

Factors Influencing School Absenteeism among G.C.E. (Advanced Level) Students

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Abstract

The G.C.E. Advanced Level examination, representing a pivotal milestone in a student's academic journey, fundamentally shapes their future trajectory. A prevailing trend of continuously declining trend in school attendance is currently being observed among students studying in the G.C.E. Advanced level grades. This research study aims to investigate the factors influencing the school absenteeism of G.C.E. (Advanced Level) students. Over the past several decades, the nation has navigated a multitude of transitions, including economic recessions, the unprecedented COVID-19 pandemic, and rapid technological advancements. In such a socio-environmental landscape, the determinants contributing to the persistent decline in G.C.E. Advanced Level student attendance may significantly diverge from those identified in previous decades. The present study is premised on the central research question: "what are the factors influencing the non-attendance of G.C.E. Advanced Level students?" study population comprised the principals, teachers, students and their parents from all government schools maintaining functional G.C.E. Advanced level sections. The research sample consisted of 10 principals, 50 teachers, 100 students and 20 parents selected from 10 schools within the Colombo Education Zone. The research sample was selected utilizing the simple random sampling technique. The research methodology employed was a mixed-methods approach. The data collection instrument utilized in this study included questionnaires, interviews and documentary analysis. The data analysis methods employed in this study descriptive statistical techniques for quantitative data, and thematic analysis for qualitative data. The research conclusions are presented under the sub-themes of student-related factors, principal-related factors, teacher-related factors, factors associated with the school learning environment, family environment-related factors and social and environmental factors.

Keywords: General Certificate of Education (Advanced Level) Examination, General Certificate of Education (Advanced Level) Students, students absenteeism, factors influencing student absenteeism, the impact on student absenteeism.

Introduction

Within the Sri Lankan Education system, The G.C.E. Advanced Level period represents the final phrase of a student's secondary schooling. The result of the G.C.E. Advanced Level Examination serves as the primary criteria for university admission, enrollment into tertiary education institutions, and the attainment of employment opportunities. Currently, there is a discernible and progressive decline in school attendance among G.C.E. (Advanced Level) students. There is a critical need to identify the underlying factors contributing to the declining school attendance of G.C.E. (Advanced Level) students and to propose viable solutions through a realistic and comprehensive analysis of this contemporary issue. Among the existing research literature, two studies are of particular significance: the 2020 study conducted by the Ministry of Education titled "The minimization of daily attendance among the G.C.E. (Advanced Level) students and measures to be taken and the" 2016 research by the National Institute of Education titled "School absenteeism among grade 13 students in Sri Lanka". The research conducted by the National Institute of Education indicates a staggering overall absenteeism rate of 72% among G.C.E. (Advanced Level) students. Research conducted internationally regarding student absenteeism is also significant in the context. Over the past few years, Sri Lanka has navigated a landscape defined by significant socio-economic and political transformations. Within this context, the necessity for a contemporary study is underscored by a notable gap in recent research literature concerning the absenteeism of G.C.E. (Advanced Level) Students. Furthermore, there is a distinct lack of empirical investigation focusing on the Colombo Educational Zone—a region characterized by a highly competitive educational environment. Consequently, these factors highlight an urgent need to conduct a formal study using the Colombo Education Zone as a representative research sample.

Research Objectives

1. To investigate the patterns of school absenteeism among G.C.E. (Advanced Level) Students.
2. To examine students' perspectives on the factors influencing absenteeism among G.C.E. (Advanced Level) students.
3. To examine the perspectives of principals and teachers regarding the factors influencing absenteeism among G.C.E. Advanced Level Students.
4. To examine parental perspectives on the factors influencing school absenteeism among G.C.E. Advanced Level Students.
5. To study the implementation and effectiveness of measures taken by school authorities and the government to mitigate school absenteeism among G.C.E. (Advanced Level) Students.

Literature Review

Integrating theoretical frameworks in to a study facility a more rigorous analysis of education data, allowing for a robust interpretation within a theoretical context. Furthermore, this approach enhances the ability to present conclusions and recommendations with greater logical coherence and academic validity. Review of empirical literature provides the broad knowledge and expertise necessary to conduct comprehensive research.

