

SCHOOL NON-ATTENDANCE: A STUDY OF ITS CAUSES AMONG HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS IN MASVINGO DISTRICT SECONDARY SCHOOLS, ZIMBABWE

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Abstract

The progress of a nation is very much dependent on the education of its citizens. One major issue schools are facing and seeing little or no improvement with is effectively dealing with absenteeism. Learners should be in school all the times for them to acquire and keep concepts taught. This qualitative study aimed to explore the factors that lead to learner non-attendance in high schools. The case study design was employed since it is an in-depth study of a district within its real life context. Data was collected using questionnaires with 20 teachers and 10 learners. Interviews with 10 students and 10 teachers from high schools in Masvingo urban schools were held to establish factors which lead to school non-attendance among secondary school learners. The participants were purposively selected.

The collected data established that risk factors associated with learner absenteeism can be grouped into four main categories. It was discovered that the factors leading to school absenteeism emanate from the family, the school, the individual child and community. Under each of the four categories, various aspects related to the category were discussed. From these findings, the study recommends that parents should understand their responsibilities and be involved in their children's work. Furthermore, schools should make efforts to involve parents to monitor their children's absence and create friendly atmosphere for learners. The study also recommends future research on effects of absenteeism on student's academic performance.

Key words: learner, education, absenteeism, truancy, non-attendance.

1.1 Introduction and Background to the Study

Education is purported to be a commodity to society, a core of human progress. It is a critical factor in the development of any country. Education influences the life of humanity the world over in all spheres of development such as political, social, cultural, religious and economic development (Malungo, 2010). According to Epstein and Sheldon (2002) when students are not in attendance they miss essential instruction which often times cannot be replicated. Non-attendance is among key problems faced by schools.

The Community Agency for Social Enquiry (2007) defines learner absenteeism as when a learner is not at school for an entire day. It is school non-attendance, that is, a period of time when a learner does not attend school. The problem of absenteeism is regardless of gender, race and religion. Hocking (2008) asserts that school absenteeism involves all ages, affecting kindergarten, elementary, middle and high school.

According to The Campaign for Fiscal Equity (2011); Gottfried (2010); Sheldon (2007), and Moseki, (2004) a common finding in the literature is that students with greater attendance than their classmates perform better on achievement tests. Also schools with higher rates of daily attendance tend to have students who perform better on achievement tests than do schools with lower daily attendance rates. The Campaign for Fiscal Equity (2011) carried out a rigorous study of fourth grade students in New York City schools which focused on the connection between students' attendance and their performance. The study confirmed that for individual students, higher attendance predicts higher performance and that poor attendance puts low-performing students at greater risk of educational failure. According to the Department of Education, 184 000 primary, secondary and special school students missed 20 per cent of lessons in 2011 whilst

more than 430 000 missed 15 percent of lessons a year. Department for Education (2011) indicated that in 2013, an ofsted report (England) reported 1 400 pupils across 15 local authorities as not participating in full time education. Research conducted by Moseki focusing on grade 10 learners in Frances Baard region of the Northern Cape found that four or more learners per class missed certain lessons during the week (Moseki, 2004).

Available information suggests that absenteeism rates in Africa are much higher. Voigts cited in (The Community Agency for Social Enquiry, 2007) conducted a study to determine the quality of education in Namibia, for example, which revealed that only 50% of grade 6 learners were in schools where learner absenteeism was described as a huge problem. Similarly, according to research carried out in Nigeria, 10% of the total school pupils per day absent themselves from school. This situation appears to cut across most African countries (Oluremi, 2013). In Uganda for instance student absenteeism rate increased from 19.3% and 21.3% in 2014 (Komakech & Osuu, 2014)

Limited school participation is associated with a greater chance of dropping out of school, disruptive and delinquent behaviours and these outcomes have latter implications for health, employment, risk behaviours, poverty and homelessness (Epstein and Sheldon, 2002). In Zimbabwe school absenteeism is escalating at a high rate. Kurebwa and Mabhandu (2015) carried out a study in Shurugwi South Resettlement primary schools in Zimbabwe on child absenteeism and school dropouts and found out that schools are faced with problems of child absenteeism as a result of financial related factors. In the study, students were found to be missing school as a result of gold panning in a bid to meet school and food needs. Given the extent of the absenteeism problem and its negative consequences, it is important to understand its contributing factors.

