School Attendance Problems in Scotland and Spain: Variations in Recording, Reporting, and Using Data

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Abstract: School attendance problems (SAPs) are a worldwide concern due to their significant impact on students' development. SAPs may vary across countries depending on the effectiveness of policy measures for prevention and care, the functioning of the educational systems, and the cultural and social environments, among others. According to the latest PISA results, 6.5% of Spanish students were absent from school once or twice per week. In Scotland, school absence rates increased from 7% to 8% from the 2018–2019 to 2020–2021 academic year even after accounting for COVID-19 related absences. This paper draws on official documents and statistics to investigate SAPs in Spain and Scotland, considering differences in the structure of the education system, approaches to recording absences in schools, strengths, and weaknesses of each system. It sets the scene by describing the educational context, the conceptualization of absenteeism, recording procedures, reporting issues and data in Spain and Scotland. The paper demonstrates that these countries have different ways of reporting and making this information available. Finally, comments on lessons learned and suggestions for policy and research relating to absenteeism are considered.

Keywords: school attendance, school absenteeism, Spain, Scotland

Schools play a significant role in children's socialization and holistic development (Jourdan et al., 2021). According to the fourth goal in the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, there is a necessity to ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities through the completion of primary and secondary education. Educational administrations must guarantee the right to education and help children and adolescents to be independent, proactive, and responsible in the future. Hence, School Attendance Problems (SAPs), defined as the various categories of school absences or difficulties in attending or remaining in school (e.g., delays, occasional or continuous absences, unexcused consent) are an important topic in educational systems worldwide which policy and practice must address (Kearney, 2019). Much research is concerned with the causes and consequences of SAPs (Gonzálvez et al., 2021; Klein et al., 2020; Sosu et al., 2021). SAPs are associated with a short and long-term negative impact on people's lives, such as internalizing problems (e.g., anxiety, depression), poorer academic achievement or school dropout (Bagaya, 2019; Fernández-Sogorb et al., 2020; Gonzálvez et al.,

2018; Klein et al., 2022; Orgilés et al., 2011). However, there is a demand for comparative studies analysing the different ways in which countries record, report, and use school attendance data.

1 Context

A comparative view of SAPs can identify the strengths and weaknesses of each educational system and its policy measures to prevent and address this issue. So far, there is no evidence from previous comparative studies between Spain and Scotland in terms of school attendance and school absenteeism. Significant differences have been detected in the way of reporting and making school attendance data available. Scotland offers national attendance rates by student characteristics and anonymised individual-level data on school attendance and absences by request from the Scottish Government, whereas in Spain, it is difficult to find official reports about school attendance rates although this country is the second one with the highest school dropout rate (16% – year 2020) in the European Union (Eurostat, 2020), given attendance as precursor of dropout. It is therefore useful to identify the strengths and weaknesses of each educational system in terms of school attendance to learn lessons to improve both systems. Thus, this paper serves as a starting point on how SAPs are approached in different contexts and a basis for further research and policies to address attendance problems in these countries.

1.1 Spanish Education System

Schools in Spain can be distributed into three groups: state-funded (*públicos*), state-subsidised private (*concertados*), and privately funded (*privados*). Compulsory schooling is from ages 6 to 16. Preschool education (ages 0 to 6), upper-secondary education (ages 16 to 18) or vocational training (from the age of 16) are not compulsory in the country. Spain is made up of 17 autonomous communities and two autonomous cities. Each one establishes its curriculum based on minimum educational standards established at the national level. It is designed based on the principles, vision, values, and competencies defined in the profile of the students to be trained, capable of exercising an active, responsible, and committed citizenship in an uncertain future. It is intended to be inclusive, comprehensive, and flexible to promote the students' learning and reduce repetition, absenteeism, failure, and early school dropout (Ministerio de Educación y Formación Profesional, 2020).

School absenteeism is regulated in article 226.1 of the Spanish penal code, a provision that punishes with a prison sentence of three to six months or a fine of six to twelve months: "To those who fail to comply with the legal duties of attendance inherent to the homeland authority, guardianship, custody, or foster care or to provide the legally necessary assistance established for the support of their descendants, ascendants, or spouse, who are in need."

