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Karel, E.; Heyne, D.A.; Weerd, M. de; Halberstadt, R.

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The Recording, Reporting, and Use of School Attendance Data by School Personnel in The Netherlands: Toe the Line or Take a New Path?

Evelyne Karel¹, David Heyne², Marga de Weerd³,
Rene Halberstadt³

¹ De Berkenschutse, Heeze, the Netherlands

² Leiden University Institute of Psychology, Leiden, the Netherlands

³ Ingrado, Rotterdam, the Netherlands

Abstract: Research signals the importance of promptly identifying and responding to emerging absenteeism, to prevent severe and chronic absenteeism. Prompt identification and response relies upon a good system for recording, reporting, and using data related to students' school attendance and absence. The current article provides an overview of law, policy, and practice in the Netherlands regarding the recording, reporting, and use of school attendance data. We then consider the ways in which current law, policy, and practice help and hinder the work of school personnel as they endeavour to promote attendance and reduce absenteeism. Thereafter, we propose modifications to current policy and practice that could enhance the prompt identification and response to emerging absenteeism. When school personnel have easy access to reliable attendance data, and when they become accustomed to using the data to inform their work to promote attendance and respond to absenteeism, they are in a stronger position to support positive developmental outcomes among young people.

Keywords: school attendance data, school absenteeism, policy, practice, reporting, school personnel, The Netherlands

The importance of youths' engagement with schooling is supported by longitudinal studies conducted in the UK and USA which indicate that school attendance contributes to intellectual development and academic achievement (Carroll, 2010; Gottfried, 2011). Another study in the USA indicates that school attendance facilitates youths' social and emotional development (Gottfried, 2014). Moreover, attendance helps prepare youths for successful participation in society. For example, in the Netherlands as in other countries, citizenship education is an integral part of the curriculum (Ministry of Education, Culture and Science, 2021b).

Various negative consequences can arise when a young person's participation in education is reduced as a result of absenteeism, especially chronic absenteeism (i.e., 10% absence across a school term or year, Kearney & Graczyk, 2020). These consequences include poor health, decrease in educational and social engagement,

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- 2 anxiety problems, depressive symptoms, reduced self-esteem, and increased isolation (Gottfried, 2014; Heyne et al., 2019; Kearney, 2008; Malcolm et al., 2003). Absenteeism may also have a negative impact on the family (e.g., Dannow et al., 2020), school peers (Gottfried & Hutt, 2019), school personnel (e.g., Finning et al., 2018), and the wider community (e.g., Allison & Attisha, 2019; Evans, 2000). As well as contributing to negative consequences, absence from school may be an indicator of underlying distress such as social anxiety or depression (Heyne et al., 2022).

1 Context

In the Netherlands, compulsory education applies to all young people from the age of 5 until the end of the school year in which they reach the age of 16, including asylum seekers and foreign nationals. Most children start education at the age of 4. Toddlers aged 2.5–4 years with (a risk of) educational disadvantage may attend preschool education to prevent or reduce their educational disadvantage (Ministry of Education, Culture and Science, n.d.).

Education commences with eight years of elementary school (pre-primary and primary grades), comprising 7,520 hours of education (Ministry of Education, Culture and Science, 2006). When a young person, due to academic deficiencies or social emotional reasons, cannot participate in regular elementary education, there is the possibility of continuing in special elementary education (SBO). When there are very serious learning problems and/or social-emotional challenges, a young person can attend special education (SO), for which a special admission statement is needed (Ministry of Education, Culture and Science, n.d.-h).

On average, youths enter secondary education at 12 years of age. There are four types of secondary education: practical education (PRO), preparatory secondary vocational education (VMBO), higher general secondary education (HAVO), and preparatory scientific education (VWO). Depending on the type of secondary education, the total number of education hours ranges from 1,000 (PRO) to 5,700 (VWO) (Ministry of Education, Culture and Science, 2021c).

Most Dutch schools for primary and secondary education are funded by the government, and there is a small group of schools providing non-government funded education. The non-government schools are not required to conform to all standards for government-funded education, but they are subject to specific laws and policies (e.g., obligation to employ qualified teachers and to apply the principles of education as described in the law). They are also required to report to the Education Inspectorate (Inspectie van het onderwijs, 2017). The number of primary and secondary students in non-government funded education has increased in recent years. For example, between 2015 and 2020 there was a 72.7% increase in non-government funded primary education (i.e., from 532 to 919 students – Inspectie van het onderwijs, 2021).

