

REVIEW STUDY

Secondary School Absenteeism in the Gulf Countries: Narrative Review

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Abstract

Problematic/chronic school absenteeism has long been a significant concern for educators, parents, and politicians, as it involves students staying away from school for various reasons. There is widespread agreement that regular attendance is crucial for academic success, particularly in secondary school, which is vital for university admission or preparation for entering the labour market. Research on attendance/absence from the Global North and South is briefly summarized, followed by a detailed narrative review of existing literature from Gulf countries (primarily Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates). Compared to international literature, studies from Gulf countries focus mainly on locally specific risk factors of absenteeism, such as student-related (health, gender) and family-related (as polygamy and socio-economic issues). Some other cultural and structural factors are noted, such as the specific absence patterns of non-citizens and the role of holidays and the school calendar. Significantly less information was found on the impact of absenteeism and on the ways in which education systems and schools address this problem. Given the variable rigour of available scholarships, the main contribution of the study is the mapping of themes covered. This study also identifies gaps in knowledge and also indicates what recommendations for educational practice and policy in Gulf countries can be drawn from the available evidence.

Keywords

absence, non-attendance, secondary school, chronic absenteeism, narrative review, Gulf countries

Absences are a phenomenon that has many different causes, manifestations, and consequences. In both research of absenteeism and school practice, attention has long been focused on truancy – a behavior of students skipping school without reasonable excuse. Today, we already know that it is necessary to monitor all absences, whatever their causes, be it health issues, lack of motivation, parental support, school climate, cultural, economic reasons etc. (Heyne et al., 2025). All school absences often can have long-term consequences for students. The higher the absenteeism rate, the lower academic performance of students, although other circumstances also play a role and modify this relationship (Hancock et al., 2017). In addition, absences are also an indicator that can help detect other problems early. Therefore, in recent years, many national education systems mandate the schools to monitor and decrease students' absenteeism to ensure that every student has an equal opportunity to realize their full potential (Graczyk et al., 2022; Heyne et al., 2022).

Special attention shall be paid to adolescent students as secondary school is their gate to higher education or labor market (Whitney & Liu, 2017). Chronically absent young people are more vulnerable to negative long-term effects, such as dropping out before graduation and subsequently less likely to get decent future jobs (Cabus & De Witte, 2015; Klein & Sosu, 2024) with subsequent impact for society's safety and productivity in the long run.

My personal motivation for this study arises from my experience as an English language teacher in a secondary school in the United Arab Emirates, where student absenteeism is a recurring challenge. Students who miss more days often return having lost essential learning, which can hinder their academic progress and, at times, lead to behavioural difficulties. There is rich literature on various aspects of attendance measurement, as well as causes and impacts of absenteeism, prevention and intervention in European countries and North America (e.g., Cattani et al., 2023; Gottfried & Hutt, 2019; Kearney, 2016). Considerably less has been published, however, on the state of this issue in Arab education systems.

The importance of research in Gulf countries is not purely local and practical as there are some specific phenomena not observed elsewhere. According to a report by Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD, 2020, p. 4), "Macau, Saudi Arabia, Türkiye, and the United Arab Emirates were the only education systems where skipping school was more common amongst advantaged students". Thus, research in this region can expand academic literature with new insights into the specific mechanisms leading to absenteeism and intervention strategies.

This review therefore answers the following questions:

- Which topics have been investigated so far in relation to absenteeism in the Gulf countries as compared with main areas of current international research?
- Where are the research gaps in scholarship on absenteeism in the Gulf or, which topics emerging in Gulf countries can enrich international literature?

The study is conceptually informed by the Kids and Teens at School (KiTeS) framework (see Section 2) based on Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006) and explaining school attendance through multiple interacting factors at the individual, family, school, and community levels.

1 Context of the Study

The Gulf countries located on the Arabian Peninsula – Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA), and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) – share the same climate, geography, economic and political status and they also share many Arabic cultural traditions and customs. They are mostly dynastic monarchies, except for the UAE, which is a federation headed by a president (who is the ruler of the emirate of Abu Dhabi). Today all countries in this area have both locals (nationals, citizens) and foreigners (expats) who constitute socially and culturally diverse communities.

Education in the Gulf countries has a long history, but their educational systems were basically religious in the past. Before 1950s, the *Mutawa* (religious teacher) was instructing students in *al Katateeb* as an informal education system that started hundreds of years ago in almost all areas in the region. The expansion of formal education started with the beginning of oil discovery and extraction. The upper secondary education systems in the Gulf countries have a similar structure now while certain differences exist in differentiation of study tracks and the role of private and religious schools. Education at this level usually lasts 3 years, is gender-segregated, and ends with a certified examination. In all countries there is: a general or advanced tier, which is the most widespread; an applied (vocational and technical) tier; and a religious (Islamic) tier. However, Islamic education is also part of the curricula in the other tiers. International programs in the private sector often serve expatriates, or members of the domestic upper classes.

The educational systems have witnessed rapid progress in recent years. For instance, the UAE partly adopted educational systems and educational strategies from other Arabic countries, as Kuwaiti or Jordanian model. In connection with the diversification of the economy so far dependent on the oil industry, there is an effort to further develop applied fields of study.

2 Attendance and Absences: State of the Art

Since there is already a vast amount of literature on attendance and absenteeism in the Western countries, secondary papers – mainly literature reviews – were used as a basis for a brief characterization of the state of knowledge and supplemented with primary studies.

2.1 Definitional and Conceptual Clarification

The terminology and classifications in the field of absenteeism have not been standardized (see, e.g., Ricking & Schulze, 2019). Older studies often used just two categories or types of school absences: 1) *excused* absence is due to valid reasons; while 2) *unexcused* absence means that student is absent without valid or acceptable reason.

Today, in international literature, total absenteeism has become the main object of attention. The complementary term attendance is also used instead of absences as a keyword in some studies. In the academic literature from the Global South, it is necessary to note that the term non-attendance sometimes means *non-enrollment*, not the absence of a student enrolled in school.

