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SCHOOL ATTENDANCE POLICIES AND LEARNERS' ABSENTEEISM: A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS IN ELEMENTARY SCHOOLS

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ABSTRACT

Education is a foundation of national development, and regular learner attendance is a significant predictor of academic engagement and achievement. This study comparatively examined attendance policies and practices in elementary schools, focusing on their implementation, challenges, and perceived effects on learner absenteeism. Using a qualitative research design, structured interviews were conducted with seven elementary school teachers who had direct experience implementing attendance interventions. Findings revealed that consistent policy enforcement, parental involvement, incentive programs, systematic attendance monitoring, and positive reinforcement helped reduce absenteeism. However, overly punitive disciplinary practices could increase learner anxiety and disengagement and potentially lead to prolonged absences, underscoring the need for developmentally appropriate and supportive interventions. Socioeconomic conditions also influenced attendance patterns, as learners from low-income households encountered additional barriers to regular school participation. The study highlights the importance of balancing policy enforcement with responsive support that addresses learners' developmental needs and socioeconomic circumstances. Strengthened school-family communication, early identification of attendance concerns, and context-sensitive interventions are therefore recommended. The findings may guide improvements in elementary school attendance

policies and practices toward creating a more inclusive learning environment that promotes consistent learner participation and improved academic outcomes.

KEYWORDS: Attendance Policies, Learner Absenteeism, Elementary Education, Parental Involvement, Attendance Interventions.

INTRODUCTION

Education is central to human development, social mobility, and national progress. However, meaningful access to education involves more than enrollment; it requires learners to attend school consistently and participate actively in the teaching–learning process. Regular attendance is particularly important in elementary education because this stage develops the foundational literacy, numeracy, socioemotional competencies, and learning habits needed for later academic success. The global learning crisis has intensified the need to protect instructional time, as an estimated 70% of ten-year-old children in low- and middle-income countries cannot read and understand a simple age-appropriate text (World Bank et al., 2022).

Learner absenteeism reduces exposure to classroom instruction and disrupts the continuity of learning. Repeated absences may result in unfinished activities, weak mastery of prerequisite competencies, limited peer interaction, and declining engagement. Recent evidence shows that increased chronic absenteeism has become a major barrier to educational recovery, with substantial growth in the number of learners missing significant portions of the school year following the COVID-19 pandemic (Dee, 2024). Although such evidence comes from an international setting, it demonstrates that learning recovery programs cannot achieve their intended outcomes when learners are not consistently present in school.

Absenteeism is not merely the result of learner unwillingness or poor discipline. It is a multidimensional concern associated with health conditions, family responsibilities, financial hardship, transportation difficulties, geographical isolation, school climate, safety concerns, disengagement, and limited parental support. Climate-related disruptions have also become an increasing threat to school participation. In 2024 alone, at least 242 million learners in 85 countries or territories experienced interruptions to their schooling because of climate-related hazards, with learners in low- and lower-middle-income countries disproportionately affected (UNICEF, 2025). These conditions indicate that attendance should be understood within the broader circumstances affecting learners, families, schools, and communities.

In the Philippines, learner attendance remains especially significant because schools continue to address learning losses and persistent inequalities in educational access and outcomes. The country's performance in the Programme for International Student Assessment underscored continuing challenges in reading, mathematics, and science, reinforcing the importance of maximizing learners' opportunities to participate in classroom instruction (OECD, 2023). For elementary learners, frequent absences may further weaken foundational competencies because missed lessons are often sequential and difficult to recover without timely academic and family support.

At the national level, the 2022 Annual Poverty Indicators Survey revealed that only 81.4% of Filipinos aged 5–24 were enrolled or attending school during School Year 2022–2023, while 18.6% were not attending. Among those outside school, the most frequently reported reasons were completion of schooling or postsecondary education (21.1%), employment (19.7%), lack of personal interest (12.6%), marriage (10.7%), and the high cost of education or other financial difficulties (9.9%). Considerable regional disparities were also recorded: school attendance ranged from 85.1% in MIMAROPA to 76.7% in the Zamboanga Peninsula, while the Cordillera Administrative Region registered the highest proportion of nonattending individuals who cited lack of personal interest, at 24.1% (Philippine Statistics Authority [PSA], 2023). Although these figures cover a broader age group and measure school participation rather than daily absenteeism, they demonstrate that attendance is shaped by economic, motivational, and contextual barriers. These national findings strengthen the need to compare attendance policies and practices in elementary schools and determine whether existing interventions adequately address the varied conditions contributing to learner absenteeism (PSA, 2023).

