

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;

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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; Määttä 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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