There are a number of options for *measuring* absenteeism. A very commonly used tool is official school attendance records, which can also be time-to-time compared with spot checks carried out by inspectors (Evans & Mendez Acosta, 2023). Related is focus on share of *chronically absent students* by setting a limit based on the absolute number of missed days or hours of instruction: e.g. UAE Ministry of Education (MOE) regulations state that students who miss 15 days in any school will get the risk of expulsion unless they have been legitimately excused from school as a result of specific circumstances. In many school systems, students are defined as *chronically absent* when missing 10% of school days or more (Graczyk, 2022; Keppens et al., 2019). Globally and in the context of the Gulf countries, however, we also encounter other operationalizations of absences (or non-attendance), some of which are also based on self-assessment scales (as in PISA study or in Saudi study by Alsayyari & AlBuhairan, 2020). Alsuwaileh (2015) chose an interesting approach in the context of Kuwait and investigated the subjective definition/perception of absenteeism of various actors. Sellami et al. (2020), in addition to absenteeism in Qatar, also studied teacher perceptions of *presenteeism* as “behaviour or condition whereby students are physically present in class during scheduled class time but do not operate to their full potential” (p. 19).

2.2 Theoretical Framing

Absenteeism is a multi-rooted problem with severe consequences that can vary according to the unique situation of each student. A clear understanding of the risk factors associated with school absenteeism helps practitioners and policy makers develop appropriate solutions to improve school attendance. Bronfenbrenner’s ecological perspective (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006) provides a suitable foundation for researching the causes of school absenteeism and its impact on child development (Childs & Scanlon, 2022; Gubbels et al., 2019). The KiTeS Framework (Table 1) was developed from Bronfenbrenner’s approach to offer a comprehensive and inclusive analysis of absenteeism and school attendance patterns (Melvin et al., 2019). The examples of factors are mostly taken from the authors of the framework, in several cases they have been updated, especially with regard to current events affecting school attendance.

2.3 Causes of Absenteeism

In Global North, we encounter many works that focus on problematic absences caused by lower-level factors of the KiTeS framework. Student- or family-level reasons were the most significant contributors to absences, and these absences had the strongest association with lower academic achievement (Hancock et al., 2018). A meta-analysis (Gubbels et al., 2019) found a moderate to very strong association of absenteeism with the student’s mental health problems – problematic internalizing behavior, depression, anxiety states and other psychiatric symptoms or disorders (see also Tessonneau et al., 2019). A very significant risk factor is the use of addictive substances, including smoking. The third group of high-risk factors consists of anti-social, risky and maladaptive behaviour. The association of absenteeism with the student’s somatic health was somewhat weaker.

Table 1 The KiTeS Framework (Melvin et al., 2019)

Factor	Description
MACRO-LEVEL	
Legislative Framework	National education policies and laws shape how attendance is monitored and regulated.
Socioeconomic Inequality	Household income, parental employment conditions, and access to educational resources influence supervision, and academic engagement. Economic pressures or family responsibilities may contribute to irregular attendance patterns.
Cultural Attitudes	Cultural beliefs about education and community norms, family priorities and gender expectations affect motivation to attend school.
EXO-LEVEL	
Neighbourhood Characteristics	Community size and composition (e.g., nationals and expatriates) as well as typical employment patterns in the area influence students' daily routines, supervision, and access to educational support.
Transportation Barriers	Transport infrastructure, long commutes and related logistical challenges affect students' ability to attend school consistently in geographically dispersed areas.
Housing Instability	Frequent moves disrupting routines or precarious housing limiting access to school resources.
MICRO- AND MESO-LEVEL	
Parent and Family	Family composition, functioning, and dynamics; parent mental health and parenting styles; parental work demands and (missing) support and engagement.
School	Teacher–student–peer relationships (e.g., bullying); curriculum, academic and social support; school climate; safety and quality of the school's physical environment.
Parent–School Communication	Parent–school communication helps address attendance issues early and effectively. Meetings, messages, and support services enable coordinated interventions to improve attendance.
PERSON-LEVEL FACTORS (STUDENT)	
Demand Characteristics	Age, developmental stage, gender, nationality may influence attendance patterns.
Resource Characteristics	Acute and chronic illness; students' physical and mental health conditions influence attendance, sleep problems, psychological distress, or mental health conditions such as anxiety or depression may increase absenteeism.
Force Characteristics	Emotional and psychological factors as students' motivation, attitudes toward school, and perceived academic ability influence students' willingness to attend school regularly.
CHRONO-LEVEL	
Calendar Effects	Attendance may vary depending on specific days of the week (e.g., Monday and Friday) and periods following school or religious holidays.
Developmental Timing Effects	During adolescence, peer influence, identity development, and academic pressure increase the risk of school disengagement and absenteeism.
Historical and Societal Events	Covid-19, armed conflict, impact of new technologies on students (ICT / mobile phones addiction), online learning environments may affect students' engagement with school.

At the family level, Gubbels et al. (2019) point out to parental behaviors such as low school involvement, parental health and psychological problems, low levels of parental support and control. Some parents do not recognize the importance of school attendance, have misconceptions about absences and underestimate the cumulative effect of even a few missed days (Balfanz & Byrnes, 2012). Positive family processes, including parental engagement and guidance, show a significant negative relationship with school absenteeism and withdrawal. Conversely, negative processes, such as tension and abuse, exhibit a positive correlation with school absenteeism (Marlow & Rehman, 2021). Also, some structural family problems are high risk – the occurrence of child abuse in the family, divorce or absence of one of the parents, single parenthood, low level of parental education and low family socioeconomic status (SES), and irregular work schedules which could make it hard for parents to follow up on students' attendance (Morsy & Rothstein, 2015). However, the relationship between family SES and school absenteeism is complex due to the multifaceted nature of both family SES and the forms of absenteeism – such as truancy, sickness, and suspension (Sosu et al., 2021).

