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The Problem of Student Absenteeism, Its Impact on Educational Environments, and The Evaluation of Current Policies*

Murat AKKUŞ¹, Şakir ÇINKIR²

¹ Ministry of National Education, Ankara, Turkey  0000-0003-1295-8470

² Ankara University, Ankara, Turkey  0000-0001-8057-938X

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ABSTRACT

Student absenteeism continues to be one of the most significant impediments preventing educational institutions from reaching their objectives. This study aimed to evaluate the present status of student absenteeism, its impacts on educational environments, and the relevant policies available. The study group of the research, which was conducted in 2019, and used the basic qualitative research design, consisted of 22 participants who were teachers, administrators, experts, and inspectors working in different parts of Turkey. The data were collected through a semi-structured interview form developed by the researchers. According to the participants, absenteeism negatively affects students' academic and social development. It damages the relationships between the student and teacher and the relationship between the school and the parents. Teachers face difficulties in classroom management due to deficiencies in learning, and schools deviate from their goals. School administrators lose time dealing with absenteeism procedures instead of engaging in educational subjects, and thus, their resources become wasted. To prevent absenteeism, intervention should be considered primarily about students at risk through an early warning system, precautions that are appropriate to the region should be taken, and collaborations with stakeholders are recommended. In addition, implementations such as scholarships, boarding schools, and Conditional Cash Transfer for Education (CCTE) should be sustained to reduce the impact of socio-economic disadvantages.

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Keywords:

Student absenteeism, educational environments, education policies, education administrators.

1. Introduction

Students' attendance at school and their classes plays a decisive role in achieving the desired result from education and training activities. For policies and reforms in education to succeed, students must attend school first. Among the main areas of work for education managers is determining and eliminating the factors that lead to absenteeism and their effects on educational environments. This study investigated the effects of student absenteeism on educational environments, and existing policies were evaluated.

According to the Ministry of National Education (MoNE), absenteeism refers to absence from school with or without an excuse (MoNE, 2015b). The Ministry of National Education Regulation on Preschool Education and Primary Education Institutions and the Regulation on Secondary Education Institutions of the Ministry of National Education classifies student absenteeism as "excused absenteeism" and "unexcused absenteeism." Excused absenteeism refers to the absenteeism of children who cannot attend school by documenting their excuses due to reasons such as accidents, deaths, natural disasters, fires, imprisonment, arrests, and illness requiring short- or long-term treatment. On the other hand, unexcused attendance refers to all absences that

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¹Corresponding author's address: Ministry of National Education, Ankara /Turkey

e-mail: muratakus88@gmail.com

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fall outside the scope of excused absences owing to reasons such as seasonal agricultural labor, fear of school, or arbitrary circumstances (MoNE, 2011). In this study, absenteeism is discussed from a broad perspective as the absence of the student from school with and without an excuse.

Absenteeism is one of the two main causes of class repetition besides academic failure (MoNE and UNICEF, 2013). Absenteeism is decisive in many issues such as students' academic success, social development, and school discipline. According to the PISA performance of students who are over-absent is low in general (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD], 2016). Before the PISA implementation, students are questioned about their absences in the last two weeks. In high-level performing Far Eastern countries such as South Korea, Japan, and Taiwan, the rate of students' full-time absence at least one day within the two weeks preceding the implementation in 2015 was less than 5%, while in Turkey this rate was 47% (OECD, 2016). It is noteworthy that the absenteeism rates of students in Turkey are relatively elevated compared to the countries that demonstrate a high level of success in PISA evaluations.

Current Situation and Policies Regarding Student Absenteeism in Turkey. In 2013, the number of permanent absentee students in primary education institutions (primary and secondary schools) was 174,625 (MoNE, 2014a). Since the total number of primary and secondary school students in the 2012-2013 academic year was 11,160,896 (MoNE, 2013), the rate of absentee students without excuse for 51 days or more is calculated as 1.56%. Similarly, the number of absentees was 234,932 (MoNE, 2015a), and the total number of students was 11,053,315 (MoNE, 2014b) in 2014, so the rate of permanent absenteeism increased to 2.13%. Table-1 demonstrates the rate of absentee students for 20 days or more between the years 2014-2019.

Table 1. *The ratio (%) of students with more than 20 days of absenteeism in formal education*

Type of School	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019
Primary Schools	14,80	5,57	5,04	6,21	5,67	6,91
Secondary Schools (Basic Education)	35,00	12,22	10,94	10,64	9,98	9,90
General secondary education	40,20	42,36	28,74	29,95	-	25,14
Vocational and Technical Secondary Education	-	46,25	39,94	39,81	44,00	40,72
Anatolian Imam-Hatip High Schools	8,80	41,17	38,95	32,20	36,00	29,79

Source: MoNE, 2015b; MoNE, 2016; MoNE, 2017a; MoNE, 2018a; MoNE, 2018b; MoNE, 2019; MoNE, 2020.

As demonstrated in Table 1, the high absenteeism rate is particularly noticeable at the secondary school level. In vocational and technical Anatolian high schools, the rate of absentee students for 20 days or more has increased to over 40% from time to time. In primary and secondary schools, the rate of absentee students for 20 days and over is lower than in secondary education. The rate of 14.80% in primary schools in 2014 decreased to 5.67% in 2018. Absenteeism in secondary schools was approximately 10% in 2015-2018.

When the distribution of absenteeism rates throughout the country is examined, it can be said that the provinces with high absenteeism rates are mainly located in the Eastern Anatolia Region and Southeastern Anatolia Region. According to the data by MoNE (2019), the 10 provinces with the highest absenteeism rates in the 2016-2017 academic year were Ağrı, Bitlis, Edirne, Şırnak, Iğdır, Mardin, Muş, Siirt, Şanlıurfa, and Van regarding primary and secondary schools.

The Regulation on Pre-School Education and Primary Education Institutions of the Ministry of National Education is established on attendance in primary and secondary schools. Accordingly, absences are recorded in the e-School system by the class teacher in primary schools and by the school administration in secondary schools and Imam-Hatip secondary schools, and the administrators monitor them. The parents of the students enrolled in primary education institutions, school administrations, provincial/district directorates of national education, education inspectors, neighborhood representatives (mukhtars), and civilian administration authorities are obliged to ensure the attendance of the students in accordance with the Primary Education and Education Law No. 222. The student who has entered the first lesson but does not attend the next one or more classes without an excuse is immediately notified to the parent by the school administration, and his absence is counted as half a day. The branch teachers board decides the passing or repeating of the class of the student with 20 days of unexcused absenteeism during the academic year in the last week of the second semester.

Regulations on attendance in secondary schools are included in the Regulation on Secondary Education Institutions of the Ministry of National Education. Accordingly, school attendance is compulsory. Parents are obliged to ensure the attendance of their students in school. In accordance with Article 26 of the Basic Law of

National Education, school administrators, directors of national education, and local civil administration supervisors shall take the necessary measures regarding the enrollment and attendance of students in school. Late arrival is limited to the time determined for the first lesson hour, and every five times of lateness is counted as half a day of absenteeism, and late arrivals beyond this period are considered as absenteeism. The condition of the absent student is communicated to the parent via mail, email, or another method, and the parent is requested to submit the excuse document, if applicable, to the school administration. Students whose absence exceeds 10 days without excuse and 30 days in total are accepted as unsuccessful regardless of their course scores, and their status is notified to their parents in writing. With an arrangement made in 2018, a maximum of five days of unexcused absence was required to receive a certificate of merit and appreciation in secondary schools.

The issue of reducing student absenteeism is given an important place in policy documents in the field of education. In the 2015-2019 Strategic Plan of the MoNE, absenteeism in primary and secondary education is considered among the "Problem and Development Areas of the Education and Training System." With the aim of "Increasing participation and completion rates in all types and levels of education and training, especially in disadvantaged groups, until the end of the plan period," absenteeism and early dropouts were expected to be reduced at all levels of formal education.

The Ministry of National Education visits the provinces with high absenteeism rates at the primary education level and collects information on the reasons for absenteeism. According to these studies, primary school absenteeism reduction objectives have been met. The Monitoring of Student Absences in Vocational and Technical Education Report was compiled and released in 2018 (MoNE, 2019). In the 2016-2017 academic year, seminars were organized for school administrators and teachers on the causes and prevention of absenteeism aimed at reducing student absenteeism in vocational and technical education, and joint studies were carried out with the Provincial Directorates of Youth Services and Sports, the Provincial Directorates of Family and Social Policies, and other public and private institutions/organizations. In this context, parents were also contacted, and home visits were carried out by school absenteeism teams. As a result of the efforts, the absenteeism problem of 67,254 students across the country was prevented (MoNE, 2017b). In line with the Absenteeism Action Plan prepared to reduce absenteeism in Anatolian Imam-Hatip high schools, seminars were given within the scope of reducing absenteeism rates. The first hundred schools with the highest absenteeism rates were identified, and the provincial and district directorates of national education where these schools are located tried to take the necessary measures (MoNE, 2019).

