteeism (MAS). The former targets authorised absenteeism due to illness in primary and secondary school students and is used by schools, health care institutions, and municipalities. The latter targets unauthorised absenteeism. It is used by all school attendance officers in the Netherlands to address SAPs. See Brouwer-Borghuis et al. (2019) for a description of the MAZL and MAS protocols.

Other than this, very little has been written about how personnel in Dutch schools use attendance data. An exception is the recent study by Roelofs et al. (2021). School-based personnel, school attendance officers, and youth healthcare physicians were asked how primary and secondary schools address absenteeism. The authors

146 found that about one-half of the primary and secondary schools have an absenteeism protocol. These protocols are based on the legal framework and specify the procedures used by the school in cases of absenteeism. Some differences in absence policy are noticeable between primary and secondary education. One example is that in secondary education, absenteeism due to illness is a specific part of the absenteeism policy, while this is not specifically addressed in absenteeism policies in primary schools. Protocols from primary and secondary schools are mainly communicated to parents and students through the school guide which provides information about the school, including the goals of education and additional support for students. In short, there is attention to the communication of procedures surrounding absenteeism, but there is no further specification of how school personnel use attendance data to support youths and families affected by absenteeism.

School-based professionals in the Roelofs et al. (2021) study indicated that their approach to addressing absenteeism was mainly aimed at prevention, by focusing on an appropriate curriculum and counselling program, sometimes in combination with a more curative approach to absenteeism. There was no specification of how attendance data is used to inform the interventions used. In the reports of school attendance officers and youth healthcare physicians, there was variation in the approach to absenteeism. They noted that some schools focus on preventing absenteeism while others adopt more of a wait-and-see approach, taking action when absenteeism becomes more problematic. One example of how schools take action to address absenteeism is to first engage with the parents and the young person, and if necessary, to then collaborate with partners such as school attendance officers or healthcare professionals.

2.3.2 Governmental Use of Attendance Data

Each year, municipalities are required to report the rate of unauthorised absenteeism to the Ministry of Education, Culture and Science, along with the efforts taken to address absenteeism during the year. The Minister for Education, Culture and Science informs the House of Representatives about the rates of school absenteeism in the previous school year, and the most important focal points (Ministry of Education, Culture and Science, n.d.-b). An example of how the government uses absence data to fine-tune policy is found in the evaluation of the law on Appropriate Education. This evaluation showed that there was no decrease in the number of students with long-term absenteeism (*thuiszitters*) since the introduction of the Appropriate Education law (Ledoux et al., 2020). According to the Minister, there needs to be improved cooperation between education and mental health care to ensure that young people are not absent from school for longer than is necessary (Ministry of Education, Culture and Science, 2021a).

To encourage this cooperation, the Minister has, for example, selected 15 experimental projects for educational care arrangements (*onderwijszorgarrangementen*). During the course of the experiment, organisations can deviate from certain laws and regulations that are found to be unwelcome barriers in the cooperation

between education and mental health care. This allows for innovative initiatives in the field of education and mental health care, to promote the development or improvement of customised approaches to reducing long-term absenteeism. The effects of the experiment are being monitored and the results will serve as the basis for modifying laws and policies in the long term (Ministry of Education, Culture and Science, n.d.-g).

A recent parliamentary letter from the Minister, which reports on school absenteeism in school year 2020–2021, refers to the importance of not just focusing on the number of youths absent from school, but also focusing on the promotion of school attendance among all school-aged youths. According to the letter, this can be achieved by increasing opportunities to participate in education, and by simplifying the recording of absence and making the recording of all types of absence mandatory. The minister also emphasises the importance of addressing the increase in exemptions related to art. 5 under a (i.e. exemptions because of serious physical and/or psychological complaints) in all municipalities by, for example, examining the roles of attendance officers and municipalities and, if necessary, clarifying and fine-tuning them (Ministry of Education, Culture and Science, 2022).

National absenteeism data collected by the government is made publicly accessible to schools, policymakers, and other stakeholders in two ways. The first is through the Absenteeism and Early School-Leavers Compass (*Verzuim en Schoolverlaters Kompas*, <https://www.vsvkompas.nl>), introduced in 2015. This is a digital platform that brings together the most up-to-date national information on absenteeism and early school leaving. The Compass has a restricted section with comprehensive fact sheets and analysis of absenteeism intended for use by people such as municipal managers and policymakers to shape their policies. A benchmark on national absenteeism figures in the past school year is also made available to anyone interested in such data. This includes nationally available data on absolute absenteeism, relative absenteeism, long-term relative absenteeism, early school leavers, exemptions, and official reports by attendance officers. The Compass is administered by Ingrado (the national branch association for compulsory education and early school leaving) at the request of the Ministry for Education, Culture and Science. The second way national absenteeism data is made publicly accessible is through the website of the national government. This includes data on absenteeism per municipality, including absolute absenteeism, relative absenteeism, long-term relative absenteeism, and exemptions from compulsory education (Ministry of Education, Culture and Science, n.d.-d).

3 Discussion

The reliable recording, efficient reporting, and diligent use of attendance data facilitate timely intervention for absenteeism which can help prevent the development of SAPs. Following, we highlight key issues identified in the literature that are relevant for school personnel as they record, report, and use school attendance data. We offer specific recommendations for the recording, reporting, and use of school attendance data, in the hope that these recommendations help pave a new path forward in the Netherlands and perhaps in other countries.

3.1 Recording Absenteeism

Currently, the legal framework regarding the school-based recording of absenteeism only requires that school personnel keep records of absences. Beyond that, school personnel are free to determine such things as who records absenteeism and which software system is used for this purpose. In practice, it seems that school personnel find it difficult to establish and maintain reliable records of absenteeism. Two points warrant attention.

First, the impression gained from school personnel in the Netherlands is that the recording of absenteeism can be complex and time-consuming. This task, usually undertaken by the classroom teacher or an absence coordinator, requires a determination about which subcategory of 'relative absenteeism' applies to each instance of absence. It is necessary that those recording absenteeism have a good understanding of when and how the subcategories apply, to promote reliable recording across those conducting the task, and over time (i.e., across every class or hour in the school day). Different interpretations of the same subcategories of absence (e.g., authorised versus unauthorised) pose a risk for prompt identification and appropriate intervention. To reduce this risk, we recommend that schools choose to respond to all absences, rather than focusing just on those subcategories of absence which the law currently deems significant. There needs to be clear communication among school personnel, and with students and parents, to understand the reasons for absenteeism and thus to offer appropriate intervention. In addition, professional development for school personnel could focus on the impact of absence, irrespective of the category of absence, underscoring the need for accurate recording of all absence.

Second, schools in the Netherlands currently decide how to record absences and this leads to variation across schools. One of the variations we are aware of is that absenteeism in primary schools is often recorded per part day or whole day, whereas in secondary schools it is often recorded per class hour. There is also variation in categories used by schools to define authorised and unauthorised absenteeism. Variations across schools is unlikely to be unique to the Netherlands. We perceive three problems with variations in what is recorded. First, because absenteeism is recorded in 'broader brushstrokes' in primary schools (i.e., half days versus hourly),

there is less nuanced information about the extent to which primary school youths are missing out on educational time. Second, it is difficult to reliably compare rates of absenteeism in primary schools and secondary schools. For example, a primary school student's short visit to the dentist could be recorded as a 'dental visit' associated with a half day of absence whereas a secondary school student's visit could be recorded as a 'medical visit' associated with an hour's absence. Third, variation makes it difficult for policymakers and researchers to conduct robust comparisons of attendance data across schools, regions, and countries (Lubberman et al., 2014; Roelofs et al., 2021).

3.2 Reporting Absenteeism

The current legal framework for the reporting of absenteeism provides school personnel with some guidance on this matter. That is, the reporting of unauthorised absenteeism needs to occur via a classification of the subtype of unauthorised absenteeism (e.g., long-term relative unauthorised absenteeism or luxury absence). Adherence to the legal framework is monitored and supported by various stakeholders such as the Ministry of Education, Culture and Science, DUO, and school attendance officers. We recommend two changes to the reporting of absenteeism, related to the difficulty distinguishing between authorised and unauthorised absence, and to the current threshold for reporting absenteeism.

First, Dutch policy seems to suggest, falsely, that there is a difference in the seriousness of absenteeism that must be reported by schools (i.e., unauthorised absenteeism) compared with absenteeism that does not need to be reported (i.e., authorised absenteeism). Because there is no reporting requirement for authorised absence, this might send an unintended signal to school personnel that this type of absence is less concerning and requires less attention. As a result, school personnel may respond to authorised absenteeism in a way which is 'too little, too late'. To be sure, authorised absence such as absenteeism due to illness accounts for a substantial share of total absenteeism among young people (Pijl et al., 2021; Roelofs et al., 2021). Moreover, authorised and unauthorised absenteeism both have the potential to affect a young person's development (Havik et al., 2015). In order to avoid misconceptions about the likely impact of different types of absenteeism (i.e., authorised and unauthorised), national policy could mandate that all types of absenteeism be reported.

The second recommendation relates to the threshold for reporting absenteeism. Current Dutch laws and policies provide some leeway for school personnel, in that there is scope to report 'worrisome absenteeism' even before it reaches the official threshold of 16 hours in 4 consecutive weeks of school-time. The reporting of 'worrisome absenteeism' has increasingly been encouraged by DUO and school attendance officers. However, the current legal threshold for obligatory reporting to DUO – 16 hours in 4 weeks – could signal to school personnel that action on absenteeism only needs to be taken when this threshold is reached. In an article

150 on the prompt identification of school attendance problems, Brouwer-Borghuis et al. (2019) compared the Dutch threshold for reporting unauthorised absenteeism (i.e., 16 hours in 4 weeks) with suggestions from the international literature about thresholds for emerging absenteeism (Tier 2: 1%, 3%, or 5% absenteeism) and severe or chronic absenteeism (Tier 3: 10% or 15% absenteeism). They concluded that Dutch laws and policies effectively require schools to report absenteeism only when it is severe or chronic. This clearly impedes timely identification and intervention. A new path forward would involve adjustments to laws and policies that foster a preventive rather than purely curative approach to absenteeism. For example, policy should encourage school personnel and municipalities to focus on the school attendance of all students, not only those whose absenteeism surpasses a threshold signalling a severe or chronic SAP.

3.3 Using Attendance Data

Little is known about how school personnel currently use attendance data in their daily practice to promote school attendance and respond to absenteeism. While Dutch laws provide some direction regarding the recording and reporting of absence, this is not the case for how to use attendance data. Furthermore, there are few non-legislative guidelines for school personnel. Ingrado (2020) recently responded to the need for more guidance for schools by offering suggestions about how to optimally use attendance data. These suggestions include: setting goals regarding attendance in school and comparing these goals to outcomes, evaluating attendance data at multiple levels (e.g. individual, classroom and school level), making sure school managers are aware of current attendance figures, and establishing a school-based attendance committee.

By default, Dutch laws draw attention to the absence of individual students, not to levels of absenteeism among groups (e.g., class or year level). Attention to the needs of individual students is important, and the current laws might explain why school absenteeism policies seem to focus on individual students, and why school-based approaches to absenteeism are fundamentally curative in nature rather than preventive. If laws and policies were to encourage school personnel to use data to also identify absenteeism trends at the class level, year level, and whole school level, this would broaden the focus of attention. For example, school personnel may then identify the need to implement more prevention and/or early intervention strategies among students in the first years of secondary school, such as personalised academic instruction, anti-bullying programs, or specific skills training (Kearney & Graczyk, 2020).

Another aspect of current Dutch laws and policies is that they focus school personnel's attention on attendance data to the exclusion of other variables known to be associated with SAPs and the remediation of SAPs. Examples of variables associated with absenteeism are school climate, bullying at school, the teacher-student relationship, and peer relations (Havik, 2021; Kearney, 2008). Examples of variables

associated with poor remediation of SAPs include older age and social anxiety (Heyne et al., 2015). By linking absenteeism data with other variables (e.g., linking absenteeism per class with student evaluations of school climate), school personnel can develop a fuller understanding of the variables influencing absenteeism and how best to respond. In the Netherlands, for example, this could involve the linking of data derived via mandatory monitoring of public safety in schools with data on absenteeism. In the US, Chu et al. (2019) provide an example of an online tool used by school personnel which makes use of various types of data to efficiently identify young people with emerging SAPs. Teachers mark attendance and absence in a centralised system, an administrative assistant monitors absenteeism and signals when a threshold is breached (five or more late arrivals, early departures, or absences), and a school counsellor completes an online questionnaire about academic, social, and family functioning. Chu et al. noted that this helps identify youth most at risk, provides direction regarding intervention, expands school personnel's knowledge of factors affecting attendance, and helps these personnel engage parents in conversations about what might be contributing to their child's absenteeism.

3.4 Conclusion

School absence and early school leaving have been high on the Dutch political agenda. Current laws provide direction for school personnel with respect to the recording and reporting of unauthorised absence. This includes a national reporting system, whereby unauthorised absence is reported to DUO and then entered in the Educational Participants Register. The government shares some of the absence data via its website and the Absenteeism and Early School Leavers Compass.

A recent letter from the Minister of Education, Culture and Science, sent to the House of Representatives, signals an important paradigm shift. There is a shift away from a sole focus on reducing long-term school absenteeism towards the promotion of school attendance among all young people. This heralds a new path forward. To enhance the path forward, we offered recommendations for improving the recording, reporting, and use of school attendance data in the Netherlands. It is no longer fitting for school personnel to simply 'toe the line' by retaining current practices in the areas of recording, reporting, and using attendance data. Policymakers also need to be mindful of ways to change policy to support school personnel taking new paths.

Specifically, attention needs to be given to how the recording of absence can be made less complex, and how to increase uniformity in the recording that occurs within and across schools. It would be important to mandate the reporting of all types of absenteeism (i.e., authorised and unauthorised), because absence from school poses a risk for negative consequences, especially as absence increases. Related, all absences should be reported, not just absences which reach a specific threshold, to increase attention to the need for early identification and intervention. Revisions to national, regional, and school-level policies, including the emphasis on

152 promoting attendance and preventing absenteeism, will help pave a better path forward.

Alongside the change in focus from absence to attendance, and improvements in the recording, reporting, and use of attendance data, we argue that the MD-MTSS framework (Kearney & Graczyk, 2020) that was introduced in Section 1.3 be used by school personnel to support their efforts as they travel this new path forward. This framework supports school personnel's efforts to promote a culture of school attendance (Tier 1) and efficiently identify and intervene with emerging, mild, or moderate SAPs (Tier 2). It contrasts, thus, with the more typical approach of solely addressing SAPs which have become severe and chronic (Tier 3). The framework also facilitates a shift from focusing solely on the individual young person, to addressing patterns of absenteeism that occur in larger groups such as the classroom or year level.

