

Reasons for Secondary School Students' Absenteeism Kuwait: A Qualitative Study

Abstract

This study aimed to explore the reasons for high rates of secondary school students' absenteeism in Kuwait. An interview was conducted on a convenience sample, which consisted of 20 students, 10 teachers and 5 parents. The findings indicated that students' high rate of absenteeism in Kuwait is related to a number of factors, among which student, school and family. Such factors are discussed and a number of recommendations were given based on the findings of the study.

المستخلص:

هدفت هذه الدراسة إلى التعرف على أسباب غياب طلبة المرحلة الثانوية بدولة الكويت. لهذا الغرض، تم تصميم أداة مقابلة وطبقت على عينة ملائمة تكونت من عشرون طالبا وعشرة معلمين وخمسة أولياء أمور. أشارت نتائج البحث إلى أن أسباب غياب طلبة المرحلة الثانوية بدولة الكويت تعزى إلى عوامل متصلة بالطالب والمدرسة والأسرة. تمت مناقشة هذه العوامل وتقديم توصيات عليها.

Introduction

Compulsory education historically has been associated with consistent student attendance (Balfanz & Byrnes, 2012). Indeed, good attendance is linked to students' attainment and future career prospects (Ronald, 1982; Malcolm, Wilson, Davidson & Kirk 2003). On this basis, one can argue that schooling in Kuwait is in jeopardy, as student absenteeism rates in Kuwait are very high, especially at secondary schools. In February 2014, for example, a local newspaper reported that despite measures taken by the Ministry of Education, they did not succeed in reducing absenteeism. The newspaper even suggested that the ministry had raised the "white flag" and considered the phenomenon of absenteeism to be an unsolvable problem (Alwatan, 2014).

This study intends to explore why absenteeism rates are high in Kuwait, despite such government efforts to reduce such a phenomenon.

Main Research Question

What are the reasons for secondary school students' absenteeism in Kuwait?

Research Significance

A considerable amount of research has been undertaken on the reasons for student absenteeism in non-Arab countries. In fact, there is a noticeable scarcity of research on the reasons for absenteeism in Arab countries' schools. In fact and to the best knowledge of the researchers, no such a study has ever been done in Kuwait. Hence, the main purpose of this study is to provide Kuwaiti educational policy makers with a better understanding of why student absenteeism is so common in Kuwait. This study might even become a reference source for other researchers in the Arabic world and beyond.

Literature Review

International Context

Historically, some educators have researched the problem of absenteeism to gain a better understanding of the reasons causing some students to be consistently absent from school (Ronald, 1982). For example, a 68-year-old study entitled: "Special Emphases to Improve Attendance," by Edmiston et al. (1947, as cited in Ronald 1982, p.20), cited the following reasons for excessive school absenteeism:

"Poor health, distance from school, lack of laws or lack of enforcement, and parental negligence or"

In the United States, Dexter (1982) sought to investigate the causes of absenteeism in an inner-city Oregon school. Dexter found that students with attendance problems attributed their absenteeism to the following factors:

- **Poor relationships with teachers**
- **Class assignments that lack meaning**
- **Lack of satisfaction with course schedule**
- **Peer pressure**
- **Family indifference**

Malcolm et al. (2003) conducted a mixed-methods study in England, “Absence from School: A Study of its Causes and Effects in Seven LEAs.” Using a questionnaire survey and an interview schedule, data were collected from 27 schools (13 primary schools and 14 secondary schools). The analysis revealed that high absenteeism rates were associated with factors such as poor school climate and ethos. Furthermore, findings highlighted that male students had higher absenteeism rates than females. Other reasons cited by the survey’s respondents (Malcolm et al., 2003, p.29), included:

- **Being bullied**
- **Dislike of teachers, subjects or lessons**
- **Wanting to avoid tests**
- **Laziness**
- **Parents putting a low value on education**
- **Peer pressure**

Along the same line but in Wales, Reid (2008) conducted an empirical study to explore the reasons for students’ absenteeism. The results of the study attributed students’ absenteeism to the following factors (p.351):

- **Parents**
 - **Parents condoning absenteeism**
 - **Parents failing to accept their legal responsibilities**
 - **Poor parental attitudes toward schools**

- **An us-vs.-them attitude between schools and parents**
- **Society**
 - **Insufficiently valuing education**
 - **The welfare safety net**
- **Schools**
 - **Poor teaching**
 - **'Inconsistent' approach to absenteeism between and within schools**
- **Government**
 - **Lenient application of laws**
 - **Unsuitable national curriculum for less-able students**
 - **Too few out-of-school/alternative-curriculum options.**
- **Students**
 - **Bullying**
 - **Peer pressure**
 - **Attitude that it is 'cool' to skip school**

In Norway, Ingul, Klockner, Silverman & Nordahl (2012) administered an exploratory study to investigate the factors to which school absenteeism can be attributed. The researchers assessed 865 Norwegian secondary-school students by testing a model of school absenteeism using Exploratory Structural Equation Modeling (ESEM). The study revealed that school factors and some demographic variables are associated with high rates of absenteeism. Examples of these school and demographic factors include:

- **School factors, such as the students' perceptions of how they were treated and respected at school, feelings of not**

being safe in school, the presence of learning difficulties, and bullying experiences at school.

