An Investigation into Truancy Intervention Programmes for Learners in Selected Primary Schools of Choma District in Zambia

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Abstract

The scale and nature of truancy in schools continues to raise significant concern among stakeholders in Zambia. As a result, the purpose of the study was to investigate truancy intervention programmes (TIP) available for learners in selected primary schools of Choma district, Zambia. The study was guided by the Social Control Theory developed by Travis Hirschi (1969) to explain disruptive behaviour and conformity to the established social order. The researchers adopted a descriptive research design. Participants were 51, comprising nine headteachers, nine guidance and counselling teachers, nine class teachers, and 24 pupils from nine randomly selected primary schools in Choma district. Data was collected through interviews and was analysed thematically. The findings revealed that truancy intervention programmes used in primary schools include feeding programmes, registration, remediation, extracurricular activities, parental sensitisation programmes, and guidance and counselling. The researchers recommended that the Ministry of General Education should support the counselling and guidance units in the schools for more coordinated intervention efforts in curbing truancy. The school disciplinary committees should also consider forming Truancy Boards to mitigate truant behaviour among learners.

Keywords: *Truancy, Absenteeism, Interventions, School Dropout, Choma, Zambia.*

1.0 Introduction

The Ministry of General Education in Zambia (MoGE) was grappling with learner truancy since the country's political independence in 1964. To date, the scale and nature of truancy in schools continue to raise significant concern among stakeholders around the country. Despite vast improvements in national school enrolment over the recent decades, many children only attend school sporadically. The Consortium for Research on Educational Access, Transitions and Equity (CREATE), observed that children who were 'silently excluded' from education including those students who were successfully enrolled but attended only intermittently (Kelly, 2018). Although numerous definitions of truancy exist, this article describes truancy as the unexcused absence of a learner from school or specific lessons (Zhang, Katsiyannis, Barrett & Wilson, 2010). Absence is considered unexcused if the learner does not have a valid reason for not attending school. Truancy contributes to high rates of grade repetition and low academic performance which often culminates into school dropouts, juvenile delinquency, high illiteracy levels and poor future employment outcomes (Epstein & Sheldon, 2010). Thus, pupils need to attend school regularly in order to increase their educational achievement and opportunities in life.

Commenting on school attendance during the early educational development in Zambia, Snelson (1970) observed that, for a long time, schools were regarded as places to go to when there was nothing more pressing to be attended to in the communities. Since then, the government has implemented policies and guided education services throughout the country to combat truant behaviour. In 1970, the government introduced Statutory

Instrument (SI) 118, making school attendance compulsory (Mwape, 1990). This legislation made truancy illegal and a punishable offence in a court of law. The instrument was tailored to improve school attendance among pupils. Schools are also compelled to record the attendance of learners in class registers daily and are at liberty to devise additional measures for keeping and monitoring attendance records. Any pupil who is absent for ten consecutive school days or two weeks without permission is considered a dropout and deleted from the class register (Musumpuka, 2016).

Despite government's intervention, Zambian schools continue to report low school attendance throughout the country. For example, a study in Choma district by Habbozya (2018) found out that 51 per cent of pupils in rural primary and day secondary schools in schools had chronic cases of truancy. Similarly, the Ministry of General Education reported that 383,676 Grade 7 pupils entered for the 2015 Grade 7 composite examinations and 39,160 were absent, out of which 20,016 where girls representing 11 per cent (Ministry of General Education, 2015). Another study by the Zambia Global School-based Health Survey (2012) reported that 58.8 per cent of the 2,257 pupils who participated in the survey were chronically truant. The high prevalence of truancy in Zambian schools prompted the researchers to investigate intervention programmes that curb truant behaviour. In order to achieve the purpose of the study, the study attempted to answer the specific research questions as follows:

(i)   What are the causes of learner truancy in primary schools of Choma district?

(ii)   What are the forms of truancy intervention programmes for learners in primary schools of Choma district?