By taking this new path, rather than toeing the current line, we believe that school personnel and the broader community of support services will be in a better position to optimise each young person's journey along their own educational pathway. To further inform the path forward, there needs to be research into current and emerging policy and practice within schools regarding the recording, reporting, and use of attendance data. More specifically, qualitative research could explore school personnel's perceptions of the strengths and difficulties associated with current policy and practice. This could inform the development of supportive guidelines for school personnel as well as the need for a change in policy and law. Research could also focus on the ideal role of support services (e.g., school attendance officers, school psychologists) in helping school personnel promote attendance and reduce absenteeism. For example, how can professionals outside the school setting best support school personnel in using their attendance data? Lastly, research could explore the optimal conditions for the work of a school attendance team (e.g., a team comprising an administrator, a data analyst, a behaviour specialist, and a learning specialist) as the team seeks to help other personnel in the school to promote attendance and reduce absenteeism.

Acknowledgements

We are grateful for the support of Irma de Wit (Senior Consultant at SWV VO North Kennemerland) who reviewed and commented on the manuscript during its preparation.

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School Attendance Problems in Scotland and Spain: Variations in Recording, Reporting, and Using Data

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Abstract: School attendance problems (SAPs) are a worldwide concern due to their significant impact on students' development. SAPs may vary across countries depending on the effectiveness of policy measures for prevention and care, the functioning of the educational systems, and the cultural and social environments, among others. According to the latest PISA results, 6.5% of Spanish students were absent from school once or twice per week. In Scotland, school absence rates increased from 7% to 8% from the 2018–2019 to 2020–2021 academic year even after accounting for COVID-19 related absences. This paper draws on official documents and statistics to investigate SAPs in Spain and Scotland, considering differences in the structure of the education system, approaches to recording absences in schools, strengths, and weaknesses of each system. It sets the scene by describing the educational context, the conceptualization of absenteeism, recording procedures, reporting issues and data in Spain and Scotland. The paper demonstrates that these countries have different ways of reporting and making this information available. Finally, comments on lessons learned and suggestions for policy and research relating to absenteeism are considered.

Keywords: school attendance, school absenteeism, Spain, Scotland

Schools play a significant role in children's socialization and holistic development (Jourdan et al., 2021). According to the fourth goal in the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, there is a necessity to ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities through the completion of primary and secondary education. Educational administrations must guarantee the right to education and help children and adolescents to be independent, proactive, and responsible in the future. Hence, School Attendance Problems (SAPs), defined as the various categories of school absences or difficulties in attending or remaining in school (e.g., delays, occasional or continuous absences, unexcused consent) are an important topic in educational systems worldwide which policy and practice must address (Kearney, 2019). Much research is concerned with the causes and consequences of SAPs (González et al., 2021; Klein et al., 2020; Sosu et al., 2021). SAPs are associated with a short and long-term negative impact on people's lives, such as internalizing problems (e.g., anxiety, depression), poorer academic achievement or school dropout (Bagaya, 2019; Fernández-Sogorb et al., 2020; González et al.,

<https://doi.org/10.14712/23363177.2023.11>
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- 158 2018; Klein et al., 2022; Orgilés et al., 2011). However, there is a demand for comparative studies analysing the different ways in which countries record, report, and use school attendance data.

1 Context

A comparative view of SAPs can identify the strengths and weaknesses of each educational system and its policy measures to prevent and address this issue. So far, there is no evidence from previous comparative studies between Spain and Scotland in terms of school attendance and school absenteeism. Significant differences have been detected in the way of reporting and making school attendance data available. Scotland offers national attendance rates by student characteristics and anonymised individual-level data on school attendance and absences by request from the Scottish Government, whereas in Spain, it is difficult to find official reports about school attendance rates although this country is the second one with the highest school dropout rate (16% – year 2020) in the European Union (Eurostat, 2020), given attendance as precursor of dropout. It is therefore useful to identify the strengths and weaknesses of each educational system in terms of school attendance to learn lessons to improve both systems. Thus, this paper serves as a starting point on how SAPs are approached in different contexts and a basis for further research and policies to address attendance problems in these countries.

1.1 Spanish Education System

Schools in Spain can be distributed into three groups: state-funded (*públicos*), state-subsidised private (*concertados*), and privately funded (*privados*). Compulsory schooling is from ages 6 to 16. Preschool education (ages 0 to 6), upper-secondary education (ages 16 to 18) or vocational training (from the age of 16) are not compulsory in the country. Spain is made up of 17 autonomous communities and two autonomous cities. Each one establishes its curriculum based on minimum educational standards established at the national level. It is designed based on the principles, vision, values, and competencies defined in the profile of the students to be trained, capable of exercising an active, responsible, and committed citizenship in an uncertain future. It is intended to be inclusive, comprehensive, and flexible to promote the students' learning and reduce repetition, absenteeism, failure, and early school dropout (Ministerio de Educación y Formación Profesional, 2020).

School absenteeism is regulated in article 226.1 of the Spanish penal code, a provision that punishes with a prison sentence of three to six months or a fine of six to twelve months: "To those who fail to comply with the legal duties of attendance inherent to the homeland authority, guardianship, custody, or foster care or to provide the legally necessary assistance established for the support of their descendants, ascendants, or spouse, who are in need."

It may be noted that there is no mention in the precept of truancy because it is included within the crime of family abandonment and, specifically, as a case of breach of the duties inherent to parental authority. This civil code lists in its article 154 the duties inherent to parental authority as follows: “Non-emancipated children are under the authority of the parents. Parental authority shall always be exercised for the benefit of children, according to their personality and with respect to their physical and psychological integrity.”

Among the duties inherent to the homeland power exercised by parents, is to educate children. Behaviour that evidences a breach of the duty to educate children is considered negligence (lack of concern and disinterest of the parents or showing a lazy attitude and absolute lack of involvement in the problem of minors). This also amply demonstrates the negligence and irresponsibility of parents (Vázquez González, 2013). However, since 1970, there has been frequent and ongoing legislative adjustments and this lack of policy stability reflect a lack of national consensus in education policies, which in turn, resulted in an inability to establish a regulatory framework, teacher fatigue and family confusion about their role (Antiñolo et al., 2014).

1.2 Scottish Education System

The provision of educational services in Scotland is mainly state-funded, with most of primary and secondary schooling provided by the 32 Scottish local authorities. All children and young people have the right to be taught in mainstream schools in Scotland. However, some local authorities offer specialist settings in mainstream schools. Only four per cent of Scottish students attend independent schools (i.e., private schools) in Scotland (Smith, 2018). The publicly funded schools managed by local authorities include Roman Catholic denominational schools with specific rights for the Roman Catholic Church embedded in statute.

Scottish primary education lasts for seven years (from P1 to P7), and secondary education lasts for six years (from S1 to S6). Children commonly start primary school at the age of five. Compulsory schooling lasts until S4 (age 16). Scotland has a comprehensive schooling system in which children remain together in the same school setting until the end of compulsory schooling. Since 2010/11, children aged 3 to 18 have been taught in the national curriculum for Scottish schools, the Curriculum for Excellence (CfE). CfE identifies four key purposes of education: “successful learners, confident individuals, responsible citizens and effective contributors” (Education Scotland, 2019).

Children in stages P1, P4, P7, and S3 (third year of secondary school) undertake national standardised assessments in literacy and numeracy. Teachers also use their professional judgement to make decisions about students’ learning and progress. At the end of compulsory (stage S4) and post-compulsory schooling (stages S5/S6), students in Scotland undertake national examinations, which are highly consequential for school continuation, entry into higher education, and labour market outcomes

160 (Iannelli et al., 2016; Iannelli & Duta, 2018). Although no between-school tracking exists in the Scottish education system, within-school tracking via curriculum differentiation is common practice. There are only two mandatory subjects (Maths and English) at the compulsory stage of secondary school (S3/S4) and no mandatory subjects at the post-compulsory phase (S5/S6). Schools can decide how many subjects they offer, and students can decide on the number of subjects, the configuration of subjects and the qualification level within each subject they want to sit exams in at both stages.

Regarding school attendance, parents are legally responsible for getting their school-aged children to school regularly. Under Section 30 of the Education (Scotland) Act 1980: “It shall be the duty of the parent of every child of school age to provide an efficient education for him suitable of his age, ability, and aptitude either by causing him to attend public school regularly or by other means.” Under Section 35 of the Education (Scotland) Act 1980: “Non-attendance at school without reasonable excuse is an offence.”

Education authorities can use measures of compulsory compliance (e.g., attendance order) to insist that parents do more to get their children to school (see Appendix 1 in Scottish Government, 2019). At the same time, schools are responsible for providing children with the necessary support and help to get them to school. The Scottish Government suggests that school attendance is aligned with the school’s overall approaches to positive relationships and behaviour. It further recognises school attendance as one of the five key drivers for raising attainment as part of the Scottish Attainment Challenge aiming to reduce the poverty-related attainment gap.

2 Recording and Reporting of School Attendance and Absenteeism in Spain

During the last decades, one of the most significant school problems that has become an essential topic in educational research is absenteeism. This problem affects many children and adolescents (Sprick & Berg, 2019). Consequently, public administrations must guarantee the right to education and help children and adolescents to be independent, proactive, and responsible in the future.

2.1 How Does the Spanish Government Conceptualise and Define Attendance and Absenteeism?

In Spain, there is no concrete conceptualization which defines attendance. The definition of absenteeism is as follows (Ministerio de Educación, 2015): a partial and discontinuous school break that implies irregular attendance at the educational centre. It is understood as the situation of non-schooling minors of compulsory school age. At the end of compulsory secondary education, numerous cases are

technically considered absenteeism since the student continues to be enrolled, but they are early school dropouts. School absenteeism manifests itself in diverse ways: delays, early or late absences and continued absences without proper justification. It can be divided into three different types: occasional if it is less than 25% of schooldays absent without justification, mild if it oscillates between 25 and 50% the number of schooldays absent without justification and high or chronic absenteeism if it is greater than 50% the number unexcused absences per month (Aguado, 2005). Schools must ensure that students attend the recommended weekly 25 hours in primary schools and between 30 and 33 hours in secondary schools. In addition, they can carry out extracurricular activities (Ministerio de Educación y Formación Profesional, 2022).

2.2 Attendance Data Recording and Reporting

In Spain, each autonomous community follows a different process for recording absences using a different web platform. For example, in the Valencian community, teachers record and report attendance through the ITACA Platform (Administrative Technological Innovation of Centres and Students) (Conselleria d'Educació, Cultura i Esport, 2010). In addition, it can be useful to register other information of interest such as students' data about their families, teachers' data and other staff who provide services in school centres. Data recording is realized daily at the beginning of each subject and families notify absences or lateness through the school platform. In this autonomous community, when it turns out to be a prolonged absence, it is notified in the platform of Conselleria d'Educació (PREVI), and education inspection is informed to do an attendance follow-up (Félix et al., 2008).

According to the PISA 2018 results in Spain, 29.6% and 43.9% of students reported not attending a full day of class and being late at least once, respectively, in the two weeks leading up to the PISA test. However, in the PISA 2022 study, Spain saw a slight decrease of 1,3 and 3,6 points in each category, reaching 28.3% and 40.3% of students reported not attending a full day of class and being late at least once, respectively, in this period of time.

There is data for other student outcomes known to be highly correlated with absences. In 2021, the repetition rate of Spanish students in compulsory secondary education was four times the OECD average: 8.7% of students ages 12 to 14 and 7.9% ages 15 to 16 repeated a grade in Spain, as compared to 1.9% and 3% of similarly aged students, respectively, in other OECD countries. In 2021, 13.3% of people aged 18 to 24 in Spain dropped out of secondary school (Ministerio de Educación y Formación Profesional & Ministerio de Universidades, 2021). Dropout rates were higher among men (16.7%) than women (9.7%), but significantly lower for both genders than 2011, when 21.5% of women and 31% of men (ages 20 to 24) dropped out their studies and has not completed upper secondary education. Moreover, these people are not studying or in any type of training in the four weeks preceding the interview.

2.3 Attendance Data Recording and Reporting Due to COVID-19 Pandemic

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, schools were closed from March 14th of 2020 until the start of the next school year (September 2020). However, teachers and students kept working using distance learning. Attendance and participation data was collected checking students who were synchronously online to the classes and sending the tasks teachers asked for. Although most students affirm that they have managed well with distance learning, 75% prefer face-to-face teaching, and 54% believe that more is learned in the school centre than studying from home (Marchesi et al., 2020).

According to the Ministry of Education (2021), during the last school year, 2020–2021, fully face-to-face teaching occurred in early childhood and primary education. 73.7% of the centres opted for reducing groups (decreasing the number of students per class) but not in the rest of the educational levels. In Secondary, only 26.3% of the centres were teaching completely face-to-face, although with flexible hours. In the school year 2021–2022, all students attended school as usual since online classes were over.

2.4 Reporting Issues

The Spanish government does not provide concrete guidance on recording and monitoring absences. Each Autonomous Community categorises responses to requests for absences. According to one nationally representative study of Cruz-Orozco et al. (2017), most of absentee students consists of teenagers between 12 and 14 years old (1st or 2nd year of compulsory secondary education) presenting lack of study habits and school delay. They also have alienation towards the educational system, leading to forgetting their school supplies at home. Their families present an overprotective profile (referring to parents who hover or control their child's actions, ensuring their child's well-being, but their efforts can be intrusive and detrimental) or lack of involvement, complemented by permissiveness (referring to a type of parenting style characterized by low demands with high responsiveness, tending to be very loving, yet provide few guidelines and rules). Related to their intrinsic feelings, their low self-esteem, little or no tolerance for frustration, lack of habits, routines, and social skills are accompanied by a lack of self-control.

In the Valencian community, there is a Programme for Guidance, Advancement and Educational Enrichment called PROA+ program, which is aimed at schools with special educational complexity, including those located in rural areas. These are schools with a significant number of students in a situation of educational vulnerability, who manifest a series of difficulties or obstacles throughout their school career; these obstacles, both personal and social, hinder the possibility of making sufficient use of the teaching within the classroom and the school context in general. In most cases, these are schools located in socially disadvantaged areas and with students belonging to families with a low socio-economic and educational level.

To carry out the implementation of the investment assigned for the program, territorial cooperation with the education administrations of the autonomous communities is established.