1.1. The Reasons for Student Absenteeism

The reasons for student absenteeism are discussed under the family, student, environment, school and legislations headings.

The Family: Adverse socio-economic conditions of the family are among the most significant reasons leading to absenteeism. Especially financial problems have a substantial impact in this regard (Reid, 2003; Ozbas, 2010; Oztekin, 2013; Akuzum, Yavas, Tan, & Ucar, 2015). The amount of absenteeism of students who are married at a young age, employed as seasonal workers or in another job, or who must take care of their siblings is increasing (Kose, 2014). In most cases, absenteeism is unavoidable if a student's family lives far away from the school and he must leave class to visit them. Within the family, tensions between the father and mother (Oztekin, 2013), fragmented families (Kose, 2014) and parents' inability to be sensitive to their children (Akuzum, Yavas, Tan, & Ucar, 2015) may lead to absenteeism by driving the student into despair. Parents' negative attitudes towards education, not giving due importance to education (Gomleksiz & Ozdas, 2013; Kearney, 2008), their low level of education (Akuzum, Yavas, Tan, & Ucar, 2015), or both working (Sahin, Arseven, & Kilic, 2016) are also among important reasons.

The Student: In this heading, which can also be put forward as personal reasons for absenteeism, there are reasons such as dislike of school, academic failure, lack of purpose, and lack of self-confidence (Kose, 2014). Health problems are reported to be the primary justification for absenteeism caused by the student himself (Oztekin, 2013; Sonmez, 2019). Reasons such as falling asleep, preparing for the university entrance exam and studying, poor social skills, and internet and television addiction (Sanli, Altun, & Tan, 2015) can also be mentioned under this cause.

The Environment: The student's social environment is a significant determinant of absenteeism. Students in a group of friends who are unsuccessful, absent, or never go to school, addicted to substances, and commit crimes are highly prone to absenteeism (Ozbaş, 2010). Thoughts that spending time with friends is more enjoyable than school are also among the reasons for students' absenteeism (Hosgorur & Polat, 2015). On the other hand, peer bullying is also reported as another major cause (Reid, 2003).

The School: The reasons for students' absenteeism related to school are manifested as the pressures exerted by school administrators, the inadequacy of social activities, the ongoing block lesson practice in some schools, and the fact that students find school boring (Sanlı, Altun, & Tan, 2015). According to Strickland (1998), the quality and effectiveness of teachers, guidance specialists, and school administrators are associated with absenteeism. Students' inability to move to areas appropriate to their interests and abilities, failure to use methods to increase the student's interest in the course, and lack of cooperation and communication between the school and the families are among the factors of school-related absenteeism (Pehlivan, 2006).

The Legislations: At the secondary education level, the full use of the right to 30 days of absenteeism with and without excuses specified in the Regulation on Secondary Education Institutions of the Ministry of National Education can be one of the critical reasons for absenteeism. According to the law, limiting late arrivals to the time determined for the first lesson hour, counting every five instances of tardiness as a half-day absence, and identifying late arrivals outside of this period as absenteeism may result in an increase in absenteeism rates (MoNE, 2019).

Gender. In some studies, the effect of gender differences on school absenteeism was also examined, and it was found that male students demonstrated absenteeism behavior more than female students (Girgin, 2016).

One aspect to emphasize is that teachers and students think differently about the source of absenteeism. Students view the school and its teachers as the causes of absenteeism, whereas teachers view the students and their families as the perpetrators (Pehlivan, 2006). Accordingly, it is seen that single causes of absenteeism have a complex, multifaceted, and intertwined structure. This issue should be considered in understanding the problem of absenteeism and in developing solution proposals.

1.2. Statement of the Problem

Most of the studies on student absenteeism in Turkey appear to focus on the causes of absenteeism (Ozbas, 2010; Gomleksiz & Ozdas, 2013; Oztekin, 2013; Kose, 2014; Akuzum, Yavas, Tan, & Ucar, 2015; Sahin, Arseven, & Kılıc, 2016; Hosgorur & Polat, 2015; Sanlı, Altun, & Tan, 2015; Girgin, 2016; Sonmez, 2019). In these studies, the reasons for the problem of absenteeism at various levels of education were exposed based on the opinions of stakeholders such as students, teachers, administrators, and inspectors. There are also studies evaluating the effectiveness of practices to reduce absenteeism along with the causes of absenteeism (Onder, 2017; Pehlivan, 2006). Research examining the effects of absenteeism on school management and the educational environment and processes is limited. In these studies, the effects of absenteeism on attitudes towards school (Adiguzel & Karadas, 2013) and children (Uzun & Butun, 2015) were investigated.

The purpose of this study was to investigate the impact of absenteeism on the school environment and to assess the current measures to reduce absenteeism in order to contribute to the relevant literature and reduce absenteeism among Turkish students. In order to accomplish this, the following sub-goals of the study were pursued:

- According to the opinions of the participants, what are the effects of student absenteeism in primary and secondary education on:
 - classroom management and discipline?
 - students' academic success?
 - students' social and cultural development?
 - the relations between the teacher and the student?
 - the relations between the school and parents?
 - the school management?

- According to the participants, what are the current practices for reducing student absenteeism in primary and secondary education?
- What are the participants' opinions on the practices of the Ministry of National Education regarding absenteeism in primary and secondary education (legislation, sanctions, periods of absenteeism, efforts to reduce absenteeism, policies, current practices, etc.)?
- According to the participants, what measures should be taken by stakeholders such as education administrators, parents, students, and non-governmental organizations to reduce student absenteeism in primary and secondary education?

2. Methodology

2.1. Research Model

This study, which examines and evaluates the effects of student absenteeism and its effects on the educational environment in Turkey, and the current policies on this issue, was designed in the basic qualitative research design, which is included in the qualitative research approach. According to Merriam (2009), basic qualitative research tries to reveal the participants' experiences, the meanings they attribute to their experiences and the process. In basic qualitative research, data is collected by observation, document analysis and interview methods, depending on the theoretical framework of the research.

2.2. Study Group

In forming the study group, the maximum diversity sampling method was used among purposeful sampling methods. In this method, different situations similar within themselves related to the subject under study are determined in line with the purpose of the research (Buyukozturk, et al., 2014). To ensure data richness and diversity, 22 participants working in different regions of Turkey and in the central organization of the Ministry of National Education formed the working group consisting of administrators, teachers, inspectors, and experts. In the establishment of the study group, care was taken to ensure that the participants differed in terms of variables such as professional experience, institution, gender, high absenteeism rates at the place of duty, and differences in the reasons for absenteeism. Table-2 provides information about the study group.

Table 2. Information about the study group

Code	Participant	Institution	Location of Employment	Gender	Experience (years)
R1	R&D staff 1	Provincial Directorate of National Education	Sakarya	Male	29
R2	R&D staff 2	Provincial Directorate of National Education	Çanakkale	Female	25
R3	R&D staff 3	Provincial Directorate of National Education	Kocaeli	Male	16
R4	R&D staff 4	Provincial Directorate of National Education	Tekirdağ	Male	14
R5	R&D staff 5	Provincial Directorate of National Education	Elazığ	Male	19
R6	R&D staff 6	Provincial Directorate of National Education	Adana	Female	19
R7	R&D staff 7	Provincial Directorate of National Education	İzmir	Male	20
I1	Inspector 1	Ministry of National Education	Ministry	Male	25
T1	Teacher 1	Anatolian High School	Sivas	Male	14
T2	Teacher 2	Secondary School	İstanbul	Female	6
T3	Teacher 3	Primary School	Ankara	Female	5
T4	Teacher 4	Primary School	Şanlıurfa	Female	4
E1	Expert 1	Ministry of National Education	Ministry	Male	20
E2	Expert 2	Ministry of National Education	Ministry	Male	18
E3	Expert 3	Ministry of National Education	Ministry	Male	14
E4	Expert 4	Ministry of National Education	Ministry	Female	4
A1	Administrator 1	Primary School	İstanbul	Male	22
A2	Administrator 2	Anatolian High School	Sivas	Male	21
A3	Administrator 3	Anatolian High School	Bolu	Male	24
A4	Administrator 4	Science and Art Center	Giresun	Female	28
A5	Administrator 5	Secondary School	Ankara	Male	13
A6	Administrator 6	Anatolian High School	İstanbul	Female	26

As seen in the data in Table 2, 31.82% of the participants work as R&D (research and development) personnel in the provincial directorates of national education, 4.5% as the Ministry education inspector, 18.19% as teachers in educational institutions at various grades, 18.19% as experts in the central organization of the Ministry, and 27.30% as managers in various educational institutions. Eight (36.36%) of the participants who participated in the research from 14 different places of employment were female, and 14 (63.64%) were male. The professional experience of the participants varied between 4-29 years.

