Accountability for learning in contexts of fragile school attendance in India

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A B S T R A C T

Accountability-focused governance reforms aiming to address the 'learning crisis' in schools across the global South have generated a performative orientation that diverts from a sustained focus on student learning. How education system actors perceive accountability for ensuring that all enrolled children attend school and learn even if children's attendance is irregular remains a critical question which this paper addresses. A global scholarly preoccupation with enrolment and absence that is inattentive to student attendance and its relationship with accountability for learning is first identified. The empirical investigation focuses on India, where despite near universal enrolment, the average rate of primary school attendance is about 70 per cent. Field sites are three government-run elementary schools, with poor material conditions, in the Adivasi region of southern Rajasthan. The paper first disaggregate the *rates* of learner attendance the schools report and identifies distinct temporal *patterns* which are captured in a typology. This is applied in a qualitative investigation of accountability for learning that uses student attendance patterns as a prism. It finds that while teachers holds themselves to account for delivering teaching, differing learner attendance patterns elicit different responses from teachers, such that teacher accountability does not extend to enabling good quality learning opportunities for all students. It shows that teacher and parent views of accountability for ensuring that children attend regularly are misaligned. The conclusion summarises the evidence-based learning for policy and argues that promoting systemic accountability for learning requires a firmer focus on the attendance – learning relationship in general, and 'fragile' attendance in particular, in both India and other global South country contexts.

1. Introduction

The urgent need to act on the 'learning crisis' in schools across the global South (Clarke, 2022; World Bank, 2017) has given rise to a plethora of accountability-focused reforms in many countries, including India. In the burgeoning literature on the subject (e.g. Bruns et al., 2011; Eddy-Spicer et al., 2016; Lingard et al., 2017; Yan, 2019), some scholars articulate an urgent concern that governance reforms aiming to increase education system accountability are not merely failing to have the intended impact (Smith and Benavot, 2019). Rather, they may be making the situation worse by encouraging 'performances' of accountability (Ball, 2003) that may satisfy the requirements of 'regulatory' system governance (UNESCO, 2017) but have little impact on improving learning outcomes.

In India, two decades of Pratham's Annual Status of Education Reports (ASERs) have shown that the learning outcomes of children attending state-run elementary schools consistently fall well below

expected levels (ASER, 2022; see also Chatterjee et al., 2018). The 2020 National Education Policy (NEP) (Government of India 2020, 8 #2.1) speaks of a 'learning crisis' where despite 'nearly universal' school enrolment, 'a large proportion of students currently in elementary school […] have not attained foundational literacy and numeracy'. In making this connection, the NEP 2020 shifts the policy gaze from the predominant preoccupation with enrolment (focusing on universal access) to the learning outcomes of children who are enrolled. There is nevertheless a persistent gap which frames this paper: the insufficient attention that policy narratives pay to the fact that enrolment *coupled with* subsequent (regular) attendance is a pre-condition for student learning (Gupta et al., 2018; Banerji and Mathur, 2021).

Ensuring a child's 'regular attendance' is consistently articulated in policy discourses as a normative expectation of parents, children and teachers (Government of India, 1986/92 and 2009). This expectation notwithstanding, household surveys conducted between 2005 and 2018 record an average annual rate of learner absence in elementary schools

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that lies consistently at around 30 % (ASER, 2022). Thus, while there are regional fluctuations, the average national learner *attendance* rate across the eight years of elementary education is around 70 %.

Bringing enrolment, attendance and learning together generates an important, yet unexamined, accountability question in contexts of what we will term 'fragile' attendance: how do system actors perceive accountability for ensuring that all enrolled children attend school and learn, even if children's attendance is irregular? This paper engages with this question in the case of India by interrogating 'student attendance'[2]; and then applying this hitherto neglected prism to explore notions of accountability for children's learning that are held by teachers, parents and monitoring authorities. We use the potential of accountability as a generative concept for policy learning [3] (see Schön, 1993) - a productive alternative to the scholarly tendency to want to clarify what 'accountability' actually is, and failure to reach a consensus (Yan, 2019). We argue that within the current vertical and 'regulatory' frame of school governance in India, there are misalignments that have important implications for practices and conceptualisations of accountability for learning. In the context of generally low student attendance rates, we show that while delivery of teaching input is found to be an internalised responsibility for teachers, teachers do not hold themselves accountable for ensuring that *all* the children who attend learn and are given equal opportunity to progress. We make and illustrate our arguments by drawing on quantitative and qualitative data from a one year study in Rajasthan, focusing here on the home – school scales of the public education system.

Section 2 briefly examines scholarship on accountability to situate the discussion of accountability for learning, and argues that student attendance and its centrality for learning have been neglected in accountability focused studies so far. Section 3 provides empirical evidence that responds to this analysis. It first explains the study design and then explores attendance reporting, rates and patterns in the field context, using this evidence to propose a tentative typology of learner attendance patterns derived from school-level attendance data. Drawing on this typology, Section 4 examines discourses and practices of learner attendance and how these shape pedagogical responses, classroom and homework routines, and notions of accountability for children's learning. The final section underlines the contribution the proposed typology makes for future research into accountability for learning. It concludes that in the context of an increasingly performative culture of 'regulatory' monitoring and 'fragile' attendance (which are evidenced here for India but occur widely across the global South), the diversity of attendance patterns and how they shape pedagogical routines and prospects for reform needs to be brought firmly into the focus of policy and scholarly discussions on accountability for learning.

2. Accountability for learning

The scholarly literature on accountability expanded exponentially after the 2004 *World Development Report* posited accountability as integral to making services work for poor people (Junaid et al. 2004). The emerging dominance of accountability in governance reforms has been described by Dubnick (2003, 8) as an 'obsession' that is 'indifferent to the role of moral commitments in accountability'; it is producing an 'ever thinner form of accountability', where 'thin accountability translates into answerability and effort is to thicken answerability, not make accountability thicker'; the resulting 'thick answerability' is performative in nature, 'vacuous at best and counter-productive at its worst'. In the education sector, accountability has been written into numerous

contemporary education policies (Smith and Benavot, 2019), including India's 2020 National Education Policy (Government of India, 2020), and was the focus of an entire *Global Education Monitoring Report* (UNESCO, 2017). Governance reforms aiming to improve accountability have focused heavily on performance measurement (Ozga, 2013) and results-based practices (e.g. Hardy et al., 2019). This emphasis has given rise to sharp concern over the emergence of 'performative' accountability (Ball, 2003) in education systems around the world, including in India (Chandran, 2020; Dyer et al., 2022a; Ahmad Dar, 2023).

Offering another perspective on challenges of increasing accountability for learning within formal education systems in the global South, Pritchett (2015) argues that poor progress on improving learning outcomes reflects the architecture of schooling systems, which are designed to be coherent around enrolment, access and other input related goals, but not learning. As Jain and Jain (2023) point out for India, input-based policies that have increased enrolment do not serve the purpose of increasing learning outcomes (see also Muralidharan et al., 2017). Furthermore, the inherent limitations of an input orientation are exacerbated by the under-resourcing of state-provided inputs (Chatterjee et al., 2018) - yet states rarely hold themselves to account for such failure (Lauermann and Karabenick 2011; Komba 2017; Shields et al., 2021).

In the Indian state schooling system, accountability is conceived as 'vertical'; that is, top-down, hierarchical, and 'regulatory' (UNESCO, 2017).[4] This stance ignores the relational and reciprocal nature of accountability (Shields et al., 2021, Lauermann and Karabenick 2011, Dyer et al., 2022a and 2022b) and typically requires actors at the school level to produce accounts that are acceptable to monitoring authorities. Given the 'input' and regulatory orientations of the schooling system, accountability in this vein focuses on monitoring execution of specific verifiable activities, usually related to system 'inputs'. Consequently, school level actors are required to execute tasks that are 'thin' - lacking in contextual and relational depth (Pritchett 2015). The resulting 'accounts' thus demonstrate compliance with formal rules (Cerna, 2014; Hooge, Burns and Wilkoszewski, 2012; Pritchett 2015) in the shape of a 'performative' accountability that has little to do with promoting student learning.

