

AVERTING LEARNER ABSENTEEISM IN ZAMBIAN URBAN AND RURAL PRIMARY SCHOOLS: A CASE OF KALINGALINGA AND SIMWEENDENGWE PRIMARY SCHOOLS

by

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Abstract

The study investigated the causes of learner absenteeism, the impact it has on academic performance and ways of averting learner absenteeism. The study used a mixed design which involved the use of questionnaires to obtain information from the teachers, and school administrators, research interview guides for the parents and focus group discussions for the learners from Kalingalinga and Simweendengwe primary schools and their catchment area respectively. The research population was composed of one hundred and twenty (120) respondents which included; forty (40) education administrators and teachers, forty (40) parents who were randomly selected and 40 learners who were purposefully selected. The data collected through questionnaires was analysed using Statistical Package for Social Sciences and the focus group discussions data was analysed thematically. The findings established that the leading cause to learner absenteeism were home related factors. The study further established that the performance of learners who consistently abscond from school in academic terms was average and in extreme cases bad. The findings also established that Pupil, Parent Teacher engagement is the best methods to use if absenteeism is to be addressed. From the findings, it was established that good policy support would enhance efficiency if learner absenteeism was to be addressed by teachers and educational administrators.

Key words: *Absenteeism, academic performance, Primary schools*

INTRODUCTION

Most primary school going children absconded classes at a given point in their school time on reasons such as; home factors, school factors and personal factors among others without the knowledge of their parents and school administrators. Other reasons include boredom, dislike of teachers and avoidance of tests. The reasons for primary school pupils' absence from school are school related rather than home related which include but not limited to; hate for teachers, frustration from school rules, and the size and

complexity of the school environment. It is therefore also a high priority policy concern on which governments have concentrated on. For example, the Ministry of Education (MoE) introduced the re-entry policy in 1997 to increase girl child participation in the education sector thereby making them more productive both socially and economically. In 2002, the Zambian Government in response to the declining enrolment rates and increasing dropout rates introduced the Free Primary Education (FPE) policy. The policy abolished statutory fees from Grades 1-7, examination fees for the Examinations Council of Zambia (ECZ) Composite examinations and abolished school uniforms (MoE, 2016; ECZ, 2013; Mukuka and Daka, 2018)). The implementation of free education policy at primary school level saw a significant increment in enrolment in grades 1 to 7 (Mulenga – Hagane, Daka and Kanchebele – Sinyangwe, 2020) and this might have also reduced absenteeism. The Indian Overseas Bank (IOB), (2011) revealed that Zambia’s enrolment in grades 1 to 7 increased by 67 percent from 1.6 million learners in 2000 to 2.8 million in 2007. According to IOB (2008), the removal of examination fees and introduction of free education for primary schools in 2002 was coupled with an increase in the number of children attending primary school.

The Government of the Republic of Zambia (GRZ) has also through the MoE introduced the National School Health and Nutrition policy in 2006, this was in line with the National Health Services Act of 1995. This was in a bid to address nutrition issues that affected a lot of learners because it impairs their cognitive development thereby impacting their school attendance. Protein deficiency increases vulnerability to diseases of the learners due to poor nutrition. Furthermore, the Ministry of General Education Science, Vocational Training and Early-childhood (MESVTEE) introduced a school feeding program as one way to help increase school attendance and progression for learners at primary level, (MESVTEE, 2012).

Furthermore, GRZ through the Ministry of General Education, Early Childhood and Vocational Training embarked on the creation of community schools to increase access to education. According to Zambia Open Community Schools, (2012), these community schools are closer to the people and are built based on the need of the community thereby guaranteeing access and participation. This was all in a bid to address the issues of learner absenteeism and factors that affect access and participation in education (MoE, 2016; Hamaleka, Daka and Mphande, 2020).

Excessive absenteeism on the part of a learner results in unlearned course materials and causes a disruption of class instruction delivered by the qualified teachers which results in poor academic performance (Daka, 2019). It also brings about low standardized scores because that particular learner does not attend classes consecutively hence missing out on key concepts and skills that could be part of the assessments, examinations or tests. In Zambia this problem of school absenteeism is covered by the Education Act of 2011, however the Act does not necessarily define or

state the term absenteeism. The Act merely provides an explanation of compulsory school attendance in the Zambia school context. Learner absenteeism is a serious hindrance to effective professional practice (teaching and learning) and thus a clear definition of learner absenteeism in the Zambian school context is called for. Learners from the rural areas have different reasons of absconding schools and therefore this study was done in both areas to address challenges from localities (rural and urban).

STATEMENT OF PROBLEM

Absenteeism at school is either deliberate or not and has seriously led to both poor class performance and school performance at class and final examination level in all subjects. It also greatly affected teachers' lesson preparations. However, despite the various measures put in place by the MESVTEE, it has proven to be a huge problem the education sector is embattling with. The ministry has sought to develop policies, frameworks and Presidential directives have been made in that regard but all in all little fruition has been attained. This was affirmed by Banda (2017) who found out that at least 26% of the learners enrolled in primary schools are absent on average on a daily basis. The impact it has on the pupil's academic performance can never be overemphasized. Despite all these efforts address them, learner absenteeism remains a huge challenge in Zambia (MoE, 2008; Kakaupa, Tembo and Daka, 2015). It is in light of the aforementioned that the study on learner absenteeism was necessary considering the complexity of the problem. Therefore this study was aimed at examining the best strategies or measures that could be taken to reduce levels of absenteeism in the selected schools. The selected were both from rural and urban areas to have an understanding of factors leading to absenteeism from both areas.

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

- i. Examine the causes of learner absenteeism in Zambian schools.
- ii. Establish the impact of absenteeism on the learners' academic performance
- iii. Establish the best strategies that could be used to avert or reduce absenteeism in Zambian schools.