Schools address absenteeism through attendance policies and practices intended to monitor participation, detect emerging patterns of absence, communicate with families, and initiate appropriate interventions. These measures may include daily attendance recording, parent notification, conferences, home visitation, referral mechanisms, positive reinforcement, incentive programs, and coordinated learner-support services. When implemented consistently, attendance policies can function as early-warning mechanisms that enable schools to respond before occasional absences develop into chronic absenteeism. Nevertheless, policies based primarily on sanctions may overlook the socioeconomic, health-related, and personal barriers preventing learners from attending school.

The effectiveness of attendance policies therefore depends on how they are interpreted and implemented at the school level. Elementary schools may follow similar institutional or national expectations but differ in their monitoring procedures, enforcement mechanisms, parent-engagement strategies, available resources, and intervention practices. Teachers are particularly important in this process because they record attendance, observe changes in learner behavior, communicate with parents or guardians, provide academic support, and recommend appropriate interventions. Their experiences can reveal whether existing policies are feasible, responsive, and aligned with the actual circumstances of elementary learners.

A balanced and learner-centered approach is necessary in addressing absenteeism. While clear expectations and consistent implementation promote accountability, attendance interventions should also identify and respond to the reasons underlying a learner's absence. International evidence emphasizes that educational participation is connected with learners' well-being, sense of belonging, family support, and experiences within the school environment (OECD, 2023). Accordingly, positive reinforcement, early identification, responsive communication, and coordinated school–family interventions may be more sustainable than purely punitive measures.

Despite the importance of attendance policies, limited attention has been given to how elementary schools differ in translating these policies into actual practices and how teachers perceive their influence on learner absenteeism. Written policies may appear consistent, yet their implementation may vary according to school leadership, available resources, family participation, community conditions, and the nature of attendance barriers. Comparing these practices is necessary to identify shared challenges, effective strategies, and implementation gaps that may not be evident from policy documents alone.

Thus, this study, titled “School Attendance Policies and Learner Absenteeism: A Comparative Analysis in Elementary Schools,” examines and compares the attendance policies and practices implemented in selected elementary schools. It focuses on how attendance is monitored, how schools respond to learner absences, what challenges teachers encounter, and how existing practices are perceived to influence absenteeism. The findings are expected to provide a basis for strengthening attendance monitoring, school–family communication, early intervention, and context-responsive learner support. Ultimately, the study seeks to contribute to the development of inclusive attendance policies that promote consistent participation while recognizing the diverse circumstances of elementary learners.

METHODOLOGY

This study employed a qualitative comparative case-study design to examine school attendance policies and learner absenteeism in selected public elementary schools within the Baguio–La Trinidad–Itogon–Sablan–Tuba–Tublay (BLISTT) area. The qualitative approach enabled an in-depth examination of teachers' experiences and interpretations within their actual school contexts (Tenny et al., 2022). Seven elementary school teachers were selected through purposive sampling based on their experience as class advisers responsible for recording attendance, communicating with parents or guardians, and implementing interventions for recurring learner absences. Data were gathered through structured individual interviews using a researcher-developed and expert-validated interview guide containing open-ended questions on attendance monitoring, policy implementation, parental involvement, intervention practices, implementation challenges, and perceived effects on learner absenteeism. Before data collection, authorization was secured from the concerned school authorities, and informed consent was obtained from all participants.

The interview recordings were transcribed verbatim, verified for accuracy, coded, and analyzed through thematic analysis, which provides a systematic method for identifying and interpreting patterns in qualitative data (Braun & Clarke, 2022). Within-case analysis was first conducted to describe the attendance policies and practices of each participating elementary school, followed by cross-case analysis to determine similarities, differences, and context-specific patterns across the BLISTT area. A comparative matrix organized the findings according to attendance monitoring, policy enforcement, parent communication, supportive interventions, implementation challenges, and perceived attendance outcomes. Trustworthiness was strengthened through member checking, peer review, and maintenance of an audit trail. Participant and school identities were replaced with codes, while all recordings and transcripts were securely stored and used exclusively for academic purposes in compliance with Republic Act No. 10173, or the Data Privacy Act of 2012.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The thematic analysis generated five interrelated themes: (1) consistent policy enforcement and accountability, (2) school–family communication, (3) attendance monitoring and early intervention, (4) supportive versus punitive responses, and (5) socioeconomic and contextual barriers. Collectively, the findings revealed that attendance policies had varying perceived effects on learner absenteeism across the selected public elementary schools in the BLISTT

area. Their effectiveness depended not only on the existence of formal policies but also on the consistency of their implementation, parental cooperation, availability of learner support, and responsiveness of the school to the causes of absence.