Despite evidence in the literature of Indian school teachers' complex positionality, and how policy contradictions affect them (Sriprakash, 2011; Chandran, 2020), teachers are often blamed for poor policy outcomes (Ramchand, 2021). High rates of teacher absenteeism across the country have been evidenced in Muralidharan et al. (2017)'s influential large-scale quantitative study, for example, and identified by those authors as a 'particularly striking indicator of weak governance' (p. 117) and as 'systemic inefficiency' (*ibid*). Successive national policies have tended to treat teachers in isolation and normalise teacher 'quality' as in need of improvement (Kumar and Wiseman, 2021). Rather than interrogating poor student learning outcomes as a reflection of systemic shortcomings that manifest at the school level, the system responds to these logics of accountability by imposing tighter regulation of teachers. This, in turn, buttresses vertical accountability. In our perspective, attempting to improve learning outcomes through mechanisms of external monitoring and teacher control occlude the moral dimension of a teacher's work to which Dubnick (2003) refers, and appear to preclude an alignment between accountability systems and teachers' sense of responsibility that would support learning (Lauermann and Karabenick 2011).

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[2] While we focus here on children who do attend school, India's UDISEPlus database reports 47.44 million children aged 6–17 years were out of school in 2023–24.

[3] We are indebted to participants at the Raising Learning Outcomes workshop in November 2024 for discussions of this way of seeing accountability.

[4] Horizontal accountability, in contrast, assumes non-hierarchical relationships and encourages adherence to articulated, professional standards (Cerna, 2014) and peer interaction and problem-solving (see Hooge, Burns and Wilkoszewski, 2012).

2.1. Bringing student attendance into discourses of accountability for learning

Scholarship on learner absence runs parallel to the literature above, and tends to consider 'accountability' implicitly, rather than explicitly. Across the global North and South, studies of student 'attendance' commonly pivot to absence and its causes, often identifying individual and household characteristics as 'determinants' (Banerji and Mathur, 2021; Jain and Jain, 2023), or school-related factors - but do not invoke 'accountability'. Some studies examine the relationship between average annual attendance rates and learning outcomes, but investigation of the timing or length of absences and their differential impacts on learning outcomes is rare. In general, accountability for learning has to be inferred from recommendations.

In literature focusing on global North contexts, studies of attendance quickly narrow to school attendance problems. In their extensive review of attendance and absence-focused studies, for example, Kearney et al. (2022) classify and describe contemporary approaches to school absenteeism and attendance with a view to 'differentiating school attendance problems'. Numerous studies have focused on examining causes of those problems and identifying predictors of drop-out to inform early intervention (e.g. De Witte et al., 2013; McConnell and Kubina, 2014; Childs and Lofton 2021). These predictors include poor results; grade retention; lack of engagement; gender (predominantly but not always female disadvantage); race; socio-economic status; and school 'climate' - but there is not necessarily a consensus on their effects.

While studies commonly note a positive correlation between time spent attending school and learner achievement, the temporality of absence has attracted little explicit attention. Studies of absence demonstrate a predominant concern with long-term ('chronic') absence, since this is a likely pre-cursor of drop-out, or with school refusal, which is potentially amenable to mitigation through intervention. A rare exception is a quantitative study carried out at secondary school level in Belgium by Keppens (2023), which examined how the timing of absence shaped learner achievement: students' absences across the school year were aggregated to individual monthly totals to examine temporal impacts on achievement. He found that while all absences have a negative impact on achievement, it is unexcused absences, and particularly those at the beginning and end of the school year, that 'seem to be most harmful' (p. 9). He concluded that schools should work 'continuously on the underlying dynamics of school absenteeism as well as on protective mechanisms' (p. 8) and ensure students 'catch up on missed instruction time to improve overall achievement rates' (*ibid*).

For global South contexts, the corresponding literature is very limited (Banerji and Mathur, 2021). In Nigeria, Humphreys et al. (2015) investigated gaps between enrolment and attendance figures and actual attendance, finding that many students 'who are counted as being in school, often shift between attending and being absent for a myriad of complex reasons related to out-of-school and in-school factors' (p. 141) and thus did not have sustained access to schooling / the classroom. For India, Bhatty et al. (2017) report findings similar to Humphreys et al. (2015), but focus on improving methods for estimating numbers of out of school children. To that end, they argue that policy should recognise what they term 'sporadic' attendance when defining an 'out of school' child and advocate for improved material conditions and teacher attendance in redress. Other studies in India tend to foreground drop-out, as an outcome of absence, and often cite poor material conditions in schools and homes as a causal factor (e.g. Chatterjee et al., 2018). Some statistically evidence 'pinch points' for drop out (such as the transition from Grade 1–2 and from elementary to secondary education, cf. Siddhu, 2011, Kumar et al., 2022) and identify risk factors as correlates of socio-economic disadvantage (typically rurality, caste status, gender). For Adivasi students, poor rates of transition to higher

levels, exclusionary curricula and cultural alienation are reported (Jayakumar et al., 2023). Nevertheless, as Nakajima et al. (2018: 247) point out, drop-out is 'relatively understudied considering the seriousness of the issue'. There is also discussion about the relative merits of grade retention and social promotion for preventing drop-out. 'Automatic promotion' was made legally binding in India's 2009 RtE Act and rescinded in 2024, but the evidence base for policy decision-making on the effects of this policy is indecisive (Agarwal, 2019); and globally, as Ahsan et al. (2018: 6) say, this debate is 'far from being settled'

A deficit view of learners' family circumstances and of 'parental indifference' underpins some studies of student absence in India: Mahalanabis and Acharya (2021, 1187), for example, speak of 'ignorant and illiterate parents'. This deficit view is explicitly challenged in other studies), which emphasise the need to focus on parents' livelihoods and engagement rather than their poverty or educational level when seeking explanations for children's absence and achievements (e.g. Thapa and Sarkar, 2019; Paul et al., 2021). School-side issues are also recognised as contributing factors: in response, Singh and Mukherjee (2018) call for a three dimensional analytical model ('push out' - 'pull out' - 'opting out'). The intersections that Singh and Mukherjee's model proposes respond to their critique of the missing intersections in absenteeism studies, which Childs and Lofton (2021) also find in studies of the North.

The literature on student attendance and absence is orientated towards seeing absence (and chronic absence particularly) as a risk for retention and progression, a phenomenon to be better understood in order to develop well-targeted interventions in school/and or household settings. It is, we conclude, absence, rather than attendance, that commands in-depth attention in existing scholarship. Other than in the exceptions we identified above, student attendance is described in the language of annual rates, and it is, at best, rates that are linked to learning outcomes. Accountability for learning is indirectly rather than explicitly integrated into studies of attendance. These gaps in the scholarly focus are significant not only in their own right, but in relation to understanding accountability for learning; and particularly so in contexts where student attendance is fragile.

3. Fragile attendance and accountability for learning: insights from the field

We pursue these arguments now in an empirical context in India. Field research was carried out over one year in the southern part of Rajasthan State of northwestern India. During the year of our fieldwork (2023–24), the gross enrolment ratio (GER) in Rajasthan for primary sections was 95 % (GoI 2024). Our sample comprised three government-run schools in rural Udaipur District, where the predominant school-using community is the Adivasi (tribal) Bhil community. The researchers have previously researched schooling in this region (see Dyer et al., 2022a and 2022b for background) and conducted a scoping exercise in early 2023 using secondary data, discussions with local educators, and field visits. Participating schools were purposively selected, in consultation with our partner organisation, to include three differing school types typical of the region: i) the elementary section of a Grade 1–10 secondary school [Mamadevpur]; ii) an elementary school with Grades 1–8 [Karakaliya]); and iii) a primary school with Grades 1–5 [Dantiwali].[5] Other criteria for selection were that sample schools are in one administrative block, for convenience given long travel distances; had not had material inputs from the 'corporate social responsibility' obligations of the large mining industry in the region; and were willing to participate.