FACTORS OF LEARNER ABSENTEEISM

Personal-related factors have been cited as one of the leading cause of absenteeism in schools. According to Komakech, (2015), about 27% of primary school children abscond lessons without their parents' knowledge. Other reasons included boredom, dislike of teachers and avoidance of tests (Hamaleka, Daka and Mphande, 2020). Most pupils thought their parents would keep them off school for reasons which schools would consider acceptable. According to Guryan, Christenson, Claessens, Engel, Lai, Ludwig, Turner and Turner (2017) personal reasons to miss school included the following; desire

to impress friends, laziness and moodiness, bullying and social exclusion and disabilities of the learners (ECZ, 2011) and (Ndhlovu and Mtonga, 2013).

Some other related factors include school related factors. One of the school related factors is labelling. Labelling, according Musumpuka (2016), labelling is believed to be detrimental to self-esteem and self-concept. The pupils to some extent even the teachers themselves do label the pupils that learn Zambian languages and home economics with some names. For example, if a pupil learns Chitonga they will be labeled as the Tongas or '*Banabamulaka*' (children of the tongue) and cooks respectively. This becomes detrimental to the self-images of the learners and it becomes a challenge in the teaching sector. A label is capable of destroying a powerful mind because it becomes the overall.

Another school related factors is poor teacher approach. MoE (2013) affirmed that everything that the teacher does must be focused on what learners want to know, understand and be able to do successfully. It's further stated that when teachers plan and teach, they should focus on helping learners acquire the necessary knowledge, skills and dispositions that will enable them achieve the desired outcomes. Some methodologies and teachers' approach may not be understood by the students and in this sense can easily make them start missing classes (Daka, 2019). This is because there are times when teachers go to class so that they can be marked present without doing anything sensible there. Some teachers teach a subject they do not like at all that is why they teach without a means of motivation to the learners. Some do not even care if learners understand what they teach or not. Teacher harassment is another school related factor causing absenteeism. Some learners missed classes because of being sexually harassed by teachers. This was more frequent among male teachers to their female learners ECZ, (2011). This affected learners to an extent where they even missed public exams due to psychological instability.

Home related factors

According to Shooba, (2013) mentioned home factors as another related factor that causes absenteeism. According to Mtonga, Mwewa and Simui (2012), parents with poor education background are a leading cause to absenteeism. This is because they lack the knowledge on the value of education thereby seeing no need in their children attending or not attending classes (Phiri, Musonda and Daka, 2020). This is because the children look up to the parents as significant others. This could however be argued because the situation in urban set ups is different as most parents endeavor for academic progression thereby affecting positively on the aspirations of their children (Mukuka and Daka, 2018).

Anthony (1978) explains on how some parents spoil their children by giving them everything that they demand at the time they demand; this can be from family. The students that are given excessive pocket money from their families are very likely to absent themselves from school especially from subjects they do not like since they need more time to spend that money whilst at school before they go back home.

In addition, inability to pay user fees due to the socio-economic backgrounds of most learners, they may miss lessons as their parents organise money to pay for their

user fees and carter for other school expenses. Kelly (1994) notes that inappropriate policies have caused the personal poverty in which most Zambians' lives reflects the poor state of the country's economy which has never experienced steady growth since 1970s. He went on to say the payment of Parent Teachers Association (PTA) funds have made many children to absent themselves from schools. Kelly further points out that those perpetually absent children tend to be excluded from school in this process because of a cultural bias in favour of investment in a boy child, the girl was likely to suffer. This was further echoed by the research results of the African communities which say that absenteeism is linked to pregnancy, poverty and unemployment according to Dougherty, (2018).

The last related factor is cultural factors. According to Mulauzi, Nyambe and Mtanga (2014) and Phiri, Musonda nad Daka (2020) initiation ceremonies like puberty rites are found in most parts of Zambia and are conducted nearly in all ethnic groupings in the country. Its continued existence in the rural areas and its penetration into the urban parts of the country. Girls especially who were of age for the ceremony were secluded during the puberty rites like 'Chinamwali' and 'Nkolola' for a period of time most often during the school calendar days. To some extent learners sought to gain exposure by attending even their friend's cultural rites ceremonies robbing them an opportunity to learn concepts in class. However, there is an urgent need to sensitive both parents and pupils on the need to uphold both their traditional values and the need for education without compromising the other. The very fact the young girls are taught women therapeutically techniques for sexual enchantment, reproduction and sexual education makes them vulnerable to test what they are taught (Daka, Mwelwa, Chibamba, Mkandawire and Phiri, 2020). These further causes leaners to feel so grown that they are forced to go in seclusion even among fellow learners thereby making them miss class and other school interactions. However, this can be argued on grounds that learners are also vulnerable to the culture that they learn from electronic and print media platforms which are mainly influenced by the western culture.

IMPACT OF LEARNER ABSENTEEISM ON ACADEMIC PERFORMANCE

Due to absenteeism teachers have to reteach lessons, this takes away instructional time from learners who attended classes regularly. They spend extra time over absentee extra homework and class assignments. It is beyond the planning period of lessons and time needed to provide individual assistance to pupils. Pupils miss valuable information when they are absent from classes. They also miss the learning interaction and benefits of specific examples which are used to clarify the difficult concepts. The valuable information cannot be repeated when a teacher re-teaches a lesson to absent pupils (Sprick, 2017).

According to Sparks, (2010), absenteeism affects the learning abilities of pupils which can be the reason in the decrease in grades and result in learner failure and in extreme cases repeating grades. Outstanding performance of pupils becomes prominent and effective when they attend classes on regular basis and its positive impact on

performance is felt. Pupils who attending classes on a regular basis tend to get higher grades and marks in the examination than pupils who abscond classes. Once the pupil is absent from class, he or she will miss the opportunity to learn new techniques and miss the opportunity of getting higher grades in the examination. There is a strong positive correlation between attendance and academic performance (Antwi and Edet, 2011). This could be argued as well because lack of learning and teaching material is a leading factor to poor pupil performance in most public schools due to poor funding of these institutions.