1.1 The Need for Accurate and Consistent School Attendance Data

A data-driven approach can be used to support youths' school attendance and thus ensure their optimal development (Chu, 2021; Keppens & Johnsen, 2021). In many countries, including the Netherlands, schools are required to monitor students' school attendance. By monitoring, we mean the act of recording and reporting students' attendance and/or absence. In the Netherlands, the requirement that schools monitor attendance is largely there to ensure that parents and young people comply with compulsory education (Wittelman-van Leenen et al., 2017). Importantly, the monitoring of school attendance also helps schools and communities identify youths and families needing support to prevent or remediate a school attendance problem (SAP).

The standard way for schools to monitor students' attendance is to record their absences in a monitoring system. This data must be accurate if it is to be used to draw conclusions about the needs of a young person or a group of young people (e.g., youths in a specific year level), and if researchers are going to use the data to study influences on attendance and absence. Nevertheless, Belgian research suggests that schools' recording of absences is not always accurate (Keppens et al., 2019). In addition to the need for accurate data, there is a need for consistency in the type of data that is recorded, to benefit comparison across schools, regions, and countries. Dutch research reveals little consistency across schools in the way absence data is recorded; variations include recording on an hourly basis, per half day, or daily (Roelofs et al., 2021). The lack of reliable data – data which is accurate and consistent – jeopardises the prompt identification of SAPs and the deployment of adequate interventions to prevent chronic absenteeism and subsequent early school leaving.

1.2 The Need to Use School Attendance Data to Inform School-Based Practice

Reliable attendance data is necessary but not sufficient for preventing and addressing SAPs. School personnel need to harness the potential in their attendance data by regularly analysing the data and using this analysis to select strategies that promote attendance and reduce absenteeism (Keppens et al., 2019). The analysis of attendance data can be done at an individual level, as well as at the level of the class, grade/year, and school. Relevant school personnel need to receive timely reports of students' absence in order to conduct this analysis.

The multi-dimensional multi-tiered system of supports model (MD-MTSS; Kearney & Graczyk, 2020) facilitates decision-making at multiple levels (e.g., school level, year level, class level) during the analysis of attendance data. It reinforces the use of broad preventive measures to promote school attendance and prevent absenteeism (Tier 1) and provides guidance on how to address emerging, mild, or

- 4 moderate absenteeism (Tier 2) as well as severe and chronic absenteeism (Tier 3). Attendance-based cut-off scores help demarcate movement from Tier 1 to Tier 2, and from Tier 2 to Tier 3. For example, when a student's absence surpasses 5%, this indicates the need to employ Tier 2 strategies to address emerging absenteeism, such as teacher mentoring or social skills training (Kearney, 2016). Absenteeism of 10% or more in a specified period signals the need to implement more intensive Tier 3 strategies such as the @school program (Heyne & Sauter, 2013), Back2School (Thastum et al., 2019), or an alternative education program (Brouwer-Borghuis et al., 2019). To date, there has been no research in the Netherlands on the use of the MD-MTSS model, but the authors are aware that the model is gaining increasing exposure among Dutch professionals in education and mental health.

1.3 Aim

In sum, prompt identification of absenteeism guards against the emergence of SAPs and thus the development of severe and chronic SAPs, and the MD-MTSS model supports the process of identifying and responding to SAPs. In effect, young people can benefit from the opportunities schooling provides for their academic and social-emotional development. The aim of the current paper is to advance the recording, reporting, and use of school attendance data in the Netherlands, in the interests of promoting school attendance and reducing SAPs. The following two questions were addressed: 1) What are the current laws and policies in the Netherlands with respect to recording, reporting, and using school attendance data? 2) In which ways do current laws and policies likely help and hinder school personnel as they use the MD-MTSS framework to promote attendance and reduce SAPs? To answer these questions, we drew upon the international literature on school attendance; Dutch laws and policies; and Dutch literature directly or indirectly addressing the recording, reporting, and/or use of school attendance data. Furthermore, we drew on the knowledge and experience of authors Rene Halberstadt and Marga de Weerd who work with Ingrado (the national branch association for compulsory education and early school leaving) and are expert on law, policies, and practices associated with school attendance in the Netherlands.

Following, in Section 2, we describe existing laws and policies and the way in which school personnel currently record, report, and use school attendance data. Thereafter, in Section 3, we reflect upon existing laws, policies, and current practice, and propose modifications that would help to pave a new path forward.

2 Current Law, Policy, and Practice Related to the Recording, Reporting, and Use of Attendance Data in the Netherlands

This section begins with an overview of Dutch law and policy pertaining to school attendance and absenteeism. It provides the context for understanding current practice related to school attendance data, described thereafter.