As Grade 1 typically has considerable flux at the beginning of the year, with late admissions and some school switching, we focused on Grade 2 as the lowest Grade for tracking student attendance. Since there is a state-run ('Board') examination in Grades 5 and 8 that preoccupies

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[5] All school, student, parent and teacher names are pseudoyms.

Table 1
Enrolment and staffing in sample schools, school year 2023–24.

School name	No. of Grades	Student enrolment rates	Enrolment in sample Grade			Teacher total incl. Principal
		Total (boy / girl)	Grade 2	Grade 4	Grade 7	
Mamadevpur	10	119 (75 / 44)	13 (8 / 5)	2 (0 / 2)	7 (6 /1)	8
Karakaliya	8	188 (98 / 90)	18 (8 / 10)	27 (15 / 12)	25 (13 / 12)	9
Dantiwali	5	58 (27 / 31)	22 (8 / 14)	8 (4 / 4)	n/a	2

teachers, we took up Grades 4 and 7 to identify older students (other than in Dantiwali, which has only Grades 1–5); see Table 1. For all students in the selected Grades, we collected and digitised daily attendance data from physical registers. Within the selected Grades we also identified sample students to build profiles across home-school domains (n = 32, 4 per sampled Grade), using the following criteria: gender (girls, boys), home-school distance (relatively near, far), and teacher assessment of regularity (relatively low, high). Fieldwork in school, home, and community sites spanned the period March-December 2023, with follow-up visits and communication in early 2024. With the help of a full-time research assistant who was trained in early 2023, one of the authors [Choksi] planned and conducted the bulk of the fieldwork with shorter visits by the other authors [Dyer and Jacob].

The study adopted a qualitative methodology. Over the school year, the research team conducted semi-structured and open-ended interviews with system actors including monitoring officials, Principals, teachers, parents / families and community leaders in school and home settings; carried out classroom observations (generally of whole morning and/or afternoon sessions given the fluid nature of 'lessons', shown below), focusing on the sample children, and conducted follow-up interviews with teachers on those observations; and interacted with children and family members in domestic settings about home lives and experiences of schooling. As the children were young, we took an informal approach that combined observations and frequent (usually short) conversations with them at home, en route from school, and during breaks at school. All qualitative data were generated in Hindi, translated into English and cross-checked by another team member. They were then analysed in N-Vivo using codes that derived from our research questions and literature reviews, and in-vivo codes generated by participant narratives, to identify patterns, themes and meanings. We also used school registers to generate a descriptive analysis of quantitative data on learner attendance.

Material conditions in the sample schools were poor. All three schools were under-staffed and had a shortage of rooms and teaching-learning materials – a reminder of the point about absent reciprocal accountability raised in the literature cited earlier. The largest school, Mamadevpur, had just four rooms, one of which had been turned into a midday meal kitchen and another the Principal's office, but the Principal had secured a corporate social responsibility agreement to contribute three new classrooms and was preoccupied with this. In Mamadevpur, under-staffing was compounded by state failure to post any teachers for Grades 1–8, so that teaching in the elementary section had to be covered by secondary-trained teachers. In Karakaliya, understaffing in the lower primary level was exacerbated by the frequent deployment of primary teachers to upper primary Grades. Enrolment totals in Dantiwali fell below state norms that would justify more than the two teachers working across all five Grades; and one of those had been absent on maternity leave with no cover and returned during the fieldwork period.

In all these schools, the teacher absenteeism which Muralidharan et al. (2017) report was noticeable. What was striking across them all was not only the normalisation of teachers' non-attendance, but how this absence intersected with two other kinds of 'teacher absence': the structural deficit of under/mis-staffing; and the preoccupation of teachers who were physically present with administrative tasks outside the classroom. In combination, these dimensions of teacher absence combined to produce irregular teacher attendance in class in all sample schools. The Mamadevpur Principal explained this and described its impact on the foundational primary Grades:

Another issue is irregularity and that is not just children, even the staff, as one day a teacher is there in the lower class and next day, they are not there. So, some children are also irregular but not having teachers and their [teachers'] irregularity affects the learning. There is no continuous and constant education in the lower classes. Children's [learning] level is not half of what it should be.

In Dantiwali, until the second teacher returned from maternity leave, the Principal had looked after all five Grades. She told us: 'I normally divide the classes in different rooms (two rooms) and spend my time between the classes. I have to keep going between the classes'.

When in school, teachers spent time on tasks associated with the administration of incentive schemes, reporting to authorities and, during our period of field work, elections at both the State and national levels. The Mamadevpur and Karakaliya Principals complied quickly with authorities' routinely urgent demands for 'data', ensuring they were met promptly by allocating teacher time to those tasks instead of teaching; the Dantiwali Principal complied, but more slowly, as she refused to prioritise such tasks above teaching.

3.1. Attendance rates and monitoring procedures

While the state stipulates the numbers of days per year that comprise full learner 'attendance', that number is not consistent across its legal and national curricular frameworks. The 2009 RTE Act sets out 200 working days for Grades 1–5 and 220 days for Grades 6–8, with instructional hours totalling 800 and 1000 respectively (Government of India, 2009). According to the National Curriculum Framework (NCF 2023: 93) the school year comprises 220 working days (of which 20 may be allocated for assessment-related activities, and a further 20 for school events) such that 'a safe estimate can be of 180 days of instruction time'. The NCF prescribes a working week of five and a half days, so 'a working school year would have around 34 working weeks of around 29 hours of instruction every week' (Government of India, 2009), and the curriculum is designed accordingly.

Fig. 1 shows enrolment and average attendance rates for 2023 from July 1 (school opening after summer break) until November 6. Of the 129 days in that period, 99 were school days. The last graph shows the attendance rate (percentage of enrolled students who attended averaged across that time period). The smallest school (Dantiwali) has higher attendance rates (range of 70–80 %) compared to the other two (range of 65–70). Average attendance rates fall noticeably below 100 % in all schools. In Karakaliya and Mamadevpur, average attendance was around only two thirds of the time for which the curriculum is designed.

[Fig. 1 here]

For each Grade, students' daily school attendance is recorded physically by a designated 'class' teacher in a hard copy register.[6] While the school holds a record of each student's daily attendance, the monitoring system requires only total rates by class to be reported. Each school calculates and uploads those rates to Shala Darpan, Rajasthan's digital school monitoring system. Poor connectivity in these rural locations makes digitisation challenging. In Dantiwali, a reliable network connection requires a walk up the hill behind the school. In Karakaliya a

