



ABSENTEEISM, REPETITION AND SILENT EXCLUSION IN INDIA

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ABSENTEEISM, REPETITION AND SILENT EXCLUSION

Due to frequent absenteeism from school, children perform poorly which causes repetition which in turn makes children vulnerable to drop-out. This group of problems is called 'silent exclusion' (Lewin, 2007) This policy brief explores the causes and correlations of absenteeism, repetition and silent exclusion in India and suggests policy recommendations. The analysis is based on CREATE research in three clusters in the states of Madhya Pradesh and Chhattisgarh.

Absenteeism and Meaningful Access

Many children who are nominally enrolled do not attend regularly. School attendance is a critical factor for performance. Studies show that higher attendance is related to higher achievement for students of all backgrounds (Epstein and Sheldon, 2002).

There is a close association between access, regular attendance and learning outcomes leading to meaningful access which *"requires high attendance rates, progression through grades with little or no repetition and learning outcomes that confirm that basic skills are being mastered"* (Lewin, 2007).

Issues, Trends and Causes of Absenteeism

The Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA) programme, universalising elementary education in India, provides special grants to each school for preparing/acquiring teaching-learning material. It also recommends a no-detention policy and continuous and comprehensive evaluation (CCE) to promote effective learning and participation of children in schools.

A 'mid-day-meal' scheme is being implemented to protect children from hunger and malnutrition, but

also to increase school enrolment and attendance. These initiatives have improved access and retention but problems of irregular attendance, extended absenteeism and repetition affect many across the country. Particular groups of children belonging to disadvantaged communities and living in remote areas are vulnerable to these problems (Govinda and Bandyopadhyay, 2008; Pratham-ASER Report, 2007).

The causes of absenteeism include demand issues such as health problems, demand for paid or unpaid children's work, school phobia, anxiety and truancy among children (Kearney and Silverman, 1993). Supply issues such as the quality of services provided in schools, infrastructure and availability of qualified and trained teachers also act as determining factors for students' attendance. This is true in the case of India where research suggests that there is an urgent need to improve the physical infrastructure, use of TLM (teaching learning material), availability of teachers and their presence in the school (Kremer et al. 2005; Mehrotra et.al, 2005; Jha and Jhingran, 2005).

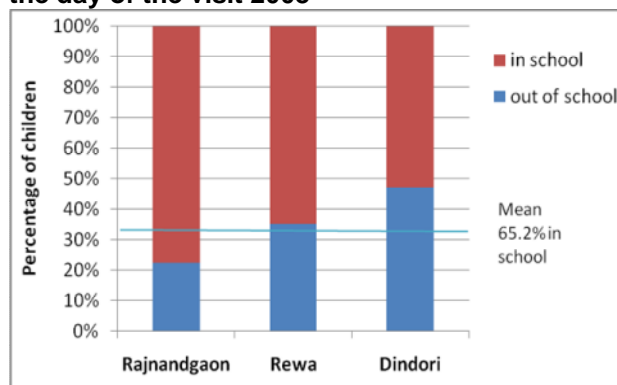
The next section summarises CREATE research in India on the factors behind absenteeism, repetition and exclusion.

Attendance and Repetition in Schools

From the CREATE community and school surveys (ComSS) carried out in 36 villages from the three clusters of Rewa and Dindori in Madhya Pradesh and Rajnandgaon in Chhattisgarh it is evident that student absenteeism is rampant. Absenteeism is calculated on the basis of the number of days absent in the last month.

On the day of the field visit, 22% of children were absent from school in Rajnandgaon, 35% in Rewa and 47% in Dindori (Figure 1).

Figure 1: Percentage of children in school on the day of the visit 2008



Surveys carried out in the three clusters in 2008 indicate that most of the students in all three clusters were absent for 1 to 3 days per month.

Poor health was cited by parents as the major reason for absenteeism, followed by other social reasons like visits to relative's houses. In Rajnandgaon, one fifth of students were absent because of poor health, in Rewa and Dindori, around 33% of children were absent due to poor health.

The availability of physical and academic facilities has considerable impact on learning outcomes. Some of the schools do not even have basic facilities like drinking water and toilets. For example, while all schools in Rajnandgaon and the majority in Rewa (29 out of 35) have drinking water, in Dindori, out of 23 schools only 3 have drinking water and none have toilets.

