When Students Miss School: The Impact on Early Literacy

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Abstract

This study examined the relationship between student attendance and reading achievement among first-grade students in a Title I elementary school. Using a mixed-methods action research design, the researchers used quantitative analysis of attendance records and FastBridge reading assessment scores with qualitative data, informed by semi-structured teacher interviews. Quantitative data included days absent in a three-month period (January-March) and reading scores measuring concepts of print, phonemic awareness, phonics, and fluency. Qualitative data included teachers' experiences with absenteeism and its impact on literacy instruction with developing readers. Results indicated a clear pattern in which students with more frequent absences tended to demonstrate lower reading performance. Furthermore, teachers consistently reported that absenteeism disrupted instructional pacing, skill development, and opportunities for targeted support. These findings highlight the importance of consistent attendance for early literacy growth and underscore the need for schoolwide strategies that address barriers to attendance while supporting students who miss instructional time. Being in school affects early reading achievement.

Key words: absenteeism, reading achievement, families

Introduction

Student attendance has long been recognized as a foundational component of academic success, particularly in the early elementary grades when essential literacy skills are rapidly developing. Yet in many schools, consistent attendance remains a persistent challenge. The first author, a first-grade teacher in a Montana Title 1

elementary school, observed how absences at her school impacted student learning and how teacher conversations often centered on the challenges of helping young readers with high absenteeism learn. Consulting with her graduate advisor from a nearby university, the second author, she sought to formalize her inquiries into a research project. In this manuscript, the use of “I” references the first author, or the first-grade teacher.

Their conversations about the relationship between attendance and reading achievement led to formalizing a way to find answers about student learning trajectories that manifested differently depending on attendance patterns. At this Title 1 school, many students performed below national percentiles in both reading and math; additionally, there were students who were chronically absent. Research suggests that even moderate absenteeism can hinder early literacy growth because foundational reading skills require repeated exposure and practice (Allensworth & Easton, 2007; Gottfried, 2010). The authors wondered how these broad findings played out in this particular school context, where many of the students encountered cultural, familial, or logistical factors that influenced attendance.

Students who were absent often struggled significantly to catch up because first grade introduces and reinforces a dense, sequenced curriculum in decoding fundamentals, word recognition, and fluency support. When students missed instruction repeatedly, I found myself trying to bridge substantial learning gaps while still maintaining momentum for the rest of the class. At the same time, I had other students who missed long stretches of school for extended family vacations, yet when they returned, they were able to participate, progress, and remain at or above-grade-level

benchmarks. These contrasting patterns made me question the nuances of absenteeism: When does it matter most? For which students? Under what conditions? How might these differences influence reading achievement?

I am four years into my teaching career and currently pursuing a master's degree in Curriculum and Instruction. In my current position at a high-needs, linguistically diverse school, I was curious about how a teacher might navigate instructional gaps caused by absenteeism and how positive literacy outcomes for all learners remain a priority. My graduate advisor and I constructed the following research questions:

- What is the relationship between student attendance rates and reading achievement in first grade?
- How do patterns of absenteeism (frequency and duration) appear to influence reading performance for first-grade students in a Title I school?

Background

Student attendance has long been recognized as a critical factor in academic success. Across diverse educational settings, researchers and policymakers alike have explored how consistent attendance influences student performance, equity, and long-term outcomes. These investigations often address societal and institutional factors that shape student engagement and learning opportunities. Roby (2003) observed that attendance is not simply a behavioral issue, but a reflection of how well schools engage students and families. His work in Ohio schools suggested that improving attendance

requires not only monitoring but also addressing environmental and structural barriers that keep students from school.

Theoretical approaches to attendance and learning provide a framework for understanding *why* attendance matters. From a cognitive and developmental standpoint, consistent school attendance ensures regular exposure to structured learning, which supports memory consolidation and skill acquisition. Ready (2010) argued that foundational cognitive growth occurs in early education; attendance gaps in early education can widen achievement disparities over time. Repeated engagement with instructional content leads to stronger neural pathways and more durable learning outcomes (Willingham, 2009). These theoretical insights illustrate the “why;” what follows explores the “how.”