2.3. Data Collection Tools

Five-question semi-structured interview form was used as the data collection instrument. The opinions of four experts were obtained about the drafted form by reviewing the relevant literature, and a pilot implementation was made with two participants who had the characteristics of the study group. After evaluating the results of the pilot implementation, the experts increased the number of questions from four to five and finalized the form. Since there was no face-to-face meeting during the form-filling process, participants were interviewed individually over the phone, the purpose of the research and their expectations were explained in detail, and data was collected by sending each participant an email. Detailed explanations and examples were requested where necessary.

2.4. Data analysis

The thematic analysis method was used to analyze the data obtained through the semi-structured interview form. Thematic analysis is a method that includes the stages of defining, analyzing, and presenting themes based on qualitative data (Braun and Clarke, 2006). During the thematic analysis process, the data was coded by researchers and a faculty member who is an expert in qualitative research methods. For the reliability of the analysis of the interview data, the Inter-Rater Reliability (IRR) formula [$IRR = \text{Number of agreements} / (\text{Number of agreements} + \text{Number of disagreements})$] developed by Miles and Huberman (1994) was used. By using the reliability formula, consensus=0.91 was found.

3. Findings

Participant opinions on the effects of student absenteeism and current policies are presented based on themes and categories in accordance with the data collection tool.

3.1. Opinions on the Effects of Student Absenteeism

Opinions on the effects of student absenteeism were investigated under the themes of classroom management, academic success, social and cultural development of students, relations between students, student-teacher relations, school-parent relations, school management, and the use of school resources. The views on the effects of student absenteeism on classroom management are presented in Figure 1.

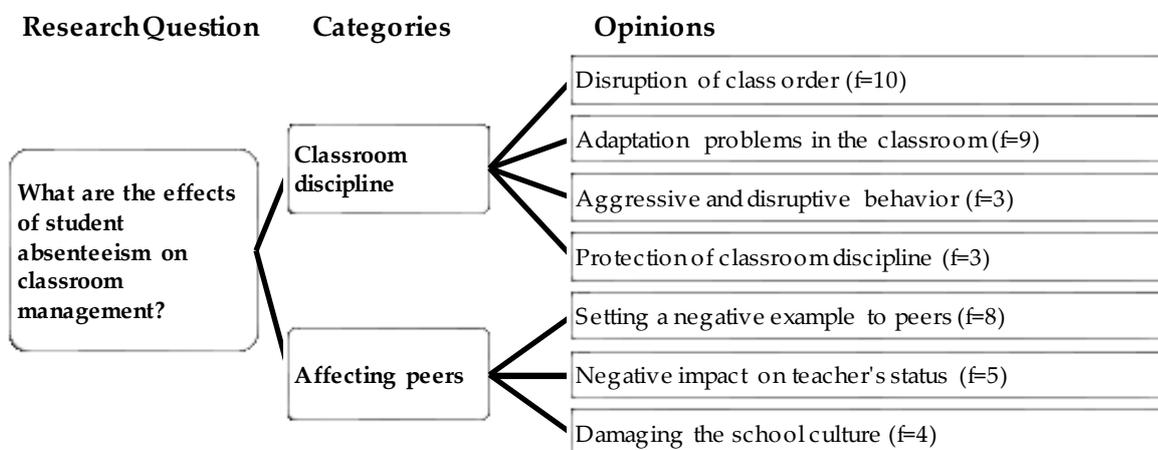


Figure 1. Opinions on the Effects of Student Absenteeism on Classroom Management

As Figure 1 demonstrates, the opinions on the effects of student absenteeism on classroom management are negative, except for one. Disruption of class order (f=10) is the most frequently mentioned condition. One manager described it as follows, "Instead of being busy with the lesson, the student is busy with other things,

disrupting the discipline of the lesson (A6).” Adaptation to the classroom (f=9) is the second most frequently mentioned opinion. It was asserted that “The student with high absenteeism is more likely to have problems with classroom management and discipline than other students (R4).”

Students with high absenteeism setting a negative example to their peers (f=8) lead to the spread of absenteeism and undesirable behavior and have a negative impact on the teacher’s status in the classroom (f=5). One expert explained this by saying, “Since absenteeism is contagious in nature, there will be a decrease in the respect of the remaining students towards the teacher, so the teacher will have difficulty in classroom management (E1).” It is also stated that the problems spread throughout the school, thereby damaging the school's culture (f=4).

One view is that absenteeism can also positively affect students who do not make absences. It has been suggested that absentee students in crowded classrooms will reduce the number of students in the class and ensure the maintenance of classroom discipline (f=3). According to this view, especially in large class sizes, the low number of students in the class will increase the quality of education that other students will receive and facilitate classroom management (E1).

Opinions on the effects of student absenteeism on students' academic achievement are presented in Figure 2.

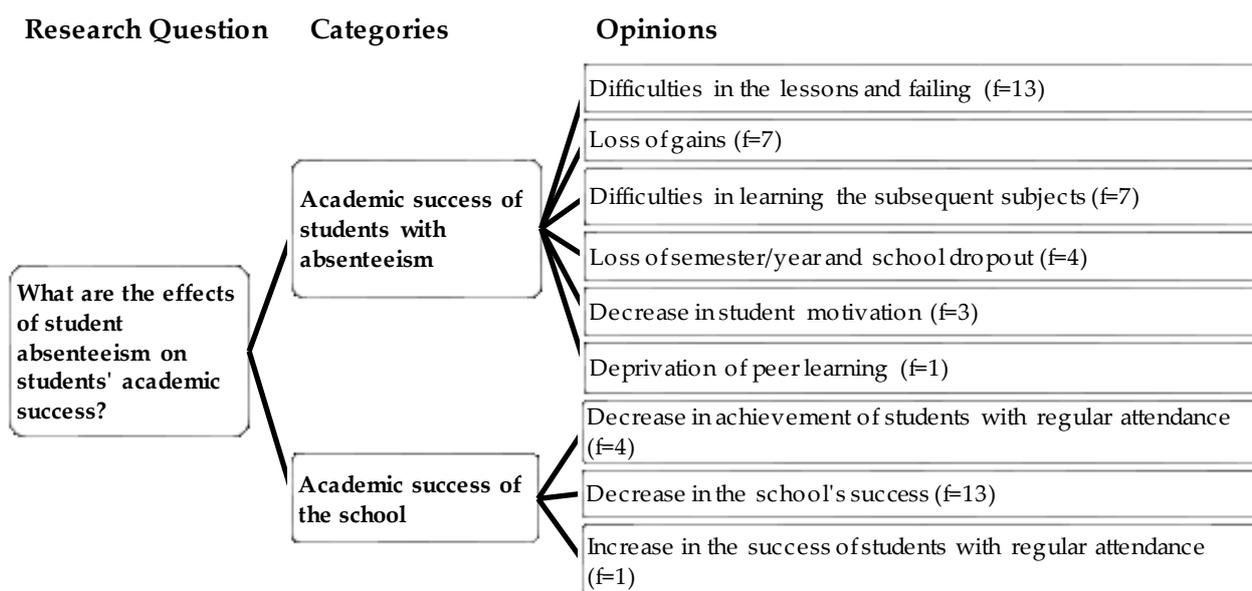


Figure 2. Opinions on the Effects of Student Absenteeism on Students' Academic Success

The most frequently emphasized issue about the effects of absenteeism on academic success is that students have difficulty and fail the courses due to lessons and learning activities that they cannot attend (f=13). Another observation is that absenteeism leads to loss of the gains in the curriculum (f=7). As one of the R&D staff mentioned, “If what needs to be done to identify and improve the student’s missing gains is not at the desired level, this negative effect increases even more (R4).” Loss of gains can also lead to learning difficulties (f=7) in the subsequent subjects for the student. A teacher explained this situation: “When absent students miss interrelated topics, especially in quantitative lessons, it is more difficult for them to understand the aftermath (T1).” A secondary school administrator stated that although students were absent, especially to study for their national exams, this did not have the expected effect on their exam success (A5).