Several school-related factors can contribute to increased student absenteeism (Gubbels et al., 2019). The concept of school alienation means decreased students' sense of belonging and negative attitudes towards their school. The general concept is currently being further differentiated into alienation from learning, from teachers, and from classmates (Hascher & Hadjar, 2018). In the first group we can include academic difficulties, lack of engagement, inadequate support systems, school schedules, and lack of extracurricular activities. The other two domains include a negative school climate, perceived support from teachers and classmates vs. excessive control from teachers, bullying and cyberbullying from classmates. In addition, physical school conditions, such as substandard school facilities, may also negatively affect students' school experiences and attendance (Pérez-Marco et al., 2025).

Research from Global South often addresses exo- or macro-level structural barriers that are beyond the control of the student, their family, and the school, such as endemic diseases, lack of access to transportation and health services or neighbourhood violence. For example, immigrant families coming from poor countries sometimes must travel to their country of origin outside of official school holidays to obtain necessary healthcare that they are not entitled to or cannot afford in the destination country (Ricking & Schulze, 2019).

From the person-level characteristics, health factors have so far received special attention in Global South countries, which can be explained by greater maturity of medical research compared to educational sciences, and possibly more frequent prevalence of certain diseases as HIV/AIDS (*Learner Absenteeism...*, 2007). Specific attention is paid to asthma, even in developed countries (Millard et al., 2008; Moonie et al., 2006), as children with asthma had a statistically significantly higher mean absentee days compared to those without asthma, and severity of asthma correlates with increased absenteeism. A meta-analysis found an association between oral health and attendance (Rebelo et al., 2018).

Regarding the gender differences in the causes of absenteeism, depending on the cultural context, higher absences may be found either for girls or for boys (Ocak et al., 2017). In some areas, belief that educating boys is more important than educating girls contributed to the lower attendance rates for girls compared to boys (Osman & Keevy, 2021). Another gender-specific factor in older female students is teenage pregnancy (*Learner Absenteeism...*, 2007). In sub-Saharan Africa girls tended to miss school more frequently when

a family member was ill, while boys were more often absent due to work obligations (Wolf et al., 2016).

The ecological factor represented by geographical isolation, difficulty in accessing affordable transport and limited schooling options contribute to absenteeism, particularly in isolated communities (Porter, 2002). In some countries as China, there are large differences between regions or between urban and rural areas, which are also reflected in regular school attendance (Hu, 2012). Food insecurity, distance from school, transportation problems and traveling time play a role in increased absenteeism (*Learner Absenteeism...*, 2007).

The unique benefit of studies conducted in countries outside of Europe and North America is that they examine country- or regional-specific causes of absenteeism. Some studies have pointed out that cultural factors, such as participating in social activities (weddings, funerals, social gatherings) or students helping their parents in their work, can significantly influence student absenteeism (Abdullah, et al., 2017). Conversely, studies from Global North countries tend towards methodological universalism and ethnocentrism, so they often do not reflect their own cultural specificities.

2.4 Effects and Intervention Strategies

The effects of absence are sometimes divided into consequences for the individual, impacts on the school and classmates, and losses due to absenteeism for the society as a whole. Absence also has a different impact on different groups of the population – for children from disadvantaged backgrounds, their absence from school has a more serious impact on their academic performance (Dougherty, 2018; Gershenson et al., 2015).

Absenteeism results in lost chances for learning and progressing academically. Students that are chronically absent continue to have lower educational outcomes and are more likely to drop out of high school and face future unemployment in both Western (Altayar, 2013; Cabus & De Witte, 2015; Kirksey, 2019) and non-Western countries (e.g., Demir & Karabeyoglu, 2015; Komakech, 2015). Student absenteeism also affects their social development and peer relationships (Garcia & Weiss, 2018). Chronically absent students are more likely to participate in antisocial behaviors and high-risk activities, to use alcohol and other addictive substances, which can result in referrals to the juvenile justice system (Gottfried & Hutt, 2019; Gubbels et al., 2019). High absenteeism also affects the whole class, especially if lessons are put on hold until the missing student returns, or the teacher has to waste other students' time by helping the absentee to catch up. This way, frequent absences result in a dull, exhausting, and unpleasant classroom atmosphere, causing discomfort for attending students and frustration for the teacher (Akkuş & Çinkır, 2022; Komakech, 2015).

Addressing absenteeism requires a combination of prevention and mitigation strategies. Various solutions rely upon the circumstances and the educational philosophy used. Mervilde (1981) examined six categories of absenteeism solutions: punitive strategies, parental inclusion programs, students' contracts, counseling techniques, community agency initiatives, and unconventional approaches such as special classes or open campuses. Today, multi-tiered and multidisciplinary comprehensive system of supports (MTSS) is considered a good standard of practice (Kearney & Graczyk, 2020).

The first step to promoting regular attendance is an appropriate system for monitoring absences in school (Evans & Mendez Acosta, 2023; Heyne et al., 2022). An early identifi-

cation and intervention system increases students' graduation rate (Balfanz, et al., 2012). Unfortunately, according to the voices of secondary school students who developed school attendance problems (SAPs), the response in the school environment was inappropriate, incoherent, insufficient, or the intervention began too late (Hamadi et al., 2025).

Severe forms of absenteeism are usually not successfully resolved by the school alone (Epstein & Sheldon, 2002). Cooperation with parents is essential (Gottfried & Hutt, 2019). School staff sometimes has to find a balance between general rules for attendance and the specific difficulties of individual students (economic problems of families, migration, physical and mental health) and create their own rules (Birioukov-Brant & Brant-Birioukov, 2019). Overly harsh and punitive rules harm students instead of helping them (Kearney et al., 2020). Educational policies try to encourage attendance through measures such as free lunches, school transportation or scholarships. Especially in cases where socio-economic variables play a decisive role, monetary incentives/scholarships can also be effective (Akkus & Çinkir, 2022).