2.5 Attendance/Absence Data Usage

While attendance data is collected daily at the local level and there is a national institute of statistics, there is no aggregated national database or way to access attendance data that is collected in schools. Table 1 (Ministerio de Educación y Formación Profesional, 2021) shows school absenteeism data in Spanish and it is the last available report in Spain about school absenteeism (which is referred to 2019): 86.3% of Spanish girls never or hardly ever miss school days. Nevertheless, 5.8% of them miss school once or more times a week. Similarly, 83.5% of Spanish boys never or hardly ever miss school days. Nevertheless, 7.2% of them miss school once or more times a week. The differences between genders are as follows: 1.4% more boys than girls miss school once or twice per week, combined with 2.8% more girls than boys never or hardly ever miss school days. There is also given some data related to the school absenteeism rates for the total EU, which are the total percentage of all absent boys and girls in all EU countries, and the OECD average, an average based on calculations of the figures from each OECD country.

Table 1 School Absenteeism in Girls and Boys

	Girls			Boys		
	Spain	Total EU	OECD average	Spain	Total EU	OECD average
Once or more times a week	5.8	5.9	6.2	7.2	7.1	7.1
Once every two weeks	2.5	3.4	4.0	2.9	3.5	4.1
Once a month	5.4	8.4	9.9	6.4	8.3	9.8
Never or hardly ever	86.3	82.3	80.0	83.5	81.0	79.0

Note. Source: Igualdad en cifras MEFP 2021. Aulas por igualdad (Ministerio de Educación y Formación Profesional, 2021).

3 Recording and Reporting of School Attendance and Absenteeism in Scotland

This section examines how the Scottish Government conceptualises and defines attendance and absenteeism, as well as the methods used for recording and reporting attendance data. In addition, it briefly discussed recording and reporting of attendance data during the COVID-19 pandemic. The section further discusses challenges that may arise during the reporting process. It concludes by analysing the various ways in which attendance and absence data are utilised by the Scottish Government.

3.1 How does the Scottish Government Conceptualise and Define Attendance and Absenteeism?

School attendance is defined as participation in a programme of educational activities arranged and agreed upon by the school (Scottish Government, 2019). These include attendance at school, learning out of the school provided by a college or other learning providers while the student is still on the school roll, educational visits, and day and residential visits to outdoor centres. Attendance also includes students attending interviews and visits to further and higher education or careers events, debates, sports, musical or drama activities organised in conjunction with the school, study leave for students participating in national exams, tuition via hospital or outreach teaching services, and work experience.

Schools must ensure that students attend a school or another learning environment for the recommended weekly 25 hours in primary schools and 27.5 hours in secondary schools.

3.2 Attendance Data Recording and Reporting

Schools are expected to record attendance and absences register twice daily (morning and afternoon) (Scottish Government, 2019). However, some secondary schools monitor attendance in every lesson given students enrol for different subjects. While attendance and absence should be recorded at least per half-day session, lateness is recorded differently depending on whether children and young people arrive during the first or second half of the morning or afternoon session. It is expected the school attendance tracking and monitoring system will enable schools to keep parents updated on their children's attendance and contact parents when children consistently miss school.

Schools are expected to check children and young people's absence against information provided by their parents, including the expected date of return to school when absent. When a student is absent, schools check this against parental information and will assume that the student has missed school without parents being aware if parents have not communicated this to the school. The student will be recorded as an unauthorised absence until the school receives a satisfactory explanation from their parent. Where a school believes that a parent has not provided a valid reason for the absence, this will be recorded as unauthorised. Schools can authorise absences if they are satisfied with the reason provided by the parent. The Scottish Government advises that family holidays during term time should not be recorded as an authorised absence unless the parent's employment is incompatible with school holidays.

Schools record, code, and manage information on absences in an Education Management Information System (SEEMIS), following predefined attendance/absence codes (see Appendix 2 in Scottish Government, 2019). The Scottish Government collects and publishes aggregated national statistics on school student attendance

Table 2 Possible Reasons for Schools to Record Absences as Authorised or Unauthorised

Authorised absences	Unauthorised absences
Illness where no learning provision is made (including ongoing mental health concerns)	Occasional absence without parental awareness
Medical and dental appointments; meeting before and during court appearances and other legal processes	Absence with parental awareness in specific circumstances (e.g., trip, family-related activities)
Attendance at, or in connection with, a Children's Hearing or Care Review or appointment with another service provider (e.g., a social worker)	Family holidays during term time
Religious observance; bereavement; weddings or funerals of close friends and family; arranged absence with children in gypsy/traveller families	Longer-term absence about school-related issues (e.g., bullying, school anxiety, conflict with teachers)
Participation in non-school debates, sports, musical or drama activities agreed upon by the school	Longer-term absence related to home and wider community (e.g., experiences of abuse or neglect, coping with adversity and trauma)
Lack of transport	Absence relating to substance and alcohol misuse
Family recovery from exceptional domestic circumstances or trauma; period of exclusion; and extended leave with parental consent (including some young carer activities)	

and absence biennially.¹ Secure access is also provided to individual-level data on school attendance and absences to vetted researchers through the National Records of Scotland (e.g., Scottish Longitudinal Study) or Scottish Government secure labs following an application, ethical approval and secure data access training.

3.3 Attendance Data Recording and Reporting during the COVID-19 Pandemic

In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, education and childcare settings were closed between March 20th of 2020 and the end of the school year, except for children of key workers and vulnerable children. Schools started to reopen on August 11th of 2020 then closed for the winter break. Scotland went into another lockdown on 5th January 2021 which meant the early January reopening period was postponed with

¹ <https://www.gov.scot/publications/school-attendance-and-absence-statistics/>

166 all schools reverting to remote learning. P1-P3 students returned on February 22nd of 2021, and all primary children returned on March 15th of 2021.

Following the end of the first round of school closures and reopening of schools (August 2020), the Scottish Government collected and published daily absence data for students, staff, and school for the school year 2020/21.² The data differentiated between non-COVID-19 and COVID-19-related reasons for student absence (e.g., student absences due to COVID-19-related sickness, school closure due to COVID-19, student self-isolation due to COVID-19 infection in the household, or parents choosing to keep students away from school as a precautionary measure). In addition, the weekly attendance measures were distinguished by school stage, sex, ethnicity, and neighbourhood deprivation (Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation – SIMD). Initial analyses of these data after the first period of school closures suggested that student absences after the first wave of COVID-19 school closures were higher than in previous years and were stratified by neighbourhood socioeconomic characteristics (Sosu & Klein, 2021). These higher absenteeism rates and inequalities were largely due to COVID-19-related reasons.

3.4 Reporting Issues

The Scottish Government provides guidance on recording and monitoring of absences via SEEMIS, the Education Management System provider. However, it is ultimately up to schools and teachers to categorize responses by reason for absence. Despite similar circumstances, the recording of absence reasons may vary across students and schools, thereby raising the possibility of measurement error and concerns about the validity of documented reasons for absences.

While the coding of authorised absences in SEEMIS is detailed, the system does not differentiate further between various reasons for unauthorised absences, except for family holidays and exceptional domestic circumstances (see Appendix 2 in Scottish Government, 2019). All other absences for which no adequate explanation was provided by a parent are recorded as unexplained (including truancy) or other unauthorised absences, although more detailed information on the nature of the unauthorised absence seems available (see the list in Table 2 of categories for unauthorised absences above).

Another concern is that students, particularly at secondary school, can present themselves for registration at each half-day session and are then absent for specific lessons. Since the Scottish Government does not require effective monitoring of lesson-by-lesson, absences may be underestimated in schools with less effective supervision and monitoring of lesson attendance.

Except for the COVID-19-related data collected after the school closures, the statistics on attendance and absence are summary data for each school year.

² <https://public.tableau.com/app/profile/sg.eas.learninganalysis/viz/COVID19-SchoolsandChild-careInformation2021/Introduction>

Consequently, it is impossible to consider variations in school attendance levels and reasons across different school year periods (e.g., months or terms). Knowing at which period of the school year children and young people are absent is important. For instance, findings from a small, urban district in California suggest that Spring absences had a stronger negative impact on school performance than Autumn absences, with the most critical period being the 30-day window leading up to the test (Gottfried & Kirksey, 2017).

3.5 Attendance/Absence Data Usage

The Scottish Government's last collection and publication of school attendance and absence data refer to the school year 2020/21 when there was a disruption to school

Table 3 Attendance Rate by Student Characteristics – Schools Open, 2020–2021

All Students	92.0
School	
Primary	94.0
Secondary	89.1
Special	89.3
Sex	
Male	92.1
Female	92.0
Ethnicity	
White Scottish	92.0
White non-Scottish	92.1
Mixed or multiple ethnic groups	93.2
Asian	92.0
African/Black/Caribbean	94.6
All other ethnic groups	91.0
Not Disclosed / Not Known	91.2
Additional Support Needs (ASN)	
Students with ASN	89.4
Students with no ASN	93.3
Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation (SIMD)	
Lowest 20% of SIMD (Most deprived)	88.7
Highest 20% of SIMD (Least deprived)	95.0

Note. Students that were not matched to the Student Census have not been included. An ASN student is likely unable to benefit from school education without additional support. It can be due to disability (e.g., language and speech disorder), learning environment (e.g., inflexible curricular arrangements), family circumstances (e.g., children in the care of their local authority), or social and emotional factors (e.g., experiencing bullying behaviour). Source: Scottish Government (2022).

168 attendance caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. Therefore, the primary measure reported for “attendance or absence – schools open” only cover periods when schools were open to students. This is to enable comparability between attendance rates across different years bearing in mind the general context of COVID-19. Rates of attendance define the average number of days attended taking into account the number of school days. Statistics are presented at the national, local authority, and school levels.

Table 3 shows national attendance rates by student characteristics. Students in Scotland had an average attendance rate of 92.0 % in the school year 2020/21. This is somewhat lower than the average attendance rate in 2018/19 (93.0%), prior to the pandemic. Primary school students had a much higher average attendance rate (94%) than students in secondary schools (89.1%). Students with additional support needs (89.9%) had a lower average attendance rate than students with no additional support needs (93.3). The contrast in attendance is even more pronounced between students growing up in the 20% most deprived areas (88.7%) and students growing up in the 20% least deprived areas (95.0%). There are also observed differences in attendance by ethnicity. For instance, African/Black/Caribbean students have a higher average attendance rate (94.6%) compared to other groups such as those from a White, Asian or undisclosed ethnic background (91%–92%).

Summary statistics on school attendance and absence data are published by the Government as part of school summary statistics every two years. In addition, secure access to anonymised individual-level data on school attendance and absences hosted by the National Records of Scotland (e.g., Scottish Longitudinal Study) has been provided to researchers following completion of an application, ethical clearance, and secure data access training. These data are also linked to other administrative datasets or survey for research purposes.

4 Strengths and Weaknesses of the Attendance Process

The Scottish Government stands out for its universal, standardized reporting expectations of school attendance biennially. The report covers types of absences and operational definitions, and definition by sociodemographic characteristics. There is also national level data with individual-level attendance and absence data available to researchers upon request to the government. In contrast, the Spanish Government lacks a centralized, standardised definitions, reporting expectations, and data compilation that would enable periodic reporting on school absenteeism. Having these reports can be particularly useful to understand and monitor attendance trends. Another strength to highlight in Scotland is having a specific definition of school attendance, while Spanish authorities should better define this aspect conceptually (decentralisation or the autonomy of each of the autonomous communities could be the reasons why there is still no agreement on the definition of school attendance).

Scotland and Spain conduct some standardised assessments, which are only for information purposes without having any impact on students' academic records. Nevertheless, it could be useful whether these results could be examined to detect possible problems associated with school absenteeism or if these results are correlated with school attendance rates.

National measures must continue to be promoted in each country to reinforce school attendance. For instance, in Spain specific interventions (school absenteeism prevention protocols and regional regulations to monitor school absenteeism) are developed for each autonomous community. Developing specific strategies in each geographical area could be useful to consider the characteristics of each geographical location. The aim of these protocols is to guarantee the full schooling of students of compulsory school age, to guarantee the right to education and to reduce truancy. Moreover, it is also necessary to establish a protocol for the detection, prevention, and intervention in cases of truancy, which systematises and coordinates the actions of all the agents involved. On the other hand, it is useful to detect and ensure interventions in the earliest stages, which avoid the persistence of truancy, and to obtain up-to-date and reliable information that allows us to recognise situations of truancy and identify the circumstances that provoke and maintain it. Finally, it is of great help to monitor truant students, facilitate their reincorporation into the educational centre and, consequently, reduce school drop-out rates (Resolución de 29 de septiembre de 2021).

Significant efforts have been undertaken in Spain to reduce school dropout with plans such as PROA+ program (see section 2.4) in centres of special educational complexity. This aims to support the educational success of students, especially vulnerable students, by providing resources and training to the centres with the greatest difficulties. Data shows that, despite the negative figures in comparison with the rest of the European Union countries, there have been small improvements in recent years (Eurostat, 2020). However, more attention should be given specifically to the early detection and solution to school absenteeism in Spain. This is important because prolonged school absenteeism during childhood may be a predictor of lasting issues that may persist into adulthood such as school dropout, among other problems (Gubbels et al., 2019).

5 Suggestions, Comments, and Lessons

After the comparative analysis conducted between Spain and Scotland, the main lines of action for the next few years are extracted as follows:

Spain needs (a) regular public reports or systematized data on school attendance and absenteeism by school year or academic level to be able to follow up students; (b) it also requires a procedural and basic consensus among political parties, which favours educational stability, greater long-term stability and the possibility to better help the different types of necessities that students may experience (Novella & Cloquell, 2022).

Scotland requires (a) a system that differentiates further between several reasons for unauthorized absences; (b) an improved data collection which captures the rapid changes in school attendance problems.

Action protocols should be agreed upon to prevent, attend and evaluate school for follow-up. In Spain, this type of protocol is developed in a particular way by the autonomous communities that consider it appropriate considering the characteristics of each area (see, for example, Conselleria d'Educació, Cultura i Esport, 2018).

Both countries should (a) improve their efforts in analysing the determinants and underlying causes of SAPs, for instance, among students with additional support needs or those growing up in disadvantaged socioeconomic backgrounds; (b) understand and learn about the enablers of higher school attendance from student groups who are traditionally disadvantaged (e.g., African/Black/Caribbean students in Scotland) to guide intervention; (c) expand their research on school absenteeism amidst new and emerging educational realities (e.g., online training, use of technology) or macro-level shocks (e.g., pandemic); (d) work with families and communities to track attendance data and implement strategies to address barriers to attendance; and (e) further research on school attendance and school absenteeism from a multidisciplinary perspective making use of the synergies between them (psychology, education, criminal and juvenile justice, social work, medicine, psychiatry, nursing, epidemiology, public and educational policy, leadership, child development, and sociology, among others).

