



Original Article

Causes of Students' Absenteeism in Public Day Secondary Schools in Kenya

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03 Jun 2022 The aim of the study was to investigate the causes of absenteeism in public-day secondary schools in Moiben sub-county, Uasin Gishu County, Kenya and to develop suggestions for solving these problems. The study used the qualitative research approach and employed a “case study” design. The study population was made up of 20 deputy principals and 200 students in public day secondary schools in the sub-county. A semi-structured interview form consisting of Likert type and structured questions was used as the data collection tools. The collected data were analysed by the content analysis method. The main themes were formed under three categories. Certain suggestions were developed based on the findings obtained as the result of the study.

Keywords: *Absenteeism, Causes, Missing, Truancy.*

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INTRODUCTION

Absenteeism is the practice of regularly staying away from school without a good reason. Student absenteeism is whereby a student misses attending school. A student may voluntarily and deliberately decide not to attend school because of a lack of motivation to do so. In other circumstances, a student may miss attending school involuntarily due to life conditions such as having to move from one location to the other regularly (Kiprop et al., 2019), thus having no control of the situation. Some students may begin this truant behaviour in primary school. However, majority of the youth absenteeism takes place in secondary schools because most of them have autonomy over the decision to be present or absent (Henry, 2007). Poor student attendance has far-reaching effects on the individual, the school, and society. As with the causes, the consequences of absenteeism are numerous and include; low performance in academics, suspensions/expulsions, and school dropouts (Benzamore et al., 2004).

According to Balfanz and Byrnes (2012), the assumption of the education system is that learners will attend school. The quality of education in a country can be measured by looking at the number of times the student was either present or absent from school (Graeff-Martins et al., 2006). Their success often depends on their complete participation in all classes. Patnode et al. (2018) opine that absenteeism reduces the rate at which students succeed because they miss their education time. Educationists can use absenteeism as a valuable factor in predicting the problems that exist presently as well as those that may arise in the near future about the present education system. Absenteeism information can be used by schools to indicate the extent to which they are able to meet the educational needs of students (Kiprop-Marakis, Ferej & Kipkoech, 2019). This is because the education provided in a country needs to have an impact on the student.

Absent students can set a bad example and encourage absenteeism among other students (Pehlivan, 2011). Direct and indirect costs of absenteeism are extremely high for individuals, schools, families, and communities. It has been found to be a strong indicator of low academic

achievement and diminished social and life success (Demir & Akman Karabeyoglu, 2015). Other risk behaviours that are associated with absenteeism include substance abuse and irresponsible behaviours such as engaging in sexual activities leading to teenage pregnancies, theft, and other petty crimes, among others (Kearney, 2008). Absenteeism makes it difficult to create a solid foundation in terms of discipline and sense of responsibility and may contribute to problems in work and discipline habits in future work life (Pehlivan, 2011).

Several factors lead to student absenteeism. More often, it may come up and subside. A student who has absenteeism tendencies in high school most probably has a history of absenteeism right from primary school (Marvul, 2012). In other circumstances, new students who just joined high school may find it difficult to adapt to the new environment and have a challenge accepting the new realities of the new normal. They may also fail to establish relationships with other students and teachers. Other factors that promote absenteeism include poor performance in academics and a curriculum that does not engage continuously (Spencer, 2009). Other causes emanate from home and are related to the socioeconomic strata of the student. Some students may be absent because they are shouldering familial responsibilities, particularly the orphans and the vulnerable children or those that have been neglected by their parents. Such children are left with the responsibility of fending for their siblings while attending school at the same time. This reduces her ability to attend school frequently or as expected. In addition, these students lack the resources to buy food, clothing, transport costs and pay for other school levies. Sometimes they also come from unstable homes or need to take care of a sick family member, situations that are beyond their control (Matage & Begi, 2017). Students who attend school at a young age may be hampered by situations such as fear of attending school or being left at school by their parents. For high schools, new triggers may crop up, including mental health and or psychological disorders that cause misbehaviour or missing school entirely. For other students, academic difficulties may crop up, particularly in situations where they are not open to the teachers to seek assistance. All these factors discussed are all associated with a

greater likelihood of being absent and particularly with being chronically absent (US Department of Education, 2016).