As a result of absenteeism, the motivation of students who have difficulties and fail the courses may also decrease (f=3). According to one administrator, “The interest of absent students decreases towards the course, and they fail due to falling behind their friends in classes (A2).” An effect of absenteeism that can be stated about the absentee student himself was described as deprivation of peer learning (f=1).

According to Figure 2, student absenteeism also affects the student's peers, and therefore, the success of the school. The most mentioned of these effects is the decrease in the success of students with perfect attendance (f=4). As an R&D staff member stated, “This effect is not only for the absentee student. Due to the interaction with the absentee student, the student with regular attendance to course activities is also negatively affected (R1 The increase in the period of student absenteeism, the increase in the rate of students with high absenteeism, and the negative impact of these students on the success of their classmates may result in a decline in the school’s success (f=3). The only opinion

that can be regarded as a positive effect of student absenteeism on students' academic success is that the success of the students with perfect attendance will increase ($f=1$) with the decrease in the number of students in the class.

Opinions on the effects of student absenteeism on the social and cultural development of students are presented in Figure 3.

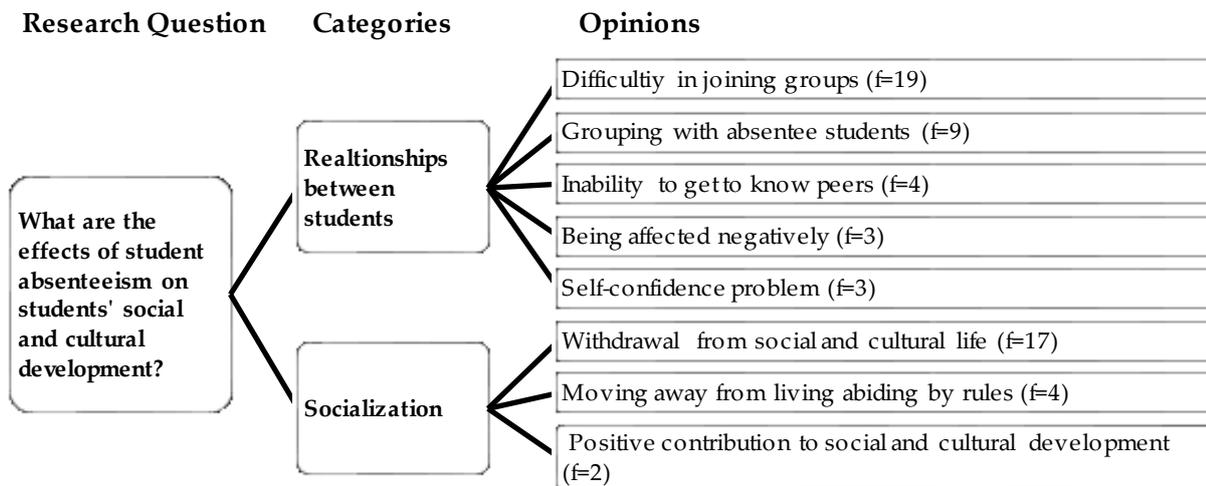


Figure 3. Opinions on the Effects of Student Absenteeism on the Social and Cultural Development of Students

Substantial problems are disclosed in the relations of absent students with their peers and the adaptation process to social life. There is a consensus on the difficulty in joining groups ($f=19$). As one primary school teacher put forward, "As time goes by, everyone finds a playmate, and the student with a lot of absenteeism is left alone this time. Indirectly, they start to say, 'I don't have friends at school, I don't want to go' (T2)." According to these statements, because of absenteeism, the student's inability to participate in peer groups brings more absenteeism.

Consequently, absentee students may group within themselves ($f=9$). It is also possible that students who are not in school cannot get to know their peers ($f=4$). One teacher said, "Students get to know each other during class and breaktimes. They make friends or don't like each other. The student who has a lot of absenteeism cannot catch this harmony or incompatibility with his friends (T2)." Their peers may also negatively label these students ($f=3$). According to one expert, "There may be stigmatization. Predictably, someone who does not come to school, is not interested in classes, and has communication problems may also have problems in friendship relations (E2)." According to the participants, it is also likely that negatively labeled students have a lack of self-confidence in forming friendships ($f=3$).

Important problems are also observed in the socialization process in which intensively absent students need to internalize social rules. Withdrawal from social and cultural life ($f=17$) is the most frequently repeated view in this category. According to an R&D staff, "Students will not be able to catch up with periods of social and cultural activity at school during periods of absence (R7)." With the increase in absenteeism, the student begins to display behaviors contrary to social rules ($f=4$). The interaction of the absentee students with out-of-school groups is one of the causes of unwanted behavior. One manager described this situation: "When the student spends time in the park, in the garden, in the internet café when he's not in school, he gets their culture. When he comes to school, we encounter situations that he has become either a bully, addicted to the internet, or other negative situations (A3)."

Seven of the eight views in Figure 3 were related to the negative impacts of absenteeism on students' social and cultural development, while one opinion was about the positive contribution of absenteeism on social and cultural development in some cases ($f=2$). Regarding this issue, one expert said, "Because the belief that children who are not in school have more social and cultural development seems attractive, other students are also attracted to the condition of not being at school (E1)." According to this view, some students are absent to contribute to their social and cultural development. In addition, the widespread belief that absentee students will fall behind in social activities in school is not always true; as one administrator stated, "A small number of students have been eager to participate in social and cultural activities despite being absent. Especially when it comes to participation in sports activities, they have shown intense interest (A2)."

Opinions on the effects of student absenteeism on student-teacher relations are presented in Figure 4.

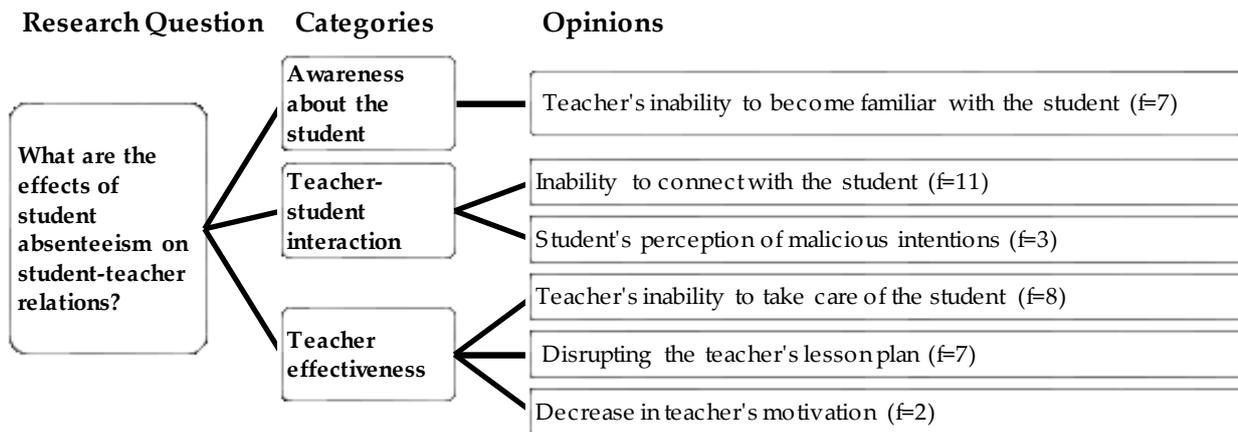


Figure 4. Opinions on the Effects of Student Absenteeism on Student-Teacher Relations

Student absenteeism prevents the teacher from becoming familiar with the student (f=7), reducing the teacher's awareness of the student. As maintained in the statements, "I think the most important problem of absenteeism for a teacher is not being able to recognize the student. It is an important issue for me to get to know the students in my field and to be able to plan activities suitable for them (E4)," the appropriate activity may not be designed for the student.

Student absenteeism also damages student-teacher interactions. First of all, the teacher fails to build a connection with the student (f=11). The teacher's actions to reduce absenteeism's negative effects can be interpreted as malicious intentions (f=3). A secondary school administrator commented, "Bored with the interest and attention shown to himself, the student may accuse the teachers of overwhelming him much (A5)" to explain this case.

Student absenteeism can harm the teacher's work towards the objectives of the curriculum. The most frequently mentioned of these situations is that the teacher cannot take care of the student (f=8). A primary school teacher in a province with a high rate of absenteeism, particularly due to seasonal labor, described the situation as follows: "The tree bends when it is young, but we have a very difficult time touching the lives of these children either because we see them very little or because one day they are present, and one day they are not (T4)." The additional burden imposed on the teacher by absent students may interfere with the teacher's lesson plan (f=7). The final situation that can be emphasized is the decrease in teacher motivation (f=2). According to a primary school administrator, if this occurs frequently and for no apparent reason, it has a negative impact on the teacher's motivation towards the student and can lead to occasional conflicts (A1).

