

School Absenteeism and Academic Achievement: Is Missing-Out on School More Detrimental to Students from Lower Socioeconomic Backgrounds?

Shadrach Dare, Edward Sosu, Markus Klein
University of Strathclyde, UK

Significant social inequalities in academic achievement are well established. Evidence suggests that students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds are more frequently absent from school. Whereas school absenteeism is a potential mechanism for explaining the social inequality in academic achievement, empirical evidence on the link between absenteeism and achievement is sparse. Additionally, it is not clear if different forms of absenteeism have the same detrimental effect on achievement. Absent students miss out on teacher-led lessons, peer interactions or activities that may stimulate their learning and ultimately their performance in exams. In addition, they might feel less integrated into their class and struggle to participate in classroom activities and interactions with peers and teachers which, in turn, is harmful to their learning. Importantly, school absenteeism may be particularly detrimental to children from lower socio-economic backgrounds as their parents have neither the time nor resources to compensate for school absence by supporting their children in engaging with the content of the missed school lessons.

In this paper, we first examine the association between different types of school absenteeism (legitimate absence, truancy and exclusion) and academic achievement in secondary school. Besides, we consider whether the association between absenteeism and academic achievement varies between different socioeconomic groups and family structures. We analysed a sample (N=5,000) from the Scottish Longitudinal Study (SLS) by linking census, school administrative and achievement, and administrative health data. The unique SLS data provided us with a rich set of confounders from the Census and health data in estimating the adjusted association between school absenteeism and academic achievement using regression-based approaches. We will discuss the data linkage process as well as the policy and practice implications of our findings.