



Improving Attendance of Chronic Absentees in Primary Schools: A study from District East of Delhi

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ABSTRACT

Regular attendance is a prerequisite for the desired learning outcomes of the students in the primary schools. Poor attendance is a pervasive problem in primary schools in India resulting in poor academic achievements of students. The present action research was conducted with objectives to identify chronic absentee students and to implement appropriate interventions to improve their attendance. The class-level and individualized interventions were carried out among 40 chronic absentee students identified in 11 classes in three primary schools. The interventions in the study brought desirable success by improving the attendances of 34 chronic absentee students out of 40. Overall percentage of attendance of these students improved from 33% in pre-intervention period to 74% percent in post-intervention period. The study indicates the usefulness of locally contextualized interventions to improve the attendance among primary school students.

Keywords: Chronic absentees, absenteeism, student, education, mental, bahviour, psychology,

Introduction

Education has enormous impact on human society. No society can be fully functional until it is properly educated which can be ensured through a good education system. A successful education system has to be built upon the strong foundation laid during primary education. Primary school provides an opportunity to students to learn basic life skills and academic skills which would shape not only their secondary and higher education career but their life in general. However, this opportunity of learning can be realized only if students attend school regularly. Poor attendance in schools has been considered to be a major obstacle in achieving expected learning outcomes and personality development of children. This has been a persistent concern of educationists, administrators and policy makers all over the world.

Irregularity in attending school has many short-term and long-term adverse consequences on the lives of students. Regularity in attendance of students at primary level is a top priority for their achievement and performance. Missing out school lead to break continuity of study topics which affects absentee students learning of the topics taught around the days

when they are absent. Marburger (2001) finds that students who missed on a given day were significantly more likely to respond incorrectly to the questions relating to material covered on that day than students who were present. Supporting this, Reid (2005) reported that absentee students face a wide range of short-term educational consequences such as missing out on assignments which may result underachievement and poor grades. Physical presence in school is one of the most basic conditions for students' success. Attendance is empirically related to achievement and academic outcomes (Gottfried 2011; Gottfried and Kirksey 2017; Roby 2004). In a study, Epstein & Sheldon (2002) showed that higher attendance is related to higher achievement for students of all background. In this way it is a well understood fact that students who do not attend school regularly, their subsequent learning suffers. Absenteeism in one grade has its impact on subsequent grades also. It is found that students who are chronically absent during kindergarten are more likely to be chronically absent in the first grade (Chang & Romero, 2008).

Regular attendance in school helps constant engagement of students with the school and community which help them to learn and grow in all aspects of life. It helps them to build and maintain friendship and bonding with peers and teachers (Sharma, 2015). They also develop a sense of belongingness to the school, which later gets translated into a sense of belongingness to the community, society and the nation at large. The irregularity in attending school can gradually become habitual resulting into drifting away from the school and engaging in undesirable activities outside the school and eventually dropping out of the school. Schools unable to engage students having irregular attendance, inadequate participation in academic and peer interactions, and low academic achievements set the stage for higher school dropouts (Cole, 2011). When absenteeism becomes a habit, it

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leads to early leaving of the school and eventually long-term problems such as loneliness and unable to find work (Rivers, 2010). Relationship between truancy and delinquent habits, crime and violence has been reported. (Baker et al, 2001; Dube & Orppinas, 2009; Lehr et al, 2004; Rivers, 2010). Studies have indicated that students who drop out of school tend to have a higher rate of incarceration and other difficulties financially (Baker et al, 2001 & Nugent 2001; Dube & Orppinas, 2009; Lehr et al, 2004). In addition to this, absenteeism can also negatively affect sustainable development especially in a country like India that has a young population. The above stated consequences are seen more often in students who habitually remain absent from school.

Absenteeism, according to Merriam -Webster dictionary means chronic absence. In the context of school, absenteeism is a term used for habitually or frequently absenting from school without a valid reason. Terms absenteeism, chronic absenteeism and chronically absent students have been used for nearly the same phenomenon, except that some of the authors have used percentage of unexcused absence from school as a criterion to define chronic absenteeism. (Bond, 2004). Thus, Bond (2004) considered a student chronic absentee when he remains absent without reason for 20 percent or more of school time. Balfanz & Byrnes (2012) considered missing 10 percent or more of school days (18 days a year) as chronic absenteeism and missing of 20 percent or more of school days (40 days in a year) as 'severely or excessively chronically absent'. In India, CREATE programme exploring various issues of educational access, transactions and equity, has used term absenteeism for children who are absent of more than seven days in one month (CREATE 2011).