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[6] Reflecting the British colonial legacy, morning and afternoon sessions in Rajasthan adopt the parlance of cricket and are entitled 'innings'.
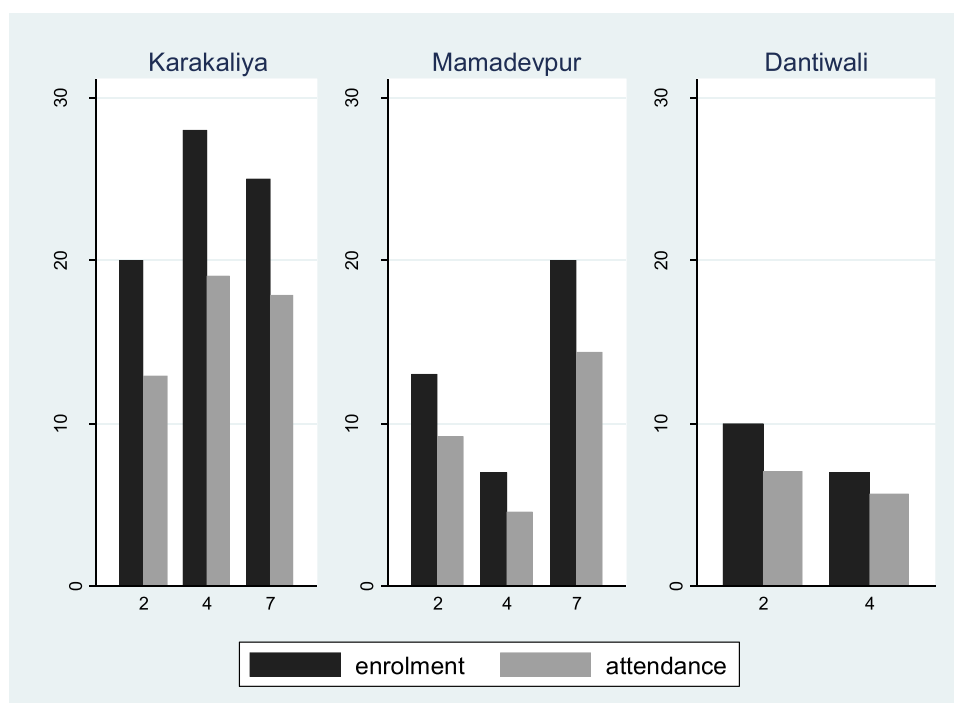
Fig. 1. Enrolment and average attendance, July 1 – November 6, 2023.

teacher told us:

> We fill the register and Sir [the Principal] looks after it. Then Sir has to fill the daybook. The teacher writes the total present (boys, girls and total). The in-charge of it uploads it. It is 10–15 min's work. It needs to be filled online but sometimes there is no net so repeatedly one has to restart it and everything you do, you lose, you lose the data. We fill it in the classroom and it all needs to be filled [uploaded] on the same day.

Digitisation has added work but removed none, and no administrative support is provided. The two larger schools addressed this new system requirement by designating one teacher to the duty of uploading, and hence diverting their time on a daily basis from pedagogical activities to digital form filling while in Dantiwali the Principal dealt with it herself. Timely data uploading is closely monitored via Shala Darpan and a penalty notice can be issued for failure, with no account taken of operational difficulties. The system is highly attentive to the performance of reporting, but not to what the records reveal about attendance, as teacher Ronan in Karakaliya told us:

> AC: If it is time to cut the crop and attendance goes down by 60–70 %, does anyone ask you?

> Ronan: No, they don't ask us the reason for less attendance. But if we don't upload one day's attendance, then they ask.

The cumulative accounts of daily attendance makes an individual learner's attendance patterns invisible to levels of the system beyond the school. It also flattens temporal variation, with implications for accountability for learning that we will later explore.

Attendance monitoring procedures reflect the system's 'input' orientation and the policy priority of ensuring sustained enrolment noted in the Introduction. Authorities use attendance statistics to calculate allocation for state-funded schemes that incentivise school-going and support low-income families, such as midday meals, milk rations, travel allowance, and uniform allowance. Attendance is thus not a matter of merely noting each student's daily presence: at the school level, individual attendance has to be recorded separately for each

scheme – a proliferation of 'thin' tasks (Pritchett 2015). In the larger schools, different teachers are tasked with this responsibility ('in-charge') for specific schemes, while in Dantiwali the Principal and one teacher share the tasks. While individual detail is captured and held on record at the school level, the digital monitoring system requires cumulative totals by Grade - albeit disaggregated by gender and caste category. Once the state remits the funds due to the school according to the records submitted, the school disburses the allocation due to the student based on their attendance record.

3.2. Attendance patterns: 'absence', 'presence' and a tentative typology

We turn now from rates to attendance *patterns*, paying close attention to the temporal dimensions of student 'absence' and 'presence'. We hypothesised that while cumulative monthly attendance rates attest to a shortfall against state norms, they mask a heterogeneity of individual attendance patterns; and that the temporal pattern of absence-presence has implications for learning and teaching processes.

We begin with absence. Recalling the NPE 1986 requirement for teachers to investigate absence of more than three days, we distinguish one/two/three-day absences and absences greater than three days.[7] Fig. 2 shows the average number of days absent (out of 99 school days) by absence category for each school and Grade. For 'short absences', one-day absences typically account for more days absent than two- or three-day absences. We also see considerable variation between schools and classes regarding absences longer than three days and the shorter absences. For instance, in Mamadevpur the share of longer absences is far higher than shorter absences in Grade 4 but the situation is the reverse in the other Grades. In Dantiwali longer absences are relatively low in Grade 4, unlike in Grade 2. While Fig. 2 shows that periods of absence vary considerably for individual Grades and schools, no clear

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[7] Schools follow a 6-day week. We study the period July 1 to November 6, 2023. Of the 129 days in that period, there were 30 school holidays: two stretches of three consecutive holidays and two stretches of two consecutive holidays and 20 single holidays (including Sundays). In calculating stretches of consecutive days absent or present, we omit school holidays.
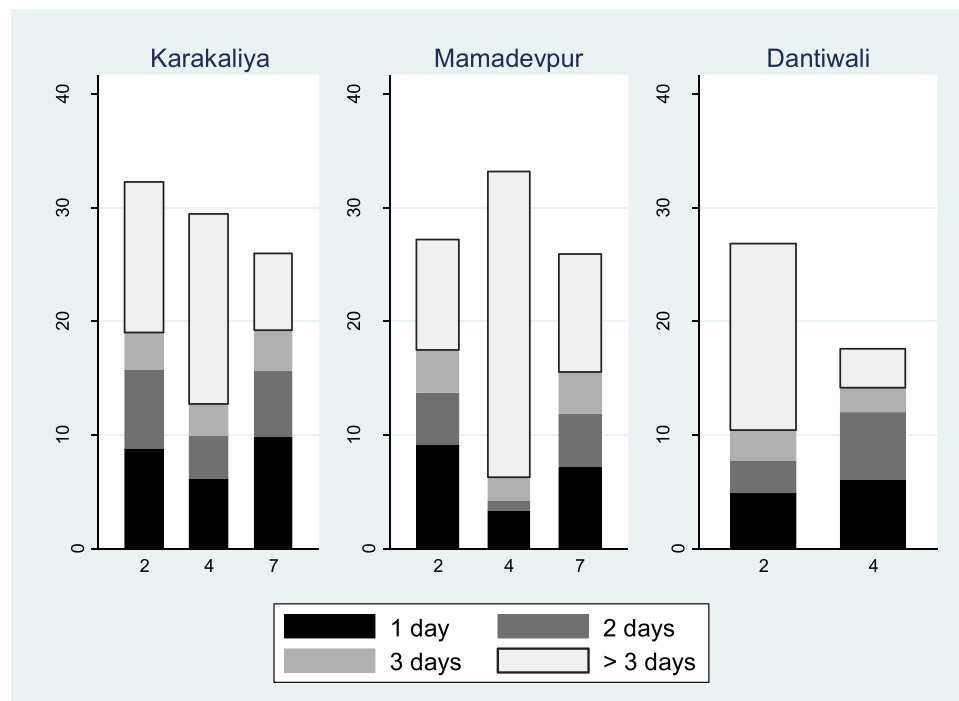
Fig. 2. Trends of absence in sample classes, July 1 – November 6, 2023.
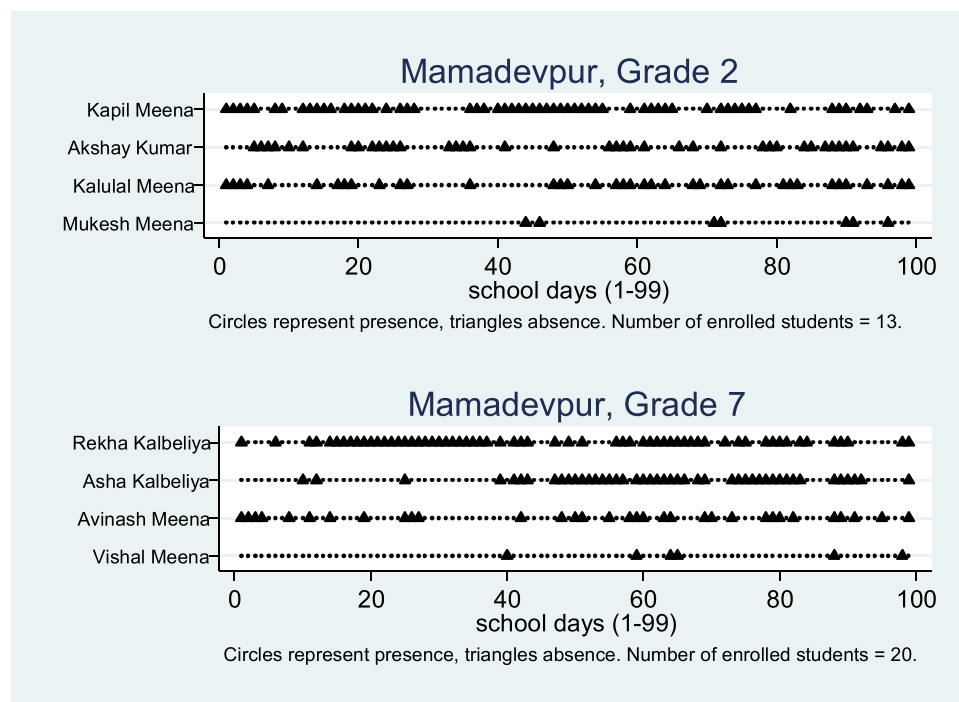