REVIEW OF EMPIRICAL STUDIES

A report by the US Department of Education (USED) identified chronic absenteeism as a hidden educational crisis (USED, 2016). Between 2013 and 2014, 14% of students nationwide were chronically absent, i.e., missed over 10% of school days, excused or unexcused. A study of US public schools' graduation patterns found that the number of days students were absent in the 8th grade was 8 times more predictive of freshmen year course failure than 8th-grade test scores (Jacob & Lovett, 2017). Similarly, a study in Baltimore City public schools found that chronic absenteeism was the strongest sixth-grade prediction of not graduating from high school (Baltimore Education Research Consortium, 2011). For the younger students, chronic absenteeism was associated with lower achievement in reading and math grades.

Romero and Lee (2008) studied the influence of maternal and family risk on chronic absenteeism in early schooling in New York, United States of America. They linked chronic absenteeism to poor socioeconomic outcomes. Also, poor academic performance may cause a student to miss school. Others included lack of sleep that may cause a student to miss the bus, hence leading to low attendance and the struggle to focus on exams leading to low achievement. The findings from the study indicated that chronic absenteeism was common among economically disadvantaged students. In the national study among kindergarten children, it was established that 21% of poor children were chronically absent compared to only eight% of their non-poor peers. Absenteeism has been found to interrupt the learning process.

For instance, in Turkey, the Ministry of Education on Secondary Education Institutions (Article 40- on Passing and Exam Regulation), the students in upper secondary education are obliged to attend school regularly because their success depends on complete participation in all classes (Demir, & Karabeyoglu, 2015). As seen, legal texts support this

assumption. However, many societies in Africa do not have a legal requirement that makes school attendance compulsory. This may be the reason for the increase in truancy cases among them (Sekiwu, 2013). Nauer et al. (2008) study found that developing and most third-world countries had high absenteeism rates as compared to developed countries. Gottfried (2010) research found absentee rates averaged 19% in a number of countries. For instance (Nauer et al., 2008) documented the absentee rates in the following countries; Peru had 11%, Ecuador 14%, Zambia 17%, India 25%, Uganda 27%, and Kenya 28%. The geographic location and socioeconomic conditions of the schools were found to have an effect on the absenteeism rates (DoE, 2010).

MATERIALS AND METHODS

This study applied a case study research approach, a process of research into the development of a particular person, group, or situation over a period of time. This enabled the examination of cases of absence in the study (Yildirim & Simsek, 2006). The target population in the research was 20-day public secondary schools in Moiben sub-county, in Uasin Gishu County, in the calendar year 2021. All the deputy principals were the respondents in the investigation since they were in charge of discipline in the schools. 10 students selected randomly from each school participated in the study by filling out the questionnaires. Semi-structured interview forms and questionnaires were used as instruments for collecting primary data. Interview forms were distributed to schools one week to the end of term and collected before the school broke for the holiday. This was repeated for the three terms in the year. Data collected was analysed using content analysis by coding data and assigning themes. The results were presented in tables and narrations.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Students' Perceptions of the Causes of Absenteeism

Students were asked to respond to the statements about the causes of absenteeism. Their responses are given in **Table 1**