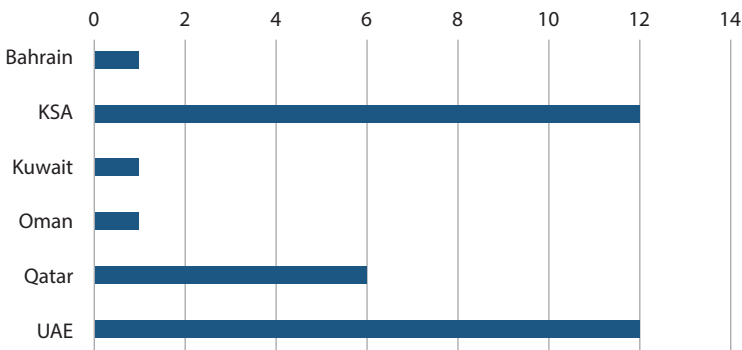
3 Method of Literature Review

Given the broadly formulated research questions and the specific structure of the literature from the Arab Gulf countries, a narrative review was chosen as an approach providing a broad overview of a research landscape, analysing and summarizing various types of existing sources to present a state of the art of the research field and identify gaps. A narrative review typically combines use of authoritative sources with literature retrieval from electronic databases, supplemented by additional manual searches (Green et al., 2006). Even though I started with a systematic search in databases, it turned out to be inappropriate to follow strict protocol as research studies that have focused on the Gulf countries may not be included in major databases such as Web of Science and Scopus. Therefore, the initial literature search was expanded using Google Scholar database covering broader array of sources. Subsequently, the sources cited in the found works were reviewed. However, saturation occurred relatively soon and no further research from the Gulf countries was found. Table 2 provides an overview of the 34 academic studies and 4 other sources selected using the following criteria:

- 1) The thematic relevance – study addressed school attendance or absenteeism (which may have been labelled as truancy in older works). Due to the low number of relevant papers found, Table 2 also lists some methodologically well-developed Gulf studies that did not have attendance as a primary topic, but paid attention to it, for example as a significant consequence of bullying (Al-Ketbi et al., 2024) or in connection with research on inequalities (Al-Thani, 2017; Ridge, 2009a,b; Ridge et al., 2016), or belonging to school (El Zaatari et al., 2021; Ibrahim & El Zaatari, 2019).

- 2) The geographical scope was limited to the six Gulf Cooperation Council countries. The studies were mostly related to UAE, Saudi Arabia, and Qatar. Only one study was found for each of the following countries – Bahrain, Kuwait and Oman (Figure 1). Newspaper articles and one paper covering all GCC countries are not included in this figure.

- 3) The target population is the upper secondary education age group, i.e. studies covering Grades 9 to 12 and/or age range between 14(15) and 17(18) years. However, three stud-

Figure 1 Regional Focus of Studies

ies that meet the other criteria but focus on younger students are included in the Table 2 because they either document the use of less common but promising research approaches in the context of attendance in the Gulf area (Alzaher et al., 2021 – experimental design; Bennour, 2021 – multilevel modeling using data from international large-scale study) or originated from Bahrain otherwise not represented (Mohamed et al., 2022). Publications related to post-secondary/university education were excluded, with the exception of one study on the relationship between absenteeism in secondary education and university success.

4) Given the overall small number of publications found, the review includes both peer-reviewed empirical studies and various types of grey literature, including theses with available full texts. This allowed for better documentation of the thematic scope but required a more critical approach to the findings of some studies. Finally, some attendance issues are already discussed in the Gulf mass media, but no academic/research studies that would reflect on them were found (this is the case of absences associated with travel by local or expat families – Abdullah, 2019; Palmer, 2024; Sircar, 2024; Walker, 2014); so four newspaper pieces are mentioned in Table 2, but they are not included in the further statistics.

All included studies, except one Arabic one, were published in English. The search was conducted using English terms, as Arabic academic journals usually have English abstracts, too. In recent years, there has been a growing pressure in the GCC to publish in English or bilingually. This may be the reason why no other Arabic-only studies appeared in the databases, even after snowballing.

5) For the reasons described in the previous paragraph (small number of relevant texts), all studies found that met the criteria up to 2024 were included. Although a few works from the 1990s and the first decade of the new millennium have been found, the corpus of studies consists mainly of studies from the last ten years (Table 2). This reflects both the increased interest in the issue of attendance and absence, which can be observed in parallel in other regions, and the expansion of academic publication production globally and in the Gulf region.

Table 2 Characteristics of Studies from Gulf Countries

Authors	Year	Country	Methodology	Topic	Sub-Topic	Note
Abd El-Mawgod et al.	2016	KSA	Survey / Questionnaire (1 region)	Causes	Health, Gender	
Abdullah	2019	UAE	NA	Causes	Family/ Cultural	Newspaper article
Abu-Shaheen et al.	2016	KSA	Survey / Questionnaire	Causes	Health, Family	
Ajaj	2018	UAE	Archival data (1 school) Correlational study	Effects Attendance policies		MA Thesis
Al Hazaa et al.	2021	Qatar	Archival data (1 school) Correlational study	Effects	Achievement	
Al-Dawood	2002	KSA	Survey / Questionnaire	Causes	Health, Social	
Al-Fadala	2016	GCC	Literature review	Effects	Achievement	
Al-Farsi et al.	2015	Oman	Administrative data (1 school) Data mining	Causes	Family	
Al-Garni	2000	KSA	Survey / Questionnaire (1 city)	Causes	Family	PhD Thesis
Al-khateeb & Al-khateeb	2015	GCC	Literature review	Causes	Health	
Al-Ketbi et al.	2024	UAE	Survey / Questionnaire (1 city – 723 students)	Causes	School (bullying)	
Alfalasi et al.	2024	UAE	Project proposal only	Attendance policies	Tracking system	
AlMakadma & Mikler	2015	KSA	Survey / Questionnaire	Causes	Family, School	
Almenhali et al.	2023	UAE	Survey / Questionnaire Structural equation modelling	Causes	School	
Almusa	2021	KSA	Survey / Questionnaire	Causes	Health, Social	