Absenteeism in schools affects the learning process of the learners. This can be seen from the grade seven (7) composite examination performance reports. Teaching provides the basis where learners interact with the teachers, observe them and differentiate them as role models. Low attendance hence may affect this process and obstruct their professional growth. On the other hand, the role of teachers in improving learners' attendance in classes cannot be denied. Good attendance is the most important and direct sign of the learners' perception of the effectiveness and usefulness of the lessons delivered. Teachers with good teaching skills deliver lessons which are organized and structured; have good communication skills which attract learners' and shows higher attendance rates (Hafeez, 2014). According to Hutt, (2018), the continued absenteeism or poor academic performance among the learners leads to high dropout rate. It is indicated by one author that absenteeism acts as a crime which is more common among the learners who got low grades (Daka, Chipindi and Mkandawire, 2020; Daka and Changwe, 2020; Mulenga – Hagane, Daka, Msango, Mwelwa and Kakupa, 2019). Absenteeism as some studies have shown, disturb the dynamic teaching and learning environment. Chronic absenteeism jeopardizes the teaching and learning environment by creating a tiresome and unpleasant classroom environment that make students who come to class uncomfortable and irritated. Absenteeism can be associated with poor academic performance and high dropout rates in schools thereby affecting the progression and completion rates. This cannot be regarded as an independent point because most learners drop out of the school system mainly because of the socioeconomic factors that surround them.

Furthermore, Lubeya, (2012) and Daka, Namafe and Katowa – Mukwato, (2019) argued that learners who missed classes on specific dates, were more likely to respond wrongly to questions related to material covered in their absence. It is given in the hypothesis that there is a correlation between learners' attendance and performance inquired empirically in educational literature. It is most surprisingly, that there is an inverse relationship between the course performance and absenteeism in most of the studies. This further robs the learners as opportunity to be masterly of certain subjects thereby leading to labelling theory which makes them even more inferior in class resulting to chronic absenteeism.

STRATEGIES IN ADDRESSING LEARNER ABSENTEEISM

Musumpuka, (2016) and Hamaleka, Daka and Mphande (2020) reaffirmed that attendance at school should be closely monitored, encouraged and enforced. In light of the above, Robinson, et'al (2017) and Daka (2019) argued that regular attendance guarantees academic success because of the actual participation in learning activities. Furthermore, teachers and pupils must be actively engaged in class attendance to provide higher academic results. Therefore, it is in this vain that care needs to be taken in a bid to address absenteeism at the lowest level more especially at primary education in order to attain the hitch free teaching and learning processes.

Additionally, in a bid to curb absenteeism, head teachers and teachers varied in their efforts to improve learners' attendance. Nearly all undertook first day calling. Those with staff dedicated to supporting school attendance were more likely to call on the first day of a pupil's absence. More primary schools had this capacity. Schools promoted good attendance in five main ways. These included group awards, individual awards, improvements of school buildings and facilities, closer primary-secondary school links and building good relationships with parents, (Rogers and Avi, 2016). The success of these were increased by the use of staff dedicated to supporting school attendance. Strategies to deal with poor attendance included use of the Education Social Welfare Services and input from other agencies, such as the social services. The frequency of Education Social Welfare Officers visits to schools varied, being more frequent at primary school level. Those in modern Zambian schools have evolved as School Matrons and Patrons as well as Counsellors. Many teachers appreciated the work done by welfare officers. Schools engage in a wide range of measures to support and reintegrate absenteeism. This could further be argued because the same parents and educationists are the ones that encourage absenteeism through the hidden curriculum as they are significant others to most learners.

According to Musumpuka, (2016), he affirms that parental involvement in education is key to a child's advancement in the school system. This is because it promotes attendance among learners. Parents need to show interest in the education of their children by counter checking the progress and attendance levels of their children because they are the major stakeholders in the sector. They need to provide school requirement such as books, bicycles (transport) where needed, buy uniforms and pay user fees. They further need to spent time with their children and take keen interest in knowing the challenges faced by their children in both acquisition of knowledge and their personal life.

METHODOLGY

The research adopted a mixed method approach. It drew information from two primary schools within the Ministry of General Education. The schools were sampled conveniently as they were easily accessible by the researchers. The sample area included urban and rural schools; all with mixed and varying socio-economic profiles with some learners coming from well to do homes while others from low socio – economic status families. This was in a bid to ascertain if the schools were faced with the problem of absenteeism and what measures were put in place to rescue the situation. The population in this research included the learners, teachers and educational administrators from public

institutions of learning at primary level namely; Simweendengwe of Chisekesi and Kalingalinga of Lusaka primary schools. The total sample of this research comprised of 120 participants from the primary level of education divided as; forty (40) administrators (2 administrators from each school) and 8 teachers from each school, forty (40) parents (20 parents from each area) and forty (40) primary schools pupils with 20 pupils from each school.

The sample selection was done on location basis in order to cater for both urban and rural populations as they are exposed to different socio-economic and political environments all in all in their access to education. The sampling for the educators and parents was done randomly while the one for the pupils was done purposively. The research also used interview guides to gather primary information from the parents of learners. Lastly, focus group discussion for the learners were used. This was in a bid to collect the much-needed data for the research with optimum reliability and validity. Further, in rare instances were necessary, checklists and observations were used in order to ascertain facts obtained with the immediate environment. The raw data was collected from the two primary schools (Kalingalinga and Simweendengwe) was put in context using a dictionary to interlink some words. The idea of selecting schools from both urban and rural was to have understanding of absenteeism factors from both areas.