(iii)   What are the effects of truancy intervention programmes on school attendance of truant learners in primary schools of Choma district?

(iv)   How can truancy intervention programmes be strengthened in primary schools of Choma district?

1.2   Statement of the Problem

School attendance is vital to ensure sustained access to education and improved completion rates. Attendance is the single most critical variable that measure students' achievement levels (Reid, 2010). In this regard, the Zambian government re-introduced Free Primary Education (FPE) policy in 2002 to indiscriminately provide equal educational opportunities, to enhance enrolment and completion rates among learners in primary schools. Despite vast improvements in access to education, the country has struggled to deliver quality education due to the high prevalence of learner truancy in primary and day secondary schools (Habbozya, 2018) among other reasons. The attainment of the envisioned increased completion rates by pupils requires more studies into the intervention measures to curb truancy available in schools and the possibility of future studies assessing their effectiveness. Considering that different localities have varied factors for truancy, this study envisions that interventions for truancy in selected schools in Choma amounts to presenting context based issues that may result in taking appropriate actions by stakeholders.

1.3 Significance of the Study

The study may provide evidence-based guidelines to school administrators, teachers, pupils and parents on the effectiveness of available intervention programmes used to curb truancy in selected schools in Choma district. Educational planners may also find this helpful information when formulating policies to curb truancy in schools. Curbing truancy is a concern among various stakeholders hence the study can provide insights on how the various efforts can be coordinated.

1.4 Theoretical Framework

The study was guided by the Social Control Ttheory developed by Travis Hirschi (1969). The theory is one of the most prominent approaches is successfully employed and empirically supported to explain disruptive school behaviour (Booth, Farrell & Varano, 2008). Social Control Theory is anchored on how the interactions of social bonds such as attachment, commitment, involvement, and belief implicate pupil truancy. The four theoretical constructs interact to determine whether or not an individual would be involved in deviant behaviour. Control theorists posit that fragile bonds to the school, family and community are associated with increased disruptive behaviour (Booth *et al.*, 2008). Conversely, strong ties to the conventional order reduce an individual's disposition to disruptive behaviour.

The researchers employed the Social Control Theory to explain truant behaviour and conformity to the established social order in schools. Attachment may relate to affection to classmates, teachers, school and work. The second construct, commitment, may project long-term educational, occupational, or other conventional goals such as going to college and getting a good job. The third construct, involvement, may refer to conventional activities such as football, choir and cheerleading at sports activities and other extracurricular activities. The fourth construct, belief, espouse school rules and regulations (Hirschi, 1969). The four theoretical constructs guided the study in investigating the problem and approaches to intervention against truant behaviour in schools. Therefore, several factors were considered in the study, including causes and intervention programmes on truant behaviour.

2 Literature Review

The review is done under the following headings:

2.1 Causes of learner truancy

Literature shows that the factors that cause learner truancy generally fall into four broad categories: individual, family, school and community. Individual factors are related to the attributes of learners such as values, attitudes, behaviours and how these contribute to truant behaviour. Shooba (2013) found that student variables, including lack of interest in school, poor attitude to school work, peer pressure, laziness, prostitution, early marriages, teenage pregnancies, alcohol and drug abuse, influenced their school attendance negatively. In the same vein, Mlowosa (2014) indicated that age, gender, low cognitive

abilities, low self-esteem and lack of educational aspiration influence a pupil's decision to attend school. In addition, DeSocio, VanCura and Cole (2007) identified physical and mental health issues as contributing towards school non-attendance. The authors indicated that truancy coexists with student mental and health problems and may indicate an existing or emerging mental health disorder, including post-traumatic stress disorder, anxiety, depression, and substance abuse. The findings are consistent with those of Parrish (2015), who found that students who abuse alcohol to the level of intoxication or smoke marijuana or both are more likely to skip school than peers who do not.