Authors	Year	Country	Methodology	Topic	Sub-Topic	Note
Alsayyari & AlBuhairan	2020	KSA	Reanalysis of nationally representative survey	Causes	Health, Family	Also prevalence
Alsowayan et al.	2021	KSA	Online survey (1 school)	Causes	Health	
Alsuwaileh	2015	Kuwait	Qualitative interviews (20 students, 10 teachers and 5 parents)	Causes		
Altayar	2013	KSA	Survey / Questionnaire (1 city)	Causes		Arabic study
Al-Thani	2017	Qatar	Survey / Questionnaire (representative)	Causes	Gender	PhD Thesis
Alzaher et al.	2021	KSA	Intervention study / experimental	Preventive measures	Health	Younger students
Bener	2011	Qatar	Survey / Questionnaire (representative)	Causes	Health	
Bener et al.	1994	UAE	School health reports Census for one region	Causes	Health	
Bennour	2015	KSA	Secondary analysis of survey data (4337 students)	Causes	School (bullying)	TIMSS 2015 data Younger students
El Zaatari et al.	2021	UAE	Mixed method study Representative sample (1 region), questionnaire + interviews	Causes	School	Based on MA thesis
Ibrahim & El Zaatari	2019	UAE	Case study (1 school) Qualitative interviews	Causes	School	
Jamil et al.	2021	UAE	Survey / Questionnaire (1 city)	Causes	Health	

Authors	Year	Country	Methodology	Topic	Sub-Topic	Note
Lee	2016	Qatar	Survey / Questionnaire (private schools)	Causes	Gender, Nationality	
Mohamed et al.	2022	Bahrain	Questionnaire, oral examina- tion, and school register data merged and analysed	Causes	Health	Younger students
Palmer	2024	UAE	NA	Causes	Travel/Family	Newspa- per article
Radhwan	2024	UAE	Specific information not available	Attendance policies		Book chapter Full text not available
Ridge	2009	UAE	Mixed method study National data reanalysis Case studies (4 schools)	Causes	Gender	
Ridge et al.	2016	UAE Qatar	Mixed methods Survey and qualitative interviews (pri- vate schools)	Causes	Social, Nationality	
Sellami et al.	2020	Qatar	Survey / Questionnaire (495 teachers)	Causes	School	
Shaikh et al.	2016	KSA	Survey / Questionnaire (480 students from one region)	Causes	Health	
Sircar	2024	UAE	NA	Causes	Travel/Family	Newspa- per article
Walker	2014	UAE	NA	Causes	Travel / Cultural	Newspa- per article
Yang et al.	2016	UAE	Survey of public-school secondary students in Abu Dhabi	Causes	Child-level, School	

Notes: GCC = Gulf Cooperation Council (all Gulf countries), NA = Not applicable

4 Attendance and Absences in Gulf Countries

This section focuses on the specifics of student attendance and absence in the Arab Gulf countries in terms of risk factors, manifestations, and solutions used. Of the 34 academic studies included in Table 2, 28 studies (more than 80%) focus primarily on the causes of absenteeism. The effects of absenteeism, school attendance policies, and interventions are therefore significantly less represented.

4.1 Causes of Absenteeism in Gulf Area

Although the causes of absences appear to be the most frequently studied topic so far, Alsuaileh (2015) or Ridge et al. (2013; 2016) point to limits of research on the causes of absenteeism in Arab countries' schools. One reason may be the very uneven attention paid to different types of causes, with a marked dominance of medically oriented research (Table 3). Older studies in the analyzed set discussed primarily medical factors, while newer studies address a broader range of aspects of absence. This also corresponds to the increase in interest in the topic of absence globally and its more comprehensive understanding.

Table 3 Types of Causal Factors Examined in Gulf Countries

Causal Factors	Number of Studies
Health	12
School	8
Family	6
Gender	4
Social status	3
Nationality	2
Cultural context	1
Other and multiple	3

4.1.1 Person-Level Factors: Adolescent as a Student

One of the cultural specificities of education in the region is gender segregation during schooling, the better educational achievement of girls as compared to boys and significantly lower representation of Emirati boys in post-secondary education and in a number of professions (Marquez et al., 2022; UNESCO, 2022). OECD (2023) data show also different rates of absenteeism of boys and girls in Saudi Arabia and Qatar while the gender difference in absences is not significant in the UAE. These issues have not been studied in more detail so far.

Al-Thani (2017) studied school attendance and learning among Qatari preparatory stage students in Grades 7 and 8 to explore students' attitude towards going to school. According to the survey, boys (and students from Qatar generally) appear to have fewer favorable at-

titudes regarding attending school than girls and students from other countries. When the Qatari and non-Qatari comparison groups are broken down further by gender, the results point to Qatari boys placing the lowest priority on education. Similarly, Lee's (2016) survey findings indicate that while the overall teaching and classroom environment appears to have little effect on Qatari students' attitudes toward school attendance, creating a positive school culture and learning environment is strongly associated with improved attitudes toward attendance among boys.

UAE mixed method studies (Ridge, 2009a, 2009b) indicated that male students' dropout rate, repetition and lower achievement rates were higher than female students. As a result, more females attend higher education and make up to 60% of public sector employees. The young males in the UAE are particularly influenced by polygamy and/or divorce. When the father divorces his former spouse or marries a new one, the eldest son from the earlier marriage often faces the responsibility of caring for the family (Ridge et al., 2013).

Some studies also focus on specific gender differences in health factors related to attendance as dysmenorrhea (Abd El-Mawgod et al., 2016). Homework, daily tasks, behavior in class, school attendance, and academic achievement were all impacted by dysmenorrhea to varying degrees.

Health Factors

Much of the research coming from Arab countries, including the Gulf countries, has so far focused on the health causes or contexts of student absenteeism. School absence for health reasons is becoming increasingly acknowledged by healthcare professionals, policymakers, social workers, and educators as a public health issue, according to a Saudi Arabian study by Alsayyari and AlBuhairan (2020). It is generally established to have both short- and long-term detrimental effects. The focus is mainly on asthma and other respiratory diseases (Abu-Shaheen et al., 2016; Jamil et al., 2021), but also on oral health (Shaikh et al., 2016).