Both countries should be committed to the creation of observatories on school attendance, which not only disseminate reports and statistics on this problem, but also identify gaps/needs in this area, offer training and make the population aware of this problem.

Acknowledgement

This article was written as part of a research stay in Scotland undertaken within the framework of dr. Mariola Giménez-Miralles' doctoral studies, contributing to the award of the International Doctorate Mention.

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Recording, Reporting, and Utilizing School Attendance Data in Sweden, Finland, Denmark, and Norway: A Nordic Comparison

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Abstract: The compulsory educational context and school systems within the Nordic countries Sweden, Finland, Denmark, and Norway share fundamental similarities, facilitating comparison across these countries. In this study, we describe and compare existing practices of recording, reporting, and utilizing school attendance data in four countries. In Sweden, Finland, and Norway there is a lack of national guidelines and agreements of how to record, report, and use school attendance data. Municipal autonomy has led to a variety of recording and reporting practices, which then lead to lack of comparable data and wider use of the data gathered. Denmark has a national registry of attendance data, and schools are required to report the data to municipal level. There are more specific guidelines regarding recording and reporting in Denmark compared to Sweden, Finland, and Norway. Problems with school non-attendance are well recognized in the North, but ways of recording and responding to absenteeism are still versatile. This leads to inconsistencies both within and between the countries. Due to variations of the way attendance is recorded, the quality of the national registry of data in Denmark can be questioned. A unified approach to inform research and practice to include formalized definitions of school absence in the Nordic Education Acts are suggested. It requires schools to record and report attendance data within a national register and finding a reliable way to differentiate problematic from non-problematic absenteeism.

Keywords: school attendance data, recording, reporting, utilizing, Nordic countries

The Nordic countries share more similarities than differences in their education systems. Sweden has a comprehensive education system (i.e., by creating homogeneous classes of students with similar abilities or by offering flexible courses) whereas Finland, Denmark and Norway have individualized education systems (Kerpens & Spruyt, 2018). In individualized education systems all students are offered a common curriculum and students are not grouped, for example, by skill level,

<https://doi.org/10.14712/23363177.2022.12>

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174 but student heterogeneity is addressed by individual or small group tutoring. The countries also share many similarities regarding the organization of the schools: most education providers are municipalities, and most of the schools are public. In addition, student welfare is provided for everyone, for example via school psychologists, counsellors, and social worker services (Sandhaug et al., 2021). The Nordic countries have established an education model comprising a compulsory school system and emphasizing ‘A School for All’ with equal opportunities for all students (Blossing et al., 2014).

School attendance problems (SAPs; Heyne et al., 2019) are multifactored and pose a challenge for students and school professionals, families, and communities in general. There is an increasing awareness of the challenges SAPs bring forth in all the Nordic countries, and each country has had versatile ways of trying to handle the problems at a local and national level.

1 Educational Context

Sweden, Finland, Denmark, and Norway are all divided into regions or counties, each of which consists of several municipalities. In all four countries, the municipalities are responsible for providing public education. Education is compulsory and free of charge for all children and adolescents. Still, not all of them are obligated to go to school if they are seeking asylum or live abroad, for example. Compulsory education is ten years and children typically start school at the age of six and continue until they are 16 years of age. There are exceptions though. Students in special schools in Sweden for instance study for 11 years. In Finland, new legislation was ratified in 2020, expanding the compulsory education age up until the student either turns 18 or completes secondary level education (Finnish Ministry of Education and Culture, 2021). All countries also have a national core curriculum for compulsory education (Sandhaug et al., 2021).

The municipalities in all countries receive funding from the state/government and through taxes. They have considerable autonomy and decide how to organize education and how much of the budget is to be allocated to education. This results in differences among municipalities within each country and between the countries. Despite the autonomy, municipalities must organize and provide the education in compliance with national policies and regulations (Sandhaug et al., 2021).

The Nordic countries all have systematic ways of providing educational support for students, and have in common the Education Act, the three-tiered support system in line with Response to Intervention (RTI; Fuchs & Fuchs, 2006), and student welfare or educational psychological services. Various means of support (e.g., differentiated instruction, targeted support to specific skills, individualized syllabi) are utilized to promote student progress, and for example grade retention is seldom used in supporting students with SAPs. For example, Finland and Norway utilize

grade-independent studies to help students keep up with their grade level, even when the objectives of some subjects are not met (Finnish Basic Education Act, 1998; Norges offentlige utredninger, 2020). In other words, instead of grade retention students get to proceed with their classmates, as accomplishing the learning objectives is not tied to certain grade levels. Norway and Sweden have national agencies for special needs education in schools and kindergartens (i.e., Statped, Swedish National Agency for Special Needs Education and Schools). In Finland, under the National Agency for Education, The Valteri Centre for Learning and Consulting aims to support inclusion and each students' possibility to attend their neighborhood nationwide. In Denmark, services supporting learning environments and special needs education are carried out by the municipalities.

In terms of legislation and statutes regarding absenteeism the countries differ. In Sweden, school-aged children are legally required to attend school. In Finland, Denmark, and Norway, children are required to complete compulsory education, but not to attend school physically. However, the schools are required to keep a record of student absenteeism and to have a plan within the student welfare plan about how to intervene in cases of unexcused absenteeism (Bekendtgørelse af lov om folkeskolen, 2020; Finnish Basic Education Act, 1998; Norges offentlige utredninger, 2020; Swedish Education Act, 2010).

2 Recording and Reporting of School Attendance and Absenteeism

There is a lack of shared definitions and guidelines on national (and transnational) levels in the Nordic countries. Specifically, the ways of recording and responding to absenteeism are diverse, impeding both the possibility and quality of using data on school attendance or absenteeism (Sandhaug et al., 2021).

2.1 Definitional and Recording Issues

In recording absenteeism in Sweden, Finland and Norway, the schools use two categories: excused and unexcused absence. There are some nuances as many schools record tardiness and absence due to other school activities as well. The schools in Denmark use three categories: absence due to illness/disability, extraordinarily permitted absence, and unexcused absence. The first two are both regarded as excused absences. Only Denmark and Sweden have some national or municipality level registry data and rates for school absenteeism (Bekendtgørelse om elevers fravær fra undervisningen i folkeskolen, 2019; Swedish National Agency for Education, 2021a) and recently Finland has had one national report evaluating absence rates (Määttä et al., 2020). An overview of recording of absence data is provided in Table 1. Following the table, we discuss the matter country by country.

176 Table 1 Recording of Absence Data in the Nordic Countries

Absence	Sweden	Finland	Denmark	Norway
Is absence registration required by law?	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
What is recorded, attendance or absence?	Absence	Absence	Absence	Absence
Which categories of absence are recorded?	No national guidelines, but commonly categorized as 1. Excused 2. Unexcused	No national guidelines but commonly categorized as 1. Excused (entails health-related absence and granted leaves) 2. Unexcused	1. Absence due to illness/disability 2. Extraordinarily permitted absence 3. Unexcused absence	1. Excused a) Health-related absence b) Granted leave 2. Unexcused
How and when are the attendance data recorded by schools?	No national guidelines. Most schools use electronic registration systems. Unexcused absence is recorded at least daily.	Recording in electronic databases, in primary schools on daily basis, in grades 7–9 each lesson.	Recording in electronic databases, the minimum requirement is 1 time a day (grades 0–6) or 2 times a day (grades 7–9). Some schools choose to record absence more often.	No national guidelines for how the teachers and the schools must record school absence. The schools are free to develop their own guidelines and procedures. Absence is recorded as lessons and schooldays missed.
Who is responsible for recording student attendance/absence?	On student level: the teachers On school level: the principals	On student level: the teachers On school level: the principals	On student level: the teachers On school level: the principals	On student level: the teachers On school level: the principals
Are there any automated attendance tracking systems in use?	Varies by the schools and is not obligatory	Varies by the schools and is not obligatory	Yes	Varies by the schools and is not obligatory
How has the recording of attendance/absence changed due to the COVID-19 pandemic?	No changes yet	No changes yet	No changes yet	No changes yet

Sweden

In Sweden there are no guidelines or national regulations on how attendance and absence should be recorded. However, in case of unexcused absence, the parent must be informed the same day. Further, data on unexcused absence should be included in the end of semester report (only grade 6–9). Given this, schools are obliged to record unexcused absence at least on a daily basis. Some schools record absence for every single lesson.

Most schools in Sweden, 84% of compulsory school according to the Swedish National Agency for Education (2021a), use electronic registration systems to record absence. However, the recording systems of each school differ considerably. For example, the municipalities use different electronic registration systems for their schools, systems that in turn provide various possibilities to store and analyze attendance data. The private schools may also use different systems than the schools organized by the municipalities.

What is classified as excused and unexcused absence is not defined in the Swedish Education Act (2010). Instead, most principals provide their own guidelines of what kind of data that should be recorded and how unexcused absence should be defined (Swedish National Agency for Education, 2021a). Otherwise, it is the individual school or teacher who classifies the absence as excused or unexcused. Tardiness, or attending class but not being active, could also be classified as either attendance or absence. A student could also be granted leave for shorter periods for individual concerns, though schools nowadays are quite restrictive in giving these grants.

Currently, no national registry of attendance data exists in Sweden. The data that exists stems from national investigations by the Swedish National Agency for Education (2008, 2010, 2021a), the Swedish Schools Inspectorate (2016), and one independent study by Öhman (2016). The possibility of recording attendance data on a national level, along with recording reason for school absence, has recently been investigated (Swedish National Agency for Education, 2021b). If it is decided to start this register during year 2022, then national data on school attendance could be reported from year 2024 on.

Finland

Even though it is not compulsory for students to attend school, attendance is still registered since the Finnish National Core Curriculum (Finnish National Agency for Education, 2014), states that the education provider (i.e., municipality) needs to have an action plan targeting student absenteeism and that they are responsible for recording absenteeism (categories not defined) and reporting to students' guardians (Finnish Basic Education Act, 1998). However, in practice this often only happens on teacher- and school level (Finnish Education Evaluation Centre, 2022), as the recorded absenteeism is not reported further, for example on municipal level. How absenteeism is monitored at the level of the class, school, or education provider level varies greatly (Finnish Education Evaluation Centre, 2022; Määtä et al., 2020).

178 The definitions of excused and unexcused absenteeism vary between the schools and municipalities, and Finland is yet to establish national definitions.

The electronic registration systems used allow the teachers to record excused and unexcused absences and it can be programmed to collect more detailed information on absenteeism if desired (i.e., individual definitions on school/municipal level). It is recommended that no data regarding physical health (for example, absence due to illness) would be saved in the databases. The principal can grant a leave of up to two weeks for example for family holiday. In general, when a student is absent, the guardian must explain the absence: in addition to the teachers, also the students and the guardians have access to the database. The guidelines for recording and reporting absence are established on the local municipal and school level (Finnish Education Evaluation Centre, 2022). For students in grades 7–9, subject teachers record absence during each lesson, while for the younger students the recording is mostly done on day level by the classroom teachers.

Denmark

In Denmark, mandatory schooling and recording of absence have a long history. The first nationwide school law from 1814 institutes mandatory schooling for all children between age 7 and 14. In the towns, children had to go to school on daily basis. On the countryside half of the time, so that the children could help at home. If a child did not go to school, the local authority should be informed. Parents who kept the child away from school without a valid reason, was sentenced to a fine. Valid reasons for absence were illness, bad weather or impassable roads (Appel & Coninck-Smith, 2015).

Nowadays in Denmark, student absence is divided into three categories: 1) absence due to illness/disability, which includes mental and physical health issues that prevent the student from attending school, medical appointments etcetera (excused absence); 2) extraordinarily permitted absence where the principal grants absence in case of exceptional events in the student's life (excused absence); 3) unexcused absence, which are absences that are not justified by the aforementioned categories (Bekendtgørelse om elevers fravær fra undervisningen i folkeskolen, 2019).

The schools are legally required to record student absence daily. Absence must be recorded in an electronic registration system in accordance with the three official absence categories. For the students in grades 0–6, the minimum requirement is that any student's absence is recorded daily and at the start of the school day. Among the students in grades 7–10, who are allowed to leave the school area at recess, any student's absence must also be recorded at the end of the school day. Absence must be recorded as unexcused if the student's parents fail to notify the school about the cause of the absence within reasonable time (i.e., often the same day or within a week at the latest) or fail to comply with the school's potential request of a doctor's note (Danish Ministry of Children and Education, 2019).

Further specifications regarding the practice of absence recordings are up to the individual school. As such, each school is permitted to set out recording rules for tardiness or early leave as well as policies regarding absence due to illness/disability and extraordinarily permitted absence (e.g., vacation outside of school holidays) (Bekendtgørelse om elevers fravær fra undervisningen i folkeskolen, 2019). There may therefore be significant differences across schools and municipalities in the types of absences that are recorded as excused and unexcused. In addition, the above-mentioned legislation only applies to the public schools. Private schools are regulated under a different legal framework, that allows greater independence at school level.

Norway

In Norway, absence is categorized by law as excused and unexcused (Norges offentlige utredninger, 2020). Excused absence is defined as absence due to health-related reasons or a granted leave of absence. The school (i.e., the principal or municipality) can grant a leave of up to two weeks (e.g., family holiday). It is up to the school principal to grant or decline excused leave of absence. Unexcused absence is undocumented nonattendance that is not excused.

There are no national guidelines for how the teachers and the schools must record school absence and therefore no national registry data. The municipalities use different electronic registration systems and have the autonomy to develop their own guidelines and routines to maintain these guidelines. From 2023, by law, the Norwegian municipalities will be responsible to respond on students with absence more than 10% over a school year (Norwegian Directorate of Education and Training, 2020). This counts for, approximately, 19 school days a year including both excused and unexcused absences.

2.2 Reporting Issues and Utilization of the Absence Data

In the Nordic countries, absence data are mostly used for recording absence rates at school level and rarely reported further than school level, except in Denmark. In Denmark, schools are required to transfer absence data to the municipal board every week. Absence data are then transferred annually to a national data bank under the Ministry of Children and Education (Danish Ministry of Children and Education, 2019). The national data bank provides publicly available absence rates at the school, municipal, and national level. Absence rates are calculated as whole days missed and made up in percentages. Absence data at the individual level can be accessed (e.g., by researchers) by a data processing agreement. In this way, it is possible to follow the development of student absence in the country year by year. It is possible to see which geographical areas that are most troubled by absenteeism, which types of absence that are most prominent (in terms of the three absence categories) and compare absence in different age groups and school types (e.g., regular, and special schools). According to the Danish National Agency for IT and Learning (2021), all

180 national education statistics, including absence data, are used in political decision making such as supporting reforms. It should be noted that all official absence data are from the public schools only.

