School attendance: Equities and inequities in growth trajectories of academic performance

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Abstract
Much of the pedagogical as well as political tension in the discussion about the effects of education on the development of children has been focused on the importance of the quality of education as distinct from the quantity of it. It is reasonable to expect that some attendance at school is necessary to achieve its desired effects, or to posit that there might be a point at which the quantity dimension becomes so eroded that the quality characteristics cannot be expressed in the achievement outcomes. We used Australian data on school enrolment, school attendance and standardised literacy and numeracy achievement tests from 2008 to 2012 to longitudinally assess the attendance patterns of over 415 000 primary and secondary students across the five-year period. We also examined how these patterns vary for students with different characteristics. We examined the extent to which authorised and unauthorised absences from school related to achievement after controlling for a range of factors. We also investigated how absence rates in previous years relate to current achievement levels and whether there is a ‘safe’ threshold of absence at which students could catch up on missed schooling without affecting their overall achievement. Equities and inequities in trajectories and outcomes are apparent – particularly at the outset of schooling – with clear implications for educational policies.