A review of literature from Arab countries, including the Gulf region, by Al-khateeb and Al-khateeb (2015) proved that asthma was a key reason for school absenteeism, and it had a significant negative impact on academic achievement of students, and asthmatic students tend to experience a much greater frequency of behavioral and emotional challenges in comparison to those who do not have asthma. These issues involved, though were not limited to, sleep disruptions, emotional strain, depression, and anxiety. According to an Emirati study (Bener et al., 2009), asthma is a frequent chronic illness and a leading reason for absenteeism among school kids in Al Ain (one of three regions in Abu Dhabi, UAE). Both boys (42%) and girls (45%) missed school most often during the spring, when there are problems with desert dust and with allergies. In autumn, asthma-related absences were least frequent (26% of events for the boys and 22% for the girls). Bener (2011) found that the prevalence of asthma and allergic rhinitis was notably higher in Qatari schools compared to UAE and KSA. Asthmatic students experienced more frequent absenteeism than non-asthmatic peers with affected students losing about 20% of school days. Environmental factors like smoking fathers and genetic predisposition were associated with asthma, posing a risk of decreased academic performance. A KSA study by Alsowayan et al. (2021) on the impact of asthma on students' absenteeism and its ramifications for student achievement emphasized that poor asthma control led to reduced academic performance

and increased school absenteeism among children aged 14 to 18. The risk of suffering the negative educational impacts of asthma was increased among Saudi boys from socioeconomically disadvantaged families, partly because of lower use of prophylactic medication (Al-Dawood, 2002).

Alzaher et al. (2021) conducted a clustered randomized controlled trial involving hand hygiene workshops for the experimental group, resulting in a significantly lower risk of absenteeism due to Upper Respiratory Infections (URIs) among attending students. Furthermore, the age of the student's mother was found to be inversely related to the likelihood of absenteeism due to URIs, with older mothers associated with lower chances. Family size also played a role, and students in families with six or more members had a significantly reduced risk of URI-related absence compared to those in smaller families. This study targeted younger students, but I mention it here because it was one of the few papers that addressed the intervention and probably the only paper that sought to experimentally verify its impact. What is rather characteristic, however, is that the intervention again targeted health factors of absence.

Relationship between oral health and attendance was not found to be of practical significance (Mohamed et al., 2022, in Bahrain; Shaikh et al., 2016, in KSA).

In a broader sense, studies that have examined the connection between addictions and attendance can be cited here. In KSA, Almusa (2021) evaluated the prevalence of internet addiction and its link to insomnia and academic performance. Internet addiction was a major issue among female high school students, negatively impacting their academic performance and overall well-being due to increased stress levels. The students' attendance and academic performance were moderately affected due to insufficient sleep and limited study time.

4.1.2 Micro- and Meso-Factors: Family and School

Family is an extremely important institution in Arab cultures. Traditional Arab families are characterized by strong loyalty and solidarity among members, a patriarchal structure with the father (if present) as the head, and the significant role of the extended family. However, under certain circumstances, it can negatively affect school attendance.

Research from the UAE (Rashid, 2014) and Oman (Al-Farsi et al., 2015) confirms that family status, structure and dynamics were the key factors of student absenteeism similarly to patterns well-documented in Western literature. Alsuwaileh (2015) investigated high absenteeism rates among secondary school students in Kuwait and identified family dynamics as a primary contributing factor. Students from families with single parents or stepmothers are less likely to find the family encouragement and support they need to keep them in school. Al-Garni (2000) achieved similar results regarding the impact of family size, parent-child attachment, and parent's education level on deviant behaviors including truancy in Makkah City, KSA.

As mentioned in the previous section, an area that also requires further investigation is father's polygamy impact on (prior) wives and children. Ridge (2009a) found that some students from outlying villages in the Northern Emirates lived in families with up to 23 siblings. Students indicated that their fathers were either retired or unemployed, and 25 percent of them reported that their father had two or more wives. In these cases, the eldest son

may face greater pressure to find employment and skip school to ensure the well-being of the family, unlike his sisters who will usually be encouraged to complete school to improve future prospects of their work or marriage. On the other hand, early marriage for girls is a cultural risk factor especially in rural or Bedouin areas.

In KSA, students from disintegrated families, with parents unaware about the importance of education and about behavior and whereabouts of their children are particularly at risk. Another unfavorable family characteristic is lack of intimate relations between its members (Altyar, 2013). Study by Alsayyari & AlBuhairan (2020) is important as it used large nationwide sample ($n = 12,121$). Students who claimed to have poor father-child relationships, children whose fathers are polygamists, smokers, regular nappers, weekend sleepers who get more than 10 hours of sleep per day, unhappy students, and those who have chronic illnesses, using the internet for more than two hours a day, or having no or little breakfast during the last 30 days were strongly associated with high absenteeism.

School Factors

Several recent studies from the Gulf Arab countries have examined school-level risk factors of absenteeism. AlMakadma and Mikler (2015) found in KSA that approximately 54% of the students reported skipping school or missing classes for at least one hour during the month prior to the survey. Absenteeism increased with grade, and a higher percentage of male students exhibited these behaviors. When students had a strong sense of connection with their school, the likelihood of engaging in risky behaviors studied decreased.

Similar results were found in studies conducted in the UAE, which looked at how school belonging is influenced by both the overall social climate of the school and the perceived activities of the teacher and his relationship with the students. El Zaatari et al. (2021) aimed to identify school climate factors influencing adolescents' feelings of school belonging in region of Al Ain's (area of UAE) public schools by mixed methods design framed by ecological systems theory, building also on previous qualitative insights (Ibrahim & El Zaatari, 2019).¹ Their study is therefore one of the more robust papers in Gulf attendance scholarship. The study found that adolescents highly value safety, positive peer relationships, and school social life as important components of school belonging. Conversely, factors negatively affecting adolescents' engagement and sense of belonging included poor teaching methods, limited opportunities for participation in group work, teacher-student power imbalance, and lack of teacher respect and support. These factors contributed to behavioural challenges such as class skipping.

