

Patterns of Student Absenteeism in Addis Ababa Government Senior High Schools and Considerations for Containment

Darge Wole*

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Introduction

Student absenteeism has been recognized as an insidious antecedent of low academic achievement and attrition (Brantner, 1972; Akins, 1980; Darge, 1997), and substantial efforts have been made to identify strategies for curtailing it (e.g Galloway, 1982; Brown, 1990; Thompson, 1990). However, the search for counter strategy is handicapped by inadequate understanding of possible cyclic or prominent features in the phenomenon - such as patterns of absenteeism across weekdays or months. It is important to determine these kinds of patterns in student absenteeism because this would indicate which specific times or which groups deserve focal attention practically. Pattern

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identification also avails streamlined information for cross-cultural (theoretical) analysis. The present study is inspired by these considerations.

Literature and Framework

The few available empirical findings are first summarized. Theoretical viewpoints and contextual factors that guide the study are then stated.

Limited evidence suggests that weekdays, sex and grade level are associated with the rate of student absenteeism. For example, in a study involving 9th to 12th graders, Levanto (1975) found that absenteeism was less frequent on Wednesdays and Thursdays than on other days. In addition, Levanto detected a lower rate of absenteeism among males than among females, and a positive relationship between grade level and absenteeism. Levanto's findings regarding the relationship between grade level and absenteeism received some confirmation from another investigation (Galloway, 1976). However, other studies (eg. CCSD, 1980; Wise, 1994; Darge, 1997) detected no reliable differences of the type although they too investigated the characteristics pertaining to the senior high school grades.

The rates of absenteeism for school shifts, months and semesters are even more cloudy. One study (Kovas, 1986) suggests that absenteeism is greater and more resistant to influence in the second semester than in the first. Other tangential information concerning primary schooling further indicates that absenteeism is higher in some months than in others. For example, locally, Anbesu and Jung (1988) found November, December and April to be peak times for absenteeism in the elementary grades. Evidence from another developing country (PIJ, 1992) also indicated that generally there were more absentees in December than in September. According to both sources, the fluctuation in rate of absenteeism

is related to whether or not there is parental demand for child labor.

The available evidence concerning the rate of absenteeism in local primary schools is essentially limited to a global consideration of male/female absenteeism, and it fails to provide reliable clues about patterns of student absenteeism in high schools. For example, one study (IDS & MOE, 1996) indicated greater absenteeism among boys than among girls. In this study, the major reason for absenteeism among girls was identified to be work overload at home. However, other studies (Anbesu and Jung, 1988; Assefa, 1991) reported no difference in the rate of absenteeism of boys and girls.

Generally, some evidence suggests that there could very well be variations in the rate of absenteeism among senior high school students depending on their sex, the grade level, semester, month and weekday. However, paucity of evidence renders this observation tentative. Specific patterns of absenteeism are even more shadowy.

One theoretical viewpoint for investigating patterns of student-absenteeism is Rotter's Social Learning Theory (Rotter, 1982). The theory proposes that behavior - or student attendance in this case - is a function of expectation of reward for the behavior, the value attached to the reward, and the psychological situation, or the individuals understanding of the environmental conditions at the time of behavior. From the theory, it is axiomatic that the behavior of the individual changes as the determinants of that behavior change.

In reference to school settings, the Social Learning Theory would postulate that the usefulness of instruction (as perceived by the individual student), the teaching-learning conditions and other relevant situational factors determine school attendance. Pursued further, the theory implies that some circumstances (or cues) may facilitate student attendance while others discourage

it. So a student may show greater attendance at one point of period (day, month, etc.) than at another.

The Role Strain Theory (Pearlin, 1983) provides a complementary perspective to the issue of student absenteeism. This theory posits that when individuals face constraints in carrying out their regular duties or responsibilities on various accounts, they develop tension, and in a bid for resolution, they may de-value their initial roles and replace them with roles that were initially peripheral. In the present context, the theory would propose that students who, for personal or other reasons, find it difficult to regularly pursue their studies, resort to non-scholastic activities which they did not originally consider significant or becoming. Absenteeism marks such a departure.

Aside from theory, there are down-to-earth contextual reasons in local situations which suggest that student absenteeism could vary from time to time, or from group to group. Concerning the 10-month academic calendar¹, for example, some of them are uniquely loaded with holy days and holy day moods, festivities and fasting. In this regard, *Tir* and *Miazia* (roughly corresponding to January and April, respectively) are perhaps the most notable ones embracing as they do the Ethiopian Epiphany, Ramadan, the Ethiopian Easter and the innumerable wedding days.²

Moreover, the first semester distinguishes itself from the second in the fact that it comes immediately (and perhaps arousingly) after a two-month vacation, and the student sees ahead of him a full ten months to make the best of his schooling rather than only five months, which is the case in the second semester. Likewise, school shifts have their own distinct qualities. For example, the morning shift requires early wakefulness while the afternoon shift demands careful scheduling of morning activities to avoid their overflow into the afternoon. When it comes to weekdays, the frequent reference to "Black Monday" (in contrast to the non-descript Tuesday, Wednesday or Thursday) so reminiscent of early industrial settings (Kossoris, 1947) is probably true of academic institutions as well.