It may be noted that there is no mention in the precept of truancy because it is included within the crime of family abandonment and, specifically, as a case of breach of the duties inherent to parental authority. This civil code lists in its article 154 the duties inherent to parental authority as follows: "Non-emancipated children are under the authority of the parents. Parental authority shall always be exercised for the benefit of children, according to their personality and with respect to their physical and psychological integrity."

Among the duties inherent to the homeland power exercised by parents, is to educate children. Behaviour that evidences a breach of the duty to educate children is considered negligence (lack of concern and disinterest of the parents or showing a lazy attitude and absolute lack of involvement in the problem of minors). This also amply demonstrates the negligence and irresponsibility of parents (Vázquez González, 2013). However, since 1970, there has been frequent and ongoing legislative adjustments and this lack of policy stability reflect a lack of national consensus in education policies, which in turn, resulted in an inability to establish a regulatory framework, teacher fatigue and family confusion about their role (Antiñolo et al., 2014).

1.2 Scottish Education System

The provision of educational services in Scotland is mainly state-funded, with most of primary and secondary schooling provided by the 32 Scottish local authorities. All children and young people have the right to be taught in mainstream schools in Scotland. However, some local authorities offer specialist settings in mainstream schools. Only four per cent of Scottish students attend independent schools (i.e., private schools) in Scotland (Smith, 2018). The publicly funded schools managed by local authorities include Roman Catholic denominational schools with specific rights for the Roman Catholic Church embedded in statute.

Scottish primary education lasts for seven years (from P1 to P7), and secondary education lasts for six years (from S1 to S6). Children commonly start primary school at the age of five. Compulsory schooling lasts until S4 (age 16). Scotland has a comprehensive schooling system in which children remain together in the same school setting until the end of compulsory schooling. Since 2010/11, children aged 3 to 18 have been taught in the national curriculum for Scottish schools, the Curriculum for Excellence (CfE). CfE identifies four key purposes of education: "successful learners, confident individuals, responsible citizens and effective contributors" (Education Scotland, 2019).

Children in stages P1, P4, P7, and S3 (third year of secondary school) undertake national standardised assessments in literacy and numeracy. Teachers also use their professional judgement to make decisions about students' learning and progress. At the end of compulsory (stage S4) and post-compulsory schooling (stages S5/S6), students in Scotland undertake national examinations, which are highly consequential for school continuation, entry into higher education, and labour market outcomes

4   (Iannelli et al., 2016; Iannelli & Duta, 2018). Although no between-school tracking exists in the Scottish education system, within-school tracking via curriculum differentiation is common practice. There are only two mandatory subjects (Maths and English) at the compulsory stage of secondary school (S3/S4) and no mandatory subjects at the post-compulsory phase (S5/S6). Schools can decide how many subjects they offer, and students can decide on the number of subjects, the configuration of subjects and the qualification level within each subject they want to sit exams in at both stages.

Regarding school attendance, parents are legally responsible for getting their school-aged children to school regularly. Under Section 30 of the Education (Scotland) Act 1980: "It shall be the duty of the parent of every child of school age to provide an efficient education for him suitable of his age, ability, and aptitude either by causing him to attend public school regularly or by other means." Under Section 35 of the Education (Scotland) Act 1980: "Non-attendance at school without reasonable excuse is an offence."

Education authorities can use measures of compulsory compliance (e.g., attendance order) to insist that parents do more to get their children to school (see Appendix 1 in Scottish Government, 2019). At the same time, schools are responsible for providing children with the necessary support and help to get them to school. The Scottish Government suggests that school attendance is aligned with the school's overall approaches to positive relationships and behaviour. It further recognises school attendance as one of the five key drivers for raising attainment as part of the Scottish Attainment Challenge aiming to reduce the poverty-related attainment gap.

2 Recording and Reporting of School Attendance and Absenteeism in Spain

During the last decades, one of the most significant school problems that has become an essential topic in educational research is absenteeism. This problem affects many children and adolescents (Sprick & Berg, 2019). Consequently, public administrations must guarantee the right to education and help children and adolescents to be independent, proactive, and responsible in the future.