1.2 Statement of the Problem

Many schools both rural and urban in Masvingo district, Zimbabwe are facing problems of learner absenteeism. This is giving rise to various moral, educational and social problems to both the students and schools. School absenteeism is a phenomenon with far reaching consequences impacting on a variety of social actors ranging from the children who are absenting, to their families, their schools and communities, the criminal justice system, social work agencies, social service organisations and the economy (Clark, Borg, Callega, Chircop and Portelli, 2005). It is the focus of this study to investigate the factors influencing learner absenteeism in Masvingo district, Zimbabwe so as to assist school administrators to come with policies for managing non-attendance so that effective learning of all learners take place.

1.3 Research Questions

This study was guided by the following research questions:

- i) What are the contributing factors of learner absenteeism in schools?
- ii) What solutions can be proffered?

1.4 Significance of the Study

Regular attendance at school and consequent interaction with peers and teachers is an important determinant of learner achievement. Effects of absenteeism are negative for both individuals and the community they live in. The findings of the present study are of importance to school heads, teachers, the community and students themselves since when root causes of school non-attendance are identified this will go a long way in ensuring that these causes are attended to so

as to prevent learner absenteeism. A study on factors that lead learners to absent themselves from school is of theoretical and practical importance in ensuring country's goal of education for all.

1.5 Theoretical Framework

This study utilized Maslow's theory as lenses to interrogate the intersection between various factors and absenteeism. The humanistic approach is of the view that human beings possess an innate tendency to improve and to determine their lives through decisions they make (Lahey, 2009:425). Maslow proposed a hierarchy of needs model featuring five levels to provide a better way to better understand how individual needs are met (Maslow, 1943). The five levels of motivational needs are physiological needs, safety needs, love and belonging needs, self-esteem needs and self-actualisation as highlighted in the diagram below.



Figure 1: Maslow's hierarchy of needs

The first basic needs are physiological needs such as water, food, medicine, and shelter (Milheim, 2012). Maslow (1943) describes the body's physiological needs as basic to human survival. Children cannot learn when they are hungry, lack adequate clothing. Socio-economic factors can cause learners to absent themselves from school. Maslow (1943) indicated that until physiological needs are satisfied to a degree to maintain life no other motivating factors can work. Children are motivated to absent from school by unsatisfied needs. The next level, safety needs implies that without safety, learners feel anxious and uncertain. If the school does not establish a comfortable climate such as proper buildings during, for example, cold or rainy days, learners may absent themselves from lessons. Moving upwards the hierarchy, the third level relates to an individual's goal of belonging and being accepted by others). If the child is deprived of love and belonging by peers and teachers there is a high likelihood not to attend school. The fourth level in Maslow's (1943) hierarchy of needs is self-esteem which is the need for humans to be respected and valued by others, students yearn to be held in self-esteem so as to have confidence. If they feel undervalued, are labeled and made funny of they will decide not to be in school all the time. According to Maslow (1943) self-actualization involves helping people become all that they are capable of becoming. If the teacher does not support students as they strive to self-actualize this will cause them to be demotivated and eventually end up attending school inconsistently.

The main premise of this theory as pointed out above is that people will not seek to satisfy higher needs such as self-actualization needs, unless the lower level needs – physiological, safety, love and esteem needs known as deficiency needs are met (Obano, 2012). In the educational setting students will attend school if their deficiency needs are addressed.

1.6 Literature Review

This section discusses literature related to the study.

Factors influencing school absenteeism

A number of factors contribute to school non-attendance. Balfanz and Byrnes (2012); Komakech and Osuu (2014) & Cook and Ezenne (2010) aver that schools and their curricula contribute to student absenteeism. Some students avoid school due to boredom with school work, and teacher absenteeism. Lack of challenging and interesting lessons contribute to school non-attendance. If relationships with students and staff are not positive attendance rate is lower. Conflicting relationships with teachers lead students to absent themselves from school (Teasely, 2004). In line with this corporal punishment with its damaging effects may discourage students from continuing with school. Maynard, McCrea, Pigott and Kelly (2013) assert that corporal punishment breeds hostility and creates low self-esteem in learners resulting in school absenteeism. Sexual relationships where for instances, teachers sexual abuse students lead to school absenteeism (Komakech and Osuu, 2014).