Pertaining to grade levels, the ninth grade is particularly interesting because it is a threshold to the senior high school with new challenges that may be both exciting and intimidating. Traditional views regarding child upbringing may also provide an ambiguous background in relation to the prediction of the school attendance of male and female students. For instance, parental control is generally more stringent on female children than on male children, and on the whole, greater emphasis is placed on the education of males than females.

Overall, consonant with theory, it appears that the characteristics of the various segments of the academic calendar, the grade levels and the students induce variations in the rate of student absenteeism in senior high schools.

Problem Statement

The study raised the following questions regarding government senior high school students in Addis Ababa.

- ◆ Is there a difference in the rate of absenteeism across (a) weekdays, (b) months of the academic year, (c) semesters, and (d) morning and afternoon shifts?
- ◆ Is there a relationship between rate of absenteeism and grade level?
- ◆ What are the major reasons for student absenteeism and what options are available for reducing the problem?

In each of the questions raised above, the focus of interest is on delineating the situation regarding male and female students *separately*.

In the present context, absenteeism is defined as class cutting for one full school shift that is indicated by an "X" mark or alternate sign (such as 'a') alongside the name of each student on the roll call forms of schools. It involves both deliberate

actions (as in truancy) and the non-deliberate (Page and Thomas, 1977; Dejnozka, 1983).

Method

A description of the schools and the respondents involved in the study is given first, to be followed by an account of the methods of data collection and analysis.

Schools and Respondents

Three government senior high schools located in different types of neighborhoods in Addis Ababa were deliberately selected for the study. They were Addis Ketema Comprehensive School (**AK**), a school located amid a highly commercial densely populated neighborhood; Ayer Tena Senior High School (**AT**), a school on the outskirts of Addis Ababa, adjacent agricultural communities, also characterized by a relatively low population density; and Kokebe Tsibah Comprehensive School (**KT**), an inner city school in a largely compact residential area with limited business activities.

Proximity and concentration of schools determined the choice of Addis Ababa as the site of the study.³ Focus was made on government schools (instead of non-government ones) because it was assumed that unlike students who paid for their education and felt impelled to attend school regularly on that account, students in government schools would show a degree of absenteeism that was sufficiently visible for pattern detection. The three schools were selected with an eye on neighborhood representation (central-commercial, central-residential, and peripheral). AK was a prominent choice from a commercial melting-pot; AT and KT qualified for inclusion partly due to their position in the city, and partly due to the results of a short tour of relevant schools to assess the adequacy of their roll call data.⁴

The study included eighteen (day program) sections that had the most conclusively kept attendance record. Six sections (two per

grade level - i.e., grades 9-11)⁵ were selected from each school. The investigation involved 754 females and 751 males (545 from AK, 537 from AT and 423 from KT). In sum 530 ninth graders, 478 tenth graders and 497 eleventh graders were included in the study.

Method of Data Collection

From each grade and shift, unit leaders and record officers in the three schools identified two sections that they believed had the most reliable and complete attendance record for the 1997/98 academic year. So altogether students in 18 sections (one section from the morning shift and another from the afternoon shift in each grade and school) were involved in the study.

Information regarding the 1505 students⁶ was then collected from roll call rosters for each school day of *Tikimt*, *Hidar*, *Tahsas*, *Yekatit*, *Miazia* and *Ginbot* which roughly correspond to October, November, December, February, April and May. *Meskerem*, *Tir*, *Megabit* and *Sene*, which approximately coincide with September, January, March and June, were excluded from the study because in one school or another the roll call data for these months were markedly incomplete.⁷

At each grade level in the three schools, a questionnaire (in Amharic) was also administered to thirty students (15 males and 15 females). The respondents were randomly selected out of those students who had some record of absenteeism. The questionnaire inquired about the reasons for student absenteeism and about possible solutions to the problem. Out of the 270 questionnaires so administered 247 (Males = 122; Females = 125) were properly completed.

Additionally, interviews were conducted with experienced academic staff in each school, including homeroom teachers and counselors, as well as with discreetly selected students from the three grades for the purpose of obtaining further information that could help in explaining the results of the study.⁸

Method of Analysis

An initial descriptive analysis involved absenteeism data on all concerned students. However, subsequent comparative investigations, which aimed at pattern detection across the variables of interest (i.e., weekday, month, semester, shift and grade) considered only those students in each grade whose sections had equivalent number of roll calls.⁹

The number of roll calls class sections had (which is the total number of roll calls made in each section) were considered comparable if, according to the 10% cut-off point for excusable and non-excusable absenteeism stipulated by the Ministry of Education (MOE, 1987), they afforded a similar chance to students to be assigned to the "Permissible" category (referring to absenteeism rate of less than 10%) or to the "Non-Permissible" one (referring to absenteeism rate of 10% or more). For instance, a couple of students with two days of absenteeism each, one coming from a section where 16 roll calls were made, and another from a section where 20 roll calls were conducted, would be presumed to face similar criteria for allocation to the "Non-Permissible" category because in both cases the threshold (criterion) for assignment into that category would be 2 days (i.e., 10% of 16 or 10% of 20, rounded to the nearest whole number).¹⁰

In the comparative analysis of the rate of absenteeism across weekdays and the six months, the relative status of students on absenteeism was coded either as "1" (Permissible) or "0" (Non-Permissible). Cochran's Q Test for dichotomous data involving multiple samples (Marascuilo & Serlin, 1988) was then applied on the information for males and females at each grade level. Similarly, the McNemar Test (for correlated samples) was employed in the analysis of the data concerning the two 3 - month blocks (*Tikimt, Hidar & Tahsas* = Quasi - semester 1; *Yekatit, Miazia & Ginbot* = Quasi - semester 2). Also, the relationship of absenteeism to school shift (morning, afternoon) and to grade level was explored using the chi-square test for

independent samples. Alpha of 0.05 was pre-set as significance level for all statistical tests.