In the other Nordic countries, national absence data are not systematically selected or reported and can therefore not be used in decision making. In Sweden, several of the municipalities track the absence rates in all the schools in the municipality, but these rates are not assembled on a national level. In Finland and Norway, there are no national guidelines for the use of absence data. Absenteeism is recorded by individual schools, but data are not systematically collected or reported further from this level (Määttä et al., 2020; Norwegian Directorate of Education and Training, 2020).

Across the four countries, schools' obligations to undertake actions in relation to absenteeism are primarily decided at the school or municipal level. However, in Denmark and Norway there can be economic sanctions for the parents (or guardians) if a student reaches a certain amount of unexcused absence. In Denmark, the principal is obliged to notify social authorities if a student reaches 15% or more of unexcused absence within three months, and the child benefit (i.e., a universal public benefit per child under the age of 18) may then be ceased for the following quarter (Bekendtgørelse om elevers fravær fra undervisningen i folkeskolen, 2019). In Norway, the municipalities are allowed to react with economic sanctions for the parents, if the unexcused absence is 10% or more during a school term (Norwegian Directorate of Education and Training, 2021). In both countries, schools are obliged to warn the parents before these thresholds are reached. In Sweden, the parent must be informed the same day in case of unexcused absence (Swedish Education Act, 2010).

Besides this, the Nordic countries do not have clear benchmarks as to when and how the schools are to intervene upon absenteeism. In all the countries, schools are to investigate and follow up on unexcused, repeated, or prolonged absences. However, the respective education acts do not state how thorough the investigation must be and do not provide clear guidelines for the exact actions to be taken. Instead, it is decided on municipal or school level, when absence is deemed to be serious enough to warrant intervention as well as the type of intervention needed, leading to a great variety of models and strategies.

Some municipalities use 10% of absence over a certain period (e.g., three months) as a criterion of when the school is to react. This is the case in some municipalities in Sweden, Denmark, and Norway, but consensus around the time frame is lacking. Some Finnish municipalities use a certain number of absence hours within a certain time-period to indicate what actions should be taken (Finnish Education Evaluation Centre, 2002; Sandhaug et al., 2021). However, the time-period and amount of absenteeism leading to actions varies greatly. The time-period of follow-up on emerging school attendance problems may range from monthly to a whole school year or missed lessons from 1–150 hours.

3 Discussion

The Nordic countries Sweden, Finland, Denmark, and Norway share a common ground with fundamental similarities in how the education systems are structured. This allows for comparisons between the countries so they can learn from each other while developing their systems and tools for handling SAPs. Yet, in most Nordic countries legislation and regulations leave great autonomy to municipalities and other education providers in how absenteeism is recorded and there are no strict reporting requirements. As a result, a lot of variances exist regarding how and when recording and reporting absenteeism data is done, and how and when the data is utilized. In the future, it would be important to map in detail, what information is needed on national, municipal, and school level to target support better. For instance, how the data collection should be done (for example in terms of General Data Protection Regulation [GDPR]), what changes (legislative or other guidelines) need to be made to gather the data, and how the data is stored and utilized on different levels.

3.1 Recording Absence

The Nordic countries all have a focus on recording absence, as opposed to attendance, but there are great variabilities both within and between the countries concerning the procedures for and the quality of the recorded absence data. The schools in all countries are required by law to record absence in categories, and almost all schools use electronic registration systems, but the systems differ among schools. All countries record excused versus unexcused absence, with Denmark being the only country dividing excused absence into two subcategories. There are no clear definitions of excused and unexcused absence in Sweden and Finland, which leaves it up to the teachers and schools to make their own interpretations. In Denmark and Norway, the absence categories used are more clearly defined, but further specifications are still up to the individual municipality or school. It differs between countries and grade levels, whether absence is recorded for every lesson, half days, or whole days.

For many schools, the accuracy of the recording is questionable, and the recordings are not compiled and used at the municipal or the national levels. The exceptions are Denmark that compiles the information on a national level, and Sweden on a municipality level. Even when the absence recording is compiled and mandatorily reported to the municipality, as is the case in Denmark, two Danish studies (Johnsen et al., 2022; Lomholt et al., 2020) have shown major flaws in absence recording of the schools, resulting in a misleading picture of some student absenteeism. For example, if a student was chronically absent, the school sometimes stopped recording the absence, so the student would erroneously be recorded as attending regularly. In addition, significant differences between the absence rates reported by the municipality and by the parents were found as the parents rated higher absence than was recorded by the school which raises issues regarding the reliability and validity of absence records in general.

One explanation for these discrepancies may be that parents over-report youths' school absence, and another may be that the absence records underestimate or falsely report absence. Another explanation could be related to how the schools record the students' absence. In all the Nordic countries, the schools are obliged to record students' absence and not their attendance. If the teacher does not actively record a missing student as absent, they will automatically be recorded as having attended school. This may often be missed or forgotten, possibly leading to an underestimation of the absence rates. It would probably produce more valid registrations to record attendance instead of absence, so that the "missing data" are not interpreted as "not absent". Another problem with the registration systems may be that in Denmark absence is often recorded as whole days, without recording tardiness or early departure. If school absence is recorded more frequently, for example by the hour, this might provide a more accurate picture of the overall prevalence, as well as the individual student's situation (as for example in Sweden, Finland, and Norway).

The Nordic countries are to different degrees intending to address absenteeism by using systems to record absence. The school systems and the education providers have established at least local guidelines for how and when to intervene in response to SAPs. The schools and the education providers need to use shared definitions and systems for recording non-attendance at least on national, if not on Nordic level.

3.2 Reporting Absence

Since Denmark is the only country where absence data are systematically reported to the municipality and to a national data bank, absence prevalence rates from the other Nordic countries are inconsistent or not available – making comparisons difficult. It is impossible for example to compare absence rates between the countries, to measure the development of absence over time within the countries, to compare absence between schools or to measure the effectiveness of school absenteeism interventions compared to "treatment as usual".

More systematic work could be done to prevent, monitor, detect, manage, and treat SAPs. The guidelines, initiatives and actions are carried out in different ways and followed up on, to limited or varying degrees, both nationally and across the Nordic countries. Reporting varies due to two reasons: lack of common definitions and different reporting requirements in the law. How to react to SAPs should be covered by law, so that national guidelines and registries could be defined. This would make it possible to address SAPs more clearly on all levels of support (e.g., Kearney & Graczyk, 2014), especially at Tier 1, with recommendations regarding promoting student engagement, school climate, and overall student well-being etcetera.

3.3 Using Data

Inconsistencies among all four countries in defining, recording, and reporting absence as well as having only Denmark with a national data bank, make across-country comparisons difficult. While absence data from Danish public schools are used in policymaking (Danish National Agency for IT and Learning, 2021), access to absence data to target SAPs in support for reforms and evidence-based research are limited in the other countries. Still, there is a debate going on about school absenteeism, especially in the media. School attendance problems of children and youth have raised a discussion during the past few years as an increasing problem. It has become a universal phenomenon leading to versatile short- and long-term consequences for students, their families, schools, and societies. In a recent investigation (Swedish National Agency for Education, 2021a) eight out of ten principals reported using attendance data to promote attendance and respond to school attendance problems.

4 Conclusions

Across the Nordic countries there is a need for clearly defined, national, municipal, and school level data not only to support decision- and policy- making, but also to benefit intervention research targeting SAPs in country-specific, Nordic, and multicenter studies. To reduce problematic absenteeism, there is a need to ensure consistent and valid recordings of absenteeism data at the local and the national levels. A standard way of recording data on attendance and absence will enable comparisons and analyses to be made at the local, the national and the transnational levels. To accomplish this, the first steps to be taken could be:

- 1) Finding a reliable way of differentiating problematic and non-problematic absenteeism. In terms of definitions and in everyday school life, mostly three types of absenteeism are recognized: (a) absence due to illness, (b) unexcused, and (c) excused absence. Shared definitions would benefit both practice (i.e., teachers recording the attendance) and researchers by making data collection more reliable and generalizable (for example, comparison across countries). That in turn could provide evidence-based knowledge on SAPs that may improve implementation of guidelines with coherent directives to political and legislative bodies. Instead of an “each for their own” perspective, collaboration between the countries in terms of definitions and possible cut-off rates would be reasonable. There are already some guidelines in how to differentiate between problematic and non-problematic absenteeism (Kearney, 2016) that could be utilized in the process.

- 2) Reporting responsibility for the schools and data monitoring responsibilities at the municipal/education provider level and the national level are needed to make the data more reliable and accessible. For instance, the schools need to analyze the data and provide statistics of absence prevalence rates in their own reports which include the interpretation of SAPs.

3) Improve actions of the education provider (i.e., schools and municipalities) by emphasizing systematic recording and reporting of attendance and absence, promoting attendance and early intervention for absenteeism. This can be done through competence building and acquisition of knowledge concerning school absenteeism in educational networks and across collaborating disciplines within the education and the health sectors. This could be achieved, for instance, by establishing multidimensional and multi-tiered system of support models (Gren-Landell, 2021; Kearney & Graczyk, 2014).

4) Definitions of school absenteeism should be formalized in the Nordic education acts, with clear notifications for school personnel about how to interpret and apply the definitions across the Nordic countries. This will ensure that students with absenteeism are protected by law. Also, it would help bridge the gaps between what is specified in legislation, and what occurs in practice with respect to exemptions from education. For instance, the Norwegian Education Act, paragraph 9a, is about the school environment, and could easily be extended to include school absenteeism.

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Recording and Reporting School Attendance and Absence: International Comparative Views on Attendance Statistics in Sweden, Germany, England, and Japan

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Abstract: There is general consensus on the negative consequences of school non-attendance, but from an international comparative perspective, it is surprising how few studies have compared school attendance problems (SAPs) in different societies and education systems. In this article, SAPs are analysed through the lens of official statistics in four countries with different education systems: England, Japan, Germany (represented by two federal states), and Sweden. The purpose of this article is to investigate which data on school attendance and absence are available in four different countries and to facilitate a comparison between school attendance statistics and possibly different conceptualisations of SAPs. The article analyses statistics and official data collected by national school authorities and education agencies. Backgrounds within systems are provided and differences between the countries are analysed. England and Japan provide official data to the public on a regular basis, while Sweden and most federal states in Germany do not. A lower threshold for how much absence is considered problematic is found for Japan, England, and Thuringia (one of the investigated German federal states) compared to Sweden and Berlin (the other German federal state under study). Due to differences in recording and reporting school attendance, it is not possible to compare the quantitative extent of the problem or trends regarding SAPs across the four countries based on the available official school statistics.

Keywords: school attendance data, comparative study, national statistics, school absenteeism, school attendance problems

The right to education is a general feature of modern welfare states, and is declared in the United Nations' Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948, Art. 26) and Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989). This is closely connected to an obligation to participate in regular education. Non-attendance has cast a shadow on school systems' ability to realise children's rights *to* education and their rights *in* education institutions. National school systems have different strategies for addressing school non-attendance, and there are different conceptualisations and definitions of non-attendance.

Internationally, school attendance problems have long been in focus (Reid, 2008; Ricking, 2003). The term *school attendance problems* (SAPs) has been proposed to describe a wide variety of phenomena related to absenteeism, such as school

<https://doi.org/10.14712/23363177.2023.9>

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188 refusal, truancy, school withdrawal, and exclusion (Heyne et al., 2019). Non-attendance can be seen as a term covering all types of absenteeism from school, but there have been growing concerns that certain types of absenteeism and amounts of non-attendance can be regarded as problematic. These definitions of what is regarded as problematic differ widely. However, there is general consensus on the negative consequences of school non-attendance (e.g., Kearney, 2008; Keppens et al., 2019; Reid, 2012). In the growing body of literature on SAPs (see for example the breadth of references in Gren Landell, 2021), much focus is on individual risk factors for absenteeism while few studies have looked at the macro level and compared SAPs in different societies and education systems (Keppens & Spruyt, 2018). According to Kearney et al. (2019), school absenteeism as well as permanent school dropout have been identified as widespread global phenomena. Still, international comparative studies on SAPs are very rare.

The current knowledge on SAPs has been expanded in part by using the regularly collected data from schools (Gottfried & Hutt, 2019). However, how attendance and absence are registered and reported has received little attention in the literature so far (Bodén, 2016; Nakao & Yamamoto, 2007). In this article, SAPs are analysed through the lens of official statistics. We will study how attendance data is recorded in schools, reported to the education authorities and back to education providers and published for the public and actors concerned. This analysis is part of a wider project that, from an international comparative research perspective, investigates societal, organisational, and individual perspectives on SAPs in different national contexts (Stockholm University, n.d.). The countries for comparison have been chosen to reflect different education systems. Sweden was included as the project is based in Sweden. Germany and England share similarities with Sweden, but also differences when it comes to their education systems,¹ which may influence school attendance statistics (Keppens & Spruyt, 2018). Japan was of interest because SAPs have long been discussed extensively there (Horiguchi, 2018).

Possibilities to compare SAPs in different school systems are limited by insufficient knowledge on the extent of the problem (Fredriksson et al., 2023). Gathering systematic knowledge about systems for attendance control and (possibly different) practices of registering, reporting and publishing school attendance and absence can be seen as an attempt to understand what is regarded as problematic school attendance and a contribution to developing policies for addressing SAPs.

¹ Information about the structure of these education systems is for example available via Eurydice at the European Education and Culture Executive Agency, a network by the European Commission, where education systems from countries that belong to the European Union are described and compared (<https://eurydice.eacea.ec.europa.eu>).

1 The Aim of the Article and Research Questions

The purpose of this article is to investigate which data on school attendance and absence are available in four different countries and to explore whether and how a comparison between school attendance statistics is possible. The following questions guide our analysis:

Which indicators of school attendance and absence are recorded, reported and published in the four countries?

Can any trends on school attendance be seen in the four countries?

Do attendance statistics define what is seen as problematic and how can school attendance and absence be compared between these countries?