In the recent decades, India has made significant progress on access to schooling and enrolment rates in primary education but drop out rates and low levels of learning outcomes remains a challenge. Problems of irregular attendance and chronic absentees are still widely prevalent and possibly is increasing. Enrolment in India does not necessarily translate into attendance. In a study conducted at all India level by Pratham, it was found that only three-fourth of the enrolled children attended primary and upper primary grade on a given day. (ASER,2016) CREATE research study (2011) reported that absenteeism in Rewa (Madhya Pradesh) increased from 20% in the year 2008 to 40% in 2010. There are no studies on chronic absenteeism in primary schools in Delhi. It is imperative to address the issue of chronic absenteeism to enhance the achievement of school education system. The issues related to absenteeism needs to be understood and appropriate interventions to curb chronic absenteeism are required to fulfill the objectives of education. The current study reports outcome of an action research to improve the attendance of chronic absentee students in primary schools in East Delhi.

Objectives of the study

The present study was carried out with the following objectives-

1. To identify the chronic absentee students in the selected primary schools in East Delhi.
2. To implement appropriate interventions to improve the attendance of chronic absentee students.

Methodology

Study design-Experimental design without control group.

Setting -MCD (Municipal Corporation of Delhi) schools in district East of Delhi

Sampling

Two-stage sampling method was followed. First, three Schools were selected through convenience sampling out of the 15 MCD primary schools covered under the SEP (school experience programme), an internship programme for the fulfillment of the Diploma in Elementary Education at a District Institute of Education and Training (DIET). Then, 11 classes were selected from these three schools where pupil-teacher undergoing SEP willing to be part of the study by assisting the researcher in implementing the interventions planned in the study.

Study period

School experience programme (SEP) consisted of 45 school days. In this study, 15 school days just before the beginning the SEP were taken as Pre-intervention period and 15 working days towards the end of the SEP period were taken as post-intervention period for assessing the status of the attendance of the students.

Identifying the chronic absentee students- The attendance of every student in the classes included in the study was retrieved from the attendance register of the respective classes. Percentage of attendance was calculated for every student for the pre-intervention period. Students having less than 60% attendance (less than 9 out of 15 working days) were identified as chronic absentee students. These students were given intervention under the study and their attendance during the post-intervention period was calculated from the attendance register.

Statistical analysis

Descriptive statistics was used to calculate percentage of attendance of the chronic absentees in three schools and the percentages of pre-intervention and post-intervention period were compared using Chi square test

Intervention strategies

1. Attendance chart: The attendance chart was developed on which vertically the name of the students of the class with colors and horizontally the dates and the days were written along with the reinforcement column at the end of every week and at the end of whole month. The chart was mounted on the wall in the classroom and students were asked to mark their attendance by tick mark against their name. At the end of each week i.e after 6 working days there was a column specified on the chart for providing reinforcement to the children on the basis of their attendance (Matangi, 2015).

The reinforcement was given in the form of green star indicating full attendance, blue star for attendance between 3-5 days and red star for attendance less than 3 days a week.

2. Students' Portfolio- Teacher-trainee developed individual student portfolio for keeping record of cumulative progress of students. The achievements of the students were collected in their portfolio packet made of old newspaper by students themselves. This helped students and their parents to have glimpses of their best performances which worked as a

stimulant for engaging more in the classroom and coming to school regularly.

3. Student corner: It is a place designed for displaying the students' performances on different subjects and activities of the class. Inclusion of name on the student corner enhances self-confidence of students and encourage others to perform better to see their names on the corner.

4. Selection of the monitor: In every class, 2-3 students who were proactively engaged in classroom activities were selected as monitors on weekly basis. These monitors assisted the pupil-teacher in organizing classroom activities for implementing the interventions smoothly.

5. Liaising with parents- The pupil-teachers had a meeting with parents of chronic absentee students in the beginning to discuss the issues related to their child's frequent absences from the school and emphasize the need for sending their child to school regularly. The importance of education for their child's future was highlighted. Subsequently, constant contact was maintained with them to apprise them of the progress of their child, including child's performance in the class as well as absences from the school.

6. Making classroom activities interesting

Pupil-teachers had periodic consultations with the school principal, regular teachers, and the study investigator regarding transactional modality of specific contents, and related teaching learning material to be used.