Results

Descriptive data appear first. Subsequent statistical analysis focus on identification of patterns in the rate of absenteeism. A summary of the findings about the reasons and possible remedies for absenteeism would then follow.

Absenteeism During the Six-month Period

The overall picture of the rates of absenteeism in the three schools during the six-month period is depicted in Table 1.

Table 1: % of Absentees for a 6 month Period by Grade, Sex and School

School/Rate of Absenteeism (%) [*]	% of Students with Rates of Various Absenteeism					
	Grade 9		Grade 10		Grade 11	
	M	F	M	F	M	F
number	60	94	113	84	106	88
AK 0-4.9%	54.7	55.3	53.1	54.7	22.7	35.2
5-9.9	10.9	19.1	18.6	17.9	18.9	21.6
10 & above (10+)	34.4	25.6	28.3	27.4	58.4	43.2
number	99	116	84	72	93	73
AT 0.4.9%	34.3	37.9	40.5	50.7	17.2	27.8
5-9.9	16.2	23.3	25.0	15.1	16.1	26.4
10+	49.5	38.8	34.5	34.2	66.7	45.8
number	71	90	58	67	67	70
KT 0.4.9%	31.4	40.0	29.8	44.1	46.3	45.7
5-9.9	28.6	16.7	29.8	23.5	25.4	21.4
10+	40.0	43.3	40.4	32.4	28.3	32.9
Overall -10+ Only	42.6	36.0	32.9	31.4	53.8	40.7

^{*}The rates of absenteeism are computed in reference to the total number of roll call days for the entire 6 months. The average roll call days were grade 9: 95; Grade 10: 80; and Grade 11: 82.

Generally the data in Table 1 are unsettling although caution is required when deriving other conclusions from them. For instance, among male tenth graders 84 students (i.e., 32.9% of 255) may be presumed to have been absent for 8 days or more (i.e., at or beyond 10% of 80 roll call days) during the entire six months. Similarly among male eleventh graders, 143 students

(i.e., 53.8% of 266) were absent for 8 days or more, which is at or beyond 10% of the 82 roll call days.

Another look at the 10+ absenteeism rate suggests that the rate becomes most prominent in AT, and that the serious problem is in the eleventh grade level rather than in the other levels.

Absenteeism During Weekdays

The statistical analysis of the data for weekdays was based on permissible and non-permissible absenteeisms. In this regard, information on all the students in the six ninth grade sections were utilized because the roll call days for them were sufficiently similar (17-22 days). In the case of tenth and eleventh graders, however, the analysis involved data that pertained to students just from three sections (from each grade) because it was only those sections which had tolerably comparable number of roll calls (i.e., 16-23). Also, at each grade level, the number of absenteeisms for a student on a particular day across the six months was counted "Non-permissible" if it was equal to or exceeded two days (see "Method of Analysis" section for details). Following is a summary of the analysis.

Table 2: Number and % of Non-Permissible Absenteeisms per Weekday and Associated Q Values

Grade/Sex	No. and % of Non-permissible Absenteeisms					Q
	M	Tu	W	Th	F	
9 th Male(n=236)	105(44.5)*	85 (36.0)	71 (30.1)	100(42.4)	82(34.7)	34.9**
9 th Female(n=296)	101(34.1)	95(32.1)	86(29.1)	107(36.1)	83(28.0)	13.1**
10 th Male (n=125)	36(28.8)	29(23.2)	35(28.0)	37(29.6)	33(26.4)	5.7
10 th Female (n=106)	30(28.3)	21(19.8)	20(18.9)	16(15.1)	22(20.8)	20.5**
11 th Male(n=108)	43(39.8)	33(30.6)	31(28.7)	47(43.5)	33(30.6)	20.1**
11 th Female (n=117)	44(37.6)	33(28.2)	28(23.9)	45(38.5)	36(30.8)	13.2**

* Percentages are in parentheses. Since Cochran's test utilizes both the Permissible and Non-Permissible counts, it was only a matter of discretion as to which should be presented here.

** P<.05.

Evidently, except in one isolated case, there seems to be a reliable difference in the rate of student absenteeism across the five weekdays. In other words, there is a difference between at least one pair of the weekdays in the proportion of absentees. Pair-wise comparisons further revealed statistically significant differences of the following order.

Grade 9: *Monday > Wednesday* (Males)
Thursday > Friday (Females)

Grade 10: *Monday > Thursday* (Females)

Grade 11: *Thursday > Wednesday* (Males)
Monday > Wednesday and Thursday > Wednesday (Females)

Generally, it appears that absenteeism is relatively higher on Mondays and Thursdays than on Wednesdays, but Monday emerges as the most deprived of days. There is no evidence, however, to suggest that differences between weekday absenteeisms are influenced by sex or grade.