Educators and schools seek those classroom practices and intervention strategies that support attendance and achievement. Gershenson (2016) identified the critical role of teacher quality in mediating the relationship between attendance and achievement. His research suggested that interventions targeting teacher effectiveness—such as mentoring, professional development, and support for classroom engagement—can indirectly improve attendance by enhancing student motivation. Similarly, Morrissey, Hutchison, and Winsler (2014) highlighted the need for family- and community-based initiatives that address attendance barriers in low-income populations. Their findings suggested that effective attendance interventions must integrate social-emotional learning principles, culturally responsive communication, and family engagement—approaches that align with inquiry-based and problem-solving models of education.

Empirical research provides the strongest evidence of how attendance correlates with academic performance. Across multiple contexts, consistent findings emerge: higher attendance is associated with stronger achievement outcomes. Gottfried's work demonstrated a causal relationship between attendance and achievement in urban schools, controlling for unobserved factors, such as student motivation (2010). Hancock, Lawrence, Shepherd, Mitrou, and Zubrick (2017) extended Gottfried's study by examining socioeconomic differences and concluded that the negative impact of absences is magnified for students from disadvantaged backgrounds. Holmes (2019) confirmed this pattern in mathematics and reading, noting that chronic absenteeism is particularly detrimental to performance in cumulative subjects. Math and reading are considered cumulative, for introductory concepts are critical for subsequent, more advanced instruction to build on these foundations. Together, these studies reinforce the importance of attendance as both an academic and social variable. Not merely a statistic to be tracked, attendance serves as a vital dimension of how students connect to the learning process itself.

Data Collection, Study Participants, and Results

This study examined the relationship between student attendance and reading achievement among first-grade students. A mixed-methods action research design allowed the authors to analyze attendance and assessment data and gather contextual insights from teachers who work directly with these students.

Quantitative data collection included analysis of attendance records and FastBridge (Illuminate Education, n.d.) reading assessment scores for students in four

first-grade classrooms over a three-month period, January through March. FastBridge reading scores provided standardized measures of early literacy development, including performance in Concepts of Print, Phonemic Awareness, Phonics (letter names, letter sounds, and decoding), and Oral Reading Fluency. These assessments offered reliable indicators of foundational reading skills and were closely aligned with typical instructional goals in early elementary literacy instruction. Together, these data sources allowed for a detailed comparison of attendance patterns and reading proficiency.

Qualitative data was gathered through semi-structured interviews with four first-grade teachers. The semi-structured interview format allowed for consistency across participants while also providing flexibility for teachers to elaborate on their experiences and perceptions. Each 30-minute interview was guided by a predetermined set of open-ended questions related to absenteeism, instructional challenges, student background factors, and literacy development. With participants' permission, interviews were recorded in the form of researcher notes, and pseudonyms were assigned to teachers to maintain confidentiality and support accurate transcription and analysis. This method provided rich, contextual insights into how absenteeism affects classroom routines, instructional pacing, and the specific needs of frequently absent students.

Analysis of quantitative data focused on determining whether a relationship existed between student attendance and reading achievement. After compiling attendance totals and FastBridge scores, we computed descriptive statistics (means, ranges, and distributions) and analyzed the extent to which the two variables correlated. A correlational analysis was conducted to examine whether lower attendance rates are associated with lower reading assessment performance across the four classrooms.

This analysis helped determine the strength and direction of the relationship between absenteeism and literacy outcomes in early elementary students.

Qualitative data was analyzed using thematic analysis. Interview notes were reviewed and coded for recurring patterns, central ideas, and shared experiences across participants to support thematic analysis of teachers' perceptions of absenteeism, its impact on literacy instruction, and contextual factors such as student background, family circumstances, or learning needs.

The study sample included all first-grade students in four classrooms at a Title I elementary school, along with their teachers—coded as Teacher A, B, C, or D—who participated in interviews. This population was selected because early literacy development is especially sensitive in early education.

Quantitative and qualitative findings of this study are described below.

Research Question 1: What is the relationship between student attendance rates and reading achievement in first grade?

Quantitative analysis indicates a clear relationship between student attendance and reading growth. On average, students measured approximately 25 points of reading growth from winter to spring, with 78% of students showing overall improvement. However, when disaggregated by attendance, differences in growth became more pronounced. The school district where this study occurred uses categories of low, moderate, and high absenteeism to track student absences. Students with low absenteeism (0–5 days) demonstrated the highest average growth (approximately 32

points), compared to 24 points for students with moderate absenteeism (6–14 days) and 15 points for students with high absenteeism (15 or more days). Results showed a moderate negative relationship between absenteeism and reading growth, suggesting that increased absences are associated with reduced academic progress. These findings align with prior research demonstrating that even moderate levels of absenteeism can negatively impact academic achievement (Gottfried, 2010).