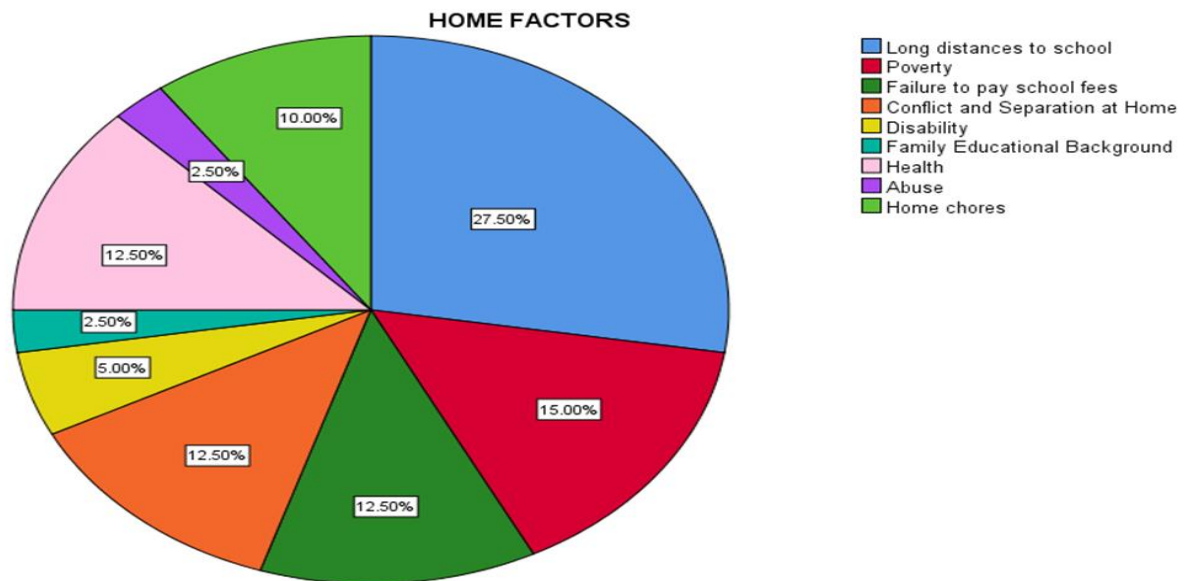
Questionnaires were administered to teachers and schools administrators as they were able to fill in themselves. This was the first instrument to be administered. The information from the questionnaires was clarified more from the interview guides from parents and focus group discussions. Interviews were ideal for parents as they gave in depth views as to why their children could abscond classes. Focus group discussions from learners gave more detailed factors leading absenteeism. The coding and re-coding was done to add value and relevance to the collected data. The quantitative data was analysed using Microsoft excel and SPSS. Tables and graphs were used in some instances to illustrate results and the precise percentages of the responses. The variables involved were then clearly outlined to broaden problem understanding and application of findings. Ethical consent was sought, anonymity and confidentiality of information provided was highly upheld.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Learner Absenteeism

Results obtained from parents, teachers and educational administrators using questionnaires availed the following related factors as causes leading to learner absenteeism.

Figure 1: Home related factors as causes to learner absenteeism



From figure 1, 27.5% of the respondents attributed long distance to school (Physical and geographical barriers) as the leading factor to learner absenteeism. The respondents acknowledge that the distribution of schools especially in rural areas is far from the people thereby making them difficult to be accessed. This correlates with the findings of Miller (2006) who attributed to home related factors as major causes to learner absenteeism. One parent stated that

“My home is very far leading to my child frequently missing school”.

Additionally, 12.5% of the respondents attributed failure to pay school fees as a factor leading to learner absenteeism. It must be mentioned that despite the ban of user fees for primary school, PTAs still charge a bit to meet the administrative costs of running these institutions and the education sector is highly influenced by the Cost Sharing model based on the Educating Our Future of 1992 policy document. These findings are in line with the findings of Dougherty, (2018), who attributed poverty as the leading factor to learner absenteeism as most of the learning and teaching material are bought at a price hence the unavailability of money render all the other efforts ineffective.

On the other hand, 15% of the respondents outlined poverty as the second leading factor. They added that lack of basic necessities such books, nutritious feeding, shelter and other learning materials forced many learners to stay away from school. At the time of the research, households and educators added that the poverty that was in homes in the close of 2019 had grown to a level where it became more specific, hunger hit most families thereby making it impossible to teach learners who are with an empty stomach as some went for three days without a meal, it was therefore inevitable for the learners to abscond classes in such an instance. This actually amplifies the impact poverty and hunger in particular affects learners’ school attendance and progression. One teacher wrote in an open ended questionnaire that;

'Some pupils usually absent themselves from school whenever they do not have school shoes, books and uniforms'.

In addition, one parent mentioned during interviews:

'My neighbor's children are always missing school, when I ask them why they tell me that their shoes have become too small to walk in or that they don't have washing powder to wash the uniform so it looks very dirty they can't go to school.'

However, 10 of the respondents attributed family educational background of parents as one of the factors to learner absenteeism. These findings correlate with the findings of Shooba (2013), who added the value that parents have on education determines the effort they would put in to ensure their children go to school. Additionally, the author stated that the educational background of the parents and guardians determine the interest and seriousness that children put on school for fear of disappointing their parents.

Further, 10 stated that conflict and separation at home led to learner absenteeism. This is in line with the findings of Mtonga, Mwewa and Simui, (2012) who added that children being human beings are emotional beings that require a friendly environment if they are to perform at their best. When there are confusions from the homes they come from, they are affected psychologically thereby making them inactive all through the learning process and in extreme cases makes them resort to staying away from school.

From the illustration in the figure 1, 12.5% of the respondents attributed health as one of the leading factors to learner absenteeism. The respondents added that, despite this being a factor, most cases of this kind are not reported to the school authorities hence are treated as mere absence in several instances. This is in conformity with the findings of Kearny, (2008), who affirmed that learners missed classes at one point or the other due to sickness.

On the other hand, 4 of the respondents attributed to disability as one of the factors to learner absenteeism. The respondents added that despite the presence of learners who are differently abled, the learning and teaching materials for them are scarcely and in some instances not available at all making it difficult for them to be included in the learning process. This however leads such learners abscond from school. These findings correlate with the findings of ECZ (2011) which attributed learner absenteeism to be vast among learners with special needs due to lack of learning and teaching materials that cater for their needs.

Further, 2 of the respondents attributed abuse as one of the factors to learner absenteeism. This is in line with the findings of Kelly, (1994) and Dougherty, (2018) who attributed learner absenteeism in their literature to abuse and mistreatment of the learners by their, parents, guardians and other people in society. This can however be argued that abuse can at times come from their peers but is mostly overlooked and underrated.