Absenteeism During Individual Months

The analysis regarding the differences in the rate of absenteeism among the six months was based on data concerning students in two sections at each of the three grade levels (since the number of roll calls for the other sections showed incompatibly wide divergence). The range of the number of roll calls for individual months for the selected six sections was 16-22, and students who were absent for two days or more in any single month were assigned a "0" (Not-permissible) for that month. The rest obtained "1" (permissible). Table 3 provides the results of Cochran Q analysis.

As Table 3 shows in most cases there is a considerable difference in the rate of absenteeism across the six months. Among male eleventh graders, for example, the rate ranges from 36.1% to 16.7%. Pair-wise comparisons based on the findings

indicated in Table 3 further produced the following statistically reliable differences.

Grade 9: *Miazia* > *Yekatit* (Males)

Grade 10: *Miazia* > *Tikmt*; *Miazia* > *Hidar*; *Miazia* > *Tahsas* (Males);
Miazia > *Hidar*; *Ginbot* > *Hidar* (Females)

Grade 11: *Ginbot* > *Tikmt* (Males);
Yekatit > *Tahsas* and *Ginbot* > *Tahsas* (Females)

Table 3: No. and Percent of Non-permissible Absenteeisms Per Month and Associated Q Values

Grade/Sex		Number and Percent of Non-Permissible Absenteeisms						Q
		<i>Tikmt</i>	<i>Hidar</i>	<i>Tahsas</i>	<i>Yekatit</i>	<i>Miazia</i>	<i>Ginbot</i>	
9 th	Males(n=62)	18(29.0)*	19(30.6)	19(30.6)	9(13.2)	21(33.9)	13(21.0)	12.83**
	Females (n=93)	32(34.4)	30(32.3)	31(33.3)	29(31.2)	34(36.6)	31(33.3)	5.68
10 th	Males(n=72)	13(18.1)	13(18.1)	19(26.4)	27(37.5)	34(47.2)	24(33.3)	32.4**
	Females (n=63)	6(9.5)	4(6.3)	8(12.7)	11(17.5)	18(28.6)	17(27.0)	22.3**
11 th	Males (n=72)	26(36.1)	24(33.3)	19(26.4)	25(34.7)	17(23.6)	12(16.7)	20.0**
	Females (n=89)	25(28.1)	23(25.8)	14(15.7)	30(33.7)	19(21.3)	29(32.6)	16.9**

* The percentages appear in parentheses.

** P < .05

Apparently *Miazia*, and to a lesser extent, *Yekatit* and *Ginbot*, are high points in student absenteeism. Interestingly too *Miazia* features as a month of large absence among ninth and tenth graders while *Ginbot* is a month of large absence among eleventh graders.

Absenteeism During the Quasi - Semesters

Investigation of the relative status of the two Q-semesters in the rate of student absenteeism involved only those sections (and students by corollary) who were exposed to similar numbers of roll calls in the two Q-semesters. There were two such sections from each grade level, and for analysis, the attendance record of each student in those sections was marked as either a "+" (less than 10% of the total number of roll calls) or a "-" (10% or

greater). The McNemar test involving the categorical data so determined resulted in the following.

According to Table 4, there is a consistent relationship between absenteeism and Q-semester among male students only. Re-visit of more specific data confirms the soundness of the present finding since those data show that at each grade level and in each school, the absenteeism rate of male students was higher in Q-semester 2 than in Q-semester 1.

Table 4: Relationship Between Q-semester and Absenteeism

Grade	Obtained X ² Values (McNemar)	
	Males	Females
9 th	4.96*(n=83)	0.30(n=102)
10 th	9.48*(n=58)	1.70(n=67)
11 th	4.03*(n=84)	1.33(n=85)

* P < .05

Absenteeism During Morning and Afternoon Shifts

Examination of the relationship between shift and rate of absenteeism focused on the data for students belonging only to those sections where a comparable number of roll calls for the morning and afternoon shifts were made.¹¹ There were four such sections (two morning and two corresponding afternoon sections) in grade 9, but only two sections (one from the morning shift and another from the afternoon) in grade 10 as well as in grade 11. Chi-square analysis (Permissibility x shift)¹² produced the following results.

Apparently, in most cases, there is no systematic relationship between school shift and rate of absenteeism, except the notable exceptions concerning male absenteeism during the second Q-semester in grade 9 and the first Q-semester in grade 10.

Table 5: Relationship between School Shift & Rate of Absenteeism

Grade/Q-semester		Obtained X^2 Values by Sex	
		Males	Females
9 th	Q-Semester 1	1.56 (n=163)	1.58 (n=212)
	Q-Semester 2	7.75* (n=165)	2.00 (n=212)
10 th	Q-Semester 1	5.80* (n=94)	0.03 (n=79)
	Q-Semester 2	0.79 (n=94)	0.08 (n=79)
11 th	Q-Semester 1	0.23 (n=106)	0.05 (n=88)
	Q-Semester 2	3.83 (n=106)	0.04 (n=88)

* $P < .05$

Absenteeism and Grade Level

Students attending nine sections (three sections from each grade level) had similar number of roll calls for the six months (91 or 92 roll calls for grade 9; 87-91 for grade 10 and 95-98 for grade 11). Following the 10% cut-off point for determining satisfactory status in absenteeism, the obtained frequencies were cast into a Permissibility x Grade matrix for each sex and subjected to chi-square analysis.