Theoretical background

The theoretical background of the study explains Faucet Theory, which explains the impact of student absenteeism. Faucet Theory is a theory introduced by Entwisle and Oslon (1997). This implies that much like the cessation of water flow when a tap is turned off, students' absenteeism canes an immediate halt to their educational progress and skill acquisition. Furthermore, this theory posits that academic progress is directly correlated with the amount of time students spend engaged with the learning environment. This implies that, much like the cessation of water flow when a tap is closed, student absenteeism leads to an immediate stagnation of academic progress and skill acquisition. Consequently, this theory underscores the critical importance of consistent school attendance.

Empirical background

The G.C.E.(Advanced Level period represent a unique and critical phase in a student's life . Consequently, the necessity for consistent school attendance among students in this pivotal stage has been extensively examined with the research literature. The empirical background of the study is discussed under three main themes, including the necessity of student school attendance, the nature of student school absenteeism, and the impact of student school absenteeism and potential mitigation strategies.

The necessity of student school attendance

According to circular number 2006/45 issued by the ministry of education students must maintain a minimum attendance rate of 80% of the total school days held at the time of submitting application for the G.C.E. Advanced level examination (National Institute of education, 2016, p. 2) In the Sri Lankan context prolonged absenteeism is defined as a student failing to attend more than 20% of the total number of school days held.(Ministry of education, 2020, p. 6). Given an annual school calendar of approximately 200 days, student absenteeism exceeding 100 days is a problematic situation linked to both the responsibility and accountability of all stakeholders in

the education system. (Ministry of Education, 2020, p. 8). Consistent classroom attendance enhances positive classroom interactions, allowing students to articulate their ideas more effectively through questioning, while fostering the development of critical thinking and communication skills. Furthermore, consistent school attendance enables students to establish strong bonds with their teachers and peers. This in turn fosters a positive learning environment. (Castenda, 2023, p. 1). Consistent attendance is instrumental to a student's academic success and the development of essential social skills. (Hoag, 2023, p. 1). Absenteeism has a critical impact on various factors, including students' academic success, social development, and social discipline. (Akkus and Cinkir, 2022, p. 979). In Qualitative terms, absenteeism represents a wastage of educational resources and a squandering of human potential. (Castenda, 2023, p. 03).

The Nature of Student School Absenteeism

On average, the school attendance rate among G.C.E. (Advanced Level) students is 72% of the required attendance. The Western Province records the highest incidence of absenteeism. Furthermore, Akkus and Cinkir highlight that student absenteeism is not a consequence of a single factor but rather the result of a multifaceted set of causes. Absenteeism appears to stem from a complex, multi-faceted structure of overlapping issues rather than an isolated reason. This complexity must be taken into full consideration when analyzing the problem and formulating potential solutions. (Akkus and Cinkir, 2022, p. 981).

The Impact of Student School Absenteeism and potential mitigation strategies

It is evident that student absenteeism impacts not only the individual student but also the wider community associated with them. Specifically, it affects every aspect, including academic achievement, the breakdown of interpersonal relationships, and institutional management. (National Institute of Education, 2016, p. 08). The excessive density of curriculum content and the emphasis on more memorization rather than introducing inquiry-based learning approaches-along with the overwhelming expansion of subject matter-subject students to unnecessary pressure. A detrimental consequence of this phenomenon is the increasing tendency of students to enrol in private tuition. Student absenteeism disrupts the learning process, and the subsequent loss of instructional time leads to academic failure. Furthermore, it exerts an indirect influence on student discipline. (National Institute of Education, 2018, as cited in Wickramanayaka and Kumari, 2023, p.1160). There is a clear correlation between chronic absenteeism, poor academic achievement, maladaptive behaviours, and broader development challenges (National Education Institute of Sri Lanka, 2016, p. 06). A review of the research literature reveals various interventions

and measures designed to address student absenteeism. In accordance with the recommendations of the National Institute of Education, schools should introduce practical activities tailored to Advanced Level streams during the interim period between the completion of the G.C.E. (Ordinary Level) examination and the commencement of Advanced Level classes. (Ministry of Education, 2020, p. 30). It is essential to empower principals to effectively implement the circulars and directives

established regarding student attendance percentages. (Ministry of Education, 2020, p. 33). Teacher effectiveness is fundamental to increasing student attendance and minimizing unauthorized absences. (Hoag, 2023, p. 09). School education should transition from a competitive examination-oriented model toward an assessment culture that priorities practical competencies. (Ministry of Education, 2020, p. 31)

Research Methodology

All Government schools in Sri Lanka offering G.C.E. (Advanced Level) grades, all principals of the above schools, all teachers teaching G.C.E (Advanced Level) grades, all students studying G.C.E. (Advanced Level) grades and their parents are used as the population. The research sample was the principals of 10 schools offering G.C.E (Advanced Level) grades in the Colombo Educational Zone of the Western Province, 50 teachers teaching G.C.E. (Advanced Level) grades in those schools, 100 students in the art and commerce stream of those schools and 20 parents of those students. The research sample was selected using the simple random sampling method. Questionnaires, interviews and document review were used as data collection instruments. Quantitative data were analysed using descriptive statistical methods, while qualitative data were analysed thematically.