2.1 How Does the Spanish Government Conceptualise and Define Attendance and Absenteeism?

In Spain, there is no concrete conceptualization which defines attendance. The definition of absenteeism is as follows (Ministerio de Educación, 2015): a partial and discontinuous school break that implies irregular attendance at the educational centre. It is understood as the situation of non-schooling minors of compulsory school age. At the end of compulsory secondary education, numerous cases are

technically considered absenteeism since the student continues to be enrolled, but they are early school dropouts. School absenteeism manifests itself in diverse ways: delays, early or late absences and continued absences without proper justification. It can be divided into three different types: occasional if it is less than 25% of schooldays absent without justification, mild if it oscillates between 25 and 50% the number of schooldays absent without justification and high or chronic absenteeism if it is greater than 50% the number unexcused absences per month (Aguado, 2005). Schools must ensure that students attend the recommended weekly 25 hours in primary schools and between 30 and 33 hours in secondary schools. In addition, they can carry out extracurricular activities (Ministerio de Educación y Formación Profesional, 2022).

2.2 Attendance Data Recording and Reporting

In Spain, each autonomous community follows a different process for recording absences using a different web platform. For example, in the Valencian community, teachers record and report attendance through the ITACA Platform (Administrative Technological Innovation of Centres and Students) (Conselleria d'Educació, Cultura i Esport, 2010). In addition, it can be useful to register other information of interest such as students' data about their families, teachers' data and other staff who provide services in school centres. Data recording is realized daily at the beginning of each subject and families notify absences or lateness through the school platform. In this autonomous community, when it turns out to be a prolonged absence, it is notified in the platform of Conselleria d'Educació (PREVI), and education inspection is informed to do an attendance follow-up (Félix et al., 2008).

There is a lack of official data to establish school absenteeism rates in Spain. According to the 2021 PISA results, 6.5% of Spanish students were absent from school once or twice per week, down from 5.8% since the previous reporting 2019. There are notable differences between men and women, with 7.2% of men having absenteeism compared to 5.8% of women. To track their progress, schools give families frequent updates of each subject.

There is data for other student outcomes known to be highly correlated with absences. In 2021, the repetition rate of Spanish students in compulsory secondary education was four times the OECD average: 8.7% of students ages 12 to 14 and 7.9% ages 15 to 16 repeated a grade in Spain, as compared to 1.9% and 3% of similarly aged students, respectively, in other OECD countries. In 2021, 13.3% of people aged 18 to 24 in Spain dropped out of secondary school (Ministerio de Educación y Formación Profesional & Ministerio de Universidades, 2021). Dropout rates were higher among men (16.7%) than women (9.7%), but significantly lower for both genders than 2011, when 21.5% of women and 31% of men (ages 20 to 24) dropped out their studies and has not completed upper secondary education. Moreover, these people are not studying or in any type of training in the four weeks preceding the interview.

2.3 Attendance Data Recording and Reporting Due to COVID-19 Pandemic

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, schools were closed from March 14th of 2020 until the start of the next school year (September 2020). However, teachers and students kept working using distance learning. Attendance and participation data was collected checking students who were synchronously online to the classes and sending the tasks teachers asked for. Although most students affirm that they have managed well with distance learning, 75% prefer face-to-face teaching, and 54% believe that more is learned in the school centre than studying from home (Marchesi et al., 2020).

According to the Ministry of Education (2021), during the last school year, 2020–2021, fully face-to-face teaching occurred in early childhood and primary education. 73.7% of the centres opted for reducing groups (decreasing the number of students per class) but not in the rest of the educational levels. In Secondary, only 26.3% of the centres were teaching completely face-to-face, although with flexible hours. In the school year 2021–2022, all students attended school as usual since online classes were over.