Table 1: Students’ Responses on Causes of Absenteeism

			SA	A	U	D	SD
School-related factors	Teachers attitude on students negative	f	21	24	10	86	59
		%	10.5	12	5	43	29.5
	Students hate school	f	14	41	45	43	57
		%	7	20.5	22.5	21.5	28.5
	Absenteeism not punished	f	30	35	0	71	64
		%	15	17.5	0	35.5	32
Peer-bullying	f	24	41	25	73	37	
	%	12	20.5	12.5	36.5	18.5	
Learning difficulties	f	21	89	17	42	31	
	%	10.5	44.5	8.5	21	15.5	
Student-related factors	Over-age students	f	31	44	30	41	54
		%	15.5	22	15	20.5	27
	Bad-circle of friends	f	47	88	49	6	10
		%	23.5	44	24.5	3	5
	Bad habits-drug abuse	f	59	91	25	8	18
		%	29.5	45.5	12.5	4	9
Boy-girl relationships	f	46	54	40	39	21	
	%	23	27	20	19.5	10.5	
Teenage pregnancies	f	54	96	25	7	18	
	%	27	48	12.5	3.5	9	
Home-related factors	Poverty	f	14	116	15	39	16
		%	7	58	7.5	19.5	8
	Attending ceremonies	f	15	68	32	48	37
		%	7.5	34	16	24	18.5
	Too much work at home	f	7	43	50	77	23
%		3.5	21.5	25	38.5	11.5	
Parents do not care about schooling	f	11	59	27	33	70	
	%	5.5	29.5	13.5	16.5	35	
Average	f	28	64	28	44	33	
	%	14.2	32.5	14.2	22.3	16.8	

School-Related Factors

The analysis from *Table 1* shows that 86(43%) students disagreed and 59(29.5%) strongly disagreed that teachers view students negatively. 21 (10.5%) strongly agreed, 24 (12%) agreed while 10(5%) were undecided. This implies that teachers’ attitude toward their students was positive and they were ready to support them in their schooling. On the statement that students hate school, 43(21.5%) were in disagreement, and 57(28.5%) strongly disagreed with this statement. Those who agreed that students hate school were 41(20.5%), while only 7(3.5%) strongly agreed. However, those who were undecided were 45(22.5%). Since about half of the students disagreed with this statement, this

indicates that students were positive about school. This finding concurs with van Eck et al. (2017); Allensworth & Easton’s (2007) studies that found that students preferred a school environment that was positive because it was found to lower the incidences of chronic absenteeism.

Also, students who disagreed that absenteeism was not punished were more at 71(35.5%), while 64(32%) strongly disagreed. From the figures, it was clear that those who missed school were given some form of punishment to deter them and others from the habit. This finding was different from Kearney (2008), who opined that some learners feared punishments that were highly punitive and when administered, may result in students not attending school at all. Those who agreed were

35(17.5%), and 30(15%) strongly agreed. Peer bullying was not a factor contributing to absenteeism since 73(36.5%) disagreed with this assertion and 37(18.5%) strongly disagreed. 41(20.5% and 24(12%) agreed and disagreed, respectively, while those who were undecided were 25(12.5%). This gave an indication that peer bullying was not common in public day schools. A large number, 89(44.5%) of students agreed that a lot of absenteeism was a result of learning difficulties among the student body. 21(10.5%) strongly agreed with this statement, 42(21%) disagreed, 31(15.5%) strongly disagreed, while a paltry 17(8.5%) were undecided. The implication from these figures was that there were students who found learning in high school to be difficult and therefore absconded from attending school. This finding resonated with the findings of US Department of Education (2016) studies that noted that some students had academic difficulties, particularly in situations where they were not open to seeking assistance from teachers. Similarly, Black et al. (2014) and Chang et al. (2018) studies found that some students evaded attending school because they felt they did not belong there owing to their poor academic scores.

Student-Related Factors

Although the majority of the students strongly disagreed 54(27%) and disagreed with 41(20.5%) that overage was a factor contributing to absenteeism, the margin was minimal with those who strongly agreed to be 31(15.5%) while those who agreed were 44(22%). However, 30(15%) of the students were undecided. This finding was not different from Balfanz and Byrnes's (2012) study, which found that the youngest and the oldest students tend to have the highest rates of chronic absenteeism. In addition, Malcolm et al. (2003) confirmed this and noted that older learners do not attend school regularly. On the statement about the bad circle of friends, most students 88(44%) agreed, and 47(23.5%) strongly agreed that some students failed to reach school because of the influence of their friends. 49(24.5%) students were undecided on this, whereas only 6(3%) and 10(5%) disagreed and strongly disagreed with this statement. The implication of this finding is that peer pressure can result in absenteeism. Also, absent students can set

a bad example and encourage absenteeism among other students (Pehlivan, 2011).