2.1 Current Law and Policy Regarding School Attendance

Every young person has a right to education. In the Netherlands, this right is guaranteed by the 1969 Compulsory Education Act (*Leerplichtwet 1969*, 2021). School attendance officers (*leerplichtambtenaren*) located in each municipality oversee compliance with the Compulsory Education Act and work to prevent school absenteeism and early school leaving. As noted above, compulsory education applies between 5 and 16 years of age. However, young people aged 16 to 18 years who have not obtained a basic qualification via their secondary education continue to be subject to compulsory education. The basic qualification is a diploma at higher general secondary education level, preparatory scientific education, or secondary vocational education (level 2 or higher). The basic qualification requirement is one of the measures instituted by the national government to prevent early school leaving, and it is intended to increase the chances of young people entering the labour market (Ministry of Education, Culture and Science, n.d.-c). Young people in non-diploma-oriented learning pathways in special education settings are not subject to the compulsory qualification.

The Compulsory Education Act allows for exemptions from school enrolment (article 5) and school attendance (article 11). The three types of exemption within these articles of law, as specified by the Ministry of Education, Culture and Science (n.d.-f), are:

- exemption for up to ten hours of education a week for children aged 5 to 6 years (article 11a);
- exemption from registration at a school because of (a) serious physical and/or psychological complaints (article 5 under a), (b) serious objections based on philosophy of life (article 5 under b), or because (c) young people are enrolled in a foreign school or do not live in one place (article 5 under c & part 5a); and authorised absenteeism (e.g., illness, suspension, funeral – article 11 a–g). Most of these exemptions are issued either by the school principal or the school attendance officer.

In 2014, the law on Appropriate Education (*Passend Onderwijs*) was introduced in the Netherlands. This law states that every young person subject to compulsory education should have an appropriate place in education where their educational needs can be met, and no student is deprived of education. In each region, schools

- 6 for regular and special education formed a so-called Collaboration (*Samenwerkingsverband*) to share responsibility for duty of care (*zorgplicht*). This implies that schools in the Collaboration cooperate in arranging the extra support that students need. The duty of care implies that a school may only deregister a student once the student has been enrolled in another suitable school (Ministry of Education, Culture and Science, n.d.-a, n.d.-e).

2.2 Current Practice Related to the Recording and Reporting of Attendance and Absenteeism

In the Netherlands, a distinction is made between two types of absenteeism: absolute absenteeism (*absoluut verzuim*) and relative absenteeism (*relatief verzuim*). Absolute absenteeism occurs when a young person subject to compulsory education and without a basic qualification is not enrolled in a school. Information about young people not enrolled in education is provided to schools and municipalities by the national government's Education Implementation Service (*Dienst Uitvoering Onderwijs, DUO*) (DUO, n.d.-a). Relative absenteeism occurs when a young person is enrolled in a school but is absent during class time. The policy resulting from the Compulsory Education Act distinguishes between relative absenteeism which is authorised (*geoorloofd*) and unauthorised (*ongeoorloofd*). This distinction determines whether a young person's absence falls under one of the legal exemptions from education as described in the Compulsory Education Act. For example, absence due to illness, suspension, religious beliefs, or attendance at a wedding or funeral is recorded by the school as authorised absence. Absence from school without a valid reason is classified as unauthorised absence, as in the case of truancy.

Schools are not allowed to report authorised absences to DUO. It is mandatory, however, to report unauthorised absence of 16 hours or more in 4 consecutive school weeks. Schools have an option to report unauthorised absenteeism in three situations: long-term relative unauthorised absenteeism (absence for 4 consecutive school weeks or more); luxury absence (vacation taken outside of the school vacations, without leave being granted by the school principal); and other unauthorised absenteeism, such as absence of less than 16 hours in 4 consecutive weeks, regular tardiness, or suspicion of unauthorised absence reported as illness (DUO, n.d.-a). In all three situations, DUO will notify the school attendance officer in the relevant municipality. The school attendance officer then makes contact with the school to discuss the steps to be taken.

The government provides schools with rather few guidelines for recording and reporting unauthorised absence. Primary schools are to report 16 clock hours of unauthorised absence whereas secondary schools are to report 16 class hours if a class hour is less than or equal to 60 minutes. If a class hour is more than 60 minutes, it is converted to clock hours and reported as 16 clock hours (DUO, n.d.-a). In reality, however, absenteeism is often recorded by school personnel as half or whole days in primary education, and by class hour in secondary education (Roelofs et al., 2021).