Ethical Considerations

The study adhered to rigorous ethical standards by ensuring the confidentiality of participant responses and opinions. Formal written consent was obtained from relevant institutions and schools prior to data collection. Furthermore, participants were assured that the data gathered would be utilized exclusively for research purposes. The study was conducted in accordance with international ethical guidelines, ensuring that research activities did not disrupt the daily operations of the participating institutions and schools.

Research Findings

Patterns of school absenteeism among G. C. E. (Advanced Level) Students.

Table 1

Students' Absenteeism by Province G.C.E. (Advanced Level) 2016

Province	No. of schools	Student enrollment	Student absenteeism	Absenteeism
Western	33	3280	2903	88.51
North-Central	21	1607	1418	88.24
North-West	24	1825	1535	84.11
South	33	2477	1911	77.15
Sabragamuwa	21	1158	881	76.08
Uva	23	1848	1222	66.13
East	48	2676	1751	65.43
Central	36	2209	1332	60.3
North	33	1889	715	37.85
Total	272	18969	13668	72.05

(National Institute of Education, 2016)

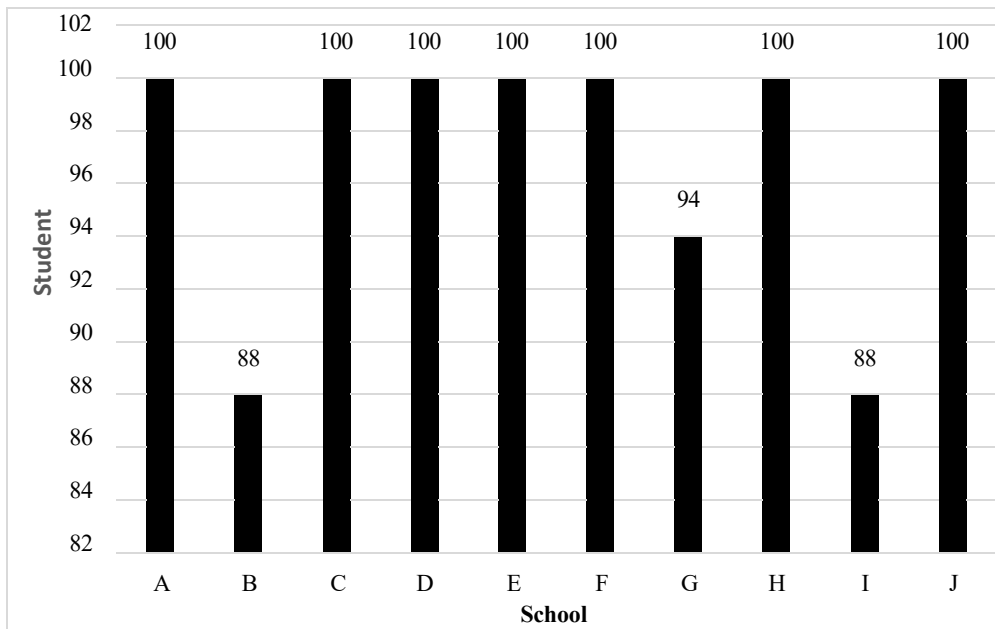
On a provincial level, the Western Province exhibits the highest trend of student absenteeism. With the exception of the Northern Province, a trend of student absenteeism exceeding 50% is observed across all other provinces. An absenteeism rate exceeding 80% is observed across all schools, specially seven schools within the sample report that 100% of their students fail to meet the 80% attendance threshold.

The nature of absenteeism among grade 13 students in the G.C. E. (Advanced Level) classes.

The following data findings represent student absenteeism among the grade 13 Advanced Level cohort for the years 2024 and 2025 of the selected 10 schools. For the purpose of this study, an 80% attendance rate was utilized as the threshold percentage.