2.4 Reporting Issues

The Spanish government does not provide concrete guidance on recording and monitoring absences. Each Autonomous Community categorises responses to requests for absences. According to one nationally representative study of Cruz-Orozco et al. (2017), most of absentee students consists of teenagers between 12 and 14 years old (1st or 2nd year of compulsory secondary education) presenting lack of study habits and school delay. They also have alienation towards the educational system, leading to forgetting their school supplies at home. Their families present an overprotective profile (referring to parents who hover or control their child's actions, ensuring their child's well-being, but their efforts can be intrusive and detrimental) or lack of involvement, complemented by permissiveness (referring to a type of parenting style characterized by low demands with high responsiveness, tending to be very loving, yet provide few guidelines and rules). Related to their intrinsic feelings, their low self-esteem, little or no tolerance for frustration, lack of habits, routines, and social skills are accompanied by a lack of self-control.

In the Valencian community, there is a Programme for Guidance, Advancement and Educational Enrichment called PROA+ program, which is aimed at schools with special educational complexity, including those located in rural areas. These are schools with a significant number of students in a situation of educational vulnerability, who manifest a series of difficulties or obstacles throughout their school career; these obstacles, both personal and social, hinder the possibility of making sufficient use of the teaching within the classroom and the school context in general. In most cases, these are schools located in socially disadvantaged areas and with students belonging to families with a low socio-economic and educational level.

To carry out the implementation of the investment assigned for the program, territorial cooperation with the education administrations of the autonomous communities is established.

2.5 Attendance/Absence Data Usage

While attendance data is collected daily at the local level and there is a national institute of statistics, there is no aggregated national database or way to access attendance data that is collected in schools. Table 1 (Ministerio de Educación y Formación Profesional, 2021) shows school absenteeism data in Spanish and it is the last available report in Spain about school absenteeism (which is referred to 2019): 86.3% of Spanish girls never or hardly ever miss school days. Nevertheless, 5.8% of them miss school once or more times a week. Similarly, 83.5% of Spanish boys never or hardly ever miss school days. Nevertheless, 7.2% of them miss school once or more times a week. The differences between genders are as follows: 1.4% more boys than girls miss school once or twice per week, combined with 2.8% more girls than boys never or hardly ever miss school days. There is also given some data related to the school absenteeism rates for the total EU, which are the total percentage of all absent boys and girls in all EU countries, and the OECD average, an average based on calculations of the figures from each OECD country.

Table 1 School Absenteeism in Girls and Boys

	Girls			Boys		
	Spain	Total EU	OECD average	Spain	Total EU	OECD average
Once or more times a week	5.8	5.9	6.2	7.2	7.1	7.1
Once every two weeks	2.5	3.4	4.0	2.9	3.5	4.1
Once a month	5.4	8.4	9.9	6.4	8.3	9.8
Never or hardly ever	86.3	82.3	80.0	83.5	81.0	79.0

Note. Source: Igualdad en cifras MEFP 2021. Aulas por igualdad (Ministerio de Educación y Formación Profesional, 2021).

3 Recording and Reporting of School Attendance and Absenteeism in Scotland

This section examines how the Scottish Government conceptualises and defines attendance and absenteeism, as well as the methods used for recording and reporting attendance data. In addition, it briefly discussed recording and reporting of attendance data during the COVID-19 pandemic. The section further discusses challenges that may arise during the reporting process. It concludes by analysing the various ways in which attendance and absence data are utilised by the Scottish Government.

3.1 How does the Scottish Government Conceptualise and Define Attendance and Absenteeism?

School attendance is defined as participation in a programme of educational activities arranged and agreed upon by the school (Scottish Government, 2019). These include attendance at school, learning out of the school provided by a college or other learning providers while the student is still on the school roll, educational visits, and day and residential visits to outdoor centres. Attendance also includes students attending interviews and visits to further and higher education or careers events, debates, sports, musical or drama activities organised in conjunction with the school, study leave for students participating in national exams, tuition via hospital or outreach teaching services, and work experience.

Schools must ensure that students attend a school or another learning environment for the recommended weekly 25 hours in primary schools and 27.5 hours in secondary schools.

3.2 Attendance Data Recording and Reporting

Schools are expected to record attendance and absences register twice daily (morning and afternoon) (Scottish Government, 2019). However, some secondary schools monitor attendance in every lesson given students enrol for different subjects. While attendance and absence should be recorded at least per half-day session, lateness is recorded differently depending on whether children and young people arrive during the first or second half of the morning or afternoon session. It is expected the school attendance tracking and monitoring system will enable schools to keep parents updated on their children's attendance and contact parents when children consistently miss school.