Keeping track of students' attendance and absenteeism requires appropriate record keeping systems in schools. According to the 1969 Compulsory Education Act, the school principal is responsible for the accurate recording of absenteeism, along with the reporting of unauthorised absenteeism through the DUO absenteeism portal (DUO, n.d.-a; Witteman-van Leenen et al., 2017). However, schools may decide for themselves how to record absences, such as which software system to use and which subcategories are used to specify reasons for absence (e.g., doctor's visit, tardiness, or orthodontist visit). Since 2012, the Inspectorate of Education oversees whether schools keep accurate records of absenteeism, and it checks whether schools have reported unauthorised absenteeism (i.e., 16 hours or more in 4 consecutive school weeks) via the DUO absenteeism portal (Witteman-van Leenen et al., 2017).

Absence reports in the DUO portal are subsequently recorded, by DUO, in the Educational Participants Register (*Register Onderwijsdeelnemers*). This register contains data on students from all education sectors (e.g., primary and secondary education) for the purpose of, among other things, funding educational institutions, ministerial preparation of policy on absenteeism, and making reliable diploma information available. The data includes demographic data, exemption data, absenteeism data, diploma data, and national identification numbers of students (Wet register onderwijsdeelnemers, 2021).

2.2.1 School Personnel's Compliance with the Recording and Reporting of Absence

As noted, the Education Inspectorate supervises school principals' compliance with the Compulsory Education Act. In school year 2015-2016, the Education Inspectorate investigated the extent to which there was sufficient compliance with the Act, focusing on: absence administration, reports of unauthorised absence, the handling of leave requests, and schools' communication of their absence policy to families. A rating of 'unsatisfactory' was applied to 27 percent of the primary schools that were surveyed, 69 percent of special education schools surveyed, and 11 percent of secondary schools surveyed (Witteman-van Leenen et al., 2017). The most problematic areas were absence administration, reporting unauthorised absence, and granting leave. There was also room for improvement in school personnel's communication with families about the school's absence policies. Follow-up in school year 2016-2017 revealed substantial improvements by these schools (Witteman-van Leenen et al., 2017).

There may be differences in the way primary schools and secondary schools record and report absence. Roelofs et al. (2021) studied absence due to illness (authorised absence) and short-term unauthorised absence (less than 16 hours in 4 weeks) in primary, secondary, and special education schools in the Netherlands. They found that the average number of absences due to illness was three times lower in primary schools compared to secondary schools. The authors suggested that this may occur because absenteeism is recorded in a more systematic way in secondary

- 8 schools, resulting in higher reports of absence. They also suggested that school personnel in primary schools might be hesitant to officially report absenteeism, out of a concern that involving the school attendance officer might damage parents' trust in the school. According to Roelofs et al., the inclination of primary school staff to address absenteeism with the parents, rather than reporting it, could explain the lower rates of reported illness among youths in primary education.

2.2.2 Challenges for school personnel in Recording and Reporting Absence

For personnel in Dutch schools, the task of differentiating between authorised and unauthorised absence is not straightforward. This difficulty is also described in the international literature. Absences may be recorded as authorised because a parent writes a note stating that their child is ill, when in fact their child is not ill (Kearney, 2003). In effect, the recorded authorised absence camouflages an unauthorised absence. Moreover, school personnel (e.g., teachers, attendance coordinators) employ subjectivity when recording absences as authorised or unauthorised (Zhang, 2003). Indeed, Panayiotou et al. (2021) suggested that the conceptualisation and operationalisation of authorised and unauthorised absences vary according to the teacher, school, and circumstance, and that a student's high number of unauthorised absences may be interpreted by teachers as a sign of emotional disturbance, leading them to record subsequent absences as authorised. Other international researchers have similarly suggested that the validity of the assumptions of parents, young people, and school personnel, regarding authorised versus unauthorised absence, is weak (Birioukov, 2016; Keppens & Johnsen, 2021).

School personnel in the Netherlands are required to have good registration systems in place to record student absences (Ministry of Education, Culture and Science, 2020). The Compulsory Education Act does not mandate however, that authorised absences such as absence due to illness be reported to DUO. It is thus difficult to identify exact rates of absence due to illness on a national or even municipal level. Research suggests that absences due to illness account for a large proportion of total school absenteeism in primary education (Pijl et al., 2021; Roelofs et al., 2021). Nevertheless, there is sometimes less awareness of the impact of (authorised) illness-related absence on young people's well-being (Pijl et al., 2021).

The Compulsory Education Act does provide an option for school personnel to report worrisome authorised absence under the category of 'other absenteeism' (DUO, n.d.-a), but this is not mandatory. According to Roelofs et al. (2021), school personnel and school attendance officers have difficulty specifying authorised absences that are worrying. While there is no clear definition of worrisome authorised absence, school personnel in Roelofs and colleagues' study indicated that worrying authorised absenteeism is related to: the duration and frequency of absenteeism, the underlying issues for the young person (e.g., medical or social-emotional problems), and an overall sense that the absence is worrisome. The authors suggested that the lack of a clear definition for worrying authorised absenteeism poses a risk

for under-recording and under-reporting of absenteeism. This is likely to delay appropriate intervention, counter to the MD-MTSS model for promoting school attendance and reducing absenteeism.