Similar disparities exist between clusters for other facilities. The PTR (Pupil Teacher Ratio) and SCR (School Classroom Ratio) in the schools of the three clusters vary considerably. In Rajnandgaon the SCR is 4:3 and PTR is 35:1 while in Rewa the SCR is 3:7 and PTR is 32:1. In Dindori the PTR is 34:1 and the SCR is 2:2. This varies between

schools within each cluster leading to a wide range and unacceptably high and low ratios in some cases.

In addition, a large number of teachers have few qualifications, low salary and hardly any training. 66% of male teachers and 62% of female teachers have an educational qualification above the graduate level. Many of the less qualified teachers are posted in single teacher schools run by the Education Guarantee Scheme (EGS); these teachers have to handle administrative and teaching roles together, across pupils enrolled in all five grades of primary school.

Although these clusters display improving trends in literacy rates, progress is constrained by the lack of infrastructure and facilities in schools which in turn may cause students' absenteeism and poor performance.

The socio-economic profile of absent students

Factors such as parental education and the socio-economic situation of the children are associated with absenteeism (Drèze and Kingdon, 1999). Caste also plays an important role. Children belonging to scheduled castes (SC) and scheduled tribes (ST) and 'other backward castes' (OBC) are less likely to go to school than children belonging to general castes (Drèze and Kingdon, 1999:17).

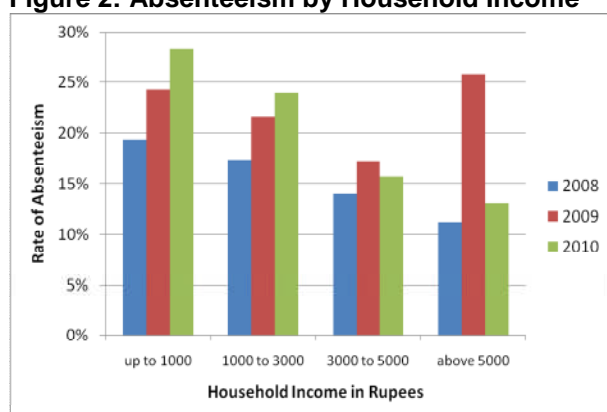
The majority of students in our study areas came from these three marginalised caste groups. However, there was no clear relationship between caste affiliation and absenteeism across the three clusters.

Rates of both absenteeism and repetition are high in all three clusters. They are highest in Rewa and increased between 2008 and 2010 from 20% of pupils absent for more than seven days in the last month in 2008 to 40% in 2010. Rates are lower in Rajnandgaon and Dindori. In general, absenteeism rates are higher than repetition, except in Dindori where repetition rates were higher than absenteeism in 2008 and 2009.

Rates of absenteeism and repetition varied tremendously between the three clusters, which have different levels of development. This is one reason why data from all three clusters disaggregated by social groups is so unclear. Despite differences between the clusters, there were relationships that cut across them. Research revealed a negative correlation between parent's educational status and income.

Figure 2 indicates higher rates of absenteeism (child is not in school for more than seven days in the last month) among poorer households across the three clusters and in each year except 2009, where the children from the richest households showed the second highest rate of absenteeism.

Figure 2: Absenteeism by Household Income



In Figure 2, the anomalous results found in 2009 are clear. These go against expected trends, with a higher rate of absenteeism among the wealthiest income group, this is due to the fact that during the period in which data was collected in 2009, greater numbers of students were absent in preparation for exams. Wealthier students have private tuition to help them pass exams, they therefore stay out of school in higher numbers.

Absenteeism was also higher in 2009 due to the elections which meant that many schools were closed, as they are used for polling stations and teachers work as election officials. As a result we have omitted the 2009 data from Figures 3 and 4 which show the relationships between parents' levels of education and rates of absenteeism.