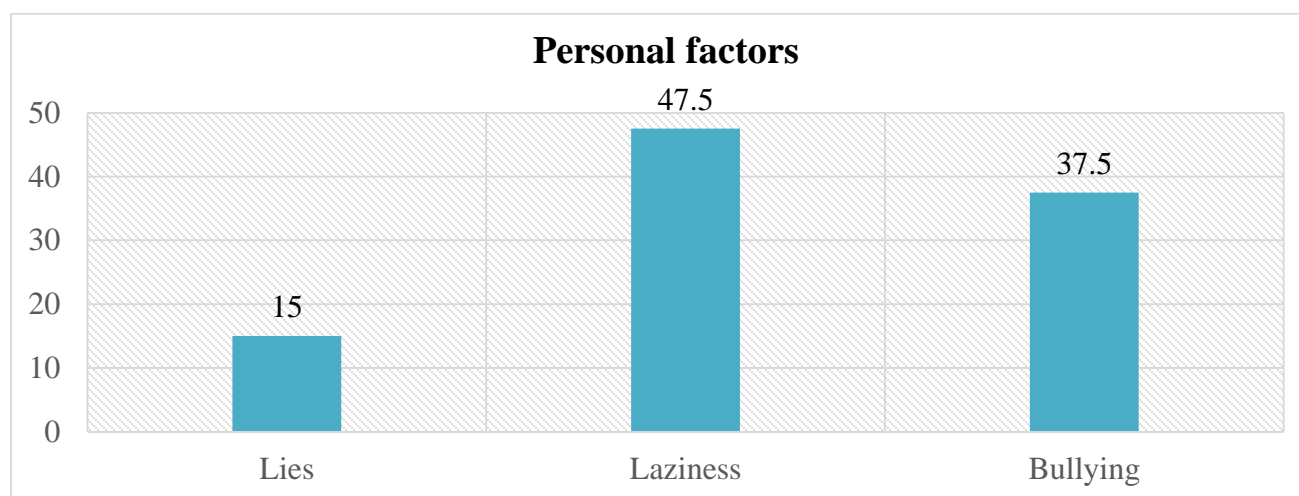
Additionally, 10% of the respondents attributed home chores as one of the factors to learner absenteeism. The findings equate with the findings of MoE, (2016), which

argued that the burden of home chores placed upon learners most especially in the rural areas affected their attendance. The author further stated that this affected not only the attendance but also affected the learners adversely even after executing these tasks because they became so tired to attend to school demands thereby making them vulnerable to chronic absenteeism. One pupil during focus group discussion mentioned:

'I am sometimes late for school because of too many chores at home and because of this I leave home pretending to go to school but in actual sense I never reach school but divert elsewhere to go study, i do this often to avoid house chores.

Additionally, those who were interviewed mentioned personal factors as being among the factors to learner absenteeism.

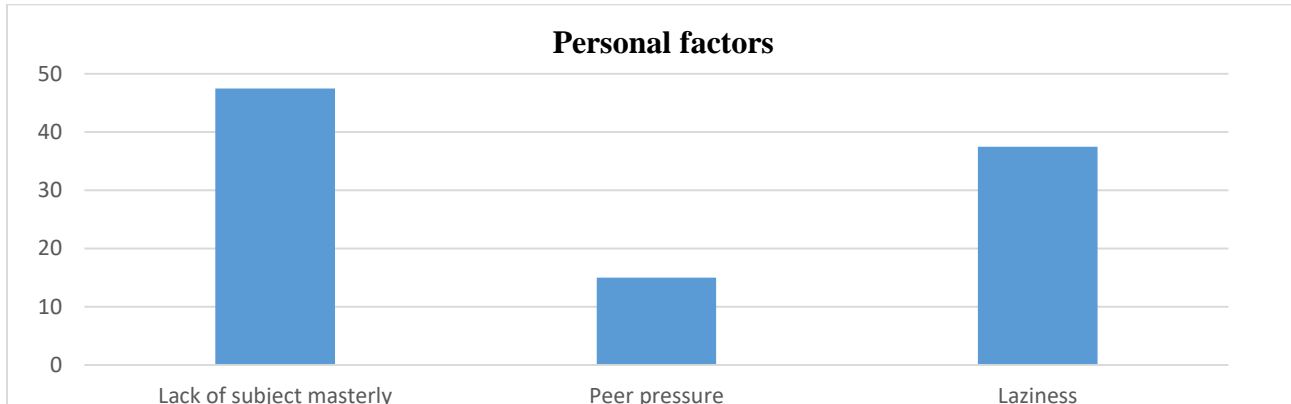
Figure 2: Parents' Perception on Personal factors



From the illustration in the bar chart above, it is evident that 47.50% of the pupils based on the parents' perspective missed classes because of laziness as the leading personal factor. Another fraction of respondents' representing 37.50% attributed to bullying as a factor to learner absenteeism among learners. On the other hand, 15.00% of the respondents acknowledged the fact that laziness and moodiness led to learner absenteeism among primary school pupils. However, it can be argued that the willingness to attend classes can be reinforced or is negatively affected by the little incentives that are given to the learners in form of lunch allowance and break allowance. These findings are therefore in line with the finding of Guryan et'al (2017).

Before pupils were engaged in focus group discussion, each pupil was asked to list three (3) major causes to learners' absenteeism and the following were the findings.