Consistent Policy Enforcement and Accountability

Participants A and C perceived that consistent enforcement of attendance expectations reduced unnecessary absences. Participant A emphasized that promptly informing parents about unexcused absences encouraged accountability, while Participant C maintained that clearly explained consequences could discourage habitual absenteeism. One participant even reported having no cases of habitual absenteeism within the school context being described. However, this account should be treated as the participant's perception rather than a verified rate because the study did not independently analyze school attendance records.

These findings corroborate Dee's (2024) conclusion that attendance norms and school-level practices influence learners' decisions to attend regularly. Nevertheless, consistent enforcement should not mean imposing identical consequences regardless of the circumstances surrounding an absence. Chronic absenteeism may originate from declining engagement, health concerns, family responsibilities, transportation problems, and other barriers beyond learners' control (Dee, 2024). Thus, accountability mechanisms should be accompanied by an assessment of whether an absence is avoidable, justified, or caused by conditions requiring school assistance.

School–Family Communication and Shared Responsibility

Parental involvement emerged as a central condition for effective policy implementation. Participants A, D, and F emphasized that parents or guardians should receive timely information regarding their children's attendance patterns. Participant D noted that policies were more effective when parents and learners understood that repeated absences could lead to missed competencies, incomplete requirements, and declining academic performance. Through regular communication, parents could verify the reasons for absences and work with teachers in developing appropriate interventions.

This finding supports the OECD's (2023) observation that positive relationships among learners, families, and schools contribute to participation, engagement, and school belonging. Communication should therefore extend beyond notifying parents about violations. It should involve collaborative problem-solving, regular feedback, and shared attendance planning.

However, participants also observed that some parents were difficult to contact or were occupied with employment, financial problems, and family responsibilities. When school–family communication was weak, attendance expectations were less likely to be reinforced at home. This indicates that learner attendance is a shared responsibility that requires coordinated action among teachers, school administrators, parents, and community stakeholders.

Attendance Monitoring and Early Intervention

Participants identified systematic attendance monitoring as an essential policy practice. Participant C explained that irregular documentation and delayed follow-up made it difficult for teachers to recognize learners developing patterns of repeated absence. The participants maintained that monitoring should not be limited to counting absences; it should also establish their frequency, duration, and underlying causes. Differentiating excused from unexcused absences would allow schools to respond fairly to learners affected by illness, emergencies, family difficulties, or other legitimate circumstances.

This finding corroborates evidence that chronic absenteeism can obstruct educational recovery when schools fail to identify and respond to attendance problems promptly. Dee (2024) found that chronic absenteeism in the United States increased from 14.8% to 28.3% between school years 2018–2019 and 2021–2022, representing approximately 6.5 million additional chronically absent learners. Although this evidence came from another national setting, it demonstrates the importance of early identification before occasional absences develop into persistent disengagement. Attendance records should therefore function as an early-warning system that triggers parent communication, learner conferences, academic catch-up assistance, home visitation, or referral to appropriate support services.

Supportive Versus Punitive Responses

Participants expressed contrasting views regarding sanctions. Some considered consequences necessary to discourage unjustified absences, while others cautioned that stringent implementation might produce anxiety, frustration, or resistance. Participant B observed that learners required to complete numerous missed activities could become overwhelmed and increasingly disengaged. Participant A similarly indicated that fear of punishment could discourage some learners from returning to school. In contrast, Participant E believed that weak consequences reduced the deterrent value of attendance policies.

These contrasting perspectives reveal the need to balance accountability with learner welfare. The OECD (2023) reported that learner participation is associated with school safety, teacher support, and a sense of belonging. Consequently, punitive practices that cause learners to feel unwelcome may aggravate rather than resolve absenteeism. This concern is particularly relevant in elementary schools because young learners depend heavily on adults for transportation, preparation, healthcare, and decisions concerning school attendance. Learners should not be automatically penalized for circumstances over which they have little control. Participants also identified recognition and incentives as constructive alternatives. Awards for regular attendance were perceived to encourage learners to attend and participate more consistently. Nevertheless, recognition should not be limited to perfect attendance because such a standard may disadvantage learners who are absent because of illness, disability, emergencies, or other legitimate circumstances. Schools may instead recognize improved attendance, punctuality, perseverance, successful re-engagement, and consistent communication regarding unavoidable absences. Such practices preserve positive reinforcement without pressuring sick learners to attend school or unfairly excluding vulnerable children.