Fig. 3. Presence and absence over 99 school days, selected students.

pattern emerges across Grades or schools—and neither do we seek such patterns in this exploratory exercise.

We see not only considerable variation in lengths of absence in any specific Grade and school, but also that patterns of presence and absence vary considerably even among students within a specific Grade. To examine this, Fig. 3 presents illustrations from four students each in Grades 2 and 7 of Mamadevpur school. We consider 95 school days (July 5 to November 6, 2023).[8] In Grade 2, Mukesh Meena was present on 88

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[8] Our data start from July 1, but since we are calculating short absences and presences of three consecutive school days or fewer, the numbers in the text pertain to the 95 school days between July 5 and November 6.

days, and absent for two 2-day periods and three 1-day periods. That is, long periods of presence were interspersed with short absences. His classmate Kapil Meena had a very different pattern. Of the 57 days Kapil was absent, 43 constituted long absences of over three consecutive days; and of the 38 days he was present, almost half were 'short presences' of three days or fewer. Thus, Kapil Meena exhibits a pattern of long periods of absence interspersed with short presences. Between the two extremes of Mukesh and Kapil lie the other two students shown in Fig. 3, Kalulal Meena and Akshay Kumar. Of the 36 days Kalulal Meena was absent, 32 were short absences (nine 1-day absences, four 2-day absences, five 3-day absences), and of the 59 days he was present, 32 were short presences. Thus his pattern consists mostly of short presences and absences. By contrast, of the 41 days Akshay Kumar was absent, only 17 were short absences; and of the 54 days he was present, only 16 were short presences. Thus, compared to Kalulal Meena, Akshay Kumar's pattern consists of relatively long presences and absences. While the two have roughly similar attendance rates (62 for Kalulal Meena, 57 % for Akshay Kumar), the distribution of short presence was very different (of the days present, it was 54 % for Kalulal Meena and 30 % for Akshay Kumar), and the distribution of short absence is similarly very different (of the days absent, it was 89 % for Kalulal Meena and 41 % for Akshay Kumar).

Our analysis in Fig. 3 shows that even for a period of about 100 school days within a single Grade of a single school—with an enrolment of only 13 students—there are widely varying patterns of presence and absence. While it is not the goal of this paper to construct a robust typology, the patterns in Fig. 3 suggest a tentative typology of attendance patterns. We have identified a student with *long presences punctuated by short absences* [LP-SA] (Mukesh Meena), one with *long absences punctuated by short presences* [SP-LA] (Kapil Meena), one with *bursts of short presence and short absence* [SP-SA] (Kalulal Meena), and one *alternating between long stretches of presence and absence* [LP-LA] (Akshay Kumar). Fig. 3 also presents patterns for four other students of another Grade of the same school (Grade 7 of Mamadevpur). Here, too, we see students illustrating these different patterns, which correspond to the four types identified for Grade 2, in respective order: Vishal Meena [LP-SA], Rekha Kalbeliya [SP-LA], Avinash Meena [SP-SA], and Asha Kalbeliya [LP-LA].

By disaggregating *rates* of attendance, we have established that there are *patterns* of attendance (LP-SA; SP-LA; SP-SA; LP-LA); and that even among students with similar overall attendance rates, patterns of presence and absence vary. We now examine the implications of these patterns and perspectives on accountability for learning.

4. Teacher perspectives on attendance, learning and accountability

Regular student attendance was positively associated with learning by all sample teachers, across all three schools. In Karakaliya, teacher Kiran voiced the common view: 'Children who are regular learn better. If they don't come to school, they don't. And if children are regular they can learn'. In Mamadevpur, teacher Suman told us: 'If they are absent and irregular, they will miss things'; and the Principal of Dantiwali said, 'Children who do not come regularly can't learn anything. Children who come to school also learn from their peers. But it is difficult for children who don't come to learn'. At the same time, given that average student attendance rates generally lay between 60 and 70 %, teachers also all normalised irregular attendance. In a focus group in Karakaliya, teachers reported without comment learner attendance that day:

Heena: There are 3–4 children who are not regular. Today, out of 27, 22 came.

Priya: In my class there are 25 but 18 came.

Sharda: Out of 25, 22 came.

Ronan: Out of 22, 19 came. One girl has come after 5 days.

An idea of regularity also underpins the timetable that the State sets. Schools are required to display this: Karakaliya did so prominently in a unchanging formal grid on a whiteboard in the Principal's office; Mamadevpur did so erratically, posting the Principal's handwritten note on an exterior wall; and Dantiwali did not -, but in our observations this formality bore little resemblance to realities. The timetable is undermined by the staffing adjustments described earlier, and as adherence to it is not monitored, it is liable to be interpreted as superfluous. Kiran, who simultaneously teaches two classes in Karakaliya with an enrolled total of 41 students, said: 'We do have a timetable but I don't use it. One has to make a timetable but I haven't made one yet. For me, children who are regular, I can teach them regularly. The ones who are irregular, sometimes come and sometimes don't, then there is a gap'. Glossing over the matter of how time is organised, all teachers saw 'covering content', that is teaching the text/workbook content, as their primary responsibility as teachers.

Another dimension of note is the impact of the no-retention clause of the RtE Act, which made Grade progression unconditional on learning achievement. The Mamadevpur Principal articulated a view that others shared when she said, 'The old system was good as we could fail them. Now we can't do anything, it's non-stop promotion. Even the children know that we cannot fail them'. As a policy measure, the clause not only affirmed the 'vertical' governance frame but also actively undermined a systemic sense of purpose around learning: it negated teachers' agency and also erased the relevance of regular student attendance as a prerequisite for achieving Grade-wise learning benchmarks.

In these schools, teachers' sense of being accountable for student learning was tempered by the demands of urgent administrative tasks, short-staffing, and the absence of 'regular' student attendance that teachers unanimously believe to be key to student learning and yet know is not possible for many students. Teachers articulated a sense of duty towards irregularly attending students, which Karakaliya's Kiran explained:

To teach those kinds of children [all those attending irregularly] is also hard for us. But we have to look after them [Haame dyan rakhna hahi hai]. The thing is, I feel I have to pay attention to them. So I have 23 in class 1 and 18 in class 2. Today not all of them were present but when they all come, they are all there.