Schools are expected to check children and young people's absence against information provided by their parents, including the expected date of return to school when absent. When a student is absent, schools check this against parental information and will assume that the student has missed school without parents being aware if parents have not communicated this to the school. The student will be recorded as an unauthorised absence until the school receives a satisfactory explanation from their parent. Where a school believes that a parent has not provided a valid reason for the absence, this will be recorded as unauthorised. Schools can authorise absences if they are satisfied with the reason provided by the parent. The Scottish Government advises that family holidays during term time should not be recorded as an authorised absence unless the parent's employment is incompatible with school holidays.

Schools record, code, and manage information on absences in an Education Management Information System (SEEMIS), following predefined attendance/absence codes (see Appendix 2 in Scottish Government, 2019). The Scottish Government collects and publishes aggregated national statistics on school student attendance

Table 2 Possible Reasons for Schools to Record Absences as Authorised or Unauthorised

Authorised absences	Unauthorised absences
Illness where no learning provision is made (including ongoing mental health concerns)	Occasional absence without parental awareness
Medical and dental appointments; meeting before and during court appearances and other legal processes	Absence with parental awareness in specific circumstances (e.g., trip, family-related activities)
Attendance at, or in connection with, a Children's Hearing or Care Review or appointment with another service provider (e.g., a social worker)	Family holidays during term time
Religious observance; bereavement; weddings or funerals of close friends and family; arranged absence with children in gypsy/ traveller families	Longer-term absence about school-related issues (e.g., bullying, school anxiety, conflict with teachers)
Participation in non-school debates, sports, musical or drama activities agreed upon by the school	Longer-term absence related to home and wider community (e.g., experiences of abuse or neglect, coping with adversity and trauma)
Lack of transport	Absence relating to substance and alcohol misuse
Family recovery from exceptional domestic circumstances or trauma; period of exclusion; and extended leave with parental consent (including some young carer activities)	

and absence biennially.[1] Secure access is also provided to individual-level data on school attendance and absences to vetted researchers through the National Records of Scotland (e.g., Scottish Longitudinal Study) or Scottish Government secure labs following an application, ethical approval and secure data access training.

3.3 Attendance Data Recording and Reporting during the COVID-19 Pandemic

In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, education and childcare settings were closed between March 20th of 2020 and the end of the school year, except for children of key workers and vulnerable children. Schools started to reopen on August 11th of 2020 then closed for the winter break. Scotland went into another lockdown on 5th January 2021 which meant the early January reopening period was postponed with

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[1] https://www.gov.scot/publications/school-attendance-and-absence-statistics/

10   all schools reverting to remote learning. P1-P3 students returned on February 22nd of 2021, and all primary children returned on March 15th of 2021.

Following the end of the first round of school closures and reopening of schools (August 2020), the Scottish Government collected and published daily absence data for students, staff, and school for the school year 2020/21.[2] The data differentiated between non-COVID-19 and COVID-19-related reasons for student absence (e.g., student absences due to COVID-19-related sickness, school closure due to COVID-19, student self-isolation due to COVID-19 infection in the household, or parents choosing to keep students away from school as a precautionary measure). In addition, the weekly attendance measures were distinguished by school stage, sex, ethnicity, and neighbourhood deprivation (Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation – SIMD). Initial analyses of these data after the first period of school closures suggested that student absences after the first wave of COVID-19 school closures were higher than in previous years and were stratified by neighbourhood socioeconomic characteristics (Sosu & Klein, 2021). These higher absenteeism rates and inequalities were largely due to COVID-19-related reasons.

3.4 Reporting Issues

The Scottish Government provides guidance on recording and monitoring of absences via SEEMIS, the Education Management System provider. However, it is ultimately up to schools and teachers to categorize responses by reason for absence. Despite similar circumstances, the recording of absence reasons may vary across students and schools, thereby raising the possibility of measurement error and concerns about the validity of documented reasons for absences.