2 Methodology, Comparative Approach and Structure of the Article

This article analyses statistics and official data collected by the relevant education authorities in the concerned countries. In line with the study's purpose, to facilitate a comparison between officially available data on school attendance, preconditions for this comparison need to be established. In the following subchapters we describe what kind of data on attendance and absence are available (see sections 3.1 to 3.4). Data can only be compared when what is collected is defined in the same way, or at least similarly. A description of how data are recorded, reported and published can contribute to understanding whether available data can be compared and what limitations need to be considered. After an introduction of the respective country's school system, we introduce how (national) school attendance statistics are recorded and reported and what terms are used. We focus on the situation of reporting data before the COVID-19 pandemic in order to rely on the typical case rather than the extraordinary case of the pandemic. Different strategies for closing schools or keeping them open complicates the comparison of absence dates. We provide examples on published data for the respective school systems and we investigate if any trends can be seen in the different countries. Ways of recording, reporting and publishing data suggests different understandings of what is regarded as the most prone problems of school attendance in the respective country. Possibilities of comparison of attendance statistics are summarised (see sections 4.1–4.2) and limitations of the study are carefully considered.

3 National Statistics on School Attendance and Absence

England and Japan have gathered national statistics for many years, while only a few federal states in Germany gather school attendance data systematically. In Sweden, there have only been occasional investigations. This guides the order in which the findings are presented.

The following description focuses specifically on England and not other parts of the UK (Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland). Primary school comprises six years (Key Stages 1–2, ages 5–11) and secondary school five years (Key Stages 3–4, age about 11–16). This is followed by two more years of secondary education or education through other education institutions until age 18. The English system can be characterised as a common core curriculum system. The overall responsibility for the education system in England lies with the UK Government's Department for Education (DfE), which since 2010 is also in charge of child protection. About 93% of all school children attend state-funded schools such as academy schools, community schools, free schools, foundation schools, and others. About 7% are enrolled in privately run, fee-charging independent schools. Home schooling is an option to fulfil compulsory education in England. The responsibility to ensure education for children of compulsory age for schooling (5–16 years) lies with the parents. After compulsory schooling until the age of 18, youth must attend either full-time education, apprenticeship, or traineeship, or work/volunteer while receiving a part-time education. The responsibility to support children at risk of missing education lies with the local education authorities (Eurydice, n.d.-b).

3.1.1 The Conceptualisation of SAPs

In England data on school attendance and absence are publicly available for statistical analysis, and can be used freely by researchers, public administration, or other stakeholders. There are weekly updates by the DfE on school attendance and absence that are published online on GOV.UK, and everyone can subscribe to regular information via E-mail. Information on attendance statistics and policy development are regularly communicated to policy makers and education administration, media officers, special advisers and other relevant actors (see for example list of pre-release access of attendance statistics in DfE, 2020b). Raw data is available for analysis. Reporting school attendance statistics has a high priority for addressing SAPs in England.

3.1.2 What Indicators of Absence are Recorded and Reported in England?

Schools are required to take attendance twice a day (DfE, 2020b). Data is collected regularly by education authorities who report to the DfE, and in a systematic way. Schools register attendance and report their data to the DfE, according to a detailed list of categorisations. Registration categories are: (a) present; (b) attending an approved educational activity; (c) absent; and (d) unable to attend due to exceptional circumstances. Altogether there are about 25 codes for different reasons for school non-attendance in the central school census (DfE, 2019, Annex 3), including

codes for different forms of authorised and unauthorised absence.² Pupils can also be considered absent if they have been expelled from school. There is a great deal of data, available online, that allows analysing attendance for different subgroups, for example according to social and individual categories such as school type, city council, gender, ethnicity, eligibility to free school lunches and more (<https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/data-catalogue>). This means that authorities in England can provide detailed follow-up not only on the number of absences but also on which children have missed school (and for what reasons).

In England, absence has long been registered centrally, and absence statistics are reported back to 1993. Figures with timelines are available back to the 2006/2007 school year when present definitions were established. The DfE provide official statistics on school attendance for state-funded primary and secondary schools and special schools. This information is based on pupil-level absence data collected via the school census (DfE, 2021b). Statistics are published by the DfE on their website three times a year, and data for the whole year is made public annually in March. These data have been used for timelines.

There are two main indicators in the DfE statistics: overall absence rates and persistent absence rates. Absence rates are ‘the number of absence sessions expressed as a percentage of the total number of possible sessions’ (DfE, 2020a).³ Overall absence is the sum of authorised and unauthorised absence. Attendance is taken twice a day; in other words, one session is equal to half a school day. Authorised absence is recorded illness and absence that was approved by the school in advance or satisfactorily explained. The *persistent absence rate* is defined as the rate of students who are absent for more than 10% of the half-day sessions they could have attended.⁴

The persistent absence rate is based on overall absence. That shows that in England all forms of absence, both authorised and unauthorised are considered as possibly problematic. Definitions of what amount of absence is regarded as problematic has changed over time. In a document from 2011, it is stated that the persistent absence rate in England had earlier been recorded at 15% of missed sessions, and that prior to that the critical percentage had been considered to be 20% of sessions missed (DfE Press release, 19 October 2011).

3.1.3 Examples of Published and Publicly Available Data

The DfE in England provide information on trends over time regularly. Data for timeline comparison are available back to the school year 2006/07. For example, the

² The list of reasons is recorded in the school attendance guidance, with ten pages explaining the various codes for registration.

³ The formal definition states: “The absence rate is the total number of sessions missed due to overall absence for all pupils as a percentage of the total number of possible sessions for all pupils, where overall absence is the sum of authorised and unauthorised absence and one session is equal to half a day” (DfE, 2020a).

⁴ DfE (2020a). School attendance guidance for maintained schools, academies, independent schools and local authorities, August 2020. This document was withdrawn on 20 September 2022 and has been replaced by *Guidance. Working together to improve school attendance*.

192 *overall absence rate* decreased from 6.4% during the 2006/07 school year to 4.7% in 2017/18 (DfE, 2020a). This means that pupils on average missed fewer sessions in recent years than they did a decade earlier. Both the overall absence rate and the authorised absence rate have been declining since then, while the unauthorised absence rate is more or less stable at around 1% (DfE, 2020a).

The *persistent absence rate* is defined as pupils missing school 10% or more of half-day sessions during the respective term or school year due to authorised or unauthorised absence. This persistent absence rate was 10.9% for all students in state-funded schools (DfE, 2020a). As the school year has 190 school days (380 morning/afternoon sessions), the figure of 10% is the equivalent of 38 morning or afternoon periods, which would be 19 school days (DfE, 2020b).

Overall absence can be categorised for different intervals. Table 1 shows how many pupils in state-funded secondary schools missed a certain amount of schooling according to DfE attendance statistics. These values allow us to see that 64% of students missed less than 5% and 13.6% missed more than 10% of their schooling.

Table 1 Absence rates for overall absence in secondary schools in England during 2018/19

Absence rates for overall absence in secondary schools (% of students)							
Measured in school days							
None	0.5–5	5.5–10	10.5–15	15.5–20	20.5–25	> 25	
8.2	38.5	24.1	12.9	6.5	3.2	6.5	
Measured in % of the school year							
None	< 5%	5%–10%	10%–15%	15%–20%	20%–30%	30%–50%	> 50%
8.2	55.8	22.3	6.5	2.4	2.0	1.4	1.3

Note. Percentage of enrolment by students’ overall absence rates for state-funded secondary schools, without special schools; overall absence is the sum of authorised and unauthorised absence. Source: DfE (2020a) Absence statistics; Absence 3 term 2018/19 tables (Excel file, Table 3.1 and 3.2).

Both overall absence and persistent absence rates are published three times a year. Attendance statistics include reasons for absence and can be differentiated for school forms, grades, student backgrounds, and characteristics such as gender, ethnic group, English as first language, free school meal (FSM) eligibility, special education needs, and more. The publicly available statistical data online indicate different reasons for both authorised and unauthorised absences. Illness accounts for slightly more than half of all absences.

3.2 Japan

The education system in Japan is a single structure system, with no tracking during compulsory school. Six years of primary school (*shôgakkô*) are followed by three years of lower secondary school (*chûgakkô*) and three years of non-compulsory upper secondary school (*kôtô gakkô*) or alternatively six years of secondary school.⁵ Japan has nine years of compulsory schooling; however, about 98% of pupils who graduate from lower secondary school are said to continue to upper secondary school (OECD, 2021). Children start school at age six, after daycare (*hoikuen*) or kindergarten (*yôchien*). The central responsibility for education lies with the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT). According to the OECD (2019), most decisions for school education are taken by the local education councils and on the regional level rather than the state or school level. Statistics, however, are available through MEXT for the whole country according to common definitions.⁶ The School Basic Survey is published annually since 1948, providing fundamental statistics on all school forms. This census, gathered by MEXT through questionnaires to schools on the 1st of May every year, includes also a Survey on Out-of-School Children at School Age. Since 2003 information is gathered also online and nowadays most data is online available (The National Institute of Education – NIER, n.d.). To our knowledge, raw data are not directly accessible, although many reports have recently been digitally archived in a Web Archiving Project (WARP). There are many surveys conducted regularly including also timelines on education and attendance. The National Institute of Education has gathered and systematised many of these surveys (NIER, n.d.).

3.2.1 The Conceptualisation of SAPs

In Japan there is an extensive body of literature on SAPs focusing on what is called *futôkô*. Literally, *futôkô* means not being at school, and is sometimes translated as school absenteeism or truancy. The term has been used by MEXT since 1999. *Futôkô* has been regularly discussed as one of the most important ‘problem behaviours’ (*mondai kôdô*). As developed below, *futôkô* covers long term absence that is not due to illness or economic reasons. Intensive discussions are ongoing, and MEXT announced in 2016 that they want to change their approach to *futôkô* fundamentally, in order to counter prejudice against this phenomenon (MEXT, 2016a) in line with the law for ensuring equal educational opportunities (MEXT, 2016b). However, until today the term is still regularly used.

⁵ In this text, official translations according to the International Standard Classification of Education (ISCED) are used for consistency, although literature on education in Japan as well as the Japanese Government mostly apply American terms such as junior high and high school

⁶ MEXT was established in 2001 through a merging of the Ministry of Education, Science, Sports and Culture and the Science and Technology Agency. <https://www.mext.go.jp/en/about/organization/title03/detail03/1375119.htm>

3.2.2 What Indicators of Absence are Recorded and Reported in Japan?

For Japan, annual absence data are available for compulsory schools since 1966, building on attendance records kept by schools (MEXT, 2004). Annual statistics on school attendance are available from the School Basic Survey. Data build on absence recorded in schools and reported by the school leaders in a very detailed school survey to the MEXT. The school statistics include state, public, and private schools. Data can be accessed through the annually published School Basic Survey for different prefectures and cities, timespans, and grades. Absence is recorded according to four categories: illness, economic reasons, *futôkô*, and other.

Futôkô is the term in focus in all official publications, and is defined as involving ‘those who have been absent for a long time because they cannot attend school for some reason other than “illness” or “financial reasons”’ (MEXT, 2021). In other words, the term does not stand for overall absence but can neither be seen as equivalent to unauthorised absence. Since 1991, long-term absence is defined as 30 days or more per school year,⁷ but data are also available for both shorter and longer intervals (1–3 days; 4–6 days; 7–13 days; 14–20 days; over 21 days; more than 90 days; and completely absent) (MEXT, 2020).⁸

Data on long-term absence are annually published by MEXT, Children and Students Division, Elementary and Secondary Education Division. Data are available for all years in compulsory school (Grades 1–9) and upper secondary school (Grades 10–12), differentiated by school organisation (state, public, and private) and prefecture. The Ministry has published several reports on school non-attendance that include both attendance statistics (for state, public and private school in different prefectures) and results from detailed school surveys, where reasons for the non-attendance are investigated for categories like for example bullying, family problems, tired of school and many others. There are also statistics from all prefectures on what kind of support the students with attendance problems have received (MEXT, 2019).

3.2.3 Examples of Published and Publicly Available Data

Japan is one of the countries where trends can be reported for lower secondary school students missing 30 days or more per school year, and timelines are often used to show the increase in the problem. There was an increase in *futôkô* from 1% in 1991 to over 4% in recent years, but with alternating periods of increase, stable values, and moderate decrease. The trends for primary school were similar but at a much lower level (see Table 2).

⁷ Earlier long-term absence was defined as 50 days or more. The development of statistics since the 1950s is well described in Shimizu (2011) and Horiguchi (2018). These articles also include timelines (see more in detail Kreitz-Sandberg & Lesch, 2019).

⁸ Data for (non-compulsory) upper secondary schools are available from 1999 onward.

Table 2 Long-term absence *futôkô* in Japanese lower secondary schools (% of students)

1998	2000	2002	2004	2006	2008	2010	2012	2014	2016	2018	2019
2.32	2.63	2.73	2.73	2.86	2.89	2.73	2.56	2.76	3.01	3.65	3.94

Note. Information for *futôkô*, percentage of students with absence for 30 days or more per school year due to reasons other than illness or economic reasons. Source: MEXT 2021, p. 15.

In Japan, information on absenteeism, or specifically *futôkô*, is published on a regular basis and often makes the news. The focus is typically on *futôkô* rather than overall absence. Frequently, long reports are published with data from the School Basic Survey and other survey studies. In 2019, 1.88% of compulsory school pupils (grade 1–9) were registered as *futôkô* long-term absent.⁹ This prevalence had increased over previous years (MEXT, 2020).

3.3 Germany

In Germany, the federal states (in German: *Bundesländer*, in English texts sometimes: *länder*) are responsible for organising school education, and the organisation can vary substantially between different federal states. In all federal states there is some type of differentiated lower secondary education. After nine years of full-time schooling, at the upper secondary level, pupils can choose between compulsory full-time schooling and compulsory part-time schooling in relation to vocational education (Eurydice, n.d.-b). Public schools are free of charge, and the funding of public schools (primary and secondary education) is divided between the federal states and municipalities (Federal Republic of Germany, 2018, 2019). Full-time compulsory education or training ends at the age of 18 or 19 depending on the state (Eurydice, n.d.-a).

In the 16 states we find different albeit parallel types of secondary education from the age of about ten years. For example, in the state of Berlin, primary school lasts six years. After this, pupils continue their education either in integrated secondary school (ISS, *Gemeinschaftsschule*) or the academic track, grammar school (*Gymnasium*). There are also various branches of Special Needs Education (SNE) schools. The school system in Thuringia in southeastern Germany is more complicated, with many parallel branches: community school (*Gemeinschaftsschule*, Grades 1–12), primary school (*Grundschule*, Grades 1–4), grammar school (*Gymnasium*, Grades 5–12), comprehensive school (*Gesamtschule*, Grades 5–9 plus 10–13), basic secondary school (*Regelschule*, Grades 5–9), SNE school (*Förderschule*, Grades 1–9), vocational college (*Berufbildende Schulen*, after Grade 9; up to three years), and college for adults (*Kollegschule*) (Thüringen, 2019a).