Opinions on the effects of student absenteeism on school-parent relations are presented in Figure 5.

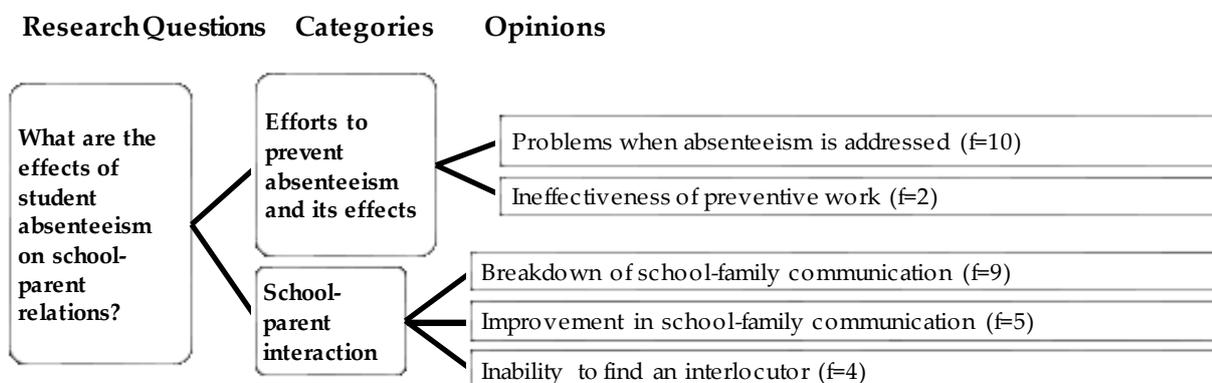


Figure 5. Opinions on the Effects of Student Absenteeism on School-Parent Relations

Student absenteeism disrupts efforts to reduce absenteeism and its impact in two different ways. The most emphasized of these is that problems occur when absenteeism is addressed (f=10). According to an R&D staff member in a province where the problem of absenteeism is intense, "With the sanctions that do not satisfy some

parties, it is observed that they sometimes confront the course teachers, sometimes the parents, and sometimes the students (R5)." According to another view, preventive efforts can be ineffective (f=2).

The most emphasized situation in school-parent relations is the breakdown of school-family communication (f=9). The feedback that the school administration gives to the parents about absentee students can alienate the parents from the school. An education inspector expressed it as, "Parents do not want to come to school over time because of the school's constant negative feedback about the student (I1)." However, there may also be a positive contribution (f=5). A teacher emphasized the significance of communication between the school and the family by stating, "Since the parents of absent students are contacted, the school administration and the parents are in constant communication." According to the participants (n=4), it may be difficult to reach the families of absent students and "find an interlocutor." According to one teacher, "Parents of students with a high absenteeism problem do not follow up on absenteeism, rarely visit school, and can often not be reached (T3)." From time to time, it is stated that parents have unlawful demands from the school administration (f=2).

Opinions on the effects of student absenteeism on school administration are presented in Figure 6.

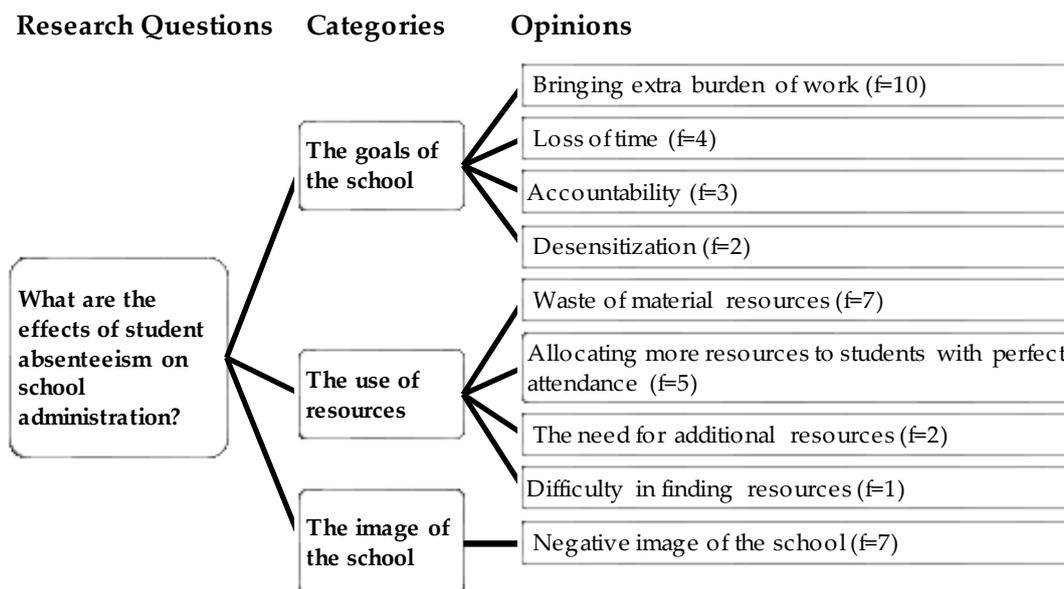


Figure 6. Opinions on the Effects of Student Absenteeism on School Management

Student absenteeism can lead a school to deviate from its goals. Extra workload (f=10) is the most frequently cited of these. A high school administrator explained it as "Can you imagine? You have goals, but when you need to deal with absentee student problems instead of them; what a huge waste of energy of the classroom teacher, the guidance counselor, the assistant principal, and the principal (A3)." Absenteeism leads to loss of time (f=4), can leave school administrators in a difficult situation against their superiors, and constitutes an important part of the interviews with superiors (f=3). It has also been claimed that some school administrators are becoming increasingly desensitized (f=2). According to an elementary school teacher who works in an area with a high rate of absenteeism, "the school administration, as well as the students, have gotten used to the situation. I don't believe it has a significant impact on management (T4)."

A situation of waste of financial resources (f=7) is explained by an expert as, "As you know, lunch service is provided in transportation-centered schools. If there are more absent students and absenteeism is at irregular intervals, it will be very difficult to create statistics for incoming meals. In this case, the school principal will purchase food as much as the total number of students benefiting from the mobile education service (E4)." Letters sent to parents can also create a serious financial burden in schools with high absenteeism rates. Despite opinions that more resources will be allocated to students with regular attendance (f=5), according to R&D staff, "possible negative attitudes towards the school administration regarding absenteeism may lead to situations such as affecting the school's relations with external stakeholders and the school's inability to obtain possible resources from the environment" (R4). Finally, the image of the school may also be damaged due to the negative situations mentioned (f=7).

3.2. Current Practices to Reduce Student Absenteeism

Current practices for reducing student absenteeism are presented in Figure 7.