Figure 3: Absenteeism by Father's Education (2008 and 2010 average)

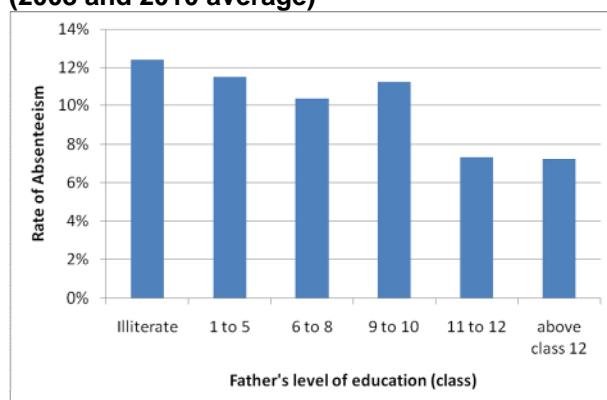
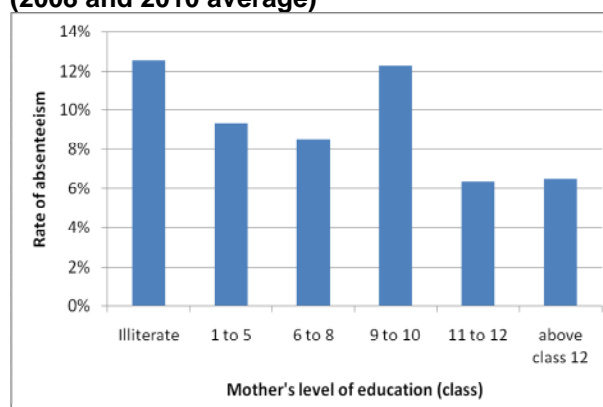


Figure 4: Absenteeism by Mother's Education (2008 and 2010 average)



Figures 3 and 4 illustrate the well known relationships between parents' levels of education and indicators of access to education, in this case, absenteeism. Children whose parents are illiterate are more likely to be absent from school.

The vicious cycle of absenteeism and repetition

Absenteeism has long term academic and social effects. Absent students are at higher risk of poor performance and repetition than the children who attend school regularly. Repetition leads towards a loss of confidence and low self esteem for children because of the social stigma associated with failure. Ultimately, unable to cope up with the repeated failure, the child drops out of the education system. Thus, irregularity, repetition and poor learning levels function as a vicious cycle. These characteristics of exclusion are known as zone 3 or 'silent exclusion' in the CREATE conceptual model and eventually lead to drop out (Lewin, 2007). Although substantial numbers of students are in school up to the primary level in all three clusters, many of them remain vulnerable to silent exclusion. About 9% of pupils in Rajnandgaon and 18% in Rewa had repeated a grade in 2008.

Policy Implications

CREATE research shows that children from economically and educationally disadvantaged families have high levels of absenteeism and repetition. In addition, rates of absenteeism and repetition vary between the three clusters studied. This may be because some regions are yet to receive quality educational facilities in terms of physical infrastructure and human resources. It may also be to do with the social and economic status of the inhabitants of each cluster, for as Figure 2 shows, income is strongly correlated with absenteeism. It is also correlated with other

indicators of access to education (Lewin, 2007). In this context, the following issues may be considered for future policy initiatives. These are:

- Implementing the 'no detention' policy and continuous and comprehensive evaluation will help to reduce levels of repetition
- While there have been macro level gains in the number of teachers, schools and enrolment overall in India, extra attention needs to be paid to groups and regions who do not benefit from development. Wide variation between groups and regions shows that some are getting left behind.
- Children of poor families, from uneducated backgrounds, disadvantaged social groups and clusters need particular help to encourage them to stay at school.
- Remote, deprived, rural areas need more rather than less of the best educational infrastructure, teachers and equipment to improve equity.
- More emphasis needs to be given on improvement of each individual school, involving parents, students, school and community jointly along with other stakeholders. School Development Plans need to give more attention to absenteeism and repetition of children ensuring additional support to children who remain frequently absent and have low attainment.
- More research is needed to examine the reasons why children are absent from school to inform locally appropriate policies.
- Poor health was one of the major reasons contributing to absenteeism. Improved health infrastructure in medically deprived regions will help address absenteeism along with other problems.
- The introduction of school health programmes with regular medical checks for children would be another way to reach disadvantaged children.
- The role of teacher parent communication in preventing absenteeism needs to be examined through further research.

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This policy brief has been written by Madhumita Bandyopadhyay, Debanjana Das and Benjamin Zeitlyn, based on CREATE research in India.



CREATE is a DFID-funded research programme consortia exploring issues of educational access, transitions and equity in South Africa, India, Bangladesh and Ghana. For more information go to: www.create-rpc.org