According to Wadesango and Machingambi (2011) family obligations deter students from attending school regularly. In high poverty environments, students experience absenteeism seeking for part time employment instead of applying themselves fully to their studies. Some parents do not understand importance of regular school attendance (Maynard, 2014). Parents' inability to promote dedication has an adverse effect on their children's attitude towards school attendance.

Illness is a major cause of student absenteeism. Annual colds, flu, and other ailments contribute to school absenteeism (Balfanz and Byrnes, 2012). Girls may absent themselves due to menstruation periods. Peer influence also leads to school absenteeism. Truant individuals are influenced by their peers not to attend school and engage in activities outside the school (Wadesango and Machingambi, 2011).

Impact of absenteeism on learners

Sparks (2010a) points out that school absenteeism as early as kindergarten, is predictive of chronic absences in later grades. When students are not in school they miss critical academic learning opportunities. Numerous studies have concluded that school non-attendance leads to lower levels of academic achievement (Komakech, 2015; Gottfried, 2010; Hocking, 2008; Reid, 2008b & Sheldon and Epstein, 2002). Gottfried (2010) carried out a study with third and fourth grade students in elementary schools. His study found out that attendance predicted both grade point averages and reading and mathematics performance on the Stanford Achievement test. Gottfried concluded that there was a significant relationship between attendance and achievement.

When absenteeism is widespread it impacts students who are not absent (Chang & Jordan, 2010). Teachers will slow down the pace of instruction for entire class to help absent students catch up when they return. It causes re-work and wasted time for teachers. School absenteeism is a waste of educational resources, time and human potential.

Poor attendance is predictive of high school dropout. Students who are always absent will eventually drop out of school. When students experience school failure, they become

frustrated and end up alienated and experience exclusion leading to eventual dropout (Komakech, 2015). Studies have also found that excessive absences are correlated with risk taking behaviours such as drug abuse, truancy, bullying, and prostitution (Gottfried, 2010).

1.7 Methodology

Research methodology refers to the way in which a researcher retrieves data from the selected sampling frame, methods to collect data, instruments to be used and how data is scrutinized and presented (Matseketso and Mapolisa, 2013). The conduct of this study was rooted in a qualitative paradigm. The qualitative approach was preferred because it allows the researcher to gain understanding of the social phenomenon from the perspectives of participants in their natural settings (McMillan and Schumach, 2010). Qualitative researchers study things in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of, or to interpret phenomena in terms of meanings people bring to them. Schools are natural settings where student absenteeism occurs. The approach enabled the researchers to obtain view points from participants (Silverman, 2006) on factors leading to learner absenteeism.

The study employed a case study design. A case study is a form of descriptive research in which a single case is studied deeply so as to reach greater understanding about the phenomena and establish generalisations to similar cases (Magwa and Magwa, 2015; Silverman, 2006). As the study sort to explore the perceptions of teachers, parents and learners about school absenteeism the researchers felt this design appropriate since it seeks narrative, descriptive and informing responses about phenomena from research participants (Creswell, 2003).

Case studies deal with small samples in order to have a deeper understanding of issues pertaining to a phenomenon. Thus the study made use of 50 purposively sampled participants, 30 teachers and 20 learners. From the total participants 20 teachers and 10 learners completed questionnaires. The researchers used questionnaires for the reason that response rate is high (self-administered), with no likelihood of interview bias since participants would fill questionnaires in the comfort of their privacy and data collected is easy to process (Magwa and Magwa, 2015:76). Data was also gathered using in-depth interviews with 10 learners and 10 teachers. The main aim of using in-depth interviews was to obtain detailed information on why some learners absent themselves from school.

Participants were briefed on the purpose of the study. Informed consent was sort and confidentiality of participants was protected by not using actual names (JesaniandBarai, 2004). The researchers personally distributed and collected the questionnaires. Each interview lasted for about 30 to 40 minutes. De Vos, StrydomFouch, Poggenpoel and Schurink, (2005) assert that data analysis is the process of bringing order, structure and meaning to the mass of collected data. All data from interviews and questionnaires were grouped into relevant issues of concern. The data was analysed using themes that emerged. Tables were also used to present data. Data interpreted from themes generates more knowledge (Silverman, 2006).