Qualitative data from this study also supported this finding. Teacher A noted, “The students who are here every day are the ones who make the biggest jumps in reading.” Teacher C emphasized that consistent attendance allows for “continuity in instruction,” which is essential in early literacy development where skills build sequentially. These findings align with research suggesting that early literacy development depends heavily on consistent instructional exposure (Allington, 2012).

Research Question 2: How do patterns of absenteeism (frequency and duration) appear to influence reading performance for first-grade students in a Title I school?

The data suggest that both the frequency and duration of absences significantly influenced reading performance. Students with frequent or prolonged absences demonstrated lower overall growth and were less likely to meet benchmark expectations. Students with 15 or more absences averaged approximately 15 points of growth, less than half the gains observed among students with strong attendance. Students with 20 or more absences were more likely to show stagnation or regression. These findings are consistent with research linking chronic absenteeism to lower

academic outcomes, particularly in high-poverty school contexts (Chang & Romero, 2008).

Teacher perspectives reinforced the findings that link attendance with learning. Teacher B explained that missing instruction during the introduction of new skills created significant learning gaps, while Teacher D emphasized that consecutive absences disrupted instructional continuity. These observations align with research highlighting instructional time as a critical factor in student achievement (Ready, 2010; Willingham, 2009).

Quantitative data was analyzed using descriptive statistics and comparative group analysis to examine the relationship between attendance and reading growth. Reading growth was calculated using the difference between winter and spring benchmark scores. Students were grouped by attendance level to identify patterns in achievement. Results indicated a consistent negative relationship between absenteeism and reading growth. A scatterplot of individual student data points shows a downward trendline, reinforcing the finding that increased absences are associated with decreased reading progress (see Fig. 1).

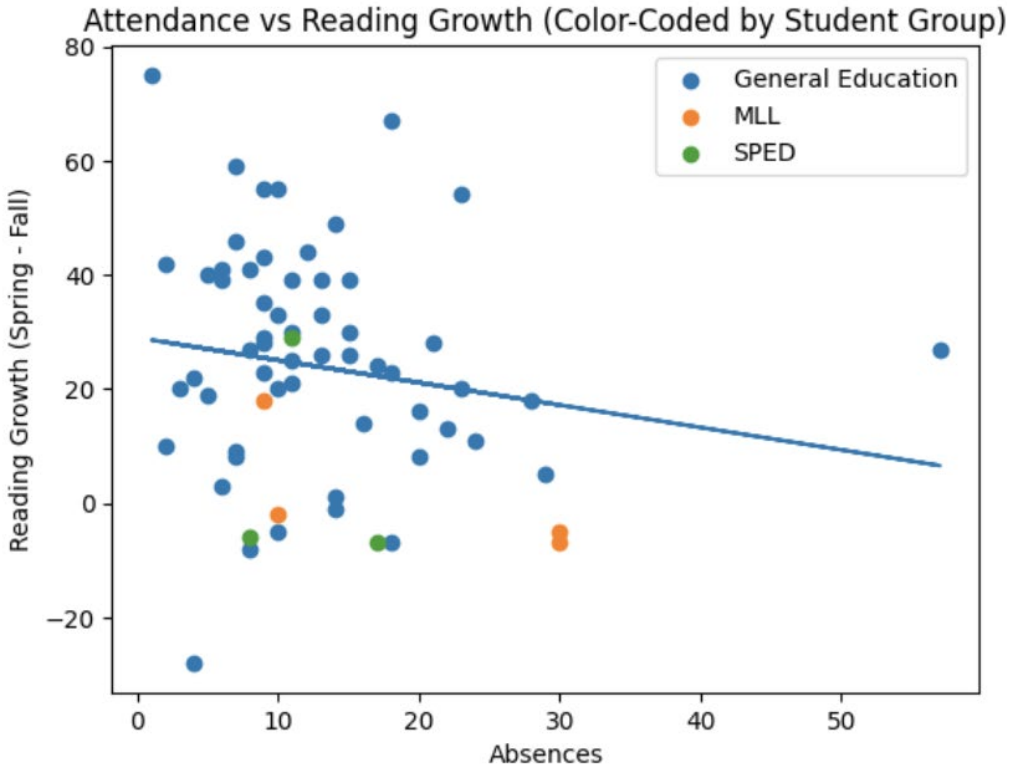


Figure 1: Attendance and Reading Growth

While the study was context-specific to a Title I school setting, alignment with prior research increases confidence in the consistency of findings. Care was taken in interpreting findings to avoid framing absenteeism as an individual deficit. Instead, absenteeism was contextualized within broader systemic and structural factors that may influence student access to schooling, including socioeconomic conditions and family circumstances.

