

Alarming missed education time in primary education

Time for a new notification standard

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Introduction

School absenteeism is a health issue because it has negative effects on the health and well-being of young people. Nevertheless, absenteeism from Dutch primary school is not clearly identified. Following the Dutch Compulsory Education Act, unauthorized absence of >16 hours in 4 weeks has to be reported. All other forms of absenteeism lack an established reporting standard.

Methods

A descriptive study was performed at 20 elementary schools, including special education schools, of the Dutch municipality Almere. Data was collected through questionnaires. School principals, school counselors and teachers provided information about absenteeism, types of absenteeism (unauthorized, authorized, other), teachers' concerns about pupils' absenteeism and personal situation, and school policy on absenteeism.

Aim

This study examined:

- 1) the prevalence of absenteeism in primary education, including different types of absenteeism,
- 2) the relationship between teachers' concerns about pupils' absenteeism and personal situation, and the types of absenteeism, and
- 3) the relationship between factors related to school policy and the types of absenteeism.

Results

Absenteeism

On the day of data collection, **179 pupils** (7.6% of 2,364 pupils, i.e. 11% of the primary school population in Almere) were absent a total of **500 class hours**. Missed education time was not restricted to school absenteeism. A student can be in school without getting education (other missed education time (hereafter 'other')). A total of 189 reasons for absence were mentioned and divided over three types of absence (see figure 1).