Bad habits and in particular drug abuse were singled out as a major cause of absenteeism with 91(45.5%) of students agreeing and 59(29.5%) strongly agreeing. A paltry 8(4%) were in disagreement, and another 18(9%) strongly disagreed with this statement. Students who were not sure were 25(12.5%). The figures show that many students in day school were into drugs, and this led to absenteeism for many of them. According to Kearney (2008), other risk behaviours that are associated with absenteeism include substance abuse. On boy/girl relationships, 54(27%) of students agreed, and 46(23%) strongly agreed that it contributed to absenteeism among students; 39(19.5%) and 21(10.5%) disagreed and strongly disagreed, respectively, while 40(20%) of the students remained undecided. Teenage pregnancy was also found to contribute to absenteeism cases in public day secondary schools with almost a half of 96(48%) of the students agreeing and 54(27%) strongly agree. Only 7(3.5%) and 18(9%) disagreed and strongly disagreed, respectively. 25(12.5%) were, however, undecided about this statement.

Home Related Factors

More than a half of students 116(58%) agreed and 14(7%) strongly agreed that poverty was a major factor contributing to students' absence from school. 39(19.5%) students disagreed, and 16(8%) others strongly disagreed, while 16(8%) were not sure about this statement. This gave an indication that most students who missed school were out looking for monies to pay other school levies or had been sent home due to non-payment of the same. In other instances, these students lacked the resources to buy food, clothing, and transport costs. This finding concurred with Romero and Lee's (2008) and Balfanz and Byrnes's (2012) studies that linked chronic absenteeism to poor socioeconomic outcomes. The findings from the study indicated that chronic absenteeism was common among economically disadvantaged students. A study by Mafa (2018) and Chang et al. (2018) also found poverty to be a serious factor attributing to learner non-attendance.

Almost an equal number of students agreed and disagreed that students missed school because they were attending lessons and the day ceremonies at home, such as weddings and funerals. Those who agreed were 68(34%), while those who strongly agreed were 15(7.5%). On the other hand, those who disagreed were 48(24%) and strongly disagreed were 37(18.5%). However, 32(16%) were unsure of this statement. On the statement that students missed school because they were given too much work at home, 77(38.5%) disagreed, while 23(11.5%) strongly disagreed. The students who strongly agreed and agreed were 7(3.5%) and 43(21.5%), respectively. 50(25%) were undecided. It was also not true that parents did not care about

the schooling of their children leading to frequent absenteeism, as half of the students refuted this with 33(16.5%) disagreeing and 70(35%) strongly disagreeing. Those that agreed and strongly agreed were 59(29.5%) and 11(5.5%), respectively. 27(13.5%) of students were not decided on whether to agree or disagree.

Deputy Principals’ Views on Student Absenteeism

Deputy Principals were asked to respond to the statements about the causes of absenteeism. Their responses were categorised into three themes and are given in *Table 2*.

Table 2: Deputy Principals’ Responses on Absenteeism

		SA	A	U	D	SD
Family-related issues						
Negligence by parent	f	8	12	0	0	0
	%	40	60	0.0	0.0	0.0
Children are given too much work at home	f	0	16	2	2	0
	%	0.0	80	10	10	0.0
A child attending ceremonies, funerals	f	18	2	0	0	0
	%	90	10	0.0	0.0	0.0
Parents’ separation, disjointed families	f	18	2	0	0	0
	%	90	10	0.0	0.0	0.0
Students’ view of education						
Lack understanding of benefits of education	f	8	12	0	0	0
	%	40	60	0.0	0.0	0.0
Inability to complete assignments given	f	6	12	0	0	2
	%	30	60	0.0	0.0	10
Dislike subjects/lessons	f	6	12	2	0	0
	%	30	60	10	0.0	0.0
Do not relate well with teachers	f	2	2	8	8	0
	%	10	10	40	40	0.0
School Environment						
Lack of co-curricular activities	f	2	16	0	0	2
	%	10	80	0.0	0.0	10
Peer-bullying	f	0	0	8	2	10
	%	0.0	0.0	40	10	50
Low-self-esteem	f	0	10	8	2	0
	%	0.0	50	40	10	0.0
Punishments are severe	f	0	0	0	8	12
	%	0.0	0.0	0.0	40	60
Exam phobia	f	2	12	2	2	2
	%	10	60	10	10	10
Academic failure	f	0	8	0	0	12
	%	0.0	40	0.0	0.0	60