- Demographic variables, such as gender, parental education and occupational status, whether students lived with parents, relocation, friendships or lack of friends, and participation in leisure activities.

Arabian Context

Despite the importance of studying school absenteeism, very little research on this topic has been done in the Arabian world. Suleiman and Ahmad (2005, p231) said, “As far as we know, there is only one Arabian study that investigated the reasons for school absenteeism, which is that of Vaiolit Foad’s (1997).” Foad (1997) attributed secondary school students’ absenteeism to the following factors:

- Schools not serious about addressing the problem
- Students’ dependence on private tutors
- Lack of prenatal involvement
- Peer effect
- Distance between home and school
- Student health

Suleiman and Ahmad (2005) examined the reasons for students’ absenteeism in Egypt from the perspectives of students, teachers, and school principals. The sample in the study consisted of 190 students, 10 teachers, and 15 principals who were chosen at random. Using a questionnaire survey, the results attributed students’ absenteeism to the following factors:

- Student factors
 - Attendance is not viewed as important
 - Studying at home is more important
 - Private tutors are more helpful in understanding school curricula

- **Coping peers**
- **Student indifference**
- **Laziness**
- **School factors**
 - **School administration indifference**
 - **Long school days**
 - **Classic teachers: depending on lecturing.**
 - **Lack of learning resources**
 - **Large class sizes**
 - **Lack of educational activities**
- **Parental factors**
 - **Family disintegration**
 - **Low income**
 - **Family negligence and indifference**
 - **Disengagement between parents and schools**
- **Teacher factors**
 - **Teachers are ineffective compared with private tutors**
 - **High rates of teacher absenteeism**

Recently, Abu Esninah et al (2012) conducted a study was to scrutinize the reasons for student absenteeism In Jordan. A sample of 1,330 secondary-school students were randomly chosen to participate in a questionnaire survey. The results showed that students' absenteeism can be attributed to the following factors:

- **Reasons related to students**
 - **Students decide to skip school together**
 - **Absenteeism becomes a habit**
- **Reasons related to schools**

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- **There are no penalties for absent students**
 - **There is no actual teaching**
 - **School climate does not encourage attendance**
 - **Failure to identify the reasons and motives for absenteeism**
- **Reasons related to parents**
 - **Poor communication between school and home**
 - **Parents' carelessness**
 - **parents are often traveling and rarely home to supervise their children's school attendance**

Having reviewed the related literature, it was found that the vast majority, if not all, of the research on absenteeism has been quantitative in nature (e.g. Reid, 2008; Abu Esninah et al., 2012; Suleiman & Ahmad, 2005). However, quantitative research is believed by many methodologists to produce knowledge that is too wide and abstract, and such knowledge might not be helpful in understanding complex social phenomena (Reid, 2008). With this in mind, it might be safe to conclude that such quantitative studies mask lots of information that is necessary for a better understanding of factors contributing to students' absenteeism. These studies were, to some extent, able to advise us about the causality of relationships, though they could not draw a clear picture of the nature of these relationships. Johnson and Onwuegbuzie (2004) underscore that qualitative approaches focus on the notion of "depth" in examining social phenomena, especially approaches regarded as very complex. Also, it is believed that qualitative approaches are appropriate when little information is available in relation to the problem studied (Creswell, 2011), and as we stated earlier, no studies have been done on student absenteeism in Kuwait. Hence, we chose to adopt a qualitative approach to explore issues that might be important in exploring the reasons for students' absenteeism. (Guba, 1990; Johnson & Onwuegbuzie, 2004).

The researchers in the current study also noticed a degree of ambiguity regarding the definition of absenteeism. While there

are studies that considered an absence of 7-10 days during the school year as a high rate of absenteeism, other studies considered only chronic absenteeism as significant. In this study, absenteeism will be defined by the stakeholders (students, teachers, and parents) in the interviews. (See research methodology.)

Methodology

Population and Sample

The target population of this study was all secondary-school students in Kuwait. However, having only two individual researchers with limited time and resources, we had to be selective when identifying our samples. We chose the convenience-sampling method, which resulted in choosing 20 students, 10 teachers, and 5 parents.