School factors that relate to the school structure, policies, climate, and staff composition have been a cause of truancy. In Kenya, Omutinyu (2016) undertook a study investigating school-home-related causes of truancy and its influence on academic achievement. The study adopted a descriptive research design, and the data were analysed thematically. The author found that poor teacher-pupil relationships, teacher attitude, class size, bullying and lack of curriculum relevance influence learner school attendance. Dohho (2015) supports the view that school climate especially, lack of teaching and learning resources, understaffing, and corporal punishment, are barriers to school attendance. Additionally, schools often have inconsistent procedures for dealing with chronic absenteeism and may not have meaningful consequences for truant youths.

Just as individual and school factors have been shown to influence attendance patterns in some studies, characteristics of family members exhibit a significant influence on school attendance. Factors such as inconsistent discipline, ineffective parenting skills, low family social support, high family mobility, parental emotional disorders, child abuse or neglect, single parent and domestic violence also trigger truant behaviour (Parrish, 2015). In the same vein, Baker, Sigmon and Nugent (2001) cited problematic family dynamics and parental marital discord as triggers for school refusal behaviour by students. In Zimbabwe, Nyika and Kurebwa (2015) found that home factors include child labour in agriculture, household chores, lack of parental support, parents with multiple jobs, illiteracy, single parenting, ill-health, mental illness, and ill-health problems influence school attendance. Perhaps surprisingly are social responsibilities in which parents instruct a child not to attend school to take care of the homestead while attending to other matters.

Furthermore, the literature identified socioeconomic status (SES), which is often measured as a combination of education, income and occupation of a family to influence school attendance. Supporting evidence indicates that higher socioeconomic parents are usually more involved with teachers and schools. Often truant children, who are more likely to come from an impoverished background, have parents who are unable to be as involved due to work or other responsibilities as shown in a qualitative study by Katanga (2017), which investigated the management of learner absenteeism in Namibia and found that poverty, hunger, lack of affordable transport and low income forced children to engage in child labour at the expense of attending school. Jones and Lovrich (2011) support the view that truant students tend to come from economically disadvantaged homes. Conditions such as abject poverty, single-parent households, or families with an above-average number of children are more likely to be truants than their peers. This also led to participation in *ganyu,* a form of short-term paid informal labour to help meet these

expenses (Kelly, 2018). In this regard, it can be concluded that SES is a barrier to school attendance.

Although essentially folded into individual, school, and family characteristics, the community setting also influences truant behaviour. In Malawi, Kelly (2018) conducted a longitudinal study that examined school absenteeism and the impact of cleaner-burning biomass-fuelled cook stoves in Karonga district. The study used a mixed-method approach and found that community factors, including cultural traditions, economic relations, and infrastructural development, can also have profound implications for school attendance. Communities with high poverty levels, threats to personal safety (such as dangerous routes to school), general community insecurity (sporadic 'wars'), the prevalence of community child labour, limited access to educational and health institutions were responsible for school non-attendance (Adhvaryu and Nyshadham 2012). Studies from rural Ghana, Tanzania and South Africa highlighted the contribution of community factors on truancy by showing how treacherous walking routes inhibit school attendance, particularly when routes became impassable during the rainy season or due to perceived risk of physical attack or rape, especially among girls travelling alone (Porter, Hampshire, Abane, Tanle, K. Esia-Donkoh, Amoako-Sakyi, 2011). Thus, the community characterised by insecurity and an unsafe environment contributes to school non-attendance.

2.2   Truancy intervention programmes

Previous studies have consistently shown that school, family, and community-based interventions can decrease truant behaviour. For example, Musumpuka (2016) found that guidance and counselling teachers in schools provide counselling to pupils against vices such as peer pressure, truancy, absenteeism, bullying and substance abuse. In their analysis, Ojo, Ojo and Onaolapo (2016) also concluded that guidance and counselling could proffer a lasting solution to the problem of truancy in schools. Students need regular guidance and counselling services and career support to cope with school life and related matters.