		SA	A	U	D	SD
Average	f	5	8	2	2	3
	%	25	40	10	10	15

Family-related issues

Table 2 shows that deputy principals 8(40%) strongly agreed, and 12(60%) agreed that parents were negligent in their parental roles resulting in student absenteeism. The study by Komakech and Osuu (2014) concurs with this study and says that most of the students are absent because they lack basic materials for learning because of the un-interest of their families. On the statement that students were given too much work at home, almost all of them 16(80%) agreed. Only 2(10%) disagreed and the same number 2(10%) were undecided. Of all deputy principals, 18(90%) strongly agreed, and 2(10%) agreed that students missed attending school because they were attending ceremonies. This had an implication that the majority of the student body chose to attend ceremonies over the school. Another premise that was agreed upon by all deputy principals was that of parents’ separation and disjointed families, with 18(90%) strongly agreeing and another 2(10%) agreed. Students who came from these types of families were more likely to miss school because of one reason or another. This finding concurs with Egger et al. (2003) study that found that some students may fail to attend school out of fear or anxiety that emanates from the separation of parents.

Students’ View of Education

Deputy Principals were again asked to give their responses about how students view education. The first statement stated that students lacked an understanding of the benefits of education. 8(40%) strongly agreed with this statement, and the rest 12(60%) agreed. The implication was that some students do not understand the value attached to education. The deputy principals also strongly agreed that 6(30%) while 12(60%) agreed that a major cause of absenteeism was the students’ inability to complete assignments given by the subject teachers. However, 2(10%) of them strongly disagreed about this. Dislike of subjects/lessons was rated highly as a major cause of absenteeism by

The analysis from

teachers, with 6(30%) strongly agreeing and 12(60%) agreeing. Only 2(10%) of deputy principals were unsure if this caused absenteeism. On being asked whether students missed school because they could not relate well with their teachers, an equal number 8(40%) disagreed and were unsure about this. Only 2(10%) strongly agreed and disagreed equally.

School Environment Deputy Principals were asked to give feedback as to whether the schools’ environment led to absenteeism of students. Deputy Principals rated the lack of co-curricular activities highly as one of the causes of absenteeism as the figures indicate an agreement of 16(80%) and 2(10%) strongly supporting this. 2(10%) strongly disagreed. However, this implies that students wanted a school environment that provided other fun-filled activities other than academics alone. A study in Chicago Public High Schools by Allensworth and Easton (2007) found that students in high engagement schools were likely to be present in school more than their counterparts in low engagement schools. In addition, Humm Brundage et al. (2017) opine that students in the low engagement school may choose to be absent to concentrate on other activities outside school. A boring learning environment and weak student-teacher relationship also bring about absenteeism (Wadesango & Machingambi, 2011).

More than half of the deputy principals strongly disagreed 10(50%), and another 2(10%) disagreed that there was peer bullying in schools that caused students not to attend school due to fear of being bullied. 8(40%) of them were unsure whether the fear of bullying was the actual cause of students’ absenteeism. On low self-esteem, half the number of deputy principals 10(50%) agreed that this was a cause of absenteeism. On the other hand, only 2(10%) disagreed with this statement, while 8(40%) were undecided. All deputy principals did not support the statement that punishments were severe leading to absenteeism with 8(40%) disagreeing and 12(60%) strongly disagreeing. According to

12(60%) deputy principals, some students missed school because of the fear of exam failure. Another 2(10%) strongly supported this, while those who disagreed and strongly disagreed were 2(10%) for each. The deputy principals who disagreed with the statement that students missed school due to fear of academic failure were more at 12(60%) than those who supported (agreed) at 8(40%).