Currently, there is a large teacher shortage in the Netherlands. The consequent high workload experienced by teachers is a major challenge and it impacts the quality of education and well-being of students (DUO, 2019; Inspectie van het onderwijs, 2022). One could speculate that the large teacher shortage also has a negative effect on the recording of absenteeism, due to insufficient time to routinely and accurately record students' attendance and absence.

The COVID-19 pandemic caused major disruptions to schooling, with ramifications for how absence was conceptualised, recorded, and reported. During the first lockdown in the Spring of 2020, schools in the Netherlands were not obliged to report absenteeism to DUO. School attendance officers mainly focused on supporting schools by getting in contact with young people who were absent from school, rather than simply enforcing the law surrounding absenteeism. This was an attempt to ensure that as many young people as possible remained 'in view'. After the first lockdown, schools were required to report unauthorised absenteeism from distance learning such as online classes. These 'distance learning absences' belonged to the same category as unauthorised absences during regular class time in school. DUO and the school attendance officers encouraged schools to report absences that are worrying even before absence reached the statutory threshold of 16 hours in 4 weeks (DUO, n.d.-b; Ministry of Education, Culture and Science, 2021a).

2.3 Current Practice Related to the Use of Attendance Data

The careful recording and diligent reporting of school attendance data can improve educational and social-emotional outcomes for young people when that data is used to inform decisions about which young people and families need attendance support.

2.3.1 Using Attendance Data for School-Based Intervention

There are two commonly used protocols in the Netherlands that provide guidance regarding the use of attendance data. These protocols are Medical Advice for Sick-Reported Students (MAZL –*Medische Advisering van de Ziekgemelde Leerling*) and Methodical Approach to School Absenteeism (MAS). The former targets authorised absenteeism due to illness in primary and secondary school students and is used by schools, health care institutions, and municipalities. The latter targets unauthorised absenteeism. It is used by all school attendance officers in the Netherlands to address SAPs. See Brouwer-Borghuis et al. (2019) for a description of the MAZL and MAS protocols.

Other than this, very little has been written about how personnel in Dutch schools use attendance data. An exception is the recent study by Roelofs et al. (2021). School-based personnel, school attendance officers, and youth healthcare physicians were asked how primary and secondary schools address absenteeism. The authors

10 found that about one-half of the primary and secondary schools have an absenteeism protocol. These protocols are based on the legal framework and specify the procedures used by the school in cases of absenteeism. Some differences in absence policy are noticeable between primary and secondary education. One example is that in secondary education, absenteeism due to illness is a specific part of the absenteeism policy, while this is not specifically addressed in absenteeism policies in primary schools. Protocols from primary and secondary schools are mainly communicated to parents and students through the school guide which provides information about the school, including the goals of education and additional support for students. In short, there is attention to the communication of procedures surrounding absenteeism, but there is no further specification of how school personnel use attendance data to support youths and families affected by absenteeism.

School-based professionals in the Roelofs et al. (2021) study indicated that their approach to addressing absenteeism was mainly aimed at prevention, by focusing on an appropriate curriculum and counselling program, sometimes in combination with a more curative approach to absenteeism. There was no specification of how attendance data is used to inform the interventions used. In the reports of school attendance officers and youth healthcare physicians, there was variation in the approach to absenteeism. They noted that some schools focus on preventing absenteeism while others adopt more of a wait-and-see approach, taking action when absenteeism becomes more problematic. One example of how schools take action to address absenteeism is to first engage with the parents and the young person, and if necessary, to then collaborate with partners such as school attendance officers or healthcare professionals.

2.3.2 Governmental Use of Attendance Data

Each year, municipalities are required to report the rate of unauthorised absenteeism to the Ministry of Education, Culture and Science, along with the efforts taken to address absenteeism during the year. The Minister for Education, Culture and Science informs the House of Representatives about the rates of school absenteeism in the previous school year, and the most important focal points (Ministry of Education, Culture and Science, n.d.-b). An example of how the government uses absence data to fine-tune policy is found in the evaluation of the law on Appropriate Education. This evaluation showed that there was no decrease in the number of students with long-term absenteeism (*thuiszitters*) since the introduction of the Appropriate Education law (Ledoux et al., 2020). According to the Minister, there needs to be improved cooperation between education and mental health care to ensure that young people are not absent from school for longer than is necessary (Ministry of Education, Culture and Science, 2021a).