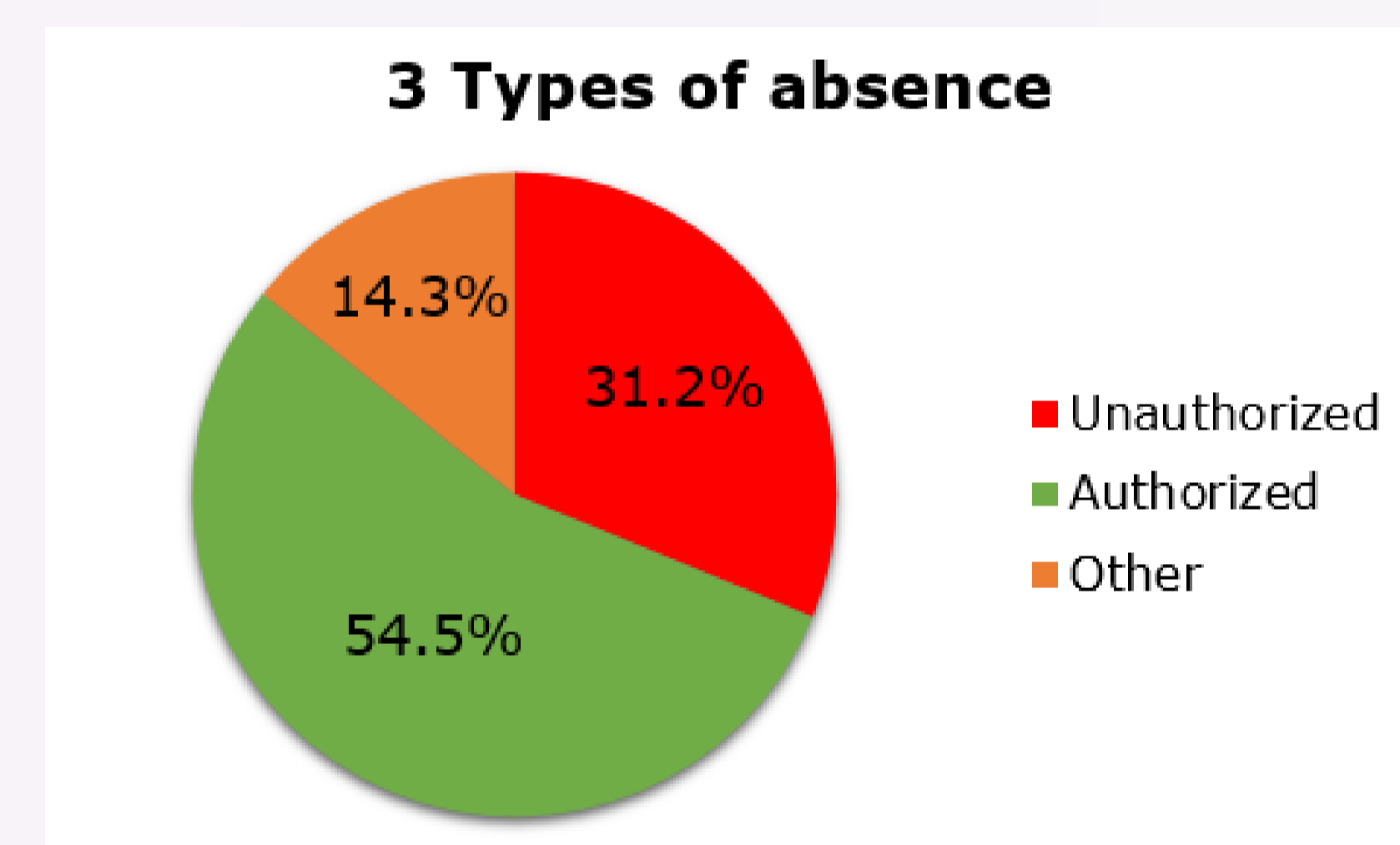


Figure 1. Types of absence reported by teachers

Teachers' concerns

For 42.5% of absent pupils, the teacher expressed concern.

Table 1. Relationship between teachers' concerns and types of absenteeism (N=189)

Regarding the pupil's...	n	% Unauthorized	% Authorized	% Other
...absence the teacher is				
concerned	53	37.7	39.6	22.6
not concerned	136	28.7	60.3	11.0
...personal situation the teacher is				
concerned	74	37.8	36.5	25.7
not concerned	115	27.0	66.1	7.0

Note: Only significant differences ($p < 0.05$) on the chi-square test are shown.

Teachers' concerns (continued)

In 22.9% of the 179 absent pupils the teacher was concerned about both the pupil's absenteeism *and* the pupil's personal situation. If both are present, this is considered 'alarming missed education time'.

Table 2. Relationship between alarming missed education time and types of absenteeism (N=189)

Missed education time	n	% Unauthorized	% Authorized	% Other
alarming	43	37.2	34.9	27.9
non alarming	146	29.5	60.3	10.3

Note: Only significant differences ($p < 0.05$) on the chi-square test are shown.

School policy

Schools varied in the registration and monitoring of absenteeism.

- At 70% of the schools (n=14) absenteeism was always registered.
- At 60% of the schools (n=12) there was no consistent monitoring of absenteeism.
- 73.2% of the 179 pupils attended a school that rarely reported absenteeism to the attendance officer.
- 7.3% of the 179 pupils attended a school that always reported suspected unauthorized absence: 'If the child has been called in sick, we can't do anything.'

Frequencies were tested for statistically significant differences (chi-square test). The outcomes showed:

- significantly more unauthorized absenteeism
 - with automated registration
 - with absenteeism monitoring
- significantly more authorized absenteeism
 - with registration by phone only
 - with consistent absenteeism monitoring



Additional study outcomes can be found here (in Dutch):

Conclusions

This study showed that 1) 7.6% of the primary school pupils were absent on the day of the data collection and a large portion, i.e. 45.5%, presented unauthorized or other absenteeism, 2) teachers' concerns resulting in 'alarming missed education time', mostly concerned pupils with unauthorized absenteeism, and 3) school policies, i.e. type of absence registration and absenteeism monitoring, are related to types of absence.

This implies that teachers' concerns may be an important tool, as a notification standard, to identify pupils who may benefit from prevention strategies that reduce (un)authorized school absence. In addition, absence registration via phone may play a role in the prevention of unauthorized absenteeism. Further research on efficiently identifying pupils at risk for 'alarming missed education time' and the (cost)effectiveness of school policies to reduce school absenteeism in primary schools is recommended.

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