The results were statistically significant both in the case of males ($X^2 = 8.03$; $p < .05$) and females ($X^2 = 9.62$, $P < .05$). Closer inspection of the frequency data suggested that a lower rate of both male and female absenteeism is associated with the tenth grade. To elaborate, in the sections considered, the percentages of male grade 9, 10 and 11 students who had unsatisfactory (Non-permissible) status regarding absenteeism were 47, 30

nd 37 respectively. The corresponding proportions in the case of females were 36, 20 and 38.

Table 6: Reasons for Absenteeism as Indicated by Students in Grades 9-11*

Responses by Males (n=122)			Responses by Females (n=125)		
Reason	% Citing Reason	Rank	Reason	% Citing Reason	Rank
Illness	85.2	1	Illness	76.0	1
Gate hold up**	37.7	2.5	Attendance at ceremonies	32.0	2.5
School distance	37.7	2.5	Gate hold up	32.0	2.5
Work (for self-help)	35.2	4	Work (to help parents/guardians)	30.4	4
Frustration with teaching methods	27.9	5	School distance	28.0	5
Work (to help parents/guardians)	26.2	6	Work (for self-help)	23.2	6
Attendance at ceremonies***	20.5	7	Shortage of stationery	19.2	7

* Only those reasons cited by about 20% or more of respondents are presented here.

** Gate hold up = keeping students at the school gate if they arrive late.

*** The ceremonies include festivities as well as mourning occasions.

Reasons for Absenteeism and Leads to Solutions

The results of the questionnaires pertaining to the reasons for absenteeism are presented in Table 6.

According to Table 6, the most serious reason for absenteeism among both male and female students is illness. However, this finding proved to be a prime suspect because during the interview many respondents intimated that it is common for students to advance the said reason to escape personal responsibility. Similarly, the hold up at the gate may be taken (at best) as an exacerbating factor but not as a basic reason for absenteeism because it is only the latecomers who face it.

Considering the whole range of the table, however differences in the responses of male and female students revealing. Overall, it appears that more males than females are absent from school classes due to distance of school, working for self-maintenance and disappointing teaching methods. On the contrary, it is found that more females than males become absent from school because of parental demand for labor, family withholding ceremonies, and inadequacy of stationery.

Interview data provided supplementary information about the reasons for absenteeism. These include: the relatively large amount of homework teachers give on Fridays (making it difficult for the non-chalant to appear at school on Mondays with completed homework), the overflow of morning personal engagements into afternoon hours, students' habit of chewing *chat* (*catha edulis*), drinking and gambling that appears most unbridled in the afternoons, the relatively loose parental supervision of male children, the adjustment problem of ninth graders who often come from far away feeder schools, and the feeling of helplessness evinced by some eleventh graders in the face of a difficult course of study and a pre-eminent national examination, the Ethiopian School Leaving Certificate Examination (ESLCE).

Regarding mechanisms for reducing absenteeism, over forty different suggestions were collected from the questionnaires and the interviews, which may be categorized as follows:

protection from distracters/ debilitators – such as, avoiding drinking houses, gambling and drug spots from the school environment;

amendment of regulations and schedule – such as, admitting latecomers to class after the first period, arranging entertainment during break in school;

parental support and supervision - such as, reducing domestic work assignment contacting schools more frequently; *teacher effectiveness* – such as, improving teaching methods, taking attendance personally and regularly;

enhancing self-management – such as, doing homework consistently, always carrying identification card.

Overall, the respondents advanced more than others the following suggestions: close supervision by teachers and guardians, improvement of teaching methods, and protection from distractors.

Discussion

The issues at hand include the distinctiveness of the patterns of absenteeism, their underpinnings, and the propositions for addressing them.

Patterns

Some patterns do seem to exist in student absenteeism in the schools of the type investigated. Among weekdays, Monday appears to be particularly notorious. Among months, it is *Miazia*, followed by *Yekatit* and *Ginbot*. Similarly it appears that ninth and eleventh graders are more susceptible to absenteeism than tenth graders, and male students more prone than females. Though not impressive, the data further suggest that the afternoon shift and the second semester are afflicted with more absenteisms than the morning shift and the first semester respectively.

Moreover, the rates of absenteeism, re-cast into approximate clock and calendar time, are substantial. Considering the data for the six months and for all groups together, on the average, the amount of absenteeism per student ranged from 26-53 minutes for each school day, 1.4-3.9 days a month, and 6-10 days per Q-semester.¹³

Underpinnings

To begin with, Monday appears to be a threshold to uninspiring parade of school days, or alternatively, a transitional point from a relatively lazy weekend to restrictive and laborious weekdays. Students who fail to finish their relatively cumbersome homework during the weekend readily choose to miss school on Monday presumably to escape eminent disciplinary action. Those who enjoyed some relaxation during the two days, need time to shake off the inertia that usually results from such a break and are reluctant to re-join school the following Monday. Apparently, there are also students who dash out on petty business to far-flung towns along the Addis Ababa - Djibouti railway during the weekend and need some breathing space beyond Sunday before returning to class.