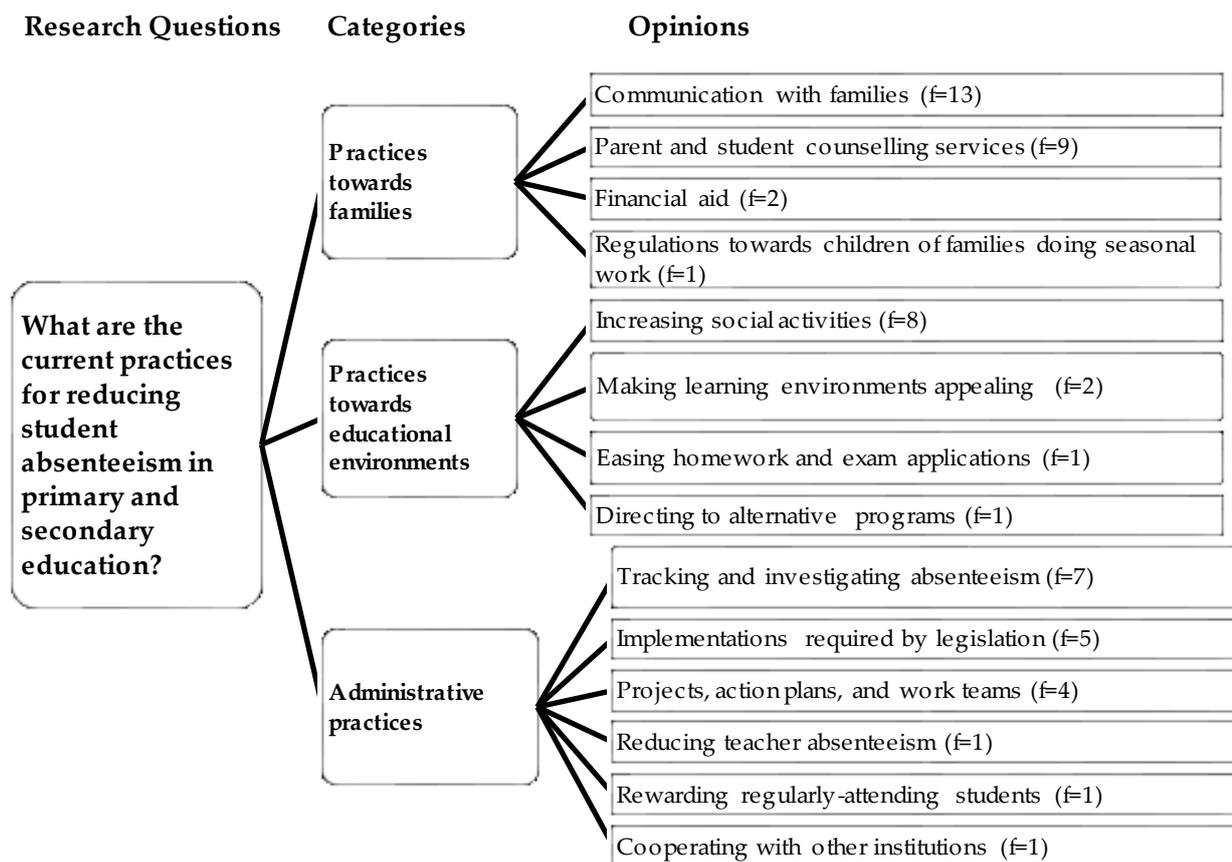


Figure 7. Current Practices for Reducing Absenteeism

As seen in Figure 7, it is understood that most of the practices aimed at families involve communication with families and home visits (f=13). A school principal said that home visits have contributed to reducing absenteeism, indicating “Although I work as a school principal in a district of a region that receives the highest immigration in our province, we do not have any permanent absentee students. We systematically conduct home visits to become familiar with the child (A1).” Counseling practices for students and their parents (f=9) also stand out in this regard at the school, district, or provincial level. For example, in one province, “Parent-student trainings are organized by school guidance and counseling services for students who have absenteeism, run away from school, or have problems (R5).” Other practices for families are aimed at eliminating the socio-economic causes of absenteeism. A school principal mentioned the work related to financial aid (f=2) as “The needs of the children of families experiencing socio-economic difficulties, the school uniforms, clothes, and stationery needs of these students attending school are provided by the school family association and the social assistance foundation (A1).” As a facilitating legislation arrangement for seasonal agricultural labor, it is stated that the address-based transfer obligation is abolished for these students, and it is tried to ensure that they can continue school in the places they go with their families (E4).

To reduce absenteeism in the educational institutions where the participants work, increasing social, cultural, and athletic activities was cited as the primary action (f=8). A member of the R&D staff commented on these activities, stating, “Social and cultural activities offer the chance to keep students in school (R5).” A secondary school teacher who adopted the approach of organizing interesting learning activities said, “Individually, I try not to bore the students in the lessons, but to teach them by having fun. I can take shape according to them, and in the same way, they can take shape according to me (T2).” The same teacher stated that he provided convenience by easing homework and examination applications (T2). The fact that the curriculum may not be suitable for the interests and abilities of the student is likely to decrease the student's motivation and lead to absenteeism. A high school administrator explained the precaution he took against this danger as follows: “If the school they are in feels

overwhelming to some of them, we provide support so that they can be transferred to a more appropriate school to maintain attendance (A3).”

The most commonly expressed administrative practice is the monitoring and investigating absenteeism (f=7). A school principal described the work at his school as, “We investigate why every student is absent and find specific solutions (A3).” The practices required by the legislation (f=5) are fines and reporting of the issue to the relevant authorities. Since decreasing absenteeism is one of the critical agenda items of educational organizations at all levels, systematic efforts such as action plans and visits to regions and schools are also observed in this regard.

An R&D staff member who cited teacher absenteeism among the causes of student absenteeism stated that efforts were made to reduce teacher absenteeism (R1). An R&D staff member who suggests that reducing absenteeism cannot be possible with the measures to be taken by educational organizations alone summarizes their work in this context as follows: “Students who could not go to school due to economic problems were reported to İŞKUR [Turkish Employment Agency], those who could not go for health reasons were reported to the Provincial Directorate of Health, and those who could not go due to family reasons were reported to the Provincial Directorate of Family and Social Policies, and thus, it was ensured that they continued to attend school (R6).”

3.3. Evaluation of Existing Policies to Reduce Student Absenteeism

Figure 8 presents participant evaluations of existing policies to reduce student absenteeism.

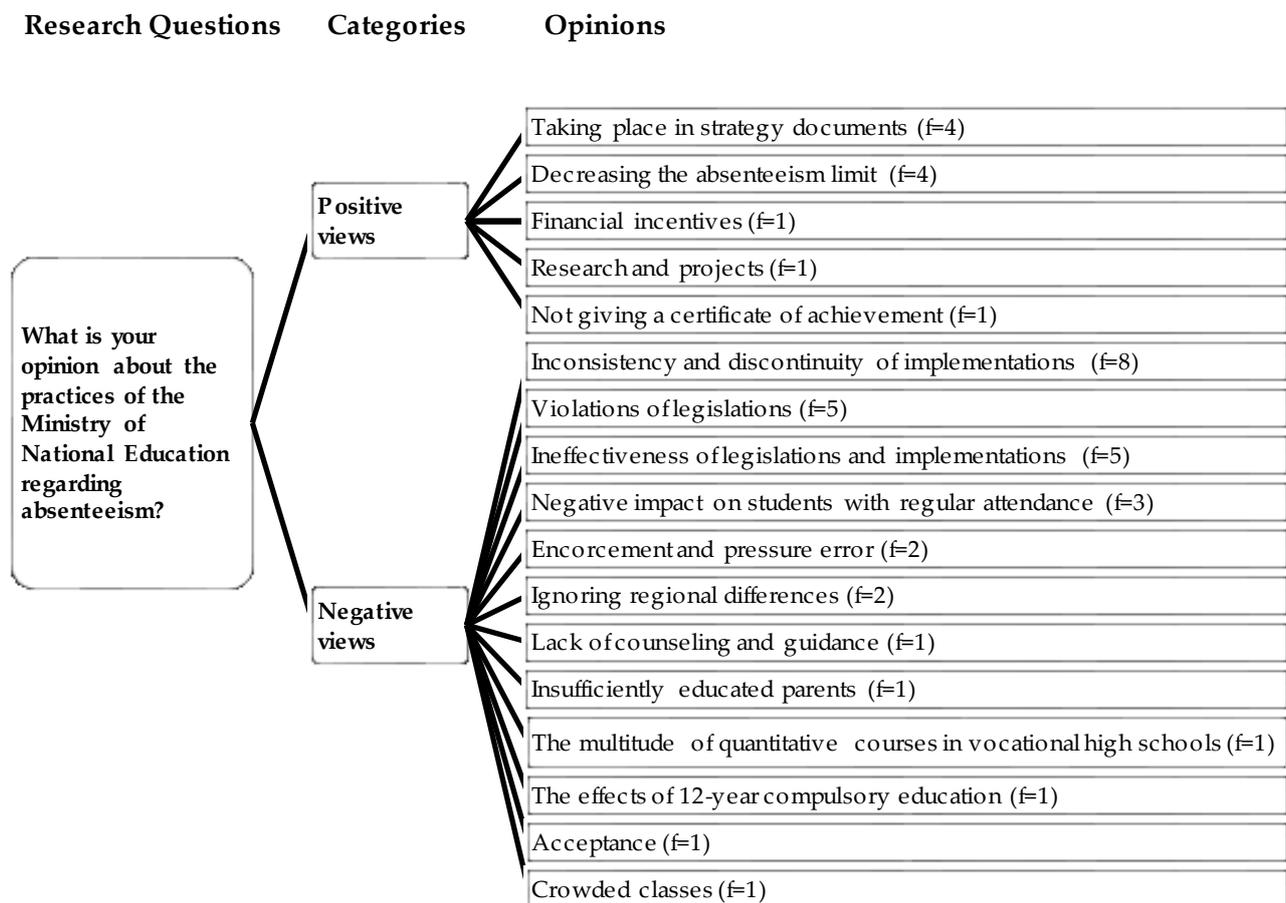


Figure 8. Participant Opinions on the MoNE's Practices on Absenteeism

Four participants stated that policies to reduce absenteeism were included in the strategy documents prepared by the Ministry of National Education. Reducing the absenteeism limit was seen as an appropriate arrangement by three participants. An R&D staff said that reducing the absenteeism limit contributed positively to the perspective on this issue: “With the change in legislation, students approached the issue of absenteeism seriously. Thanks to the reduction in time, absenteeism has become an important issue. Students have changed their minds about looking at absenteeism as a right (R2).” In addition, an elementary school teacher working in an area with high absenteeism said, “Providing financial incentives for children to come to school

contributes to reducing absenteeism (T4)." A teacher who thinks that the projects carried out on this subject have a guiding effect said, *"The Ministry of National Education conducts some studies and projects on absenteeism. I find these studies positive; they contribute to us teachers about understanding what absenteeism can be caused by and how we should proceed (T3)."*