To encourage this cooperation, the Minister has, for example, selected 15 experimental projects for educational care arrangements (*onderwijszorgarrangementen*). During the course of the experiment, organisations can deviate from certain laws and regulations that are found to be unwelcome barriers in the cooperation

between education and mental health care. This allows for innovative initiatives in the field of education and mental health care, to promote the development or improvement of customised approaches to reducing long-term absenteeism. The effects of the experiment are being monitored and the results will serve as the basis for modifying laws and policies in the long term (Ministry of Education, Culture and Science, n.d.-g).

A recent parliamentary letter from the Minister, which reports on school absenteeism in school year 2020-2021, refers to the importance of not just focusing on the number of youths absent from school, but also focusing on the promotion of school attendance among all school-aged youths. According to the letter, this can be achieved by increasing opportunities to participate in education, and by simplifying the recording of absence and making the recording of all types of absence mandatory. The minister also emphasises the importance of addressing the increase in exemptions related to art. 5 under a (i.e. exemptions because of serious physical and/or psychological complaints) in all municipalities by, for example, examining the roles of attendance officers and municipalities and, if necessary, clarifying and fine-tuning them (Ministry of Education, Culture and Science, 2022).

National absenteeism data collected by the government is made publicly accessible to schools, policymakers, and other stakeholders in two ways. The first is through the Absenteeism and Early School-Leavers Compass (*Verzuim en Schoolverlaters Kompas*, <https://www.vsvkompas.nl>), introduced in 2015. This is a digital platform that brings together the most up-to-date national information on absenteeism and early school leaving. The Compass has a restricted section with comprehensive fact sheets and analysis of absenteeism intended for use by people such as municipal managers and policymakers to shape their policies. A benchmark on national absenteeism figures in the past school year is also made available to anyone interested in such data. This includes nationally available data on absolute absenteeism, relative absenteeism, long-term relative absenteeism, early school leavers, exemptions, and official reports by attendance officers. The Compass is administered by Ingrado (the national branch association for compulsory education and early school leaving) at the request of the Ministry for Education, Culture and Science. The second way national absenteeism data is made publicly accessible is through the website of the national government. This includes data on absenteeism per municipality, including absolute absenteeism, relative absenteeism, long-term relative absenteeism, and exemptions from compulsory education (Ministry of Education, Culture and Science, n.d.-d).

3 Discussion

The reliable recording, efficient reporting, and diligent use of attendance data facilitate timely intervention for absenteeism which can help prevent the development of SAPs. Following, we highlight key issues identified in the literature that are relevant for school personnel as they record, report, and use school attendance data. We offer specific recommendations for the recording, reporting, and use of school attendance data, in the hope that these recommendations help pave a new path forward in the Netherlands and perhaps in other countries.

3.1 Recording Absenteeism

Currently, the legal framework regarding the school-based recording of absenteeism only requires that school personnel keep records of absences. Beyond that, school personnel are free to determine such things as who records absenteeism and which software system is used for this purpose. In practice, it seems that school personnel find it difficult to establish and maintain reliable records of absenteeism. Two points warrant attention.

First, the impression gained from school personnel in the Netherlands is that the recording of absenteeism can be complex and time-consuming. This task, usually undertaken by the classroom teacher or an absence coordinator, requires a determination about which subcategory of ‘relative absenteeism’ applies to each instance of absence. It is necessary that those recording absenteeism have a good understanding of when and how the subcategories apply, to promote reliable recording across those conducting the task, and over time (i.e., across every class or hour in the school day). Different interpretations of the same subcategories of absence (e.g., authorised versus unauthorised) pose a risk for prompt identification and appropriate intervention. To reduce this risk, we recommend that schools choose to respond to all absences, rather than focusing just on those subcategories of absence which the law currently deems significant. There needs to be clear communication among school personnel, and with students and parents, to understand the reasons for absenteeism and thus to offer appropriate intervention. In addition, professional development for school personnel could focus on the impact of absence, irrespective of the category of absence, underscoring the need for accurate recording of all absence.

Second, schools in the Netherlands currently decide how to record absences and this leads to variation across schools. One of the variations we are aware of is that absenteeism in primary schools is often recorded per part day or whole day, whereas in secondary schools it is often recorded per class hour. There is also variation in categories used by schools to define authorised and unauthorised absenteeism. Variations across schools is unlikely to be unique to the Netherlands. We perceive three problems with variations in what is recorded. First, because absenteeism is recorded in ‘broader brushstrokes’ in primary schools (i.e., half days versus hourly),

there is less nuanced information about the extent to which primary school youths are missing out on educational time. Second, it is difficult to reliably compare rates of absenteeism in primary schools and secondary schools. For example, a primary school student's short visit to the dentist could be recorded as a 'dental visit' associated with a half day of absence whereas a secondary school student's visit could be recorded as a 'medical visit' associated with an hour's absence. Third, variation makes it difficult for policymakers and researchers to conduct robust comparisons of attendance data across schools, regions, and countries (Lubberman et al., 2014; Roelofs et al., 2021).