While the coding of authorised absences in SEEMIS is detailed, the system does not differentiate further between various reasons for unauthorised absences, except for family holidays and exceptional domestic circumstances (see Appendix 2 in Scottish Government, 2019). All other absences for which no adequate explanation was provided by a parent are recorded as unexplained (including truancy) or other unauthorised absences, although more detailed information on the nature of the unauthorised absence seems available (see the list in Table 2 of categories for unauthorised absences above).

Another concern is that students, particularly at secondary school, can present themselves for registration at each half-day session and are then absent for specific lessons. Since the Scottish Government does not require effective monitoring of lesson-by-lesson, absences may be underestimated in schools with less effective supervision and monitoring of lesson attendance.

Except for the COVID-19-related data collected after the school closures, the statistics on attendance and absence are summary data for each school year.

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[2]   https://public.tableau.com/app/profile/sg.eas.learninganalysis/viz/COVID19-SchoolsandChildcareInformation2021/Introduction

Consequently, it is impossible to consider variations in school attendance levels and reasons across different school year periods (e.g., months or terms). Knowing at which period of the school year children and young people are absent is important. For instance, findings from a small, urban district in California suggest that Spring absences had a stronger negative impact on school performance than Autumn absences, with the most critical period being the 30-day window leading up to the test (Gotffried & Kirksey, 2017).

3.5 Attendance/Absence Data Usage

The Scottish Government's last collection and publication of school attendance and absence data refer to the school year 2020/21 when there was a disruption to school

Table 3 Attendance Rate by Student Characteristics – Schools Open, 2020–2021

All Students	92.0
School	
Primary	94.0
Secondary	89.1
Special	89.3
Sex	
Male	92.1
Female	92.0
Ethnicity	
White Scottish	92.0
White non-Scottish	92.1
Mixed or multiple ethnic groups	93.2
Asian	92.0
African/Black/Caribbean	94.6
All other ethnic groups	91.0
Not Disclosed / Not Known	91.2
Additional Support Needs (ASN)	
Students with ASN	89.4
Students with no ASN	93.3
Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation (SIMD)	
Lowest 20% of SIMD (Most deprived)	88.7
Highest 20% of SIMD (Least deprived)	95.0

Note. Students that were not matched to the Student Census have not been included. An ASN student is likely unable to benefit from school education without additional support. It can be due to disability (e.g., language and speech disorder), learning environment (e.g., inflexible curricular arrangements), family circumstances (e.g., children in the care of their local authority), or social and emotional factors (e.g., experiencing bullying behaviour). Source: Scottish Government (2022).

attendance caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. Therefore, the primary measure reported for "attendance or absence – schools open" only cover periods when schools were open to students. This is to enable comparability between attendance rates across different years bearing in mind the general context of COVID-19. Rates of attendance define the average number of days attended taking into account the number of school days. Statistics are presented at the national, local authority, and school levels.

Table 3 shows national attendance rates by student characteristics. Students in Scotland had an average attendance rate of 92.0 % in the school year 2020/21. This is somewhat lower than the average attendance rate in 2018/19 (93.0%), prior to the pandemic. Primary school students had a much higher average attendance rate (94%) than students in secondary schools (89.1%). Students with additional support needs (89.9%) had a lower average attendance rate than students with no additional support needs (93.3). The contrast in attendance is even more pronounced between students growing up in the 20% most deprived areas (88.7%) and students growing up in the 20% least deprived areas (95.0%). There are also observed differences in attendance by ethnicity. For instance, African/Black/Caribbean students have a higher average attendance rate (94.6%) compared to other groups such as those from a White, Asian or undisclosed ethnic background (91%–92%).

Summary statistics on school attendance and absence data are published by the Government as part of school summary statistics every two years. In addition, secure access to anonymised individual-level data on school attendance and absences hosted by the National Records of Scotland (e.g., Scottish Longitudinal Study) has been provided to researchers following completion of an application, ethical clearance, and secure data access training. These data are also linked to other administrative datasets or survey for research purposes.