Making classroom livelier through quiz competitions, gaming activities, story narration, and other activities to engage students (Wadhwa, 2017, 2018; Malik 2017).

7. Motivating Students by the teacher trainees:

Reinforcing children for participation in class room activities (keeping record of participation by the children in the class/ school like if someone is raising hand it is also to be counted participation (giving 1), who gives right answer after asking (give 3), who raise hand but give wrong answer (give 2) and to get the final score in each subject add the scores received by the child in a week.

Praise students on the basis of their attendance, including celebrating students with best attendance at the end of week in the school assembly.

8. Peer motivators- The more regular students living in the same neighbourhood were buddy up with the chronic absentees and were asked to motivate chronic absentees. These peer motivators would call the chronic absentee in their neighbourhood every day before coming to school.

During School Experience programme the intervention strategies were implemented with constant supervision by the investigator.

Results

The study was conducted in 11 sections in three schools. Total strength of students in these 11 sections was 422. Based on the study criteria of attendance of less than 60%, 40 (9.47%) students were identified as chronic absentees and were given intervention under this study. Table 1 indicates that the overall attendance of chronic absentee students has increased from 33% in pre-intervention period to 74% in post-intervention period. The rate of attendance of chronic absentee students increased in all the three schools. In absolute

percentages, the attendance increased by 50% (from 33% to 82%) in the first school, by 30% (from 40% to 70%) in the second school and by 40% (from 31% to 71%) in the third school.

Table 1: Change in Attendance of Chronic Absentees

School	Number of absentee students	Maximum possible attendance#	Change in attendance	
			Preintervention (% of maximum attendance)	Post-intervention (% of maximum attendance)
School 1	11	165	55 (33.33%)	136 (82.24%)
School 2	6	90	36 (40%)	63 (70%)
School 3	23	345	107 (31.01%)	245 (71.04%)
Total	40	600	198 (33%)	444 (74%)

Maximum Attendance = Total number students*working days (15)

Table 2. Number of chronic absentees showing improvement

School	Class	Total strength of the class	Total number of chronic absentees	Number of students having improvement
School 1	VB	42	5	5
	IB	39	1	1
	IV B	36	1	1
	II B	44	1	1
School 2	III A	37	3	3
	IV B	43	1	1
School 3	I A	25	5	4
	I B	46	7	3
	II B	40	5	5
	IVC	37	7	6
Total	IV A	33	4	4
		11	422	40

Table 2 shows the number of chronic absentees who had improvement in their attendance after intervention in the study. Target attendance rate for the intervention in the study was 60%. This means that a student who got 60% or more attendance during post-intervention period (ie. More than 9 days out of 15 days) was considered to have improvement. Out of 40 chronic absentees in pre-intervention period, 35 students improved their attendance to 60% or more during the post-intervention period. It is worth mentioning that the attendance for some students increased from zero (0) attendance in their pre-intervention period to 15 during in the post-intervention period. There was no statistical difference in the improvement among students in three schools (Chi2 = 2.77, df 2, P= 0.25).

Discussion

Poor attendance in schools has aptly been recognized as one of the major problems of school education system. Poor attendance affects learning and also contributes to drop out from schools. Annual Status of Education Report (ASER)

Survey, 2016 conducted in 589 districts in India reported that 25% of students in primary and upper primary schools were found absent from school on the day of survey (ASER, 2016). The national level programmes such as Mid Day Meal Scheme, Sarva Siksha Abhiyan, and 'No Detention Policy' have improved enrollment significantly (almost 100%) and also have resulted into increased retention of children in school. However, these macro-level interventions have not made significant improvement in the attendance of the students in school. Micro level interventions which takes into consideration the local school context, individual students' factors and family factors are likely to be more effective in managing absenteeism in schools. This may be even more relevant in the case of chronic absentee students as each of them might be having different background and personal factors contributing to their habit of remaining frequently absent from school. The present study reports the outcome of such intervention in 40 chronic absentee students in 11 classes in three government (MCD) schools located in district East Delhi.

Intervention in this study included actions taken at classroom level to deal with the common factors contributing to absenteeism as well as individualized intervention for each student to address specific individual and family problems (Arora, 2015). It is evident from the results that the interventions in the study brought desirable success in improving attendance in the chronic absentee students. Thus 34 students out of 40 had attendance of more than 60% during post-intervention period of two weeks and hence would no longer be considered as chronic absentees as per the criterion to define chronic absentees in this study. Overall, the percentage of attendance of these students improved from 33% during pre-intervention period to 74% during the post intervention period, more than double of the pre- intervention period. The improvement was noticed across all the three schools.