Another mechanism for mitigating truancy that has received specific attention in the literature is the school feeding programme (SFP). The programme is designed to provide meals to children who are attending school. Lawson (2012) systematically reviewed the impact of food for education intervention programmes on educational, nutritional, and agricultural development goals in developing countries. The study adopted randomised controlled trials (RCTs), quasi-experimental, and non-experimental designs. The data were analysed using an Excel spreadsheet. Results showed that well-designed school feeding programmes (SFP) increase enrolment and attendance. Other benefits include improved health and nutrition, cognitive skill and abilities, and decreased wasting and underweight among participants. The findings are consistent with those of Jomaa, McDonnell and Probart (2011), indicating that SFP improves rates of enrolment and attendance and impacts the overall health and nutrition of school children. Overall, SFP increases school attendance by lowering the opportunity costs of attending school and providing additional incentives to engage in formal education (Fareo, 2013).

The literature also highlighted the importance of children's involvement in extracurricular activities to mitigate truant behaviour in schools. Katanga (2017) investigated teachers'

perceptions and experiences in managing learner absenteeism in rural primary schools in Namibia. The qualitative study adopted an experimental research design. The data was analysed thematically. The author found that extracurricular programmes such as sports and cultural activities were encouraged to attend school regularly. Awards were also given to pupils with the best and most improved attendance. Similarly, Nyika and Kurebwa (2015) observed that extracurricular activities improve attendance, especially where the truant are given responsibilities such as football captain, choir and cheerleading at sports activities.

Furthermore, previous studies have shown that changing dysfunctional family patterns or encouraging more parental involvement in children's education in the case of chronically truant children can help reduce truancy (Kelly, 2018). In addition, joint therapy, which enables children and their families to resume healthy growth and development, has proven effective. Musumpuka (2016) carried out a descriptive survey on 'curbing absenteeism from junior secondary examination: strategies employed in selected schools of Chingola. The author found that parental involvement through the Parent-Teacher Committee (PTC) meetings, Open Days, Family pack programmes and homework promotes good attendance. Musumpuka also cited academic monitoring, daily recording attendance, comprehensive school policies and rewarding good and improved attendance. This is in line with earlier findings by Reid (2013), who recommended that schools work closely with parents and guardians to address truancy issues.

In addition, the literature indicated that inclusive school policies and programmes on truancy create a supportive climate in the school and effectively curbing learner truancy. For example, a survey carried out by the Hampshire County Council School Services (2015) found that inclusive attendance policies reduce truancy and absenteeism. Results indicate that policies including re-admission policy, anti-bullying policy, behaviour and reward policy, exclusion policy, and special educational needs have improved attendance in English schools. Musumpuka (2016) supports this view, especially about remedial and homework policies. Thus, a clearly defined policy and supported by stakeholders provides a relevant mechanism for managing, monitoring, and reducing learner truancy.

Lastly, literature has shown that a *collaborative approach involving the courts, law enforcement and the wider community is more effective for learner truancy* (Sheldon 2002). For example, a study by Parrish (2015) found out that community-based truancy reduction programmes such as juvenile court systems, human resources departments, and local social services have successfully reduced truancy among students. The author also cited programmes such as Stop Truancy and Recommended Treatment (START), Check and Connect (CC), Abolish Chronic Truancy (ACT), Truancy Assessment and Service Centre (TASC) and Truancy Reduction Programmes (TRP) as having been successful in reducing truant behaviour in schools. This view aligns with Epstein and Sheldon (2002), who successfully employed family and community involvement programmes to increase overall school attendance and decrease absenteeism among chronically absent children in elementary schools. During the three-year longitudinal study, Epstein and Sheldon used incentives, home visits, parental calls, appointed attendance officers, attendance officers,

family workshops, counselling and court referrals to increase school attendance. It is therefore evident that community involvement is crucial in mitigating truant behaviour.