Bennour's (2021) study explored the impact of *bullying* in Saudi schools on absenteeism, gender gaps, and between-school variation in mathematics achievement. According to Bennour, addressing bullying is crucial to reducing absences and enhancing attendance in Saudi schools. Although the study focuses on younger students, it is mentioned here

¹ Almenhali et al. (2023) survey was done in the same area within the UAE and focused on school-level factors behind students' absenteeism, too. Neither the composition of the sample nor the content of the questionnaire items is specified in more detail, however. Authors found significant relationship between absenteeism and somewhat vaguely described school environment and attendance intervention strategies.

because it is a methodology that has been so far rarely used in the Gulf Area, using representative (albeit self-reported) absence data from international surveys.

The studies reported so far have focused primarily on the socio-psychological aspects of the school environment. Sellami et al. (2020) point to Qatari teachers' beliefs that frequent curriculum revision is important, too, to prevent absenteeism as relevant content of instruction prevents boredom and reduces absenteeism. Altayar (2013) also found the lack of interesting activities in school as risk factor for absenteeism in KSA.

As mentioned above, Al-Thani (2017) or Lee (2016) point to gender differences in the impact of school factors. Such insights are crucial for policymakers and practitioners to enhance educational experiences and psychosocial development.

Shortage of qualified teachers is one of the challenges some Gulf education systems face that could contribute to students' disengagement and absenteeism (Middle East Credit Rating Agency, 2023).

4.1.3 Exo- and Macro-Level Factors

A specific feature of Gulf countries, including the UAE, is the high proportion of expatriates who do not hold citizenship. Differences between local and expatriate students are reflected in socioeconomic status and in school type attended (public vs. private/international – Weeraratne, 2025; Al-Ketbi et al., 2024; OECD, 2023; Ridge et al., 2016; Yang et al., 2016). Some findings remain inconsistent (OECD, 2020), which may be explained by contextual differences, such as the fact that different groups of expatriate students are distributed across public and private schools. Private (international) schools also vary considerably in quality, as well as in attendance policies, resources, and intervention strategies (Al-Ketbi et al., 2024).

4.1.4 Chrono-Level Factors: Holidays and School Calendar

One of the consequences of the population structure, religious and family traditions, and the problems faced by migrant workers is also increased absence on certain days or periods of the school year. This problem is not addressed in academic literature enough, so information comes more from the mass media. Additionally, UAE school timetables are four and a half days, while the Emirate of Sharjah has introduced a three-day weekend and the impact of having less class time is exacerbated by the low student attendance rates (Al-Fadala, 2016).

According to principals quoted in popular press absences in schools reach up to 50% in the days preceding and following major Eid Al Adha and Eid Al Fitr holidays (Abdullah, 2019). According to Walker's (2014) report, the academic performance of school children in Qatar has been affected adversely during the initial days after the extended summer break due to low attendance rates.

Schools are trying to counter this by intensive communication with parents. Other measures include, on the one hand, scheduling tests and exams on days just before and just after Eid holidays; on the other hand, bonuses for students who come to school on these days. Emirati teachers also note that in the KSA, the school calendar respects the specifics of these holidays and students have more days off.

The second period of high absenteeism in UAE occurs after the main two-month summer holidays and mainly concerns schools serving high share of expats. Some schools have only 75–85% attendance in the first week after the holidays. The reason is considered to be significantly higher air ticket prices at the end of the holidays (typically surge by 60% to 70% in late August). Expat families, especially Indians, are therefore postponing their return from their homeland until a time when air fares are more affordable (Sircar, 2024).

4.2 Effects and Intervention Strategies

Gulf Arab countries are making intensive efforts to improve the quality of education and its outcomes, which, despite often high spending on education, lag behind Western countries (McKinsey and Company, 2024). Therefore, attention is also paid to absenteeism as the negative factor affecting students' achievement (Ajaj, 2018; Sideridis & Alamri, 2023).

Emirati authorities responsible for education have been intensively addressing the problem of absenteeism in recent years, partly under pressure from school principals (Abdullah, 2019). Nevertheless, relatively few papers on interventions to support attendance and their effects have been found in academic literature. The texts are mainly normative in nature, drawing attention to the specificities of societies in the Gulf and providing recommendations for various actors based on Western literature.

One of the problems not mentioned so far is late arrivals (tardiness), which may be related to the daily rhythms in Arab culture, the habit of studying late into the night, but more recently also to addiction to electronic media and networks. A Qatari study (Al Hazaa et al., 2021) emphasizes the value of on-time class attendance.

Ridge et al. (2013, p. 36) stated that in rural areas of UAE, there are anecdotal accounts of parents not even knowing the name of the school their child is enrolled in, which means that schools and communities need to invest in strengthening the relationships between family and the school. Social workers should have an active role supporting students with family issues in addition to regular communication and follow up on students' absence with parents through SMS and calls. School nurse regular medical check is necessary as well (Ridge, 2013, p. 37; Unesco, 2022).

To tackle the absence associated with extended holidays, on the one hand, schools are trying to convince parents of the importance of attendance from the first day of the school year, because otherwise students not only miss out on important academic content, but also on days when social ties with classmates are created or renewed and students are orienting themselves in a new stage of education (Palmer, 2024). At the same time, school leaders make sure that teachers develop individualized plans to help late-returning students catch up. The extended holidays affect the lowest income groups of expat students in the UAE, among those who can even afford holidays in their country of origin. They also usually do not have access to quality education (Marquez et al., 2022).

4.3 Theoretical and Methodological Challenges of Gulf Studies

Empirical studies of attendance from the Gulf area often lack a theoretical framework: the reason may be the high share of texts focused on biomedical/health mechanisms of absences, and more recently, technologically oriented studies on digital tools for automatic

recording and reporting of attendance and absences, or for communication with parents. Theoretical framing is used in some studies that focus on the social dimension of absences or on the broader causes of students' alienation from school. Ecological theory is applied similarly to studies from the Global North (Ibrahim & El Zaatari, 2019).

Many studies on school absenteeism rely on paper-based questionnaires or online surveys (Table 2) using spatially limited and/or convenience samples. A study conducted in Oman examined one school as a case study to delve into the specific factors influencing student absenteeism using data mining Decision Support System (DSS). The methodology involved leveraging data mining techniques to identify students as those most likely / least likely to be absent and analyse relevant factors of attendance and absenteeism (Al-Farsi et al., 2015). Recently, Alfalasi et al. (2024) published another case study of a high school in the UAE describing problems of manual absence evidence and proposed options for automating attendance tracking within the school.