⁹ The values are 3.94% of lower secondary school pupils (Grades 7–9) and 0.83% of primary school pupils.

3.3.1 The Conceptualisation of SAPs

In Germany there are no centrally gathered statistics on school attendance. The Standing Conference of the Ministers of Education and Cultural Affairs of the Länder in the Federal Republic of Germany (Kultusministerkonferenz – KMK) is responsible for coordinating between the education systems in different states (KMK, 2020). However, although KMK gathers a great deal of statistics, these do not include information on school attendance or absence. We wrote to the responsible ministries in all 16 states, most of which provided no applicable information on school attendance. Only four states – Berlin, Hamburg, Hessen and Thuringia – provided some statistics. This shows that school attendance is not transparently documented in most of the federal states.

3.3.2 What Indicators of Absence are Recorded and Reported in Germany?

Digital reporting is not yet the rule in German schools. It is common practice for school attendance to be recorded by the teacher for each lesson in what is called a *Klassenbuch*, a form book in which the content of teaching, homework, and special occasions is noted and which also includes the class register on a daily and lesson basis. Some schools have changed to digital *Klassenbücher*. Below we will present the data from the two federal states that provided the most detailed information to our inquiry, Berlin and Thuringia. The Senate Department for Education, Youth and Science in Berlin and the Ministry for Education, Youth and Sports in Thuringia, both are using the term distance from school (*Schuldistanz*) to investigate attendance problems (Berlin, SenBJF, 2015; Thüringen, 2013).

In Berlin, data on absence are regularly reported twice a year and discussed (Berlin, 2015, 2019a). At the end of each term, schools report overall absence (*Fehltage insgesamt*) as well as unauthorised absence (*Fehltage unentschuldigt*) to the education authority, the Senate Department for Education, Youth and Family, which follows up with information back to the schools.

Overall absence is defined as the proportion of absent days in relation to all teaching days (*Fehlquoten*). Unauthorised absence is not explicitly defined in the available information. Absence is registered for each lesson, and six missed lessons during a school term are considered one (additional) day of unauthorised absence since the 2018/19 school year. Late arrivals (*Verspätungen*) are also registered, according to teachers' reports in the class register. The proportion of students with more than 20 days of absence *per term* is highlighted (slightly over 20% absence, which we might call the local definition of persistent absence in Berlin). Data are also published for the following categories: no school days missed, as well as 1–10, 11–20, 21–40, and over 40 school days *per school term* missed (Berlin, 2019a, 2019b, 2020a).¹⁰

¹⁰ There are two school terms per year. The first term is from August to December and the second term from January to the beginning of the summer holidays. Due to rising numbers, the 1–10

In Thuringia, data on school attendance are recorded in all schools, reported to the education authorities. Data are regularly summarised and distributed by the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports in Thuringia (Thüringen, 2019b, 2020). The data from Thuringia covered only *unauthorised* absence, and a certain number of days. The tables show the percentage of those who have missed a certain number of school days. Data are presented for different regions, school types, and grade levels, and are recorded for the following ranges per year (and not per term, as is done in Berlin): 1–5, 6–10, 11–20, 21–40, and more than 40 days. The 11–20 day amount is called *beständiges Fehlen*, which can be translated as persistent absence. There is a timeline for the absence data for the last ten school years (2010/11 to 2019/20; see Thüringen, 2019b, 2020).

For Berlin as well as Thuringia, no data are provided for different student category features such as gender, socioeconomic status (SES), ethnicity, or other categories.

3.3.3 Examples of Published and Publicly Available Data

Example 1 – Berlin

The statistics can provide general trends of absence rates in Berlin in recent years. In some districts these rates are rising, while they are stable in other parts of the city (Berlin, 2020a, 2020b). Table 3 provides rates for overall absence and unauthorised absence for 2019. Information material that is, for example, distributed to schools also provides tables or graphs for the 12 different districts of Berlin and for different school types for three consecutive years (Berlin, 2020b, 2021). It illustrates that non-attendance is more frequent in certain districts and grades (grouped for Grades 5–6 and 7–10) as well as school types. Raw data are not publicly available.

Table 3 Students with overall and unauthorized absence (in %) in Grades 7–10 in Berlin, autumn term 2019, all school types.

Students with absence (%)				
None	1–10 days	11–20 days	21–40 days	> 40 days
Overall				
17.19	61.56	14.29	5.11	1.86
Unauthorised				
74.71	21.68	2.00	0.87	0.73

Note. The table presents how many percent of secondary school students missed a certain number of school days during half a year. Source: Berlin (2020) SenBildJugFam I C 4.2 2020-06-03.

Example 2 – Thuringia

For Thuringia, data are available on unauthorised but not overall absence. Table 4 shows that absence is highest in Grade 8. Material presented by the school

category will be divided into 1–4, 5–7, and 8–10 in the near future (e-mail communication on 2020-12-07 with A. Schmidt, SenBildJugFam I C 4.2).

198 authorities also shows that there are clear differences in absence rates between the different school types, with very low numbers in grammar school and higher numbers in basic secondary school and community school (Thüringen, 2020, 2021). Data and some timelines are available for the 2010/11 to 2019/20 school years.¹¹ During this decade, the percentage of students with unauthorised absence has risen. The strongest increase is among the group skipping one to five days, but the number of students with longer absence has also risen. The numbers seem to be on a lower level compared to Berlin, however. A great deal of statistical data is available online for Thuringia, and after enquiry to the statistical office attendance statistics (unauthorised absence) could be accessed on the school level. Their policy is to record, report and analyse their data in order to be able to work with prevention and successful interventions (Thüringen, 2013).

Table 4 Students with unauthorised absence (in %) by school grade in Thuringia (school year 2019/20)

Grade	Students with unauthorised absence (in %)					
	Number of days absent per school year					
	Sum	1–5	6–10	11–20	21–40	> 40
7	6.1	3.9	0.8	0.5	0.4	0.4
8	9.8	5.5	1.6	1.1	0.7	0.9
9	6.5	4.0	1.1	0.6	0.3	0.5
10	3.1	2.2	0.5	0.2	0.1	0.1

Note. The table presents how many percent of secondary school students had a certain number of unauthorised absent school days during a full school year. Source: Data provided by the statistical office of Thüringer Ministerium für Bildung, Jugend und Sport, school year 2019/20.

3.4 Sweden

Sweden has a decentralised education system. Its central government, through the Ministry of Education and Research, has the overall responsibility for the education system, while the municipalities and independent providers are responsible for implementing educational activities, organising and operating school services, allocating resources, and ensuring that the national goals for education are met. Education is compulsory for ten years, starting with preschool at the age of six and followed by compulsory school (Grades 1–9). As its organisational model, Sweden follows a single structure education (Eurydice, n.d.-a). The school system is decentralised and both public and independent actors provide education. All costs are carried by the state and the municipalities. A great majority of students continue to upper

¹¹ Data for the 2019/20 school year cover 19 August 2019 to 16 March, 2020, when school closed due to the pandemic (Thüringen, 2020).

secondary school (*gymnasieskola*), which is differentiated between various academic programmes and vocational/professional-oriented ones.¹²

3.4.1 The Conceptualisation of SAPs

Discussions about non-attendance have intensified in Sweden in recent years. The National Agency for Education has re-evaluated the categories for reporting absence, and now works more systematically with gathering absence data. Public and independent school providers seem to be gradually becoming more aware of the importance of actively gathering, reporting, and following up on attendance data.

The concepts of *giltig frånvaro* (authorised absence) and *ogiltig frånvaro* (unauthorised absence) are used in the Swedish Education Act (SFS 2010:800), but without clear definition (Skolverket, n.d.). This means that teachers or principals themselves must define what should be considered authorised reasons for absence, possibly leading to variation among schools (Skolverket, 2021). Examples of authorised absence include illness and non-attendance that has been authorised by the school in advance. Another term used in the law is *upprepad eller längre frånvaro* (repeated or long-term absence).

A governmental investigation (SOU 2016:94) into SAPs addressed the public, education actors, and politicians. It introduced the term *problematiser frånvaro* (problematic absence) and stated that all kinds of non-attendance (both authorised and unauthorised) can be problematic, especially regarding students' participation and performance in school.

3.4.2 What Indicators of Absence are Recorded and Reported in Sweden?

In Sweden, school attendance data are not regularly or centrally reported, although some systematic data on school attendance have been collected on certain occasions (Skolinspektionen, 2011, 2016; Skolverket, 2010, 2014, 2021).¹³ In 2015, the Swedish School Inspectorate conducted a nationwide survey based on estimated numbers from principals or school administrators. It distinguished between unauthorised continuous absence for at least one month and repeated unauthorised absences exceeding 5% of the teaching time during the previous two months. No data on authorised absence were collected (Skolinspektionen, 2016).

The most recent study by the National Agency for Education (Skolverket, 2021) analyses data reported by municipalities and independent school providers for the autumn term 2019 and the autumn term 2020. These data were based on what had been recorded either manually or by digital register systems. A majority of the municipal schools and about two-thirds of the independent school providers used

¹² Following international codes, this can be characterised as preschool (*förskola*) (ISCED 0), which most children attend between the ages of one and five years; compulsory school (*grundskola*) (ISCED 1–2); and upper secondary school (*gymnasieskola*) (ISCED 3) (OECD, 2021).

¹³ While the Swedish National Agency for Education (Skolverket) is responsible for policies and curricula, the Swedish School Inspectorate (Statens Skolinspektion) regularly conducts systematic inspections of schools.

200 digital systems for registration. Only 60% of these actors answered the survey, but the reported data nevertheless covered close to 80% of compulsory school pupils. A positive change from the prior national investigations was that data on overall absence, thus also including authorised absence, were collected.

Data are not collected regularly, in a systematic way using the same definitions by the National Agency of Education. Thus, it is not possible to report trends or time-lines for absence in compulsory schools based on official school statistics, as data were gathered differently and according to different definitions. An investigation on gathering absence data nationwide on a regular basis was recently presented to the Swedish Government, and there will be a decision in this regard in the near future.

3.4.3 Examples of Published and Publicly Available Data

Data published in Swedish studies usually derive from occasional studies. Data from 2021 on unauthorised absence were presented according to three intervals: students with 5–14%, 15–29%, and 30% or more of unauthorised absence. Information on overall absence was reported according to the categories 15–29%, 30–49%, and more than 50% (Skolverket, 2021). Overall absence increases with age, and is also the most frequent in lower secondary schools. As in other countries, in Sweden unauthorised absence is the most common in lower secondary school; absence rates rise from Grade 7 to Grade 9 (see Table 5). During autumn term 2019, a fourth of eighth and ninth graders and about a fifth of seventh graders had missed more than 15% of their overall schooling (Skolverket, 2021).

Table 5 Overall absence and unauthorized absence in Swedish lower secondary schools (Grades 7–9), autumn terms 2019 and 2020

Grade	Students (in %) – autumn term 2019 (autumn term 2020)			
	Overall absence			
	15–29%	30–49%	50% and more	Sum (15% and more)
7	14 (22)	3 (6)	2 (2.1)	19 (30)
8	16 (23)	4 (7)	2 (3)	23 (34)
9	19 (24)	5 (8)	2 (3.2)	27 (35)
Grade	Unauthorised absence (in %)			
	5–14%	15–29%	30% or more	Sum (5% or more)
7	5 (4.7)	1 (1.3)	1 (0.9)	7 (6.9)
8	7 (6.2)	2 (2.1)	1 (1.3)	10 (9.5)
9	8 (7.1)	2 (2.3)	2 (1.6)	12 (10.9)

Note. The data for autumn term 2020 covers the period of the Covid-19 pandemic, that is why unpublished, rounded data for the autumn term 2019 was added. Data for compulsory education (including lower secondary schools, schools for indigenous/Sami, and special schools) based on a survey to school leaders; data cover about 80% of students in this group. Source: Skolverket (2021, pp. 25–26) for unauthorized and overall absence 2020; unpublished statistical data provided by Skolverket for 2019.

This report is outstanding for Sweden, as it reports not only unauthorised absence but also overall absence for the first time. Skolverket (2021) presented only the most recent data for autumn 2020 when schooling was shadowed by the COVID-19 pandemic. These data are however not representative and with courtesy of Skolverket we present here also unpublished data for autumn term 2019, before the pandemic. The data show that there is a high percentage of students who miss big parts of their compulsory schooling. Over 20% of students in secondary school missed so much of their overall schooling, that they in some other school systems would be called persistently absent, although Sweden does not use this term. On top of that, there is reason to believe that a substantial proportion of students' absence is not registered. The actual numbers in Sweden are likely even higher than those reported, as principals express doubt that long-term absent students and those with reduced school days are consistently registered when they are absent (Skolverket, 2021). The report also shows that two to four percent of the lower secondary school students had more than 15% of unauthorised absence, a value that seems to be similar to the values for *futôkô* in Japan, and which is regarded as very alarming there. However, we need to keep in mind that definitions are not identical and recording and reporting of data differs. Possibilities of comparison will be discussed below.

4 Comparative Analysis of Indicators of Absence Recorded in the Four Countries

In the following, differences and similarities among the four countries investigated here will be discussed in order to analyse and compare how information on recording, reporting and publishing school attendance data can be compared among these countries. This comparison builds on the data that are published and publicly available on school attendance and absence.

4.1 Which Indicators of School Attendance and Absence are Recorded, Reported and Published, and Can Any Trends Be Seen on School Attendance in the Four Countries?

All countries have systems where teachers record attendance and absence either for the studied lessons, half-days or days. This is sometimes done on paper, sometimes digitally. The main difference seems to be whether and how the data are reported to the education authorities. There are strong differences, how absence data are summarised, specifically with regard to which form of absence is recorded, reported and published. Another difference is the way in which the collected and analysed data is shared with the schools and the public. We will in the following highlight possibilities and limitations of systematic comparisons of attendance data. This study of attendance statistics in four countries illustrated that two types of variables were useful in understanding school attendance and absence: overall absence rates and

202 long-term absence rates, sometimes called persistent absence. They served different functions, and the available data reflected different national and local practices with regard to which data were gathered and analysed. We will also argue that what is being registered is related to which form of absence is regarded as problematic. Table 6 illustrates which data are provided.