Month-wise, *Miazia* is widely recognized as a prime-time for weddings and associated festivities - such as the *mels* (literally "homecoming" of all sorts for the newly wed and the entourage), or *kilikil* ('get together' for the relatives of the bride and the bridegroom). *Yekatit* is, at least in part, a period contrived inertia because it marks the beginning of the second semester - a time which, like the beginnings of other academic seasons, does not seem to be taken seriously both by students and teachers.

During *Yekatit* and *Miazia*, the handing over of Semester results, the subsequent haggling over marks and student frustrations emanating therefrom sometimes result in class cutting. In addition, from *Yekatit* onwards, it appears that the academically desperate resort to threats and similar misconduct which often results in their temporary suspension. During the same period, it further seems that the academically ambitious students attending poorly instructed classes sharply feel the gap in their education and deliberately absent themselves from school with the intention of repeating the grade (upon the pretext of an inexcusable amount of absenteeism).

Regarding the higher rate of absenteeism during the second Q-semester, it is essentially attributable (by virtue of the definition of the Q-semester itself) to the factors identified above in connection with *Yekatit*, *Miazia* and *Ginbot*. However, as the findings indicated, the problem seems evident only among male students which suggests that whatever dysfunctional reactions students may manifest in reaction to academic frustrations (such as willful class cutting on the pretext of alleged illness or work assignment at home), these they assume more extreme dimensions among boys than among girls.

The limited findings about the higher rate of absenteeism in the afternoon shift (vis-a-vis the morning shift) relate only to males, specially to those in grades 9 and 10. The habit or ritual of taking non-prescription substances (including alcohol and *chat* following lunchtime, which appears to be alarmingly evident among male students) is one likely explanation for the phenomenon. This flight into drug and alcohol is all the more aggravated by the fact that those teachers who carry heavy teaching loads in the morning hours simply fizzle out in the afternoon and pose predictably uninviting class sessions. Other factors that may contribute to the explanation of the finding include the comparatively cumbersome subject load of ninth and tenth graders (13 subjects in contrast to 7 for eleventh graders), and, particularly in reference to the ninth grade, the suffocation and distress resulting from overcrowding and the mid-day heat.¹⁴

Perhaps the most weighty reasons for the higher rate of absenteeism among ninth and eleventh graders (compared to tenth graders) relate to the overall adjustment problems of the former and the strictly academic plights of the latter. Ninth graders are required to study a greater number of subjects than they used to (13 in grade 9 compared to less than 10 in grades 7 and 8). Pooled as they are from widely scattered feeder schools, most of them also have to cover longer distances to attend the new school. Moreover, being part of the youngest adolescent batch in the senior grades, female ninth graders are goaded into

detrimental conduct (like absenteeism and loafing) by reckless male braggarts in grades 11 and 12.

Concerning the eleventh graders, they often plunge into academic streams (Arts or Science) dictated more by peer opinion or presumed prestige of jobs associated with the streams rather than by a cool assessment of their past achievement and potential. What is more, it seems that in general, the eleventh grade poses considerable difficulties for students (presumably due to a radical departure of the syllabus from earlier ones), and that makes things even worse for those who initially chose the wrong stream or who were misplaced. There is yet another discouraging factor in store in the sense that to those eleventh graders faltering academically at this stage, the spectre of the ESLCE looms ominously large. Given such conditions, for such students, the move from near-resignation to absenteeism is easy to take.

Explanations about the higher rate of absenteeism among males probably rest on two major considerations.¹⁵ First, traditionally, unlike females, males are generally encouraged to fend for themselves as early as possible. Coupled with that, as all adolescents living in an urban environment that is strewn with tantalizing commodities, they are likely to experience widening interests and tastes, which would in turn generate a strong urge to secure cash for meeting the acquired needs. Apparently some of these male students engage in petty trades and sundry work (like peddling or serving as *wayala*, i.e., taxi attendant) to achieve that end, but such engagements compete with their school attendance. Female students may entertain the same or even a wider range of interests, but they probably venture less for fear of risks (along trade corridors or on taxis, for example).

Second, partly due to the susceptibility of their age to adventurousness, and partly due to implicit social sanction of substance use by men, male students fanatically develop the habit of drinking and *chat* chewing, and that again interferes with

class attendance. By contrast, females are less prone to such habits primarily due to cultural restraints.

Significantly, the above explanations about the differential rates of absenteeism for the various time brackets or groups fit the theoretical models mentioned earlier in the paper. For instance, congruent with predictions on the basis of the Social Learning theory, prevailing social and psychological conditions - including the weekend hangover affecting Monday classes, the drinking in the afternoon hours, and the holy day moods of *Miazia* - give shape to patterns of absenteeism along time dimensions. In addition, in line with the Role Strain theory, such sources of stress as the cumbersome size of subject areas in the ninth grade, the imposing face of the eleventh grade syllabus, and the onerous chores to support oneself or to assist one's family while still in school, exacerbate absenteeism among specific groups.

Towards the Reduction of Absenteeism

Suggestions by the respondents (both students and staff) concerning means of reducing absenteeism offer some starting points for dealing with the problems at peak points, although in a number of cases, the suggestions appear to be controversial or impractical.