In the educational sciences, it would also be desirable to have experimental studies of interventions to support attendance. In the sources found, in the Gulf area this design was used only in one medical study by Alzaher et al. (2021) to evaluate the intervention based on hygiene workshops and their effects on attendance.

My review points to lack of qualitative or mixed-methods studies from Gulf area that would describe the perspective of different factors in more depth, exemptions being papers by Ibrahim and El Zaatari (2019) and El Zaatari et al. (2021). In some qualitative studies, such as Alsuwaileh (2015), the methods and results are described only very briefly. On the other hand, although Ridge (2009a, 2009b) and Ridge et al. (2013) focused primarily on student dropout, her studies provide a useful understanding of the broader, particularly gendered context of attendance problems.

5 Discussion

The current study analyzes secondary school absenteeism in Arab Gulf countries. Western academic literature contains a vast body of research on various aspects, including the definition, classification, risk factors, manifestations, impacts, and possible solutions to problematic absence. Studies from the Global South link absenteeism to socioeconomic factors, including health conditions such as HIV/AIDS, early marriage, and poverty, which may lead to school dropout as students are required to support their families through work or labour. In addition, migrant workers' families often face challenges related to parental supervision of children's schooling. Many students also experience transportation difficulties and food insecurity.

The number of works from the Gulf region under study is significantly smaller, although absenteeism is perceived as a serious problem that contributes to poor educational outcomes in Arab countries and burdens the daily running of schools and the work of teachers. To complete this narrative review, it was necessary to search for articles outside the basic bibliographic databases. Some works lack a more detailed description of the methodology or have other shortcomings.

Thematic spectrum of papers is relatively narrow compared to Western literature. Most studies originating from Gulf countries have analyzed risk factors contributing to sec-

ondary school absenteeism. The studies focused on both the causes of SAPs known from international scholarship and the factors specific to Arab Gulf countries. Regarding person-, family- and school-level factors, the results of studies from the Gulf area are often similar to Western research. At the personal level, the health factor is the most researched due to the specifically higher prevalence of diseases such as asthma in desert areas and relatively more developed medical research compared to educational sciences. Findings further highlight the influence of gender roles and family structure on absenteeism in the Gulf context, including patterns such as polygamy and gendered educational expectations.

The second group of findings concerns the very specific social structure in GCC countries with a high proportion of expats, different types of employment and different educational opportunities for children from these families. Moreover, both groups – locals and non-citizens – are not homogeneous. Relatively less attention has been directed to school-specific factors, such as the role of school belonging and dis/engagement, school climate, teacher-student relationships, and bullying. Research so far insufficiently addressed the complex interplay of factors influencing absenteeism and academic performance.

Finally, the third main group of findings concerns chrono-level factors, such as daily, weekly and annual school rhythms, which reflect the social, religious and geographical conditions of the region. A specific topic here is extended holidays and their impact on different groups of students (nationals, expats). This level also includes the influence of unique historical events, currently the conflict with Iran, in which all countries of the region are directly or indirectly involved.

There are still research gaps in terms of how the rates, factors and effects of absence differ for different socio-demographic groups (by gender, citizenship, urban/rural, public/private schools, etc.). More knowledge is also needed about how schools record absences and how they work with attendance data; how different actors perceive absence, how they intervene and how effective these interventions are.

Quantitative research relies on surveys, often using small samples and opportunity sampling. While these studies provide insights into attendance trends and contextual factors such as parental engagement and socioeconomic inequalities, they generally do not employ longitudinal designs or investigate underlying psychosocial processes in depth, limiting their ability to draw causal inferences or fully explain the determinants of absenteeism. Overall, these methodological limitations highlight the need for comprehensive context research that integrates ecological and sociocultural perspectives within a mixed-method framework to generate more robust and generalizable evidence for attendance policies in the Gulf educational system.

5.1 Recommendations for Practice and Educational Policy

Despite the limitations of the available research from the Arab Gulf countries, some recommendations can be cautiously made.

Current evidence indicates the need for whole-child support strategies, including appropriate school-based health care, academic guidance, and social support for students from single parent or multiple mother households by school social worker follow-up. Incentives could be awarded to students with high attendance rates and good grades. Addressing family factor, schools' awareness programs are important to provide parents with information

about what is happening in the school and why it is important. The literature also recommends more frequent parent-school contact through regular messages or phone calls and educational programs for parents on how to help their children to succeed at school even if they lack education, or specialized training related to family conflict resolution.

Organizational measures can also contribute to reducing absences and their impact on various domains of student and school functioning, as adding school attendance mark as a part of student behavior's score by management policy. Interventions to mitigate chronic absenteeism are emotionally demanding and often frustrating activity that requires trained personnel, time and sufficient financial resources. Therefore, support is needed not only by students with attendance problems, but also by teachers and other professionals. Teachers agree that it is necessary to understand individual causes and choose intervention strategies accordingly, but they differ in their opinions on how effective a punitive approach is (Finning et al., 2018, 2019). It is therefore necessary to offer guidance for educators, policymakers, and practitioners to develop targeted interventions in Gulf countries.

It is highly desirable that further methodologically sound studies be conducted in GCC countries. Experiments evaluating interventions are lacking. Continuous follow-up studies are suggested for implemented measures. In a situation where many aspects of absences are poorly researched, however, even methodologically more accessible designs such as case studies and descriptive studies may also be useful if they are conducted rigorously (cf. Kein, 2000).

6 Conclusion

Promoting attendance and reducing absenteeism is not only an educational imperative but also a critical step toward fostering a healthy and thriving society. Overall, the Gulf education systems implement reforms aimed at balancing economic goals and sustainability, fostering adaptable students through improved quality assurance and stakeholder dialogue to meet societal and workforce expectations effectively. However, accomplishing this goal can be challenging due to issues such as students' disengagement, class skipping or school absence. Despite the importance of the topic, the related methodologically advanced research in Gulf region is still limited.

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Data Availability

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