1.8 Findings and Discussion

The study yielded four main themes which were identified as key causes of learner absenteeism namely, school, family, community and individual child-related factors. The main themes that emerged from both the interviews and questionnaires are reflected in the diagram below. From

each of the themes, sub-themes emerged and the presentation and findings of the study are based on these themes.

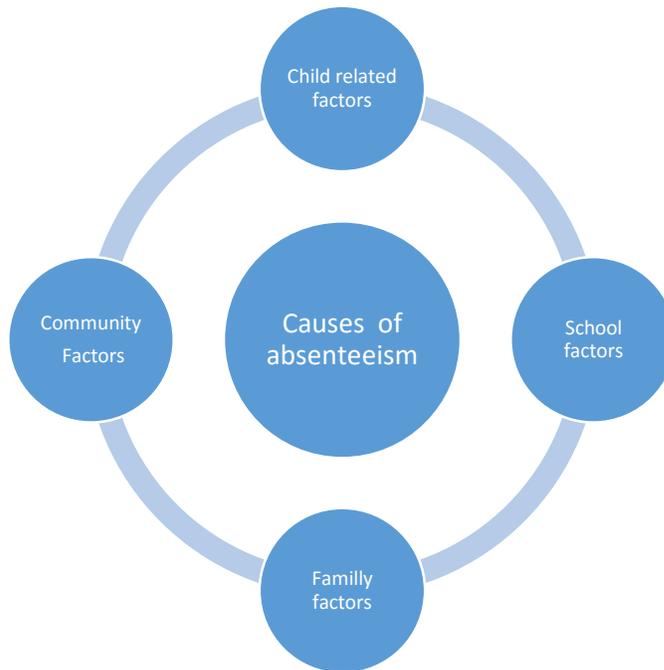


Figure 1: Themes generated from the study

Theme 1: Family Related Factors

Parental factors are those issues that impact on students' absenteeism which are within the control of parents (Cook and Ezenne, 2010 & Wadesango and Machingambi, 2011). The study established that children from disadvantaged family backgrounds have higher chances of

absenting themselves from schools as opposed to children who come from well to do families. Under this theme, the following causes were identified: poverty; lack of parental involvement; one parent families and distress in family.

If basic requirements at school such as payment of fees, uniforms, books and food are not provided for by the family, this can cause learners to stay away from school. Due to poverty, according to the findings, when parents fall ill they might fail to afford hiring someone to take care of them or to get funds for admission in hospital. In such a scenario, it was pointed out that such parents will make their children miss school so that they take care of the ill parents. One female teacher had this to say on the impact of poverty on absence from school:

Students from poor families have problems in having their fees paid, books and uniforms bought. This causes them to stay away from school. Girl students from poor families, for example during menstruation because their families cannot afford to buy them pads they will rather stay at home than come to school and mess themselves ending up being mocked.

Lack of parental involvement in a learner's education was cited as a cause of absenteeism under this theme. It was said that some parents are too busy to monitor their children's work, others do not attach value to education and this causes absenteeism since children will be free to do what they want with regards to school attendance. When parents are involved there is minimal absence.

Literature also asserts that parents of poor school attendees demonstrate no interest in the schoolwork of their children. If parents show no real regard for children's scholastic progress this affects children's school attendance (Maynard, 2014). According to Kearney (2008) children living in poverty are 25% more likely to miss 3 or more days of school per month as compared to students from higher economic background. Parents who lack financial resources cannot provide for basic needs of their children and this makes some students not to go to school (Reid, 2008b & Cook and Ezennei, 2010:44). Similarly, Nziramasanga (1999) asserts that children who hail from distressed families where parents have divorced, where there is violence and where there is disease for example, HIV/AIDS end up absent as they will be trying to care for ailing parents.

Theme 2: Child Related Factors

Child related factors are causes stemming from within a child (Kearney, 2008). Data from interviews and questionnaires revealed that health problems are a major child related factor to absenteeism. Illness including coughs, headaches, HIV/AIDS were cited as causing learners to miss school. The following excerpt from a learner expresses this fact:

When a child is ill, it is only proper for him or her to get rest. Even schools do not encourage sick pupils to come to school.

Truancy was also mentioned as another child related factor leading to school absenteeism. It was stated that some learners engage in truant behaviours such as going to a secluded place to smoke dagga or engage in love activities.