'Looking after' students, as we will shortly see, translates into teachers making arrangements to deliver missed content, but not into holding themselves accountable for student learning.

4.1. Legitimate absence as shared responsibility

Unlike delivery of teaching, teachers perceive responsibility for learning as shared with students themselves, and their families, despite highly uneven household capacities to ensure a regular attendance or support the homework on which teachers rely.

Policy narratives routinely expect parents/guardians to assume responsibility for ensuring a student's regular attendance at school. To that end, a student is expected to submit a written application in advance for permission to be absent for over three days. Teachers reported that they verbally communicate this requirement to parents: and it is indirectly as well as directly reinforced because students are taught how to write the application for absence in class, and given this as a homework task as an example of formal letter writing. A classroom observation of this is given in Fig. 4.

The teacher writes the sample on the blackboard and asks students to copy it in their notebook:

सेवा में,

श्रीमान प्रधानाध्यापक जी,

राजकीय उच्च प्राथमिक विद्यालय

[school name]

विषय : अवकाश चाहने हेतु ।

महोदय,

.... ।

आपका आज्ञाकारी

नाम

कक्षा - 4

Fig. 4. Teaching Grade 4 students how to request absence in Karakaliya (16.08.23).

Only some engage in this task. Rohan, sitting near the wall in a corner, is making noises and not writing in his notebook. The teacher comes and slaps him. He starts crying and sits against the wall. The teacher returns to the board and another student says, 'Sir, he is crying'. The teacher responds, 'Doesn't matter. He was naughty'. A boy asks the teacher, 'Sir, only one day's leave is written [in the sample letter on the blackboard]. Can I take 2 days' leave?' The teacher replies, 'When you need it, you have to write how many days' leave is required.' Badal, sitting in another corner, is writing; his copying is not accurate, and he writes in one single line, just the text, not in the letter format. Jal, who is being noisy, is told by the teacher, waving his stick, 'I will send you to HM sir', upon which he sits silently. Badal stands up and tries to leave the class: the teacher catches him and tells him to sit and write. Renuka, sitting at the front near the blackboard with her friend Devi, goes to the board, looks closely, sits back down and starts writing in her notebook, and then goes to the window (near the board) and sits near it. When the teacher comes to her, she says, 'Sir I did not understand it'. Without explanation, he tells her to sit in line. Kajal, sitting in the first row, is looking at the board, sometimes at other students, and writing a little. Then the teacher tells them all to write this application letter for days when they expect to be absent from school. He calls them to him and they form a line at the front. He checks their notebooks. He later reads out the application letter, instructs students to repeat the words after him, and then walks around and slaps four students who are not paying attention. They repeat his words exactly, including chorusing the name of a student who was scolded for misbehaving. They are given the homework of writing the application letter again.

Although the teacher's purpose is clear, in the sense of communicating the importance of this letter, students' ability to execute the task is hindered by their literacy abilities and difficulties of engagement amidst poor material conditions, violence and a pedagogical routine of rote-learning/copy/memorisation. Notably, they are expected to re-execute the task at home, in part so that parents understand its intent – although intergenerational schooling disadvantage for Adivasi communities means that many parents would not able to read it. All schools adopted this approach.

Even if the formal procedure of application for leave is not perfectly executed, or made at all, teachers see the leave as legitimate if the student's absence is explained orally. Being compliant with this expectation positively influences teacher views of a student as '*hoshiyar*' (that is, 'clever' but also 'aware' or 'with it'). In the words of Karakaliya's Ronan, for example, '*Hoshiyar* children come after a week and send information [about the absence] or application with other children'.

When asked what they did after recording attendance in the register, Karakaliya's Heena told us, 'We see who has come and who hasn't. For the children who haven't come, we ask those who live near them as to why didn't they come'. Teachers seemed content with making only casual enquiries like this until a week has elapsed: '[We ask] after a week. If they get viral fever or if they are generally not well, it usually takes a week [to recover]'. This pattern of teacher engagement was common to all sampled schools.

4.2. School-level perspectives on different attendance patterns

Accommodating the diversity of learners' attendance patterns is a daily challenge for teachers, and contributes to their frequently articulated sense of being under the constant pressure of time to complete the syllabus. In the study sample, frequent short absence interspersed with longer periods of presence (the LP-SA pattern exemplified by Mukesh and Vishal in Fig. 3) was the closest to 'regular' attendance that we found. It was so normalised that it hardly attracted comment from teachers. The cumulative effect of this attendance pattern contributes to the slow progress towards Grade-prescribed learning outcomes, but teachers did not associate it with negative implications for enrolment or drop-out. Nor were teachers exercised by two routine occurrences of 'long' absence: the predictable mass non-attendance caused by festivals such as Holi, which is celebrated locally for longer than the leave days of the school calendar, and the harvest season when children help to cut and bring in crops. They did not expect to move forward with curricular content at those times; and nor did they expect students to submit a formal leave request.

For individual 'long absence', whether or not it was explained or applied for, two outcomes were commonly noted. First, a student would miss curricular content. Heena noted, 'A whole chapter gets finished by the time the children come back again'; and Ronan explained, 'When they do not come for ten days then they are back to point one. Other children could count till 100 but these remain on one only'. Long absence was usually caused by illness or attending a family celebration. Krutika's overall attendance rate at Dantiwali school (Grade 2), for example, is a relatively high 82 %; she attends regularly (albeit often arriving late) but had two long absences. Her regularity is explained by her mother, who told us of her two girls 'sometimes they stay [home], mostly I send them. I do not stop them. I don't stop them for work. I can do the work on my own'. Krutika herself explained that 'When school started, I was at my grandfather's place, so I couldn't come. When I am home, I go every day. Last month, I had a fungal infection [*funsi*], I was

sick, so I could not go'. Teachers were tolerant of this kind of absence, and understood themselves to be responsible for enabling a child to catch up with what has been missed. For example, commenting on what she characterised as a 'gap in the learning process' from one girl's long absence, Karakaliya teacher Kiran explained 'Now she has lost 10 days, so for 4–5 days I have to work with her and get it all done again with her'.

After a long absence, however, a student's subsequent attendance pattern can either support or diminish a teacher's sense of this responsibility. Teachers expect that for a student with a long presence - long absence pattern (LP-LA, exemplified by Kapil and Rekha in Fig. 3, and Krutika here) the 'learning gap' will be filled, but this is unlikely for a pattern of short presence followed by long absence (SP-LA), where Karakaliya teacher Kiran told us, for example, 'We try to teach them but they don't come again, so they are back there [*vaapas vahi*]. So then the child just remains there [*vahi ka vahi*]. Doesn't move forward'. In a Karakaliya class 4 observation, we saw that Maya, who has a short presence / long absence (SP-LA) pattern, received from teacher Heena just two instructions (without eye contact or any encouragement) in one hour and sat alone, occasionally making marks in her notebook. When asked about her, Heena generalised, saying: 'If a child doesn't come for 10 days, again comes on the 11th day, then again doesn't come for 10 days, what is the point in investing in that child? They don't want to learn'. Maya herself told us she helps her working mother by caring for her siblings and a sick elderly relative.

The pattern of short presence and short absence (SP-SA, exemplified by Kalula and Avinash in Fig. 3) leads to attendance in short bursts, upon which teachers comment unfavourably. We heard from Mamadevpur's Principal, for example: 'If a child takes 2–3 days off in a month then it's OK, it's normal. But more than that is a problem. There are some children with us who come 2–3 days and then don't for 2–3 days. They are not regular. There are 4–5 children like that who will come for a few days and not for the others'. Another Mamadevpur teacher conflated this SP-SA pattern with a lack of will to learn, saying 'In reality children spoil our minds. We go enthusiastically to class in the mood to teach and they just look at you and they do not give any reaction… they just don't see any point in education. Some children are good but some…'. The pattern of long presence and short absence (LP-SA) elicits a different teacher response from the pattern of short absence and short presence (SP-SA), as it seems to indicate learner willingness to attend and hence a teacher's responsibility to reciprocate by enabling the child to catch up.