When Figure 8 is examined, it is seen that the most frequently criticized issues in the current policies regarding absenteeism are the inconsistency and discontinuity of the practices (f=8) and the violation of the legislation (f=5). An expert stated that *"The penal procedures foreseen to be carried out for the student who does not come within a certain number of days are no longer effective in the society because local administration supervisors do not put the penalties in practice (E4),"* and an R&D staff member said that *"Forgiveness of absences at the end of the year creates a negative atmosphere in the society and is not taken seriously (R6)."* The ineffectiveness of the legislation and practices (f=5) was considered one of the important deficiencies in this example: *"The current absenteeism policy of the Ministry of National Education does not sanction the student. In particular, the fact that senior students take medical reports for the university entrance exam causes disruptions in education and training, and precautions should be taken against this incident (A2)."*

According to the participants, the current policies and practices on absenteeism adversely affect the students attending school regularly (f=3). A secondary school teacher explains this situation as, *"The continuation of the absenteeism problems of the absent students and the lack of solutions to the discipline problems create a kind of domino effect, and the negative behaviors of students affect the students with positive behaviors (T3)."* According to a Ministry inspector, *"Especially the 12 years of compulsory education creates a negative situation for the attendance of students with insufficient academic achievement or with talents in different professions (I1)."*

As reported in the expression *"The fact that processes are carried out according to the same legislation throughout Turkey without taking into account regional differences (A1),"* ignoring regional differences in practices (f=2) is one of the obstacles in front of the problem of absenteeism in some regions. Despite the participants' negative opinions, an expert who mentioned the idea that there is acceptance in this area said, *"It seems as if there is acceptance. Although the absenteeism rates are increasing day by day, it seems that permanent measures cannot be introduced (E2)."*

3.3. Opinions on Measures to be Taken to Reduce Student Absenteeism

The measures to be taken to reduce student absenteeism are presented in Figure 9. Information and awareness-raising activities have an essential place in decreasing student absenteeism. Informing and visiting families in an interconnected manner (f=12) and increasing students' awareness (f=12) are the most frequently mentioned suggestions in this category. An expert stated that parent information systems should be free of charge (f=2) for the effectiveness of information activities saying, *"Parent information systems should be made free of charge, and systems should be created to provide very fast information to parents (E1)."* Awareness-raising activities should not be limited to the school and parents. As one expert suggests, to increase social awareness (f=9), *"Any awareness work that draws attention to absenteeism can be carried out by other institutions, too (E2)."*

In the category of educational programs, increasing social activities (f=15) is the most frequently recommended implementation. Despite the arrangements made in Turkey since the early 2000s on the student-centered orientation of curricula, the views on the need for a student-centered curriculum design (f=7) are remarkable. An R&D staff member stated, *"The load of the curriculum should be lightened, and the course hours should be reduced to decrease the negativities caused by the intensive course program on the students and the absenteeism process it creates" (R1)."* Avoiding overly strict rules (f=2) versus homework control and repetition (f=2) are other suggestions in this category.

Research Questions

Categories

Opinions

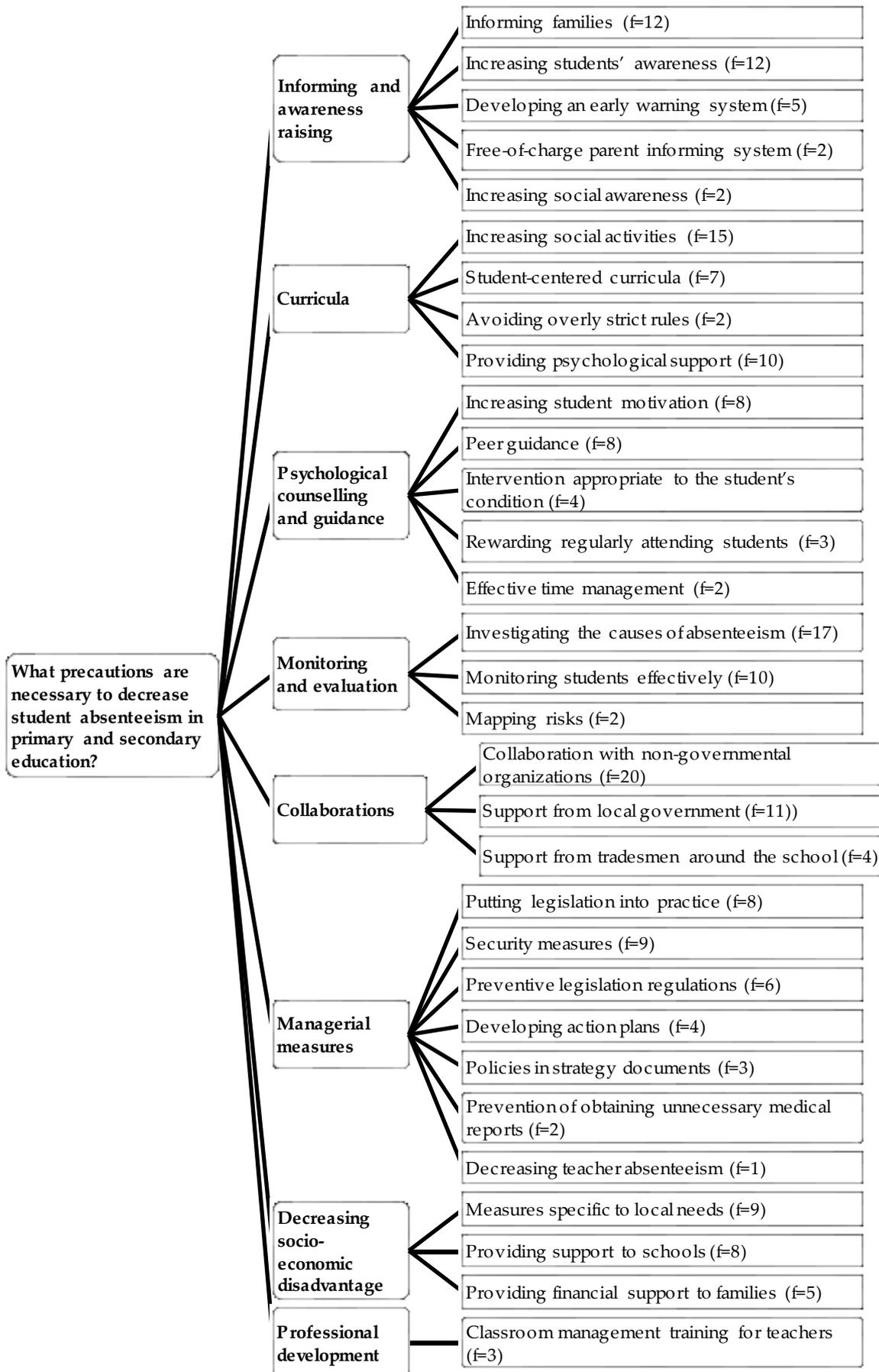


Figure 9. Opinions on Measures to be Taken to Reduce Student Absenteeism

Guidance and psychological counseling activities are recommended to complement the arrangements to be made in the training programs. Providing psychological support to students is a prominent suggestion at this point (f=10). Peer guidance (f=8) can be evaluated as a practice that can be more effective than other recommendations. According to the R&D staff of a province where absenteeism is intense, *"Peer coaching or peer companionship method can work. Children in this age group are most affected by the words and actions of their close friends (R7)."* Since the reasons for absenteeism differ from student to student, specific intervention (f=4) is required. Instead of punishing absenteeism, rewarding attendance (f=3) is more appropriate from an educational point of view. According to a secondary school teacher, *"Since the children who are permanently or frequently absent are already students who are not related to school and would not care if they failed, I think rewards are necessary to attract them... We have punishments, but we lack rewards to make children happy. Certificates of achievement are beautiful documents, but they do not delight as much as a movie ticket or a book (T2)."* The last point that should be mentioned in this category is the prevention of absences due to reasons such as insomnia and late waking up with effective time management (f=2).