Figure 2: Pupils' views on Personal Factors



From figure 3, (47.5%) shows the respondents that attributed lack of subject mastery as the leading personal factor to learner absenteeism among the pupils. The pupils argue that in situations for instance, where they were not too good in drawing or arithmetic, the likelihood that they could resort to missing classes on the day these lessons were taught was very high. This is further argued by Komakech, (2015) who stressed the same point as one of the leading factors to learner absenteeism. On the other hand, 37.50.00% of the respondents attributed laziness as the second leading factor to learner absenteeism. The learners admitted that at times they never wanted to attend classes because they were just feeling lazy or wanted to continue sleeping. For example, in the cold season and rainy season. This was reaffirmed by Guryan, et'al (2017) who emphasized on pupils' laziness to attend classes as one of the leading factor to learner absenteeism. Additionally, 15.00.00% of the respondents added that peer pressure was a factor that led to them absconding classes. This is in line with the findings of Ndhlovu and Mtonga, (2013), who attributed the puberty and early adolescent stage as the most vulnerable stage which has peer pressure as the major determinant in undertaking certain decisions.

Traditional and cultural practices Factors

The educational administrators and teachers that were administered questionnaires affirmed to cultural factors as causes to learner absenteeism in schools. Additionally, cultural practices and traditional ceremonies were highlighted as among the salient but often overlooked factors leading to chronic learner absenteeism.

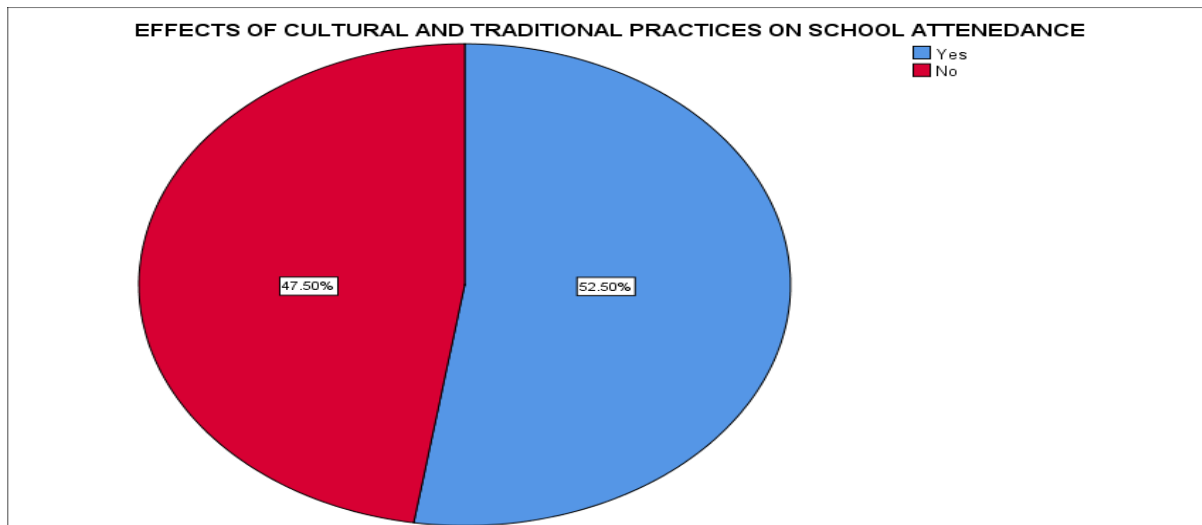


Figure 4: Cultural and Traditional Practices

The figure 4 shows cultural and traditional practices as one of the major but salient factors leading to learner absenteeism as 52.5% of the respondents agreed to it being a factor while 47.50% disagreed to cultural and traditional practices being factors to learner absenteeism. This correlates with the findings of Mulauzi, Nyambe and Mtonga (2014), Phiri, Musonda and Daka (2020) and Daka, Mwelwa, Chibamba, Mkandawire and Phiri (2020) who attributed to cultural and traditional practices such as; initiation ceremonies, rites of passage, seasonal practices and traditional ceremonies as factors that promote the act of learner absenteeism in most schools more especially in households where there is lack of proper parental guidance.

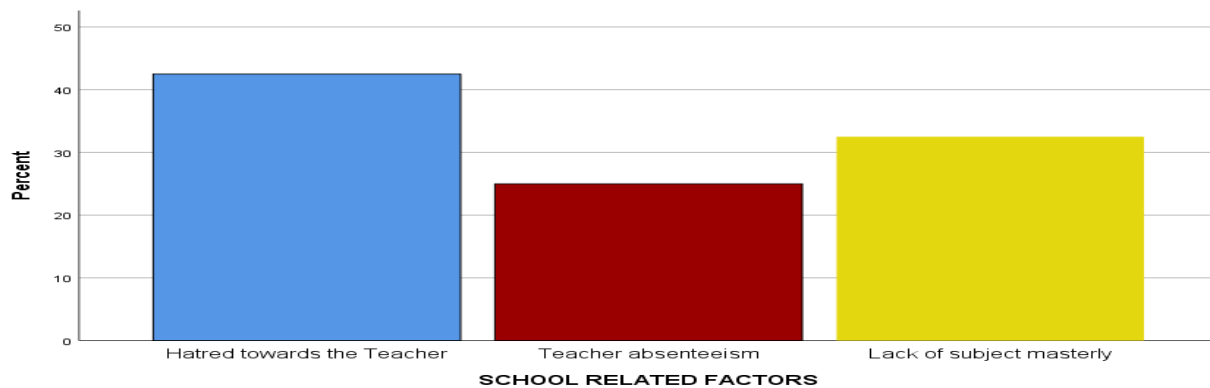
However, at the time of the research, it was discovered that some learners were in their second week of the three weeks 'Nkolola' sexual rites initiation ceremony which automatically made them miss classes for a period of three weeks. These learners had to miss three (03) weeks of their school time thereby robbing them an opportunity to learn. These findings were supported by Mkandawire, Simooya and Monde (2019, p. 46) who noted that traditional initiation ceremonies "stops girls from going to school during the period of confinement and soon after. This absence from school impacts negatively on the girls' education..." It was noted also that other learners missed classes to attend to sessions or ceremonies when their peers were released from seclusion or even to watch traditional ceremonies such as 'Lwiindi Gonde Ceremony'. These findings are in relation with the findings of Banda (2017) and Phiri, Musonda and Daka (2020) who reaffirmed these facts by outlining that traditional ceremonies not only rob academic time but also affects the behaviour of the learners. The author added that due to the exposure and sexual rites lessons taught to the children, they tend to indulge in sexual activities early and at times feel too old for their peers thereby making them miss classes. This could however be argued on facts that the same way comprehensive sexuality education (CSE)

is meant to increase awareness and positive sexuality decisions, so are these practices. It is also determinant on the individual who acquires such a training, others use it to the betterment of themselves and others to the destruction of themselves.