Regarding the Monday blight, for example, it has been proposed that reducing excessive homework on Fridays, enforcing consistent teacher presence on Mondays and admitting to class even those students who claim to have forgotten their identification cards at home or who come late by a few minutes help in minimizing the problem. Some evidence (Bryk, 1989) actually supports the importance of the regular presence of teachers to encourage student attendance. However, reducing homework simply for the sake of easing student life hinders learning. Similarly, leniency in gate-side control or inspection may prove counter-productive because students are likely to take it as a rule rather than an exception and act even more carelessly after that.

Concerning absenteeism in the afternoon shift, again the solutions are hardly straightforward. It may, for instance, be possible to attract more students for the shift by reducing the teaching load of teachers for the morning sessions (thereby allowing them to save some energy for the afternoon sessions), but if that is broadly applied, it may create congestion in afternoon classes or seriously conflict with teachers personal schedule. Given this catch, perhaps one viable option is to fix morning hour class assignments of teachers in selected subject areas (eg. Maths) in such a way that they remain reasonably energetic in the afternoon as well.

The provision of greater security for students against hooligans (who seem to step up their harassment around mid-day) has also been cited as a means of beefing up afternoon attendance, but obviously the implementation of this suggestion is largely beyond the school's province. Granted that the school can handle this matter to some extent specially in its premises, a complementary measure could be allowing students scheduled for the afternoon shift to use the school library or reading room in the morning hours thereby keeping them safe and on-site for upcoming classes.

Pertaining to the particularly high rate of absenteeism in *Miazza* and more broadly, in the second semester, it is plausible that some improvements may be had if all teachers start the semester classes earnestly on the first day, if parents judiciously tighten up their monitoring during the said period, and if students who achieve low semester 1 results are spurred through counselling to work intelligently harder instead of abandoning classes. Literature (Galloway, 1982; Brown, 1990; Sapp, 1994) upholds such measures by emphasizing the importance of impressing on parents the usefulness of school attendance for improving achievement, and that of organizing counseling sessions which focus on enhancing the academic self-concept of low-achieving absentees.

The relatively higher rates of absenteeism in grades 9 and 11 may also be counter-checked to some degree by giving sufficient orientation to ninth graders (about study methods, and about coping methods in the face of hostile advances by seniors, for example), conducting adequate testing and consultations to help students proceeding to grade 11 select their academic streams on the basis of their potential and interest, ensuring a reasonably smooth transition from the grade 10 syllabus to that of grade 11, and organizing tutorials for low-achieving eleventh graders. There is some support in literature concerning the benefits of tutorials in such a context (Mayer, 1993), which, in the case of ninth graders, may be supplemented, for better results, by role modelling and peer counseling involving carefully selected senior students (Thompson, 1990).

Respondents have further indicated, rather in a simple form, that the relatively more serious problem of male absenteeism may be curbed by safeguarding schools from drinking houses, drug spots and similar establishments, and by drastically reducing the number of excusable absenteeisms. The former proposal should be difficult to implement because it conflicts with underhanded or life-saving business. The effect of the latter is unpredictable; it might simply raise the number of suspensions by lowering the maximum allowance. Other options that may have a positive, though limited impact, include integrating lessons about substance abuse in school programs, and organizing alternative and personally enhancing entertainment forums in the school premises.

Overall, some modest reduction may be achieved in rates of absenteeism, particularly in relation to the identified singular cases, through the efforts of schools. However, the effectiveness of measures that are taken by the school are necessarily contingent on the responsiveness of the high school educational program as a whole to student needs and interests (in relation to admission to higher educational institutions, preparation for a job, or access to preferred vocations, for

example) and to his/her perception of chances of success in the program.

Supervision or no supervision, the student's decision will inevitably be accentuated by whatever inadequacies that exist in the actual educational provisions. Trends regarding intervention against absenteeism (Birman and Natriello, 1978; Hernan, 1991) bear out this assertion. Fundamentally therefore, the issue of absenteeism is inextricably tied to educational planning and curriculum development. The present Education and Training Policy (TGE, 1994) which assigns considerable importance to vocational preparation in school curricula, if truly functional, would provide some momentum to the cause.¹⁶

The above mentioned basic planning issue aside, research (eg. Ficula, *et.al.*, 1983; Southworth, 1992) points to the existence of different taxonomies in the domain of absenteeism, some marked by greater behavioral disturbance than others. One such taxonomy for instance recognizes Traditional, Institutional, Psychological and Generic absentees, the Psychological type being the most unstable of all. The over-riding implication of such classifications is that, even within the context of a conducive educational program, preventive and intervention measures regarding absenteeism should attend to individual differences.

Conclusion

Mapping out patterns of student absenteeism helps to identify those times or groups that deserve focal attention for remediation, and apparently some such patterns are truly detectable in government senior high schools of Addis Ababa. Evidence further re-affirms the importance of considering cultural and environmental factors in explaining variations in the rate of student absenteeism and in dealing with them. Regarding the solutions in particular, there is an eminent need for wide-ranging workable measures -- over and above what schools can do by themselves.

The study has revealed unexpected patterns. To wit, its findings shake intuitive or stereotype thinking about the academic participation of high school students, as evidenced in the relatively more satisfactory attendance record of females over males and tenth graders over eleventh graders.