3.2 Reporting Absenteeism

The current legal framework for the reporting of absenteeism provides school personnel with some guidance on this matter. That is, the reporting of unauthorised absenteeism needs to occur via a classification of the subtype of unauthorised absenteeism (e.g., long-term relative unauthorised absenteeism or luxury absence). Adherence to the legal framework is monitored and supported by various stakeholders such as the Ministry of Education, Culture and Science, DUO, and school attendance officers. We recommend two changes to the reporting of absenteeism, related to the difficulty distinguishing between authorised and unauthorised absence, and to the current threshold for reporting absenteeism.

First, Dutch policy seems to suggest, falsely, that there is a difference in the seriousness of absenteeism that must be reported by schools (i.e., unauthorised absenteeism) compared with absenteeism that does not need to be reported (i.e., authorised absenteeism). Because there is no reporting requirement for authorised absence, this might send an unintended signal to school personnel that this type of absence is less concerning and requires less attention. As a result, school personnel may respond to authorised absenteeism in a way which is 'too little, too late'. To be sure, authorised absence such as absenteeism due to illness accounts for a substantial share of total absenteeism among young people (Pijl et al., 2021; Roelofs et al., 2021). Moreover, authorised and unauthorised absenteeism both have the potential to affect a young person's development (Havik et al., 2015). In order to avoid misconceptions about the likely impact of different types of absenteeism (i.e., authorised and unauthorised), national policy could mandate that all types of absenteeism be reported.

The second recommendation relates to the threshold for reporting absenteeism. Current Dutch laws and policies provide some leeway for school personnel, in that there is scope to report 'worrysome absenteeism' even before it reaches the official threshold of 16 hours in 4 consecutive weeks of school-time. The reporting of 'worrysome absenteeism' has increasingly been encouraged by DUO and school attendance officers. However, the current legal threshold for obligatory reporting to DUO – 16 hours in 4 weeks – could signal to school personnel that action on absenteeism only needs to be taken when this threshold is reached. In an article

- 14 on the prompt identification of school attendance problems, Brouwer-Borghuis et al. (2019) compared the Dutch threshold for reporting unauthorised absenteeism (i.e., 16 hours in 4 weeks) with suggestions from the international literature about thresholds for emerging absenteeism (Tier 2: 1%, 3%, or 5% absenteeism) and severe or chronic absenteeism (Tier 3: 10% or 15% absenteeism). They concluded that Dutch laws and policies effectively require schools to report absenteeism only when it is severe or chronic. This clearly impedes timely identification and intervention. A new path forward would involve adjustments to laws and policies that foster a preventive rather than purely curative approach to absenteeism. For example, policy should encourage school personnel and municipalities to focus on the school attendance of all students, not only those whose absenteeism surpasses a threshold signalling a severe or chronic SAP.

3.3 Using Attendance Data

Little is known about how school personnel currently use attendance data in their daily practice to promote school attendance and respond to absenteeism. While Dutch laws provide some direction regarding the recording and reporting of absence, this is not the case for how to use attendance data. Furthermore, there are few non-legislative guidelines for school personnel. Ingrado (2020) recently responded to the need for more guidance for schools by offering suggestions about how to optimally use attendance data. These suggestions include: setting goals regarding attendance in school and comparing these goals to outcomes, evaluating attendance data at multiple levels (e.g. individual, classroom and school level), making sure school managers are aware of current attendance figures, and establishing a school-based attendance committee.

By default, Dutch laws draw attention to the absence of individual students, not to levels of absenteeism among groups (e.g., class or year level). Attention to the needs of individual students is important, and the current laws might explain why school absenteeism policies seem to focus on individual students, and why school-based approaches to absenteeism are fundamentally curative in nature rather than preventive. If laws and policies were to encourage school personnel to use data to also identify absenteeism trends at the class level, year level, and whole school level, this would broaden the focus of attention. For example, school personnel may then identify the need to implement more prevention and/or early intervention strategies among students in the first years of secondary school, such as personalised academic instruction, anti-bullying programs, or specific skills training (Kearney & Graczyk, 2020).