School related factors

The school being the centre and premise under which formal education takes place, it is cardinal to examine the relationship that exists between the school environment and learner attendance. The educational administrators, parents and teachers that answered the questionnaires gave the following responses.

Figure 5: School Related Factors

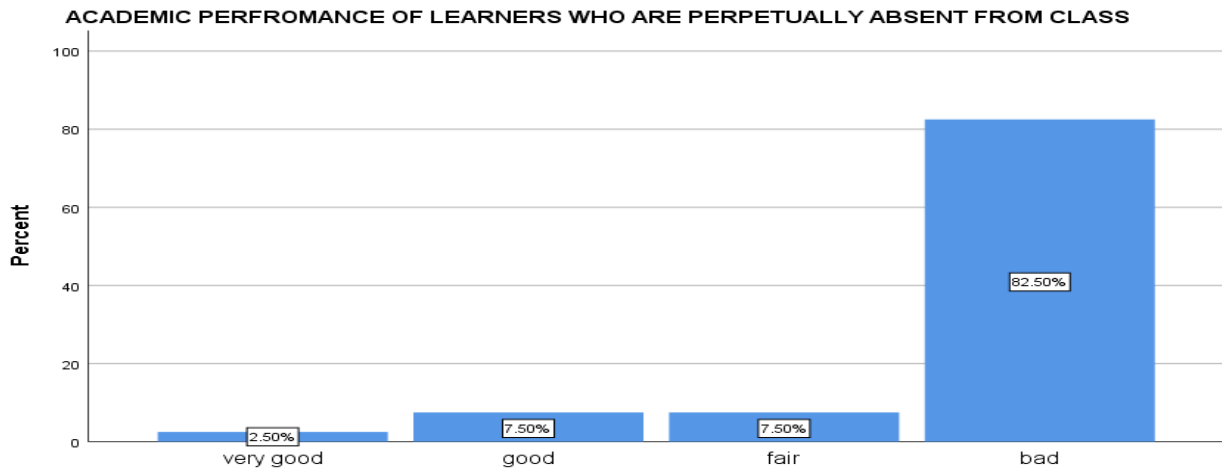


From the bar chart above, it is evident that 43.00% interviewed outlined that hatred toward the teachers was the leading school related factor causing learners to abscond from classes. On the other hand, 32.00% attributed lack of subject mastery as a second leading school related factor that lead to learner absenteeism. These respondents added that if a learner never had the competences in a particular subject, they would prefer missing it so as not to be regarded as dull by both their peers and teachers. However, this could be argued in the sense that it is impossible for a learner to be a masterly in all the subjects hence them attending classes guarantees them an opportunity to learner with others and only when they lack self-esteem can they decide to shun away from classes. Additionally, 25.00% of the respondents attributed teacher absenteeism to be one of the school related factors. The respondents added that learners see teachers as significant others hence they emulate their behaviours in what is referred to as the hidden curriculum. These are effects of schooling on the learners, if the teachers often miss classes then then learners would be vulnerable to believe that there is no harm in missing such obligations as learning. Although this can be argued from the administrative point of view by adding that at times teachers are assigned duties to perform by the administration thereby missing classes, the impact it has on the learners can never be under estimated. These finding therefore are in line with the findings of Musumpuka, (2016), Daka (2019)

and MoE, (2016) who attributed the school environment, teachers behaviour and school effectiveness as leading factors in encouraging learners' school attendance and participation.

4.2 Impact of Absenteeism on Academic Performance

Figure 6: Impact of Absenteeism on Academic Performance



Based on Figure 6 above, it can be deduced that 82.50% of the learners that abscond from class perform poorly academically, 7.50% perform moderately fair academically, 7.50% have an average performance and 2.50% have an outstanding performance. The results of these findings can be argued that at least there are some learners that manage to perform better despite missing classes, however, this can be attributed to the individual learning capabilities where there are some learners that are able to learner with little to no instruction at all. This is in conform with the literature of Hutt, (2018) who reaffirmed on the importance of school attendance in achieving high in the academic cycles among learners. The findings correlate with the findings of Antwi and Edet, (2011). The author affirmed that due to the absence by a leaner, it robes them an opportunity to grasp concepts more especially in subjects or topics that re interrelated. For example, in mathematics, if they miss the basic rules such as BODMAS, they may find it difficult to solve arithmetic problems.

Respondents outlined that learner absenteeism disturbs the learning process. These findings correlate with the literature by Sprick (2017), Mkandawire (2012), and Hafeez, (2014). The three authors in their literature confirmed that absenteeism causes a delay and disruption in the learning process because the teachers have to be repeating the lessons, they taught in order to keep all the learners at the same pace. Further, the authors attributed this fact to the loss of time meant to progress in the delivery of lessons and as a result leads to untimely covering of the syllabus in most instances.

Furthermore, respondents outlined that learner absenteeism results to Low academic performance. These findings correspond with the literature of Sparks, (2010). They were further supported by Mumba and Mkandaire (2020) who affirmed that due to the fact that learners miss classes at one point or another, they may miss important lessons that would come in the exam and other assessments leading to them performing poorly in these assessments. The author further outlined that due to the low grades by the learners, it lowers their self-esteem thereby leading degrading their self-worth risking any remarkable changes with regard to their academic work. The findings were also reaffirmed by Sommer et'al, (2017) and Lubeya, (2012) who attributed absenteeism to wrong response to questions by learners thereby increasing their discomfort in class and risking their subject masterly abilities.