In conclusion, the literature has shown that the factors that cause truancy are individual attributes, socioeconomic status, school environment and community setting. The four factors largely influence a child's decision to attend school. It was also reviewed that schools utilise feeding programmes, remediation, extracurricular activities, school policies, guidance and counselling to curb truant behaviour in schools. However, *successful interventions demand* a collaborative approach involving the individual, school, family and the wider community.

3. Research Methodology

This study employed a qualitative research approach to collect, analyse and interpret data primarily concerned with understanding people's experiences in a naturalistic and interpretive approach (Leedy & Ormrod, 2005; Mapoma & Masaiti, 2012) by allowing close interaction with participants within their natural setting (Cohen *et al.*, 2007). The participants described their experiences of truancy in primary schools, thus enabling researchers to gain an in-depth understanding of the experiences of teachers, school administrators and learners with truant behaviour.

The study adopted a descriptive research design which was considered suitable for this study because it allowed the researchers to gather more information from the participants on what they perceived to be factors that cause truancy, interventions being utilised and how the interventions can be strengthened (Masaiti, 2015; Masaiti & Simuyaba, 2018). Out of sixty-three government primary schools, nine were conveniently selected for the study due to the limited time granted for the study. From the nine schools, the participants were fifty-one and comprised nine head teachers, nine guidance teachers, nine class teachers and twenty-four truant learners who were purposefully sampled for the study. The researchers used semi-structured interview guides to collect data on the causes of truancy, interventions being utilised to curb truancy and ways of strengthening truancy intervention programmes for learners in selected primary schools in Choma district. The researchers also engaged pupils through focus group discussions to gather data on causes of learner truancy. The collected data were coded and analysed thematically.

4. Findings and Discussions

The findings are presented and discussed according to the themes that emerged from the research questions and literature. The researchers used verbatim quotations from participants to provide a detailed narrative for each theme and give participants a voice in presenting research findings. When necessary, participants' responses are paraphrased to facilitate grammatical continuity. The names of the participants and schools are disguised due to confidentiality and research ethics. Instead, the researchers used codes and labels.

4.1 Causes of learner truancy

The study identified several factors that cause learner truancy in primary schools, including family, school, individual and socioeconomic factors.

4.1.1 Family obligations

The findings showed that some learners missed school due to family obligations. During one of the Focus Group Discussions (FGDs), learners indicated that parents and guardians instruct the learners to look after the homestead, to perform domestic tasks, take care of siblings or an ill family member at the expense of attending school. The head teacher from **School B** indicated that:

> *"Some pupils are left do domestic chores when parents go to the market bearing in mind that most of the learners at this school come from low-income townships where families depend on selling goods at the market for a living."*

In addition, a pupil from school E said that:

> *"My step-mother gives me much work to do. By the time I finish working, I am tired and late for school. And so, I stay at home."*

The finding is consistent with the finding of Nyika and Kurebwa (2015). They found out that parents and guardians often instruct children not to attend school to look after the homestead, take care of siblings or an ill family member without informing the school authorities. Similarly, Humphreys, Moses and Dunne (2015) found that some learners miss school to assist with family chores. The participants' views suggest that some parents and guardians circumstantially condone truancy by keeping children at home at the expense of attending school.

4.1.2 Lack of parental support

The study also revealed that lack of parental support increases the rate of truancy. The participants contended that children from families where parents do not show a keen interest in their education, do not motivate them to attend a school or tell them the importance of education, is more likely to miss school than their peers. The deputy head teacher from school F pointed out that:

> *"Some parents do not supervise their children especially marketeers. You find that the parents are already out early in the morning before the child goes to school. They do not know whether the children go to school or not."*

The finding echoes the finding of Parrish (2015), who established that low social family support negatively affects a child's decision to attend school. In the same vein, Thornton, Darmody and McCoy, 2013 showed that participation in parent-teacher meetings, monitoring the child's school attendance, and homework promotes a child's school attendance. Thus, parents should be vigorously involved in getting their children to school.