4 Strengths and Weaknesses of the Attendance Process

The Scottish Government stands out for its universal, standardized reporting expectations of school attendance biennially. The report covers types of absences and operational definitions, and definition by sociodemographic characteristics. There is also national level data with individual-level attendance and absence data available to researchers upon request to the government. In contrast, the Spanish Government lacks a centralized, standardised definitions, reporting expectations, and data compilation that would enable periodic reporting on school absenteeism. Having these reports can be particularly useful to understand and monitor attendance trends. Another strength to highlight in Scotland is having a specific definition of school attendance, while Spanish authorities should better define this aspect conceptually (decentralisation or the autonomy of each of the autonomous communities could be the reasons why there is still no agreement on the definition of school attendance).

Scotland and Spain conduct some standardised assessments, which are only for information purposes without having any impact on students' academic records. Nevertheless, it could be useful whether these results could be examined to detect possible problems associated with school absenteeism or if these results are correlated with school attendance rates.

National measures must continue to be promoted in each country to reinforce school attendance. For instance, in Spain specific interventions (school absenteeism prevention protocols and regional regulations to monitor school absenteeism) are developed for each autonomous community. Developing specific strategies in each geographical area could be useful to consider the characteristics of each geographical location. The aim of these protocols is to guarantee the full schooling of students of compulsory school age, to guarantee the right to education and to reduce truancy. Moreover, it is also necessary to establish a protocol for the detection, prevention, and intervention in cases of truancy, which systematises and coordinates the actions of all the agents involved. On the other hand, it is useful to detect and ensure interventions in the earliest stages, which avoid the persistence of truancy, and to obtain up-to-date and reliable information that allows us to recognise situations of truancy and identify the circumstances that provoke and maintain it. Finally, it is of great help to monitor truant students, facilitate their reincorporation into the educational centre and, consequently, reduce school drop-out rates (Resolución de 29 de septiembre de 2021).

Significant efforts have been undertaken in Spain to reduce school dropout with plans such as PROA+ program (see section 2.4) in centres of special educational complexity. This aims to support the educational success of students, especially vulnerable students, by providing resources and training to the centres with the greatest difficulties. Data shows that, despite the negative figures in comparison with the rest of European Union countries, small improvements in recent years (Eurostat, 2020). However, more attention should be given specifically to the early detection and solution to school absenteeism in Spain. This is important because prolonged school absenteeism during childhood may be a predictor of lasting issues that may persist into adulthood such as school dropout, among other problems (Gubbels et al., 2019).

5 Suggestions, Comments, and Lessons

After the comparative analysis conducted between Spain and Scotland, the main lines of action for the next few years are extracted as follows:

Spain needs (a) regular public reports or systematized data on school attendance and absenteeism by school year or academic level to be able to follow up students; (b) it also requires a procedural and basic consensus among political parties, which favours educational stability, greater long-term stability and the possibility to better help the different types of necessities that students may experience (Novella & Cloquell, 2022).

14   Scotland requires (a) a system that differentiates further between several reasons for unauthorized absences; (b) an improved data collection which captures the rapid changes in school attendance problems.

Action protocols should be agreed upon to prevent, attend and evaluate school for follow-up. In Spain, this type of protocol is developed in a particular way by the autonomous communities that consider it appropriate considering the characteristics of each area (see, for example, Conselleria d'Educació, Cultura i Esport, 2018).

Both countries should (a) improve their efforts in analysing the determinants and underlying causes of SAPs, for instance, among students with additional support needs or those growing up in disadvantaged socioeconomic backgrounds; (b) understand and learn about the enablers of higher school attendance from student groups who are traditionally disadvantaged (e.g., African/Black/Caribbean students in Scotland) to guide intervention; (c) expand their research on school absenteeism amidst new and emerging educational realities (e.g., online training, use of technology) or macro-level shocks (e.g., pandemic); (d) work with families and communities to track attendance data and implement strategies to address barriers to attendance; and (e) further research on school attendance and school absenteeism from a multidisciplinary perspective making use of the synergies between them (psychology, education, criminal and juvenile justice, social work, medicine, psychiatry, nursing, epidemiology, public and educational policy, leadership, child development, and sociology, among others).

Both countries should be committed to the creation of observatories on school attendance, which not only disseminate reports and statistics on this problem, but also identify gaps/needs in this area, offer training and make the population aware of this problem.

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