Study design was not intended to analyze as to how different components of intervention could have contributed to the success achieved in improving attendance of chronic absentees. However, based on observations and experiences as well as constant discussions with the teacher-trainees (who implemented interventions under the supervision of the author) during the study period, following inferences can be made safely.

It is well known that factors related to students not attending school regularly, may be related to student himself/herself, and his/her family and school as well as the community (Baker et al 2001). Therefore, we deployed a combination of classroom level interventions and individualized interventions with students and their parents. Both the types of intervention have their unique role in contributing in improvement of attendance of the chronic absentees. Research also indicates that proportionate combination of both school and student level interventions can ensure good attendance at early grades when habits, values and attitudes are formed (Baker et al, 2001).

The Attendance Chart on the classroom wall had many positive effects on students resulting into higher motivation to attend school regularly. Students were excited about it and participated enthusiastically in marking their attendance on the chart every day. Preparation of the Chart and execution of this activity by themselves with facilitation by the teacher-trainee led to development of sense of ownership and belongingness among the students and enhanced self-confidence among

them. This was especially true for the chronic absentees who otherwise feel alienated and isolated from their peers and mostly are inhibited in the classroom (whenever they are there). With their newly discovered self-confidence and sense of belongingness with the class, they started coming to school more regularly (Opoku, 2016). Their behavior was reinforced through the strategy of star system as these students successfully competed with their peers in obtaining green and blue stars by attending class more regularly.

Making classroom livelier and interesting through activities such as quiz competition, game activities, storytelling session, 'speaking about myself' etc. made students involved and focused in the class. This helped in maximizing their potentials as well as building up their self-confidence. Students who previously did not come to classes due to feeling of boredom started enjoying in the classroom and were more eager to come to school regularly.

The students' Corner created a strong pulling effect on the absentee students to come to school for seeing their name displayed by making better performances during the classroom activities. This also boosted the students' self -concept and made them feel that they are at par with the others.

Proper implementation of various strategies was crucial for achieving the intended outcomes in this project. Proactive students were selected as monitors on weekly basis to assist the pupil-teacher in the execution of various activities in the classroom (Bhalla, 2018). These monitors played a key role in timely and effective implementation of interventions (Matangi, 2015). They were also rewarded as best monitor in terms of their performance rated collectively by the pupil-teacher and the peers. The best monitor of week was named on the Students' Corner.

In addition to the class level interventions, many individual level interventions such as liaising with parents, peer motivators and motivating the students contributed to the increased attendance among the chronic absentees.

Parents are the school's main source of support for getting the children to school ((Sheverbush et al, 2000). Liaison with parents through home visits and telephonic contacts leading to their enhanced involvement in their wards' education played a vital role in increasing attendance of the students. During the intervention pupil- trainee built a continuum of liaison with the parents of chronic absentee students to identify the root causes for which the children are not coming to school and suggesting solutions to the parents. The parents realized the importance of education of their wards and were eager to ensure that their wards go to school daily. They were regularly briefed by the pupil teacher about the progress of their ward.

One unique strategy in this project was use of peer motivators. It is well known fact that the school students are strongly influenced by their peers which worked very well in this project. The peer motivators were regular attendees living in the same neighbourhood. They motivated their absentee friends to come to school regularly.

Limitations of the study and suggestions for further studies

The present study has certain limitations such as short duration, small sample size and absence of a control group. We cannot comment whether the interventions done in the study would have produced a sustained improvement in attendance of chronically absent students in long-run. Small sample size did not allow us to carry out in-depth study related to the factors associated with chronic absenteeism and we also

could not look systematically into the relative contribution that each intervention could have made towards the study outcome. Absence of control group make it difficult to conclude if the observed results were not due to some external factors unrelated to the interventions. The future studies on larger sample size with longer duration of observation and with a control group can provide more insight into the issue of chronic absenteeism in Indian schools.

Conclusion

Poor attendance is a pervasive problem at large number in Indian schools. Since there are many negative individual outcomes associated with chronic absenteeism, focused and timely interventions are required for addressing this issue. This article presents a short-term outcome of micro-level interventions within classroom and with students and their parents. A combination of both school -based, student based and community interventions such as after school remedial programme for academically poor students and periodic health check -up services which can act as a trigger for early intervention of absenteeism may be the most effective way to address the issue over the long time.

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