41.3 Poverty

Concerning poverty, the findings indicated that lack of money, hunger, and adequate school requirements such as uniforms, books, and pencils contribute to learner truancy. The participants explained that children from economically disadvantaged families often engage in income-generating activities instead of school. The pupils use the money earned

from moulding bricks, gambling or selling plastic bottles to buy food and supplement the family income. The guidance teacher from school E mentioned that:

> "If the child comes from a poor family, for example, the child is not looking presentable in terms of clean uniform, jersey or shoes, they feel embarrassed. The only way to avoid embarrassment is to stay away from school."

The finding is in line with the result of a study conducted in Namibia which found that poverty, hunger, lack of affordable transport, and low income forced children to engage in child labour at the expense of attending school (Katanga, 2017). In the same vein, Jones and Lovrich (2011) observed that truant students come from economically disadvantaged homes. Therefore, poverty negatively affects school attendance in that the children themselves may be caught between choosing to be involved in their own survival and attending school.

4.1.4 Personal reasons

Furthermore, the study showed that some children miss school due to personal reasons such as negative attitude, low cognitive ability and lack of educational aspiration. A class teacher from school C observed that:

> "Some learners missed school because they did not do their homework while others were due to lack of interest in school."

This finding is consistent with Shooba (2013), who found that student variables such as lack of interest in school, poor attitude towards school work, peer pressure, laziness, alcohol and drug abuse negatively influence school attendance. In the same vein, Mlowosa (2014) also found that low cognitive abilities, low self-esteem and lack of educational aspiration may influence a pupil's decision to attend school. Therefore, personal attributes were argued to be a significant cause of truancy in schools.

4.1.5 Peer pressure

Peer pressure was also cited as one of the reasons for school non-attendance. The participants explained that teenagers align themselves to various anti-school attendance peer groups, and the decisions made by the group tend to affect the behaviour of all its members. The guidance teacher from school A pointed out that:

> "Our pupils have ganged up with wrong groups in the compounds which influence them not to attend school. Other pupils come to school but do not attend lessons due to peer pressure."

In the same vein, Shooba (2013) found that student peer pressure, alcohol and drug abuse negatively influence school attendance.

4.1.6 Unsupportive school climate

Finally, the results showed that pupils play truant due to an unsupportive school climate. The participants indicated that bullying, shortage of desks, teacher absenteeism, and abusive language negatively affect a child's decision to attend school. In a focus group discussion, a pupil from school D said:

> *"I do not come to school because I sit down [on the floor]. It is difficult to write when I am sitting on the floor. My uniform also gets dirty when I sit on the floor."* T

he deputy head teacher from school H also pointed out that:

> *"Teachers are sometimes the cause of truancy due to a lack of serious preparation for lessons. You find that the lesson's introduction is always the same every day: 'What did we learn yesterday?' This makes pupils bored."*

Similarly, studies in Namibia and Kenya found out that learners tend to avoid schools associated with bullying, lack of teaching and learning resources, teacher absenteeism and use of abusive language (Katanga, 2017; Omutinyu, 2016 & Parrish, 2015). Dohho (2015) also indicates that understaffing and corporal punishment are barriers to school attendance. Thus, the likelihood that a student will not attend school increases when students feel unsafe or threatened in the school environment.

4.2   Truancy intervention programmes and their prospects on school attendance

The study identified several truancy interventions programmes used in primary schools, including the SFP, guidance and counselling, catch-up programmes, class registration and extracurricular activities.