Figure 1

Students' Absenteeism by Province G.C.E. (Advanced Level) 2016



The data regarding student absenteeism in grade 13 Advanced Level classes across the 10 sampled schools is presented above. An absenteeism rate exceeding 80% is observed in every school, and in 7 out of the 10 schools in the sample, 100% of the students failed to meet the 80% attendance requirement.

Table 2

Factors Influencing the Absenteeism of G.C.E. Advanced Level Students: A Comparative analysis by Academic Stream (Arts/Commerce)

The cause of absenteeism	Art stream		Commerce stream	
	No of responses	]	No of responses	]
Inadequacies in teaching	01	04]	05	07]
Health concerns	16	57]	15	21]
Financial hardships with the family	02	07]	06	08]
Private tuition	05	18]	25	35]
Peers perspectives	01	04]	06	08]
other	03	11]	15	21]
Total	28	100]	72	100]

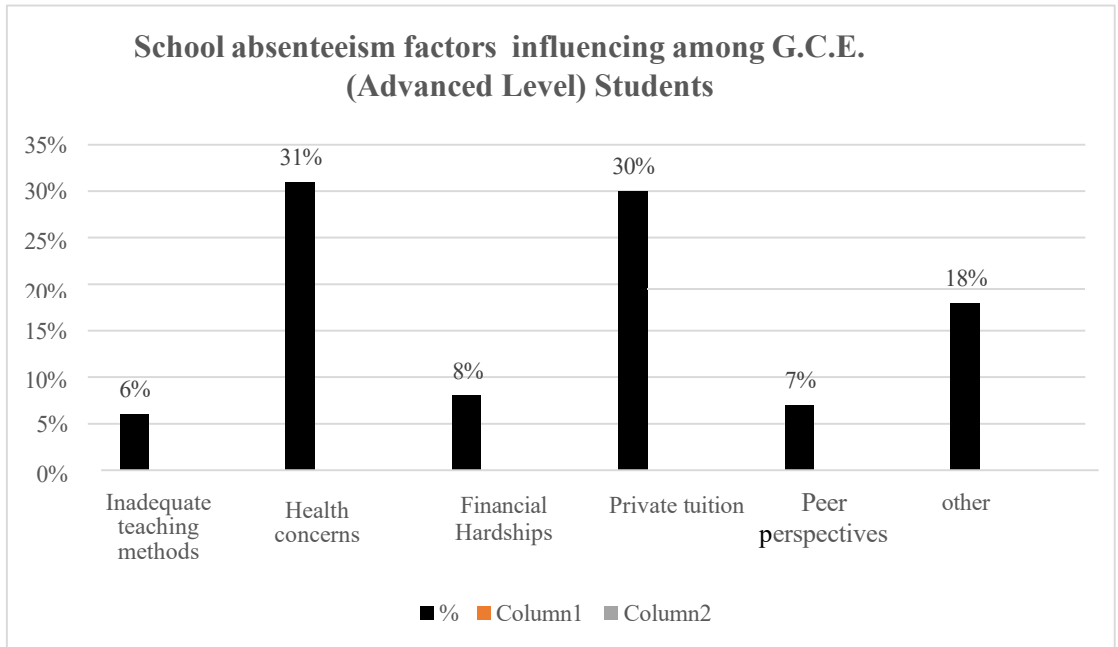
According to the above data, it is evident that 57% of students of the Arts stream cited health issues as the primary reason for their school absenteeism. The secondary reason cited by these students is their attendance at private tuition classes. Student in the commerce stream identified attendance at private tuition classes as the primary reason for their school absenteeism. This accounts for 35% of respondents. Other significant factors cited include health-related issues and various other concerns.

Students' perspectives on the factors influencing absenteeism among G.C.E. (Advanced Level) student

According to student responses, it is evident that the primary factors contributing to the consistent absenteeism of G.C.E. (Advanced level) students are attendance at private supplementary classes and health related issues. These two issues account for 60% of the total reported causes. Furthermore, it is noteworthy that 18% of the students cited various other reasons.

Figure 2

Factors Influencing Absenteeism among G.C.E. (Advanced Level) Students



Perspectives of principals and teachers regarding the factors contributing to absenteeism among G.C.E. (Advanced Level) Students

Based on the study results, it is evident that from the teachers' perspective, the primary factors influencing the school absenteeism of G.C.E. (Advanced Level) students are private tuition classes and family financial constraints.