Socioeconomic, Health, and Contextual Barriers

Socioeconomic difficulties were consistently identified as barriers to attendance. Participant E explained that learners from low-income households encountered problems involving transportation, school supplies, meals, healthcare, and other daily educational expenses. Some learners were also expected to perform household responsibilities, care for younger siblings, or assist in family livelihood activities. In geographically dispersed sections of the BLISTT area, distance, transportation availability, road conditions, and adverse weather could further restrict access to school.

National data corroborate these findings. The 2022 Annual Poverty Indicators Survey showed that 18.6% of Filipinos aged 5–24 were not attending school. Among the reported reasons were employment, lack of personal interest, and the high cost of education or other financial difficulties (Philippine Statistics Authority [PSA], 2023). Although these statistics cover a broader population and do not directly measure daily elementary absenteeism, they demonstrate how economic and motivational factors shape educational participation.

Health-related difficulties were also identified as causes of prolonged absence. Participants noted that families with limited resources might postpone consultation or treatment, causing

learners to miss additional school days. This result is consistent with Black's (2024) national health survey findings in the United States, which showed that children living below the poverty threshold were more likely to experience chronic health-related absenteeism than children from higher-income households. The corroboration indicates that absenteeism should not be interpreted solely as a behavioral or disciplinary concern. Schools may need to coordinate with healthcare providers, local government units, and community organizations to address health-related barriers.

Participants further identified behavioral problems and concerns about school safety as possible influences on attendance. Disruptive behavior may result in suspension or other exclusionary measures, while an unsafe or unwelcoming environment may make learners and parents reluctant to attend. The OECD (2023) similarly established that safety, belonging, and supportive relationships are important conditions for educational participation. Restorative discipline, counseling, behavior-support plans, and family conferences may therefore be more appropriate than sanctions that remove learners from instruction and directly increase their absences.

Comparative Synthesis

Across the participating elementary schools, the common practices included daily attendance recording, parent notification, verification of absence reasons, consequences for unjustified absences, and recognition for regular attendance. Differences were evident in the consistency of monitoring, the degree of parental involvement, the availability of support mechanisms, and teachers' flexibility in responding to individual circumstances. Schools characterized by timely monitoring, sustained family communication, and supportive follow-up were perceived as more effective in managing absenteeism. Conversely, policies appeared less effective when implementation was inconsistent, parents were difficult to engage, or the causes of absence remained unresolved.

The findings demonstrate that attendance policies may contribute to reduced learner absenteeism, but their effectiveness is conditional rather than automatic. Consistent enforcement can establish expectations, yet sanctions alone cannot resolve absences caused by poverty, illness, transportation difficulties, family responsibilities, or adverse environmental conditions. This interpretation aligns with international evidence showing that chronic absenteeism is a multidimensional problem requiring both school-wide preventive

measures and targeted interventions for learners with persistent attendance difficulties (Dee, 2024).

Therefore, elementary schools in the BLISTT area need an integrated and learner-centered attendance framework combining accurate monitoring, early identification, prompt parent communication, positive reinforcement, academic catch-up assistance, counseling, health referrals, and community support. The policy response must address both the observable pattern of absence and its underlying causes. A balanced approach—one that maintains accountability while providing context-sensitive assistance—is more likely to promote regular attendance, strengthen learner engagement, and prevent vulnerable learners from becoming further disconnected from education.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Conclusions

The study concludes that school attendance policies can reduce learner absenteeism in public elementary schools within the BLISTT area when implemented consistently, clearly communicated, and supported by active school–family collaboration. Their effectiveness, however, is shaped by the quality of attendance monitoring, parental involvement, availability of learner support, and responsiveness to socioeconomic, health, transportation, family, and environmental barriers. Although sanctions may reinforce accountability, excessively punitive approaches may heighten anxiety and disengagement, particularly among learners whose absences arise from circumstances beyond their control. Therefore, addressing absenteeism requires a balanced and learner-centered approach that combines reasonable accountability with early intervention, positive reinforcement, and context-sensitive assistance.

Recommendations

Public elementary schools in the BLISTT area should establish a coordinated attendance-management system involving accurate daily monitoring, clearly defined early-warning indicators, prompt communication with parents or guardians, and individualized intervention plans for learners with recurring absences. Schools should prioritize supportive measures such as home visitation, counseling, academic catch-up assistance, health and social-service referrals, transportation coordination, and recognition of improved rather than exclusively perfect attendance. School heads should also orient teachers, learners, and families regularly on attendance procedures and strengthen partnerships with local government units and

community organizations to address barriers beyond the school's capacity. Future researchers may validate the findings using larger samples, school attendance records, and mixed-method or longitudinal designs to determine the measurable relationship between specific attendance practices and learner absenteeism.

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