Additionally, respondents highlighted that absenteeism leads to high repetition and dropout rate. These findings were found to be in tandem with the literature of Sparks, (2010), Balfanz and Byrnes, (2012) and Hutt, (2018). These authors related high dropout rates and repetition rate more especially among learners in rural and low-income backgrounds.

Furthermore, the findings from 26 respondents availed that learner absenteeism causes loss of good morals and values because schools play a major role in inculcating these values in the school going children. The above revelation proved the findings of Sommer et'al, (2017) and (Kearny 2008) valid. This is because the two authors outlined school as the centre from which learners acquired the needed societal norms and values through the hidden curriculum, core curriculum, and formal curriculum respectively. The acquired norms were then tabulated as; discipline, self-awareness, culture, time keeping and respect for elders and significant others in the society which rescues them from social vices such as illicit use of drugs.

STRATEGIES OF AVERTING ABSENTEEISM

Based on the findings, learners highlighted the Pupils Parent Teacher Engagement (PPTE) programs and broaden counselling and guidance services among learners as a measure that can be used to avert learner absenteeism. This is because these are the major players and stakeholders of the education process which correlates with Nkhata et al, (2019) who outlined educational welfare services as key components in resolving learning problems including absenteeism. This could be coupled with frequent checking of the progress of the learner by the parents. This point was reaffirmed by Musumpuka, (2016) who stressed on parent involvement as key in averting learner absenteeism. The author also highlighted that schools could use parents' sensitization programs as well. Public awareness-raising campaigns were also seen as the most effective approach to community awareness of the importance of school attendance.

Furthermore, respondents highlighted improving Parent Teacher Association (PTA) or Parent Teacher Committees (PTC) in schools as a solution to learner absenteeism. This correlates with the findings of Musumpuka, (2016) and (UNESCO, 2018) who affirmed the importance of parent and school engagement in improving learning outcomes and attendance. Respondents added that the frequent use of the attendance register by the teachers in the schools was seen as the most effective way of identifying absenteeism at an early stage. This correlated with the findings of Rogers and Avi, (2016) who argued that teachers are the solutions to the problem of learner absenteeism in as much as they could also be the cause if they acted unprofessional.

Respondents stated that lessening of punishment to the learners was also a remedial factor that would promote and increase learner class attendance. This correlates with the findings of Weiss and Garcia, (2018) who outlined that one of the reasons why learners missed classes was because of their anticipation for trouble when they never did their school assignments and other school related activities. However, this could be argued in the sense that discipline by some learners is mistaken for punishment, this thereby distorts the meaning and purpose of discipline as a way of nurturing good and acceptable behaviour in a school set up.

Respondents also stated that broaden of the feeding program for those coming from poverty-stricken homes was a viable solution to learner absenteeism. However, the community could be active partners in doing this by fundraising and also asking for funds from other private agencies. This correlates with the findings of lauchlan (2003) and Banda (2017), who affirmed that providing food to pupils was one of way that would improve learner school attendance, this was also reiterated by (Komakech,2015) who allude that school feeding programs encouraged pupils to come to school especially those who come from poverty-stricken homes.

Additionally, increased learner participation in extra curricula activities such as clubs as a solution to learner absenteeism. This however equates with the findings of Lauchlan (2003) who asserted that pupils' participation in extra curricula activities such as music, sports and other clubs enhanced school attendance and instilled discipline in the learners. The author further stated that in schools that do not have extra core curricula a high rate of absenteeism was observed compared to schools that provided extra curricula activities which enforced high pupils turn up. Extra-curricular activities should reinforce the pupil's character, values, ability to think critically and also provide a space for learners to practice the principles they learnt in class including active listening, negotiation, advocacy and service.

From the evidence obtained among respondents, the inclusion of practical subjects in the curriculum was seen as remedial measure to learner attendance. This conforms to the findings of Shadreck (2013) who reaffirmed that including practical subject in the curriculum would make learners more participative thereby reduce absenteeism. For

instance, diversifying the curriculum in rural areas where they practice fish farming which can be put in the curriculum, this will increase critical thinking and improve grades which will upsurge learner attendance as they would not be missing home factors that would have led to them absconding class because they would have been doing these activities within the school environment.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The important aspect of learners' access to education is the amount of time specifically spent in the classroom. When learners abscond from school, arrive late or cut class hours, they reduce their opportunities to learn. However, it must be noted that the habitual absence from class leads to poor development of moral values and attitude that are capable of endangering the holistic development of the learners. Despite the various efforts that the government in relation to policy such as the introduction of; feeding programs in schools, abolishment of examination fees for the grade 7 composite examinations, introduction of PTAs and sponsoring of some learners in collaboration with faith based organisations and NGOs such as Forum for African Women Educationalists of Zambia (FAWEZA), Adventist Development and Relief Agency (ADRA), and Catholic Relief Services (CRS) among other, the problem of absenteeism has prevailed to be the most destructive vice affecting the academic progression among learners. Additionally, the educational administrators in collaboration with the parents, acknowledge to have used positive reinforcement alongside coaching and motivation to stimulant the learners' interest to attend lessons. However, even when this is a good intervention, the results are minimal hence absenteeism remains the biggest nightmare most educators have to encounter in the education institutions. However, the collaboration among learners, educators and parents remains the hope for a lasting solution that would bring learner absenteeism to an end and of course with strong policy direction by the government through the MoGE.

Recommendations

After a critical analysis of the research problem and indeed based on the findings, it was noticed that there are gaps that need urgent attention. The inadequacies were grouped and constitute the following recommendations;

- a. Broaden the feeding program for those coming from poverty-stricken homes. Pupils coming from homes where meals are not easily accessible end up being malnourished.
- b. In addition to government efforts to reduce absenteeism, there is need to increase motivation talks to help build learners' self-esteem. Incentivizing good performance

by awarding pupils with prizes, certificates and gifts in order to help them stay encouraged to go to school. There is urgent need to formalise and document a policy on attendance rewards for the learners.

- c. In addition, normalising talking to pupils and helping them with work that they find challenging instead of scolding at them is the most viable way to help them realise their self-worth thereby promoting participation and school attendance.

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