Some teachers constructed students' irregularity within a larger negative attitude towards parents that is (re)produced by prevailing social inequalities. A glimpse into these unequal power relations when it comes to schooling, the precarity of Adivasi livelihoods and the fragility of school attendance, is heard in Kiran's discussion of what they do in parent-teacher meetings about students with long absence in Karakaliya school:

> We [teachers] do tell them [parents] and we show them the books. And we show them your child's gap is from this to this date, this much. So the children who are regular, we show their books to them. Then we show them from this date to this date your child didn't come, this is how much loss your child had. But parents don't understand and that is their main problem. Parents here are all labourers and they can't look after their children. They don't take care of family planning either. So they keep giving birth and keep older children and ask children to look after siblings or help then with work because they work in the fields.

The admonitory approach heard at the beginning of Kiran's remark was very prominent in parent-teacher meetings we observed in Mamadevpur too, but less so in Dantiwali, whose Principal favours informal communication via her open office window which opens onto a path that many parents regularly use. While some teachers, such as Kiran, projected a negative interpretation, others – such as Mamadevpur's

Principal - were more empathetic. Remarking that '[students'] irregularity impacts learning', she noted that there are many reasons behind student irregularity:

> People can only eat if they earn. Many go for different jobs – duty [government service], labour, goat grazing. Children also go for goat grazing, social events and taking care of their siblings. I get many applications for leave stating that I have a young child, and my [older] child will take care of them, hence, they need seven days leave. Parents themselves come and tell me that their child works at a shop so he cannot come to school all day. His work is also important. Otherwise, how will they survive?

For some students, the short presence and short absence pattern (SP-SA) is a direct outcome of this status quo. But we also found that attendance could be a matter of negotiation between school and parents – and this gave rise to an SP-SA pattern too. This was pressing in Mamadevpur, where the teacher-student ratio was precarious, and teacher Suman explained the negotiations:

> They [learners] go for labour for 10 days, and we call them [parents] and tell them your child's name will be cut [removed from the enrolment register], then they send them here for 2–4 days. When we put pressure on them, parents will come to school or send them. That child will remain here for 2–4–7 days. There are 5–7 children in class 6–8. After some days they will vanish again. We call them again after 2–4 days. They come, and vanish again.

Suman went on to say,

> They [parents] know that madam [the teacher herself] supports them, so they tell me everything. I try to negotiate with them, like: 'You can take the child for two days but you must send them to school on the third day.' I listen to them and negotiate 50 % to them and 50 % mine, and that is how it works.

The 'fragile' attendance patterns identified in these schools thus may reflect a hard-won achievement and extended process of teacher – parent negotiation that follows initial enrolment. While the SP-SA pattern creates difficulties for the teaching-learning process, unenrolling persistently absent children could worsen an already difficult situation. Negotiations that result in achieving even intermittent attendance enable a school to maintain the enrolment rate that justifies its existing (albeit inadequate) staff-student ratio, and a drop could worsen the situation; and they also help parents to comply with the legal requirement of enrolling their children (teachers are required to carry out enrolment drives and, in the absence of other arrangements, are the *de facto* enforcers of this legal requirement of parents (Dyer et al., 2022a)).

As we have seen, a dominant teacher discourse nevertheless associates students' irregular attendance with parental carelessness or lack of awareness. Interactions with parents contradicted this assumption, showing that Adivasi community views of parental authority and child autonomy diverge from teachers' normative expectations of parental roles in ensuring regular attendance. Krutika's father articulated this view when he said 'Now, if my children stop going to school, I will send them again. If they say that they will not study, then what can I do? We cannot send them forcibly. It is better that they go by their will. We can scold them once or twice. But if they become persistent that they will not go, then I can't do much'.

At the same time, we learned from our interactions with children and other family members that children often get diverted to domestic tasks, such as looking after the family goat(s) or, if a bit older, running errands when parents are out. Several children told us they like to go picking berries [*bor*] and that they find other things to do instead of reaching school after they have set out. Ruchika, who lives near Krutika and also attends Dantiwali's Grade 2, is an example of a child who gets diverted:

she lives in a household that has 15 goats, 3 sheep, and 2 cows, and their grandmother also has a couple of buffaloes. Her mother grazes goats as she works in the field and Ruchika's older sister told us, of the younger children, 'Actually they go with goats and keep playing there'. Children also gave us many accounts of '*masti*' - being naughty at school, typically by poking and pinching each other to generate a reaction, which we read as a reflection of boredom because they are often un-or under-occupied in class. In these settings, school attendance is neither particularly compelling nor validating for children, and it competes with other responsibilities (or pleasures) which may take precedence.

Another factor is teachers' use of corporal punishment, observed in both larger schools as a common response to children's behaviour that teachers labelled 'naughty' because it was disruptive (we saw something of this in Fig. 1). We heard the following insight from a Grade 4 boy at Dantiwali school: 'I like [Principal] madam a lot because she does not hit us'; and in interviews this Principal was very insistent that hitting children is an avoidable deterrent, while other reasons for children's non-attendance reflect home circumstances are not within her scope to address.

4.3. Pedagogical responses to fragile patterns of attendance

The sheer frequency of repetition that characterised the pedagogical style across these schools meant that students with short absences received content input without specific effort from teachers. More deliberate catching up to cover missed content was dealt with by brief inputs directly from the teacher, or by a peer directed by the teacher. The strategies for managing prevailing attendance patterns that we now outline were common across the sample schools.

As noted earlier, teachers associate regularity of attendance with learning, and regularity as an aspect of being *hoshiyar* ('clever'). Thus, a pre-dominant strategy across all three schools is to use *hoshiyar* student peers to help. Mamadevpur's Principal told us: 'The ones who are irregular, the ones who we bring back to school…. For them, we ask them to sit with the child who is *hoshiyar* in class, as they learn faster by learning from other children. So between them, they somehow cover [the material]'. Heena in Karakaliya explained, 'There are all kinds of children in the classroom, there are clever children, medium children and children who do not know anything. So I ask the clever ones to teach the ones who don't know anything. And I teach the medium ones. So I make one child sit with another one. That way, my work is going on and learning is happening too'. Kiran in Karakaliya adopts the same strategy: 'I make them [*hoshiyar* students] do their homework first. And then I make them sit with the *nimn* [literally inferior, here low] ones. So they are teaching the *nimn* ones and I teach the medium ones'.

Nevertheless, teachers saw a reduction in 'coverage' (content delivery) as an apparently inevitable outcome of irregular student attendance. In Karakaliya, Shanti said, 'If I have taught the lesson in the class I cannot repeat the lesson the following day. I explain just the main points'. Similarly, Ronan reported, 'We give them main points. We can only give basic knowledge'. Referring to Rajasthan's timetabling of a 'revision period' during the day, Heena told us, 'I get some questions done during revision. I cannot focus much on them [non-attending children]—for five of them, I cannot put 22 at a loss. If I focus more on them, the regular ones will lose out. So I get two questions done from whatever I have taught so far'. This remark highlights the trade-off when five students who individually need help unsuccessfully compete for teacher time with those who attend more regularly. Priya spoke of using content revision for some to serve as an introduction for those who missed content. This is managed via group work and reliance on peer teaching: 'I have to give some more time. I do group discussions. I get them to do revision activities. I make children who have been absent sit with regular children in the group and do revision activities'.