Instrumentation

The research instrument was a semi-structured interview schedule. Drawing on what we learned in our review of the literature, the interview schedule was divided into student, school and family factor categories (Reid, 2008; Abu Esninah et al., 2012; Suleiman & Ahmad, 2005; Malcolm et al., 2003). The aim of the interviews was to explore the participants' perceptions pertaining to the definition of and the reasons for absenteeism in a Kuwaiti context.

To ensure the face and content validity of the interview schedule, the questions were reviewed by a well-versed panel of experts in interview construction and administration. The panel checked for grammar, readability, design and the extent to which the instrument would measure what it was meant to measure (Ary, Jacobs & Sorensen, 2009). The researchers adjusted some of the questions based on feedback given by the panel.

Data Analysis of Interviews

Although they do not seem to undervalue inductive analysis, some qualitative-research methodologists appear to recommend starting with theory (e.g. Richards, 2009; Saldana, 2013). As reported by Richards (2009), "even in situations where

the researcher seems to lack a theory, s/he must make some theoretical assumptions about the phenomenon under study” (p. 74).

As implied earlier in this research, we had three pre-existing assumptions that we believed to be helpful in explaining the high rates of absenteeism among secondary school students (student, school, and family factors). Accordingly, we started analyzing our qualitative data, bearing in mind these three pre-existing key themes.

In assigning the relevant codes to the aforementioned three key themes, the analysis of the qualitative data passed through three stages. In the first stage, each tape-recorded interview was fully transcribed. Then we undertook a “purposive reading” of each interview transcript, which aimed to question and comment on the data (Richards, 2009, p. 75). The reason for reading each interview transcript separately was to gain an understanding of the general trends and patterns in each interviewee’s responses as a whole. At this stage, we initially and tentatively coded issues -- such as words, phrases, and sentences that appeared relevant to each other -- a process often referred to as “open coding” (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). The codes were about concepts, opinions, actions, activities, etc., and their possible connections to the three aforementioned key themes.

In the second stage, having collated all of the codes that were produced in the first stage, a bank of codes was generated. The bank of codes showed the frequency of the interviewees’ responses (Bryman, 2012). This process was crucial because it made it easier to examine the extent to which the codes relate to the pre-existing themes.

The third stage of the analysis was re-examination of the codes by going back to the first interview transcripts to see whether we could merge, add, or drop some codes, or even detect contradictory evidence. Consequently, the final codes were assigned to the relevant themes. These three stages helped us assemble the “big picture” of the phenomenon of absenteeism in a Kuwait context.

Research Findings

First, the definition of absenteeism is provided based on the participants' perceptions. Then the main findings are presented using the three themes: student, school and family factors.

Definitions of Absenteeism

The participants interviewed were asked about the operational (quantitative) definition of absenteeism. Table 1 shows their responses.

Table 1

Definitions of absenteeism and the frequency with which each definition was mentioned by respondents

Operational definition	Students	Teachers	Parents	Total
Absence of 15 days or more in the whole school year	9	10	1	20
Absence of 10 days or more in the whole school year	6	0	1	7
One day at least on a weekly basis	3	0	1	4
Absence of five days or more in the whole school year	0	0	2	2
Absence of 10 days or more in one semester	2	0	0	2

Most participants' responses indicated that students with a 15-day absence or more during the whole school year are regarded as students with high absenteeism rates. It should be noted that this response was given by all teachers interviewed. Some of the teachers interviewed said this was not their definition of absenteeism, but that of the Ministry of Education. It became clear in this case why more students chose this definition than parents, who might know less about Ministry of Education regulations. Consequently, the researchers in the current study

adopted the definition of absenteeism used by the Ministry of Education:

“A student who is absent for 15 days or more in the whole school year is considered a student with a high rate of absenteeism”
(Teacher H)

Reasons for Absenteeism

Student-related factors

The perceptions of 16 students (out of 20) indicated that coping with peers -- but not peer pressure -- dislike of schooling, and dependence on private tutors were the main reasons for not regularly attending schools. Four students signaled that laziness is the direct reason for the high rates of absenteeism. It might be worth highlighting that none of the students interviewed cited bullying or test avoidance as possible reasons for absenteeism.