During the interviews conducted with the school principals, they identified attendance at private tuition classes as a primary reason for student absenteeism in the G.C.E. (Advanced Level). They observed that this trend of declining attendance is evident from the very beginning of Grade 13. Furthermore, they cited health issues and familial economic constraints additional contributing factors to student non-attendance.

Table 3

Causes of School Absenteeism of G.C.E. (Advanced Level) Students

The causes of absenteeism	No of responses	]
Inadequacies in teaching methodology	00	00]
Health concerns	02	04]
Financial hardships with the family	07	14]
Participation in private tuition	32	64]
Peers perspectives	05	10]
other	04	08]
Total	50	100]

Parental perspectives on the factors influencing school absenteeism among G.C.E. (Advanced Level) Students

Parents identify attendance at private tuition classes and health related issues as the primary factors contributing to student absenteeism. Parents further noted that students attend private tuition classes conducted during school hours and engage in self-study at home on the days they are absence from school. Parents also state that they enroll their children in private tuition due to concerns regarding time wasted when teachers are absent, as well as lack of confidence in the timely completion of the syllabus within the school system.

Implementation and effectiveness of measures taken by school authorities and the government to mitigate school absenteeism among G.C.E. (Advanced Level) Students

Principals noted that the 80% attendance requirement, a government measure introduced to curb absenteeism among G.C.E. (Advanced Level) students, is not being strictly enforced or rigorously considered. Principals identified alternative measures to improve student attendance, such as convening grade level committee meeting, investing the underlining causes of absenteeism to brief parents, and

implementing various performance enhancement programs. Certain principal states that they endeavor to attract students to school by providing a conducive environment and the necessary facilities for self-study during the full period of grade 13. Parents maintain a neutral stance regarding the implementation of the 80% attendance requirement. Parents pointed out that children are occasionally unable to meet the 80% attendance requirement due to unavoidable circumstance that prevent them from attending school.

According to research findings, the factors influencing the absenteeism of G.C.E. (Advanced Level) students can be explained in accordance with Abraham Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs theory. The responses confirmed that health-related issues and domestic economic hardships serve as primary factors for student absenteeism, as these challenges prevent the fulfilment of physiological needs. This highlights that the failure to satisfy physiological needs, as outlined in Maslow's hierarchy of needs, constitutes a significant factor contributing to student absenteeism. Under the second level of Maslow's hierarchy of needs, which pertains to safety and security needs, it was necessary to ascertain the extent to which G.C.E. (Advanced Level) students perceive themselves to be secure within both their home and classroom environment. The non-fulfilment of these safety and security needs may lead to a decreased propensity for school attendance among students. Based on the responses from both students and teachers, it is evident that all stakeholders express a level of dissatisfaction with the classroom environment. Furthermore, parents indicated that safety is a primary consideration when selecting private tuition classes for their children. The study further revealed that the non-fulfilment of belongingness and esteem needs, as conceptualised in Maslow's hierarchy, also contributes to student absenteeism.

Consequently, it is evident that a lack of parental attention significantly influences student attendance patterns. It is confirmed that a primary reason for school absenteeism of Advanced Level students is their participation in private tuition classes, which stems from a lack of confidence in the school's teaching and learning process. Furthermore, it can be argued that the failure to fulfil the need for self-esteem within Maslow's hierarchy of needs is a contributing factor in this context. Consequently, a sense of skepticism develops among students regarding their ability to achieve the required competencies through school education.

Faucet theory suggests that consistent school attendance enables students to enhance their learning and skills; conversely, irregular attendance leads to educational decline and a decline in student achievement. In accordance with this theory, it can be substantiated that students demonstrate a reluctance to attend school due to

stakeholder dissatisfaction regarding the classroom environment within G.C.E (Advanced level) grades. Chronic absenteeism during the G.C.E. (Advanced Level) period results in the loss of vital learning opportunities and potential achievements. As the Advanced level stage represents the final phase of secondary education, it offers a unique environment for personality development. However, by failing to attend school regularly, students forfeit these essential development experiences.

Conclusions

Factors influencing student absenteeism can be grouped into six categories: student-related factors, including tuition, self-study, institutional dissatisfaction, peer influence, and health issues; principal-related factors, such as inadequate supervision and interventions; teacher-related factors, including teacher absenteeism, low institutional satisfaction, and limited technology integration; school-related factors, including syllabus coverage, development programmes, extracurricular activities, and classroom environment; family-related factors, such as economic difficulties and limited parental support; and social and environmental factors, including technology access, geographical context, and socioeconomic influences.

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