Discussion

The findings from this study point to a consistent relationship between attendance and reading achievement. Students with higher attendance showed greater

reading growth, while increased absenteeism was associated with reduced academic progress across all data sources. Moreover, differences in growth across attendance groups were both statistically and educationally meaningful. Students with strong attendance consistently outperformed peers with moderate or high absenteeism, suggesting that instructional time plays a central role in early literacy development. These findings align with existing research emphasizing the importance of consistent attendance for academic achievement (Gottfried, 2014; Ready, 2010). Teacher perspectives further reinforced these findings, identifying attendance as a key factor, which influences instructional effectiveness and student progress. School attendance functions as both an academic and equity-related factor in early literacy development. While quantitative results demonstrate a clear relationship between absenteeism and reduced reading growth, qualitative findings provide context for how this relationship operates within instruction. Missing instructional time disrupts sequential skill development in early literacy, making even short absences impactful. This suggests that learning loss accumulates when students are not consistently present for instruction and intervention.

Additionally, students who require additional support, such as multilingual learners (MLLs) and students receiving special education services (SPED), may experience compounded effects of absenteeism. This raises important equity concerns, as reduced access to instruction may widen existing achievement gaps. Improving attendance is an instructional priority and an equity issue that requires systemic attention. Teachers see the effects of school absences directly. Their lesson pacing is disrupted when some students are absent. Then when these students return to class,

teachers must backfill what they missed while also moving instruction forward for other learners who have not missed school. Absenteeism reduces curriculum coverage, interferes with the effectiveness of interventions, and creates gaps in foundational literacy development. Taken together, the findings in this study suggest that attendance is a key determinant of instructional access and early literacy success.

Classroom teachers, reading interventionists, and librarians support foundational literacy learning. Teachers rely on consistent instructional time to build foundational literacy skills such as phonics, fluency, and comprehension. Reading interventionists partner with classroom teachers to provide needed support, and librarians locate resources and provide additional aid. With a team approach, educators can impact the reading growth of students who attend school regularly and benefit from daily instructional continuity.

Monitoring attendance patterns must also be part of teachers' instructional decision-making. They may need to be proactive in identifying students with frequent absences and adjust instruction through reteaching, targeted small-group support, or coordination with intervention services. For reading specialists and librarians, the findings highlight the importance of expanding literacy exposure opportunities beyond core instruction. Students who miss classroom learning may benefit from supplemental reading experiences, targeted literacy interventions, and accessible resources that help bridge instructional gaps.

Conclusion

Early reading skills are cumulative; missing instruction can have a compounding effect over time. Students who attend school regularly benefit from repeated exposure to skills, guided practice, and immediate feedback, all of which are essential for reading development. In contrast, students with frequent absences miss key instructional moments that are difficult to replicate independently. This study invites further conversation about absenteeism that disproportionately affects students who are already receiving additional support, including multilingual learners and students with individualized education plans, because inconsistent access to instruction can widen existing achievement gaps. Conversations about curriculum design and instructional planning of early literacy instruction that is sequential and cumulative can contribute to improving student learning. To help absent students re-engage with core learning objectives, educators might consider a spiral review of key literacy skills, built-in reteaching opportunities, and supplemental materials for missed instruction. To alter absenteeism, schools might implement proactive attendance monitoring systems, strengthen family-school communication practices, and identify and reduce barriers to attendance, such as transportation and childcare challenges. These strategies position attendance not only as an individual responsibility but as a shared community and systemic issue. Addressing absenteeism requires collaboration among schools, families, and community organizations.

The authors conclude that attendance is a foundational factor in early literacy success and an important equity consideration in Title I school contexts. From our observations and study findings, we note that improving student outcomes requires not

only strong instructional practices, but also systems that ensure consistent access to learning. Addressing absenteeism, therefore, represents both an academic priority and a broader commitment to educational equity.

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