Still these and other aspects of the patterns identified in the present study, though comfortably substantiated, have yet to be confirmed by other similar studies due to the delimitation of the study to a six-month period and to three schools, and due to the occasional gaps in roll call data. For instance, the rate of absenteeism could have been higher if roll call data were available for *Meskerem* – a month during which many students are unlikely to start school earnestly. Moreover, with the advent of new curricula into the first cycle of high school education (starting grade 9) in the 1999/2000 academic year, it is plausible that the patterns of absenteeism in grades 9-11 just identified may change, and that opens up a new vista for pattern detection vis-a-vis educational reform.

Notes

1. The number of school days for high school grades are ordinarily 200 or marginally higher (202 in 1997/98). These school days run across 10 months (beginning September), punctuated by a break of about a week to produce two approximately equal semesters. Each semester, in turn, involves a shift system in which a batch of students from each grade attends the morning shift (8:00a.m.-12:15p.m.), and another afternoon shift (12:45-5:00p.m.).
2. The months of *Yekatit* and *Megabit* (roughly February and March) are times of fasting - segmentally for Moslems and almost totally for Orthodox Christians.
3. In 1997/98, for instance, 23 of the government senior high schools in the country - which amounted to the combined number of such schools in five regions (namely, Afar,

- Ethiopia-Somale, Benshangul - Gumuz, Gambela and Harari) were situated in Addis Ababa (see MOE, 1999, p.72).
4. Problems concerning the other schools included substantial gaps in roll call and diffused responsibility for the task.
 5. The attendance records of 12th graders were unacceptable and limited.
 6. In collecting data from roll call rosters, dropouts or those who attended school for the first few days in the semester and then totally disappeared thereafter, were excluded. Students who joined the schools later than *Tikmt* or *Yekatit* (for the first and second semester, respectively) were similarly discarded.
 7. Regarding *Meskerem*, it appeared that the list of enrollees in each grade was not yet stable due to latecoming or early withdrawal. There was also considerable gap in roll call in *Tir* and *Megabit* partly due to laxity following the semester break and partly to the interruption precipitated by a national school leaving examination conducted in the school buildings in *Megabit*.
 8. Directors, counselors and homeroom teachers participated in the interview. Moreover, male and female students from the three grades did so upon being selected by homeroom teachers as knowledgeable, articulate and genuine. The participants were: **AK:** Araaya G.Egziabher, Director; Wondimu T. Medhin & Kidane Akalu (homeroom teachers); Esubalew Kelkay (counselor); Haziza Siraj & Yonas Alemayehu (9th graders); Alemnesh Megersa & Fikru Bekele (10th graders); Yetarik Sebhatu & Habtamu Solomon (11th graders); **AT:** Abdulkadir Abdule, Director; Alene Abraha, Deputy Director. Getachew Bogale & Demeke Tefera (homeroom teachers); Mengistu Abebe (counselor); Tadesse Fikre (9th grader), Senait Kefelew, Selam Demelash & Mesert Amenu (10th graders); Misgana Atnafu & Shimelis Debebe (11th graders). **KT:** Worku W.Yohanes (counselor); Tilahun

Dagne & Aklilu Chernet (homeroom teachers); Hiwot Kebede & Dereje Getnet (9th graders); Kidist Reta & Gebre Yohanes W.Gabriel (10th graders), and Yosef Mulugeta & Meron Neguse (11th graders).

9. Only those students whose sections had experienced comparable number of roll calls were considered in order to avoid a distorted image of the changes in the rate of absenteeism from time to time, or from grade to grade. For example in monthly comparisons a 2-day absenteeism out of 14 roll calls in a given month would produce a 14% rate but the same amount of absenteeism in another month would result in 10% rate if the number of roll calls rises to 20.
10. The said students would not be presumed to face the similar criteria for allocation to the "Non-permissible" category if, for eg., the roll calls were 10 and 20 because in the former case the criterion would be one day of absenteeism (i.e., 10% of 10) while in the latter it would be 2 days (i.e., 10% of 20).
11. Data on morning and afternoon shifts from KT were not considered because of frequent changes in scheduling that rendered the data collection insufferable.
12. Again, those students who were absent for over 10% or more of the total number of roll calls figured in the Non-permissible category while the rest featured in the Permissible category.
13. The average rate of absenteeism for each school day, month, and Q-semester indicated here is based on the record of absenteeism for all students in all sections irrespective of the similarity in the number of roll calls for the sections. In terms of variations in the rate of absenteeism across the three schools, chi-square analysis (School x Permissibility) suggested that absenteeism is marginally higher in AT than in the other schools, particularly among ninth and eleventh graders perhaps due to greater demand for child labor and similar factors related to the semi-rural community around

- AT. Details are omitted here since the focus of the study was on pattern identification across schools.
14. According to the information obtained from the three schools, for example, in 1997/98, the average class size was 90 in the ninth grade 9 but 81 or less in grades 10 & 11.
15. This difference in the rate of absenteeism is not due to the fact that the participation rate of males is greater than that of females since the absenteeism rate was computed by considering enrolment figures for each sex. So male students have greater participation, but at the same time their rate of absenteeism is higher.
16. The 1994 Education and Training Policy is going to be implemented in grades 9-12 by phase starting with the 9th grade in 1999/2000.

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