Across these schools, another strategy that teachers commonly used for students with a short presence - long absence (SP-LA) attendance pattern is to 'give them old homework' to do at home. This strategy is embedded in the emphasis on homework that all teachers reiterated, but falls short of recognising that fragile attendance generates a need for support and guidance that may be difficult to find at home. The separation of the home - school domains that the homework strategy attempts to bridge emerges, for example, in Karakaliya teacher Beena's view:

The home environment of these children is not good. It is not conducive for their studies. Here we teach them, children go home, and go for grazing goats. Parents don't pay attention. A child needs practice at home. They do nothing at home, they come to school next day just like that. Parents don't say anything to them. Half of the children don't even open their bags at home. If parents ask them to read and write at home, it has an effect on their learning. If they don't write, how will they remember?

For children who did 'homework', where 'writing' is often (incorrect) copying, there would be feedback the next day; children knew that not doing homework would trigger negative teacher feedback - possibly a slap - and told us that they might then prefer to skip school for a day. Questioned further about such reliance on homework, all sample teachers recognised that parents with no/low level of schooling may find it difficult to help their children, but held them responsible for ensuring their child gains a regular study habit by making them sit and 'study' at home. Beena clarified: 'If there is someone at home who can make them sit…they do their homework incompletely. Children whose parents are aware, they do study. But most children have parents who don't say anything to them. Many of them are not educated themselves'. The home-school alignment that teachers sought was rarely heard; but Krutika's father, who had studied until Grade 10 articulated it when he said, 'Responsibility for studying is on both of us, parents and children. If we put pressure on them [children] to study, then they will study. Also, they should want to study. It is also the teacher's responsibility'. In the sample schools, the teacher expectation is not necessarily that children execute their homework well, or that homework entails learning progression; in the prevailing thin version of 'study', making a child sit to study at home functions as an expression of parental 'awareness' that satisfies teachers' expectation of parental support for schooling.

Conversely, homework affirms to parents, who commonly reported little direct engagement with teachers, that schooling is going on, as we heard for example from Krutika's father: 'My children are studying. Madam writes on the notebook like *complete homework, memorize it*. I haven't received any complaint about them. I do not get time for visiting school'.

5. Reflections on accountability for learning in a context of fragile attendance

At the outset of this paper, we noted our intention of using the potential of accountability as a generative concept for policy learning. We suggested that research into accountability in education systems has ignored the important questions of how system actors perceive accountability for ensuring that all enrolled students attend school and learn, even if student attendance is irregular. To address gaps identified in scholarly and policy discourses, we have brought attendance and accountability into a dialogue that is learning-focused. We have advanced the concept of 'fragile' student attendance, and its relationship with accountability for learning, which we have explored empirically, to generate learning for policy that is particularly important given the national scenario in India, and has resonance in many global South country contexts.

The study sites provided ample evidence supporting concerns in the literature over the emphasis of accountability-focused governance on 'thin' tasks and performativity. Urgent demands from authorities to supply data and information were observed to be common, generally required a responding teacher to leave the classroom, and routinely foregrounded the need to demonstrate compliance with administrative

matters. In these contexts, the timely, daily and digitised 'account' of student presence that authorities demand is difficult to deliver, and is used to inform incentive scheme disbursements; the state monitoring system does not link student attendance to learning outcomes. We have shown that the exigencies and focus of the state monitoring regime undermine teacher attention to teaching and learning in their classrooms and deflect accountability away from learning.

In sampled schools, learner attendance rates align with the national picture, averaging around two thirds of full (100 %) attendance. Recognising that rates serve an 'input' policy orientation but contribute little to addressing the 'learning crisis', we have shown that when attendance rates are disaggregated into patterns, rates that are similar mask a notable variety of patterns. We have formalised this learning for policy by advancing a tentative typology of the four patterns identified in the field settings, which can serve also as a valuable heuristic for future research into accountability for learning and strategic policy development. Here, we applied it to examine accountability for learning in the light of the diverse attendance patterns that it captures.

Sample teachers articulated regular student attendance as a prerequisite for learning, where here the nearest pattern is (consistent) long presence, (rare) short absence (LP-SA). In an overall context of normalised under-attendance, teachers identified children as 'absent' and 'regular', which inflected their judgments about a student's nature and capability to learn. Teachers expressed strongly negative views about students with the short presence - long absence (SP-LA) attendance pattern identified in our typology, to the extent that they do not feel sufficiently accountable to such learners to deliver the 'input' of their time. For students with the short presence and short absence (SP-SA) attendance pattern we identified, teachers appear to see in their ongoing, if irregular, attendance a reassurance of intent to attend school. This intent aligns with their sense of accountability as teachers to work with these students (in contrast with the SP-LA pattern). However, teachers do so within the dominant frame of content delivery, using a limited repertoire of pedagogic strategies that focus on ensuring content is covered - while acknowledging too, that this coverage is limited for many students.

The repetition of content that is endemic in these pedagogic routines does not at first appear to be a response to students' 'irregular' attendance patterns. It embodies the behavioural orientation that persists despite attempts to establish a constructivist approach in the 2005 National Curriculum Framework (GoI 2005). However, the teaching practices in these schools serve to mask and mitigate the impact of fragile attendance by accommodating intermittent learner attendance within highly repetitive routines that remain centred on teaching (content delivery) rather than student learning. In this respect, we infer that patterns of 'fragile' attendance which we have evidenced here are in all likelihood a hitherto unrecognised factor in teacher reliance on practices that are resistant to reform; such reliance has a particular logic in the context of normalised, fragile learner attendance. This observation suggests a new direction for investigations of teachers' responses (notably, resistance) to 'learner-centred' reform (Brinkman, 2018) and understandings of accountability for learning.

The empirical findings highlight a tension between teacher and parental views on accountability for ensuring regular learner attendance. This is conceived by teachers as the responsibility of parents which, if adequately discharged (reflecting tolerance of the prevailing high rate of non-attendance), is met with teacher accountability for delivering content and attempts to enable a child to catch up. Teachers' implicit construct of parental authority is not necessarily shared by parents or children, since values of Adivasi belonging and upbringing do not align with the norms of childhood implicit in formal schooling's arrangements. Parents with higher levels of schooling themselves were, nevertheless, more likely to exert more authority over children to go to school, although this was in all cases tempered by the realities of ensuring livelihood security and attending to social obligations. Echoes of the home-school tension also play out in teachers' instrumental

dependence on homework as a means of inculcating a regular study habit in the domestic domain, to promote regular school attendance and parental accountability for ensuring children acquire a 'study habit'.

The evidence presented in this paper suggests that realisation of the NEP 2020's desired outcomes of skills development and a shift away from rote learning will be shaped by learner attendance patterns that are socially embedded, diverse and do not reflect policy norms, while current governance arrangements adopt a regulatory orientation which encourages performativity and teacher monitoring in the search for accountability. We have empirically illustrated misalignments of policy discourses and differing actors' understandings of accountability for ensuring regular attendance and student learning that are difficult to reconcile.

In light of the findings and analysis we have presented using the prism of student attendance, we would argue that in India and beyond, promoting systemic accountability for learning requires a firmer scholarly and policy focus on the attendance – learning relationship in general, and the nature of 'fragile' attendance in particular. The paper underlines the need for a stronger, systemic focus on accountability for learning, and the attendance pattern typology it has proposed offers an innovative heuristic in support of this endeavour.

CRediT authorship contribution statement

Archana Choksi: Writing – original draft, Supervision, Project administration, Investigation, Formal analysis, Data curation. **Suraj Jacob:** Writing – original draft, Validation, Methodology, Investigation, Funding acquisition, Formal analysis, Conceptualization. **Caroline Dyer:** Writing – original draft, Supervision, Project administration, Methodology, Investigation, Funding acquisition, Formal analysis, Conceptualization.

Declaration of Competing Interest

The authors have no conflicts of interest.

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