Table 6 Availability of school attendance statistics in four countries

Country	England	Japan	Germany		Sweden
			Berlin	Thuringia	
Average absence rate	Yes	No	Yes	No	No
Overall absence	✓	–	✓	–	–
Authorised absence	✓	–	–	–	–
Unauthorised absence	✓	–	✓	–	–
Persistent absence/ Rate of long-term absent students	Yes (published three times a year)	Yes (annually published)	Yes (twice a year in internal information)	Yes (twice a year)	Yes (in single report)
Overall absence	✓	(Available but seldom presented)	–	–	✓
Unauthorised absence	–	✓	✓	✓	✓
Definition of problematic absence	More than 10% of overall absence defined as “persistent absence”	More than 30 days (≈15%) per year of absence not due to illness or economic reasons called <i>futôkô</i>	More than 20 days (about 22%) of unauthorised absence per term	More than 10 days (about 5.5%) of unauthorised absence per year	No central definition
Timeline	Since 2006; Definition changed	Since 1991 with same definition; since 1962 with 50-day definition	Since 2018/19 school year	2010/11 to 2019/20	No timeline studies to date
Data availability	Absence data freely available online	Data tables for different categories available	Some tables published, others for internal use	Data available online for research	Data not available online

Note. This table summarizes the information presented in this article by above cited sources. For Germany, Berlin and Thuringia are used as examples.

The *absence rate* is useful for education planning on a macro level and for observing the extent of the problem in the overall school system. The absence rate represents the average absence of all students during a defined time span, either a school year or a term. If absence rates are provided, the values can be calculated for both overall absence and un/authorised absence. Berlin provided absence rates in internal documents but only England published systematic data for overall absence. Although it is common that districts and schools report average daily attendance, it is known that this indicator may mask high levels of persistent absence of students. It is recommended that local, state and federal governments make sure that existing data is being used to monitor and identify chronic absence, starting already in kindergarten (Bruner et al., 2011; Gottfried & Hutt, 2019). It is not known to what extent the studied countries use collected data for the purpose of planning education and preventing school attendance problems.

The *persistent absence rate* is useful for capturing how many, or which, students are at risk of missing large parts of their education and closely related to what is being described as problematic school non-attendance. England was the country where this term was clearly defined, but some form of long-term absence rate was reported in all the studied cases. In England, persistent absenteeism is defined as more than 10% (approximately 19 school days a year) overall absence, including both authorised and unauthorised absences. This level was set just a few years ago; until 2011 it had been 15%, and earlier 20%. In Japan, 30 days per year is the most common definition of problematic school non-attendance (called *futôkô*), which is equivalent to 15% of absence due to other reasons than illness or economic explanations. Until 1998 the critical level, then called school refusal (*tôkô kyôhi*), was set at 50 days or 25% (Horiguchi, 2018). For these two countries, there are timelines over the development of persistent absence.

A recurrent question is whether there has been an increase in SAPs. In Sweden, for example, there is an ongoing discussion of whether changes in the national curriculum have contributed to worsened learning conditions, especially for students with special educational needs, thus increasing rates of SAPs. With a wide definition of SAPs and unclear rules about the intervals for which school non-attendance should be reported, it is obvious that such a question is difficult to answer. Looking only at statistical evidence, regularly collected data, and use of the same definitions over years are needed to answer this question. For Sweden obviously, there is no statistical evidence regarding whether school attendance has risen or declined over time, due to a lack of systematically gathered data. Timeline studies would be needed for this. In Thuringia there are timelines for 2010/11 to 2019/20, and in Berlin at least for the last few years. It is interesting to see that there are timelines with stable definitions for Japan back to 1991 and for England from 2006. In England a decline of persistent absence rates has been reported for the years before the pandemic. However, for Japan, there has been an increase of long-term absence (*futôkô*), that is very visible in the national attendance statistics of the last years. General trends across school systems cannot be seen. It is not clear from the investigation

204 of the countries whether or how data are used by national authorities to decrease persistent absence.

4.2 Do Attendance Statistics Define What Is Seen as Problematic?

Definitions of what is defined as persistent absence or described as critical level of long-term absence vary widely. Sometimes persistent absence is measured in relation to overall absence (England, Berlin, and in certain statistics in Sweden as well), and sometimes in relation to unauthorised absence or parts of absence without illness (Thuringia and Japan; see Table 6). These differences in registration practices illustrates that concepts of what is regarded as problematic absence vary widely between countries. For comparison purposes, it would be necessary to record and report data according to generally agreed criteria and it is most helpful if a percentage (and not only the total number of students) is published.

The analysed data for Germany shows strong variation among different federal states. In both studied states, persistent absenteeism was calculated in relation to unauthorised absence. In Thuringia, however, the critical level is set at ten days per year while in Berlin it is 20 days per term; in other words, the stated level for problematic absenteeism in Berlin is four times higher than in Thuringia. In Sweden there is no official definition of what is considered problematic absence. The term *persistent absence* is not used in Sweden, and the term *längre och upprepade frånvaro* (longer and repeated absence) has no clear definition (Regeringskansliet, 2016). In Sweden, prior investigations have only asked for unauthorised absence (Skolinspektionen, 2016). However, the latest investigation reported overall and unauthorised absence. It is stated that all forms of absence are seen as problematic (Skolverket, 2021), but 20% of overall absence is often taken as the point at which to take action.

This article has illustrated how the way of recording, reporting, and publishing data is connected to school attendance in specific ways in the different school systems. How SAPs are conceptualised is related to what kind of data are made available and published. This broad variety in definition leads to statistics for the four studied countries and federal states are generally not comparable with one another. There is no common definition of which amount of absence is seen as problematic.

4.3 How Can Data on School Attendance and Absence Be Compared between the Four Countries?

This study has shown that there are many limitations with regard to how absence is recorded, reported and published. Still, it is of interest to try to relate values from the different national or official reports to each other. With the available data, we tried to calculate the percentage of lower secondary school students who missed more than 15% of school days or sessions.

For England and Sweden, there are some data for long-term absent students based on overall absence. In England, 7.1% of secondary school students missed 15% or more during the 2018/19 school year (see Table 1). In Sweden, the values for overall absence of 15% or more were 19% in Grade 7, 23% in Grade 8, and 27% in Grade 9 in the autumn term of 2019 (see Table 5). The numbers indicate higher quota of overall absence from compulsory secondary schools in Sweden compared to England. Still, it is difficult to compare these numbers due to different ways of gathering the data. In England, students in special schools and home-schooled children are for example not included. It is also difficult to compare the values from Sweden (age 13–16), as we presented the average for secondary school students for England (age 11–16).

Respective quotas for unauthorised absence are available for Japan, Sweden, and the two German states. In Japan as of 2019, the rate for missing 30 days or more per year is equivalent to 15% or more of the school year, and was 3.94% for lower secondary school pupils (Grades 7–9, age 12–15, see Table 2). In Sweden the values for unauthorised absence of more than 15% was 2% for students in Grade 7, 3% for students in Grade 8 and 4% for students in Grade 9 in 2019 (see Table 5). In Germany we can calculate the category for 20 days or more per year. In Berlin 3.6% of pupils in Grades 7–10 missed school this much (see Table 3). In Thuringia this would be called ‘massive absence’, and is reported for 1.6% of pupils in Grade 8 (13–14-year-olds), 0.8% in Grade 9, and 0.2% in Grade 10 (see Table 4). The lower numbers for Thuringia are in line with results by Keppens and Spruyt (2018) who found that the reported absences in differentiated secondary school systems is lower than in comprehensive and single structure systems. Against the background of the available data, it is not possible to give clear answers as to whether the apparent differences in values are related to ways of recording and reporting data and to locally different definitions, or to realities in school and welfare state systems.

School non-attendance is distributed differently among various age groups in the different countries. In all the countries, absence values are the highest in lower secondary school; however, there are differences regarding the peak. In Sweden and Japan, percentages increase up to Grade 9 (15–16-year-olds), while in Germany the highest values are reported in Grade 8 (13–14-year-olds) and are lower for pupils in the final grades of lower secondary school. This triggers an interpretation that it is not a question of individual development but rather conditions in society and in the education system that influence patterns of attendance. Thus, data on absence might be used for analyses and systematic work in order to improve the learning environment and strengthen school attendance.

Understanding attendance statistics is a precondition for knowledge about the state of the problem, and can be an important starting point for policies supporting attendance and the following up of interventions (Gottfried & Hutt, 2019). This article has contributed to understanding how differently the four countries studied have approached these questions. In the presented statistics, we could see higher numbers in secondary school than in primary school; in England and Germany,

206 the statistics showed different values for different school types; and in Berlin, for example, the data displayed varying patterns depending on where the school was located. In England, absence rates can also be connected to group variables, such as students who are eligible for free school meals or those who have different ethnic backgrounds.

A number of challenges have been identified. Firstly, not all absence and attendance is registered. It is of great concern that authorised absence is not reported in most of the countries studied here. Recurrent or prolonged authorised absence constitutes a risk for negative consequences in the same manner as unauthorised absence does (e.g. Bruner et al., 2011). Differences exist between as well as within the countries discussed here. The data from the two federal states in Germany present what seem to be various realities regarding reported attendance statistics, as well as different perspectives. The use of different definitions has been reported elsewhere, for example regarding truancy in the different states in the US (Gentle-Genitty et al., 2015). In Japan the number of persistently absent pupils is rising, while in England it is slowly decreasing, according to timelines presented in the official statistics before the pandemic. In order to be able to compare data between different locations access to raw data would be very helpful. To the best of our knowledge, among the countries discussed in this article, statistical data are only publicly online accessible for England. Timelines could be used to study changes in school systems within countries and between countries as well, if national and respective education authorities would investigate attendance according to the same definitions and with stable ways of recording, reporting, and publishing data.

5 Limitations and Recommendations for Further Studies

This study has a number of limitations; for instance, we have not systematically gathered information on how the attendance data were collected, recorded, and used in the four countries for a defined equivalent group. The groups of students in lower secondary school included in the national and public statistics were not equivalent in all school systems. The study included information for school systems with a common core curriculum (England), single structure system (Japan), differentiated lower secondary education (Germany, specifically Thuringia), and decentralised single structure system (Sweden). In Sweden, Germany and Japan there is compulsory schooling, in England there is compulsory education, with possibilities to home education. For home schooled children no attendance data is available and home schooling may sometimes be used as an alternative to overcome school distance (Myhill, 2017).

We have tried to understand existing data, and argue that more data need to be collected and made more comparable, through both official statistics and other standardised studies. Besides this, in order to understand the importance of a school

system's organisation for strategies regarding school attendance more qualitative studies are needed. Specifics of the school system are related to specific limitations. For example, in England, students who are enrolled in private, non-state-funded schools or are home-schooled are not included in the attendance statistics. Although schools teach according to a common curriculum, school organisation and the gathering of statistics vary. Another example is students who are new to the country. In descriptions of the statistics from Berlin, it is mentioned that in so-called 'welcome classes' for newly arrived children with a mother tongue other than the school language, attendance is not registered. For Sweden, the available statistics were gathered retrospectively through school leadership questionnaires. There are currently developments underway that may in the future provide more comparable information throughout the Swedish school system and hopefully also across different countries' school systems. Systematic information about registration processes is limited, a factor that complicates comparisons between different settings.

Additionally, registration varies within countries. An earlier study from Japan showed variations in the registration of absence between schools and prefectures (Nakao & Yamamoto, 2007): Absence registered at one school as *futôkô* might be registered at another as being ill. A study in Sweden showed that the introduction of digital registration of attendance had effects on educational settings in school and that it needs to be further studied (Bodén, 2016). Generally, information on how data on different categories of absence had been gathered and were used in the school system – with the exception of England – was not sufficiently described in the available absence statistics.

Another limitation becomes obvious when authorities try to limit authorised absence. In England, for example, authorised absence for holidays decreased from 0.6% to 0.1% between 2006/07 and 2018/19 while the percentage of unauthorised absence for holidays increased from 0.1 to 0.4% (DfE, 2021). This means that absence for holidays was about the same, but with a shift from authorised to unauthorised. Thus, although the value of reliable statistics became evident in this article, it also seems that the processes for gathering these statistics need to be developed with care (Bodén, 2013) and that the pedagogical consequences need to be observed and studied.

Further studies would benefit from an analysis of statistics, working with original data and analysing them according to common criteria. Some countries have such digital data, but to our knowledge only the data in England is freely accessible to the public online. In some other cases, such as Japan or a few German states, data are available and might be accessible for research if one contacts the relevant agencies. While access to raw data would allow for more detailed analysis, as long as the data are gathered differently the possibilities for comparison are limited.

In order to combat the global problem of SAPs, countries could benefit from learning from each other with regard to registering school attendance and absence. Comparisons will only be possible with equivalent problem definitions. Thus, there is a need for more consistency in the use of attendance data between countries. Different countries have different ways of recording and reporting statistical information on absence, and different ways of publishing relevant information. Some countries – in our sample, England and Japan – have developed a system for collecting and disseminating information about school absence on a regular basis, while other countries have no national system (Germany), or collect national data occasionally on a non-regular basis (Sweden). When data are collected, there are attempts to set some level of absence that is considered to be problematic. There seems to be a lower threshold for how much absence is considered problematic in England, and Thuringia compared to Sweden, Japan and Berlin. It is not possible to establish a similar trend across the four countries. If a comparison were to be made between the levels of absenteeism and the trends concerning them in different countries, it would be difficult to rely solely on national statistics; it would instead be necessary to either collect specific data in international surveys designed to do this, or explore whether other international studies contain this information. This study elucidated a need for more descriptive statistics as a precondition for developing strategies for reporting and – hopefully – improving school attendance. The potential offered by using attendance data from schools together with data from research and surveys involving, for example, children's well-being and bullying, school performance, dropout, and graduation should be further explored. Finally, we believe that qualitative studies are necessary in order to understand how statistics can be used. How do actors in the school react when SAPs are detected? Developing meaningful systems for recording, reporting and publishing attendance and absence statistics is important in connection to the central question of how the data can contribute to combating and preventing SAPs.

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Acknowledgement to Reviewers

The Editors and Guest Editors of the *Orbis scholae* journal would like to take this opportunity for thanking the following colleagues who reviewed articles published in Volume 16.

Katarina Alanko
Mary Catherine Arbour
Lisa McKay Brown
Hedy Chang
Joshua Childs
Ulf Frederikson
Eduard Fuchs
Carolyn Gentle Genitty
Carolina Gonzalez
Patricia Graczyk
Kirsten Hancock
Světlana Hanušová
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