These findings match well with studies by Dey and Bloom (cited in Kearney, 2008) who estimated that students with asthma miss between 1.5 and 3.0 times more school days than their

peers without this condition. Cook and Ezennei (2010) state that when in a state of truancy, learners stay from school without parental consent. Students with low ambitions and interests tend to dodge going to school. Peer influence as echoed by Wadesango and Machingambi (2011) leads to truancy resulting in school absenteeism.

Theme 3: School Factors

From the school, a number of causes were established by the study. Among school factors leading to absenteeism, the study established that learners with poor or conflicting relationships with teachers such as when the teacher teases or labels learners causes the learners not to attend school. The learner's self-esteem would be lowered and as such the learner will avoid attending some lessons of such teachers. Harsh punishment from teachers, for example, corporal punishment or sexual abuse were said to cause some learners to absent themselves from lessons. Participants also pointed to bullying both physically and psychologically as one major contributor to non-attendance of learners. It was also established that the way a teacher delivers lesson has a lot to do with attendance. Teaching methods and styles if they are not for example, child centered, interesting and if teacher is not well versed in his or her content this can lead to boredom and some students can miss some lessons.

The following quotes by a teacher and then a learner convey the general views of participants with regards to school factors leading to absenteeism:

A pupil may fail to attend some lessons because of some negative attitudes of teachers towards some learners for example, a teacher showing favouritism to some learners. Also, if a teacher does not vary his or her teaching it becomes

monotonous causing some pupils not to come to school.

A learner also pointed to the following cause:

There are some teachers who enjoy disciplining students with the stick. Fear of such discipline can cause some learners not to come to school. Bullying students can cause students not to come to school.

The same sentiments were also obtained from questionnaire responses.

Wadesango and Machingambi (2011) also note that students absent themselves from school due to poor teaching styles, and boring teachers. Poor school facilities and unreliable infrastructure negatively influence learner attendance (Mboweni, 2014). As an example, if toilets are not enough, girl learners find it difficult to go to school during menstruation. Darling and Steinberg (2004) also point out that bullying is associated with increased absenteeism. Mboweni in a study on bullying in Lesotho found out that bullying promoted learner absenteeism by up to 35%. One in every seven (7) learners interviewed reported not going to school because they were bullied.

Theme 4: Community Factors

Community factors with regards to non-attendance are resources that are the responsibility of the local government to make accessible to every member within the community (Cook and Ezenne, 2010). According to participants of this study, water and electricity shortages can result in non-attendance in school. Inadequate and high cost of transport to and from school can lead to inconsistent school attendance. Both teachers and learners expressed this view. Sentiments of these participants are also noted in the words of one learner who lamented:

Without water and electricity it is difficult to come to school. Uniforms need to be washed and ironed. One would rather miss a day at school than come with dirty and not ironed uniform. Some pupils also fail to complete their homework as a result of electricity power cuts and as a result they will fail to come to school due to fear of being punished for not completing home work.

Literature supports these findings. Cook and Ezenne (2010) assert that transportation costs exacerbate financial constraints of struggling families. Lack of transport and its unreliability is a problem which gives rise to absenteeism. According to the above authors water shortage also impact on absenteeism of learners in schools.

1.9 Conclusion and Recommendations

A child is considered absent from school when he or she misses a day or more of the school days. Frequent absences are devastating to a child's school success. Key causal factors of school absenteeism include socio-economic background of the family. The lower the family income the higher the learner absenteeism. Parents who are not responsible for the education of their children create room for learner absenteeism. The school also contributes to this damaging trend. Negative attitudes of the teachers, conflicting relationships with students, poor teaching methods, poor and inadequate infrastructure and bullying are school related factors leading to absenteeism. On the individual level, health problems and truancy are some of the factors leading to truancy. Lastly, community factors such as water and electricity shortages and high transport costs also lead to learner absenteeism.

From the findings of the study, the following recommendations are made:

- Parents need to be aware that effects of absence accumulate overtime. They need to understand that when children miss school, it can have an ongoing impact on their learning.
- Schools should make efforts to involve parents in ensuring and monitoring absenteeism.
- Increased and improved facilities like toilets, water will lower levels of absenteeism.
- A dedicated staff should be created to deal with learner absenteeism.
- Communities should ensure basic services such as water and electricity are provided to both locations and schools.

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