Ways of Curbing Absenteeism in Schools

Students were asked to respond to some questions on the ways of curbing absenteeism in schools. The majority of the students wanted the schools to pass and implement rules strictly. They also wanted more deterrent measures to be put in place such as giving constructive punishments for the absentees as writing compositions or reading and summarising a chapter in a class reader. They also wanted teachers to investigate the actual causes of absenteeism among the affected students. Other suggestions that were given by the majority of the students included; parents are paying fees promptly, constructing more boarding schools, and parents reporting when students are going to miss school as well as accompanying them on the day they report back to school.

Deputy Principals were also asked to give their views on the ways they employ as administrators in dealing with absent students in their institutions. From their comments, the majority engaged the parents more in order to get the root cause of the problem. Deputy Principal No. 3 had this to say:

“...we work closely with the parent when a case of absenteeism is reported.....”.

Another one who supported this, Deputy Principal No. 19, reported that:

“.....parents are sensitised on the importance of the child attending school daily...”.

Apart from engaging the parent, deputy principals also said that they did their own investigations in order to find out why some students were perpetually absent. Guidance and counselling were also offered to these students upon their return. In extreme cases where the student's whereabouts were not known for over two weeks, the administrators reported that they involved the chief

and the local elders (*Mzee wa Mtaa*). One deputy principal No. 8 had this to say about dealing with absenteeism:

“... the class teacher has to remain vigilant and takes roll call personally on a daily basis and reports to the administration any recurrent absentia....”

The students were then asked what the Ministry of Education could do to support schools in order to reduce absenteeism in schools. On top of the list was the suggestion that the Ministry of Education pay fees for students, particularly the needy ones and provide scholarships to reduce cases of absenteeism. Other suggestions that were forwarded include; installing biometric machines in all schools to capture students' entry and exit, reduction of subjects in the curriculum, facilitating all schools to offer practical subjects that are interesting such as computer and home science and reduction of the fees charged on other school levies.

Deputy Principals were then asked to suggest measures that schools can take to prevent student absenteeism. The majority of them opined that schools should provide a friendly atmosphere that would make the students love being in school. This can be achieved through the provision of funds from the Constituency Development Fund (CDF) to the needy students in day public secondary schools. This will solve the problem of students staying at home due to a lack of fees.

On the support that schools can receive from the Ministry of Education in order to curb absenteeism, the majority of the deputy principals suggested that funding should be increased in public day secondary schools to cover all expenses. This can be done through the provision of bursaries and establishing a revolving fund for needy students. One deputy principal No. 1 had this to say:

“... the Ministry of Education should come up with stringent policies that will force parents to ensure their child attends school daily....”

In addition to this, deputy principal No. 13 commented that...

“.... the school can provide ‘work for fees’ for parents where the money worked for is used to clear school fees of the child.....”

Other measures that were suggested by the deputy principals included; the government to stop providing free day secondary funds for students who regularly missed school until they get serious with their schooling, forwarding the chronic absentees to the guidance and counselling department for help and the school board to give scholarships to the needy and bright students in the school.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The aim of the study was to investigate the causes of absenteeism in public-day secondary schools in the Moiben sub-county and to develop suggestions for solving these problems. From the findings, the study concludes that absenteeism in day public secondary schools in Kenya emanates mostly from the student behaviours such as having bad friends, drug use and boy-girl relationships that sometimes lead to teenage pregnancies. Students also missed attending school due to school-related factors such as difficulties in learning, lack of motivation to learn and lack of co-curricular activities, exam phobia and students who were overage. Other causes of absenteeism that were related to the family were: poverty, parents’ negligence, too much work at home, students attending ceremonies and disjointed families. The study came up with recommendations to remedy the situation that included; the schools formulating and implementing strict and deterrent school rules and regulations that included constructive punishments, investigating the real cause of students missing school and the Board of Management (BoM) together with the Ministry of Education (MoE) to build boarding facilities as well as sponsor the needy but bright students. Other recommendations that can be suggested include more cooperation between the school, parents, and the local authority (chiefs and local elders), and vigilance by the class teacher, MoE to provide funds to all schools to install biometric machines and formulate a stringent rule on parents that allow their children to miss school including withdrawing of funding from the Free Day Secondary Education kitty.

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