Here are some student responses:

“Because my friends do not attend before and after holidays”
(Student B)

“I attend because I want to meet my friends, and there is no point in attending if they don’t.”(Student E)

“My friends can’t force me to not attend.”(Student G)

“Students don’t like schools.”(Student I)

“Unlike schoolteachers, private tutors teach with conscience.”
(Student K)

“We can catch up with the private tutors.”(Student M)

“It’s difficult to get out of bed (laughter).”(Student D)

“Laziness (laughter)” (Student I)

The teachers and parents interviewed, to a large extent, gave similar responses. Most of them said students’ high rates of absenteeism might be attributed to students’ laziness and indifference. Some of them believed students did not perceive education as something of great value or importance. Three teachers signaled that students depended more on cheating than

studying. Teachers and parents, like students, did not cite bullying and test avoidance as possible factors to which absenteeism might be attributed. In fact, one teacher said students' absenteeism disappears during exams.

“They are like bats; they hate the sun.”(Parent D)

“This generation is very lazy.”(Teacher A)

“They are busy playing video games.”(Teacher C and Parent A)

“They (the students) do not care.”(Teacher G)

“They are more attached to their smart phones, and ironically, they use them to cheat.”(Teacher E)

School-related factors

All parents interviewed said most teachers seemed not to take teaching seriously and that this was perhaps why they had to pay for private tutors. Surprisingly enough, two teachers (out of 10) agreed that teaching in schools was very poor, and that most teachers worked on the side as private tutors, during which time, they teach with conscience.

Most of the teachers interviewed blamed the school's administration for students' high rates of absenteeism. The teachers said that although there were rules and sanctions on the books pertaining to absenteeism, school principals did not enable them.

The responses by most of the students, on the other hand, suggested that school environment was not supportive nor encouraging for attendance. Also, they seemed to agree with the parents interviewed regarding poor teaching at schools.

“Families pay a lot to compensate for ineffective teachers.”(Parent B)

“Kuwaiti families depend much more on private tutoring.”(Teacher D)

“There are rules and regulations that prohibit excessive absenteeism, but school management acts as if they don’t exist!”(Teacher A)

“School is boring.” (Student K)

“I can be sitting on a sofa at home relaxed and get better teaching according to my own schedule... why should I come to school while most teachers do not even teach!”(Student F)

Family-related factors

None of the students interviewed blamed parents for students’ absenteeism. Teachers, however, had a different view of parental impact on students’ absenteeism. In general, the teachers believed that students’ families do not value education. “Poor parenting skills” were cited by four teachers as a common phenomenon in Kuwait. Two teachers said lack of discipline at home was the main reason for students’ high rates of absenteeism. One teacher emphasized that student absenteeism might be attributed mostly to poor home-school communication. She said that to address students’ absenteeism, there should be a strong home – school partnership for the school nor teachers alone could solve such a problem.

“Ask the family.”(Teacher J)

“Well... what should we (the teachers) do if the students’ parents do not value education?”(Teacher C)

“A lot of parents here can’t raise children, so it doesn’t surprise me that a lot of students are often absent.”(Teacher B)

“There is no discipline at home...students come and sleep during classes...they had sleepless nights watching TV or playing games.”(Teacher E)

“Lack of parental involvement... Some of them (parents) never show up.”(Teacher J)

Summary and Conclusion

In the context of our study, the participants’ responses suggest that there is no common understanding of what

constitutes “high” rate of student absenteeism. While some regard a student who is absent for 15days or more in the whole school year as a student with a high rate of absenteeism, others are not so tolerant and believe that a student who is absent more than five days should be considered a student with a high rate of absenteeism. However, the researchers in the current study tended to adopt the “15-days” definition because it was mentioned by most subjects in the study.

Our study cannot support what has been found in international contexts pertaining to “bullying” and “test avoidance” as reasons for absenteeism. Except for those who cited “low income” and “large class sizes” as reasons for absenteeism, this study, to a large extent, confirmed the findings from related Arabian studies. For example, our findings are almost identical to those of Suleiman and Ahmad’s (2005) Egyptian study. This is not surprising, however, because Kuwait and Egypt have similar cultural components, including language and religion.

In conclusion, based on study participants’ perceptions, students’ high rates of absenteeism in Kuwait can be attributed to the following factors and reasons:

Student-related factors

- Low value put on education
- Studying at home is more important
- Private tutors are more helpful in understanding school curricula
- Coping with peers
- Student indifference
- Laziness
- School-related factors
 - School-management indifference
 - Schoolteachers are ineffective compared with private tutors

- **Family-related factors**
 - **Low value put on education**
 - **Family negligence and indifference**
 - **Disengagement between parents and schools**

Recommendations

Stakeholders such as policy-makers, principals, teachers, and parents should be aware of the contextual reasons for students' high rates of absenteeism to address this phenomenon.

Stakeholders may re-think their strategies pertaining school climate. Indeed, this study found boredom of school as one of the possible reasons for the high rates of students' absenteeism and stakeholders should find ways to make school climate more attractive.

It is recommended that a study be carried out to explore how students' absenteeism can be reduced.

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