Notable recommendations in the monitoring and evaluation category are investigating the causes of absenteeism (f=17) and the effective monitoring of students daily and weekly (f=10). It may be beneficial to intervene and prevent absenteeism before problems arise by preparing risk maps (f=2). According to an R&D staff member, *"Schools with high student absences should be identified at the level of the relevant branch offices. The risk maps of these schools should be drawn up (R4)"* at the provincial level.

Cooperation with stakeholders beyond the school was also emphasized in reducing student absenteeism. According to the participants, non-governmental organizations may have important duties such as awareness-raising activities, organization of social and cultural activities, financial support, investigating the reasons for absenteeism, and organizing various campaigns. For example, according to one expert, *"Students who are in schools through social solidarity and charity organizations and who cannot continue their education due to financial inadequacies should be supported (E4)."* Local governments and non-governmental organizations may have an important role (f=11) in reducing absenteeism. A teacher drew attention to the importance of this with the statement, *"Around the school, especially in local environments, the leading figures of the place where they live, such as mukhtars and district governors, should raise awareness about this issue (T4)."* In addition, an R&D staff member drew attention to the importance of the support of the tradesmen around the school (f=4), and by saying, *"Especially the tradesmen around the school should be conscious. Suppose they need to warn students who are running away from school or absenteeism. In that case, they should cooperate with the school administration (R6),"* she stated that business owners in school districts also have important duties.

It can be noted that the most striking of the proposed administrative measures is putting the legislation on this subject into operation (f=8). The inadequate and inconsistent implementation of the sanctions in the legislation and the failure to complete the plans in the strategy documents as required are crucial deficiencies. A primary school teacher in a province with a high rate of absenteeism stated, *"There are laws for absenteeism, but their implementation is problematic, and I believe that if the school administration strictly adheres to this, there will at least be a decrease in arbitrary absences (T4)."* On the other hand, despite the views that implementing existing policies and regulations is sufficient, there are also opinions on additional preventive legislation arrangements (f=6) and the development of action plans (f=4). According to an R&D staff, *"Especially by creating a data warehouse where data is collected in a single pool, student absences of schools in all provinces would be detected instantly (R5)."* Another remarkable recommendation in this category is the security measures around the school (f=9). According to one expert, *"In case of absences made by the student, it should no longer be forgotten that parents or services bring the child to school. Therefore, since children leave these environments and become absent, safety measures should be of a nature to prevent this (E1)."* Other suggestions can be emphasized include preventing unnecessary acquisition of medical reports (f=2) and reducing teacher absences (f=1).

Since socio-economic disadvantages are among the leading causes of absenteeism, reducing them can also significantly contribute to decreasing absenteeism. The differentiation of the socio-economic causes of absenteeism according to the characteristics of regions and settlements requires measures specific to local needs (f=9). Support should be provided to schools, especially those in disadvantaged positions (f=8). It is also proposed to provide financial support directly to the students' families (f=5).

The last category of related to recommendations on reducing absenteeism is professional development. The fact that teachers may not have sufficient skills in fields such as classroom management and communication with the student can distract the student from the lessons and the school. According to the participants, teachers can be trained in subjects such as classroom management, developmental characteristics, and coaching (f=3).

4. Discussion and Conclusion

This study was conducted to evaluate the current situation of the student absenteeism problem, its effects on educational environments from different angles, the policies applied in this field, and the measures to be taken to solve the problem. The data were collected using a semi-structured interview form and analyzed thematically. The research was conducted using a basic qualitative research design with participants from 14 different workplaces. According to the research results, student absenteeism remains as one of the major obstacles for educational organizations to achieve their goals. Absenteeism adversely affects the academic and social development of the student. Strickland (1998) revealed a negative relationship between high school student absenteeism and graduation scores. Altinkurt (2008) also found an inverse relationship between students' academic achievement and their unexcused absenteeism.

Students who group outside the school with absenteeism acquire bad habits and gradually move away from the social structure. According to Reid (2003), while absenteeism was an individual and unplanned action in the 1950s and 60s, it has turned into an organized and planned group action since the 2000s, and group absenteeism constitutes approximately 70-80% of absenteeism cases. Students who move away from social and cultural life due to absenteeism and cannot recognize their peers may also be deprived of the desired gains of informal education in school. While students interact with each other in the group they form with their peers, they become social by learning to help, solidarity, cooperation, obey the rules, and adopt the values of the group. However, it is also possible to acquire unwanted and harmful habits in the informal education process (Fidan, 2012). Absent students may acquire unwanted behaviors as a result of interactions with out-of-school groups. According to Kearney (2008), student absenteeism is an important public health issue, and the spread of unexcused absenteeism can lead to many behavioral disorders such as violence, substance use, and psychological disorders in students. According to DeKalb (1999), absenteeism can also endanger students' having a good job, gaining a good place in society, and developing their self-esteem.

As a result of absenteeism, the relationship between the student and the teacher as well as between the school and the parents may be damaged. Due to absent students' learning deficiencies, teachers face difficult situations in classroom management, and schools deviate from their goals. The workload of school administrators increases, their time is spent on procedures related to absenteeism instead of instructional issues, and therefore, some of the resources become wasted. According to Taymaz (2000), one of the tasks that school administrations deal with most regarding student services is monitoring student attendance. The compromises that school administrators will make on this issue may lead to the continuation of the absenteeism problem.

Many measures are being taken to reduce absenteeism. In this context, information and awareness-raising activities for students and families, monitoring of absenteeism situations, and increasing social, cultural, and sports activities stand out. However, due to the multifaceted and multi-layered nature of student absenteeism, it can be said that the desired efficiency cannot be obtained from preventive studies. According to Roby (2003), although some variables originating from the student, family, teachers, or curriculum that lead to absenteeism can be controlled, socio-economic variables, particularly, are difficult to control. The Ministry of National Education is trying to ensure equality of opportunity in education with implementations such as free textbook distribution, transportation-centered education and free lunches, public boarding schools and scholarships, and support and training courses (MoNE, 2019), and in a sense, is trying to reduce the negative impact of socio-economic variables on students. Especially in cases where socio-economic variables play a decisive role, it can be said that the Conditional Cash Transfer for Education (CCTE) Program and scholarship applications will be more effective.

ERG (2015) indicated that PISA and TALIS practices differ in variables of unexcused absenteeism in terms of school type (public/private), location, socio-economic conditions, and school resources. It is expected that considering these differences in the interventions to be made will yield positive results. Since 2003, the Turkey-

wide Conditional Cash Transfer for Education (CCTE) Program provides educational assistance to families in need every month, providing that they regularly send their children to school. From 2003 to the end of June 2017, 5.881.628.506 TL was paid to the mothers of primary and secondary school students (MoNE, 2017c). The ERG (2015) determined that CCTE significantly reduced student absenteeism particularly in rural areas and argued that expanding the scope of the CCTE in its current form would be a practical solution to reduce student absenteeism due to poverty.

In order to reduce student absenteeism, it is of great importance to cooperate with the school and the family, inform the families, and increase their awareness. According to Epstein and Sheldon (2002), cooperation with the family, especially at the basic education level, plays an important role in increasing student attendance rates and eliminating chronic absenteeism. Effective monitoring of students during cooperation with the family is a prominent recommendation in this regard in line with the literature. Coutts (1998) stated that ensuring high attendance by monitoring students' attendance status is one indicator of being an effective school.

The most frequently voiced recommendations for reducing absenteeism are significantly similar to current practices. Briefing activities, organization of social, cultural, and sports activities, and the monitoring of students are among the main recommendations. However, considering the course of absenteeism rates over the years and the implementation, it becomes a matter of debate whether similar practices would be effective in the future. As stated by the participants, the failures in implementing the legislation aimed at preventing absenteeism and the inconsistencies observed from time to time in the practices harm the efforts to reduce absenteeism.

Intervention before the problem arises for risky students with an early warning system, taking measures appropriate to regional conditions, and developing cooperation with stakeholders, especially families, can be presented as suggestions with priority for preventing absenteeism. It is also recommended that educational organizations of all types and levels approach the issue more systematically, and systems that will provide faster information to parents should be implemented. Implementations such as scholarships, boarding schools, and Conditional Cash Transfer for Education, which reduce the impact of socio-economic disadvantages that have an important place among the reasons for absenteeism, should also be continued. In addition, considering the possibility that the proposed policies may not be effective in the short term, it can be said that studies should be conducted to reduce the negative effects of absenteeism on educational environments.

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