Another aspect of current Dutch laws and policies is that they focus school personnel's attention on attendance data to the exclusion of other variables known to be associated with SAPs and the remediation of SAPs. Examples of variables associated with absenteeism are school climate, bullying at school, the teacher-student relationship, and peer relations (Havik, 2021; Kearney, 2008). Examples of variables

associated with poor remediation of SAPs include older age and social anxiety (Heyne et al., 2015). By linking absenteeism data with other variables (e.g., linking absenteeism per class with student evaluations of school climate), school personnel can develop a fuller understanding of the variables influencing absenteeism and how best to respond. In the Netherlands, for example, this could involve the linking of data derived via mandatory monitoring of public safety in schools with data on absenteeism. In the US, Chu et al. (2019) provide an example of an online tool used by school personnel which makes use of various types of data to efficiently identify young people with emerging SAPs. Teachers mark attendance and absence in a centralised system, an administrative assistant monitors absenteeism and signals when a threshold is breached (five or more late arrivals, early departures, or absences), and a school counsellor completes an online questionnaire about academic, social, and family functioning. Chu et al. noted that this helps identify youth most at risk, provides direction regarding intervention, expands school personnel's knowledge of factors affecting attendance, and helps these personnel engage parents in conversations about what might be contributing to their child's absenteeism.

3.4 Conclusion

School absence and early school leaving have been high on the Dutch political agenda. Current laws provide direction for school personnel with respect to the recording and reporting of unauthorised absence. This includes a national reporting system, whereby unauthorised absence is reported to DUO and then entered in the Educational Participants Register. The government shares some of the absence data via its website and the Absenteeism and Early School Leavers Compass.

A recent letter from the Minister of Education, Culture and Science, sent to the House of Representatives, signals an important paradigm shift. There is a shift away from a sole focus on reducing long-term school absenteeism towards the promotion of school attendance among all young people. This heralds a new path forward. To enhance the path forward, we offered recommendations for improving the recording, reporting, and use of school attendance data in the Netherlands. It is no longer fitting for school personnel education professionals to simply 'toe the line' by retaining current practices in the areas of recording, reporting, and using attendance data. Policymakers also need to be mindful of ways to change policy to support school personnel taking new paths.

Specifically, attention needs to be given to how the recording of absence can be made less complex, and how to increase uniformity in the recording that occurs within and across schools. It would be important to mandate the reporting of all types of absenteeism (i.e., authorised and unauthorised), because absence from school poses a risk for negative consequences, especially as absence increases. Related, all absences should be reported, not just absences which reach a specific threshold, to increase attention to the need for early identification and intervention. Revisions to national, regional, and school-level policies, including the emphasis on

16 promoting attendance and preventing absenteeism, will help pave a better path forward.

Alongside the change in focus from absence to attendance, and improvements in the recording, reporting, and use of attendance data, we argue that the MD-MTSS framework (Kearney & Graczyk, 2020) that was introduced in Section 1.3 be used by school personnel to support their efforts as they travel this new path forward. This framework supports school personnel's efforts to promote a culture of school attendance (Tier 1) and efficiently identify and intervene with emerging, mild, or moderate SAPs (Tier 2). It contrasts, thus, with the more typical approach of solely addressing SAPs which have become severe and chronic (Tier 3). The framework also facilitates a shift from focusing solely on the individual young person, to addressing patterns of absenteeism that occur in larger groups such as the classroom or year level.

By taking this new path, rather than toeing the current line, we believe that school personnel and the broader community of support services will be in a better position to optimise each young person's journey along their own educational pathway. To further inform the path forward, there needs to be research into current and emerging policy and practice within schools regarding the recording, reporting, and use of attendance data. More specifically, qualitative research could explore school personnel's perceptions of the strengths and difficulties associated with current policy and practice. This could inform the development of supportive guidelines for school personnel as well as the need for a change in policy and law. Research could also focus on the ideal role of support services (e.g., school attendance officers, school psychologists) in helping school personnel promote attendance and reduce absenteeism. For example, how can professionals outside the school setting best support school personnel in using their attendance data? Lastly, research could explore the optimal conditions for the work of a school attendance team (e.g., a team comprising an administrator, a data analyst, a behaviour specialist, and a learning specialist) as the team seeks to help other personnel in the school to promote attendance and reduce absenteeism.

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Evelyne Karel, MSc
De Berkenschutse
Sterkselseweg 65
5591 VE Heeze, the Netherlands
evelyne.karel@berkenschutse.nl

David Heyne, PhD
Developmental and Educational Psychology Unit
Institute of Psychology
Leiden University
PO Box 9555
2300 RB Leiden, the Netherlands
heyne@fsw.leidenuniv.nl

Marga de Weerd PhD
Ingrado
Hofplein 20
3032 AC Rotterdam, the Netherlands
m.deweerd@ingrado.nl

René Halberstadt, MSc
Ingrado
Hofplein 20
3032 AC Rotterdam, the Netherlands
r.halberstadt@ingrado.nl