4.2.1   School feeding programme

The study found that primary schools provide meals to learners to curb truancy. Most of the participants indicated that the SFP encourages pupils to attend school. The schools usually provide rice or porridge mixed with pounded groundnuts to learners at break time once a day. The head teacher from school C explained that:

> *"We have a feeding programme in the school, and all the children are fed except those who are not interested in eating. The feeding scheme encourages pupils to attend school regularly because they like rice very much. However, pupils who do not attend lessons are not allowed to eat to encourage them to attend regularly."*

The SFP have a positive effect on the school attendance of truants. For example, during an interview, the head teacher from school B said that:

> *"The SFP programme has helped us to reduce truancy in the school. Since the programme was introduced, many learners have come back, and they are still in school. Now that it is examination time, all the pupils come to school because they know they have time to eat."*

The finding was consistent with the finding of Lawson (2012), who concluded in his analysis that a well-designed SFP programme increased school attendance by lowering the opportunity costs of attending school and providing additional incentives to engage in formal education. However, some respondents argued that the SFP interrupts the regular running of the school. For example, a class teacher from school B noted that:

> *"Some periods are disturbed because most of the learners would still be eating at the end of break time. Moreover, some pupils miss lessons but show up during feeding time."*

Thus, the school needs to find a better way of managing the programme.

4.2.2 Guidance and Counseling

The study also revealed that schools provide guidance and counselling to curb truancy. The participants indicated that the guidance teacher provides counselling services to truant learners. The head teacher from **School E** pointed out that:

> *"once we have identified truant learners, we refer them to the guidance teacher for counselling. If truant behaviour persists, we involve parents in the counselling process*

Echoing a finding from previous surveys in Zambia and Namibia, guidance and counselling departments help mould pupils' behaviour in schools (Musumpuka, 2016; Katanga, 2016). Guidance teachers provide counselling to pupils against truancy and absenteeism.

The study has reviewed the prospect of guidance and counselling on school attendance that reduces truant behaviour. Philip (2014) found out that guidance and counselling help curb truancy cases in schools in the same vein. However, most of the guidance teachers in primary schools of Choma district are not trained counsellors. Thus, there is a need to train the practitioners and engage them as full-time counsellors to discharge their duties competently.

4.2.3 Registration

In all the schools that were part of the study, attendance registration is carried out every day to monitor school attendance. The participants indicated that teachers mark class registers, subject registers, period registers and conduct roll calls to track learners' attendance patterns. The guidance teacher from school I explained that:

> *"The school has devised a policy where the first thing a teacher does when he or she enters a classroom is to know who is absent and find if that pupil was present in the morning and just absent at that particular time. The school uses the information from the attendance register to identify regular absentees from school to counsel them and sometimes call their parents."*

In addition, the deputy head teacher from **School E** said that:

> *"We have directed teachers to conduct roll call whenever they go to teach. If there are pupils who are fond of truancy, we make a separate register for them, and every period, they come here in my office to sign."*

The finding was consistent with Shooba (2013), who indicated that class registration is conducted in schools every day. Commenting on the daily registration of pupils, most of the participants indicated that it is an effective strategy for curbing truancy in schools. Marking class registers every day help schools to know learners who are present and

absent. The information is also used to track down learners with chronic attendance problems. Musumpuka (2016) supports the view that taking into account which is present and absent is essential in all organisations, and schools are not an exception. Without class registration, a school cannot know the prevalence of truancy in classes and the school. Thus, it is an effective intervention for curbing truancy.

4.2.4 Catch-up programmes

In addition, the study showed that schools use catch-up programmes to mitigate the effects of truancy. The participants indicated that teachers provide extra lessons, remediation and assessment to learners with attendance problems before or after learning hours. Peer tutoring is also encouraged, especially where older pupils have been trained to assist lower-graders. A deputy head teacher from school H pointed out that:

> *"We have a catch-up program where we help truant pupils to breakthrough in literacy and numeracy. Firstly, the pupils are assessed and then put in groups according to their levels [abilities]. Then, we teach them [pupils] literacy and mathematics either before or after lessons."*

In the same vein, a class teacher from school C said that:

> *"We usually give truant learners remedial work to be at the same level as the other learners. Remediation helps truant pupils catch up where they lag, especially at the lower primary, where new sounds are introduced regularly."*

Clark (2008) indicated that referred students are assigned extra tutoring, work hours, essays, or additional class attendance in line with the finding. Therefore, catch-up programmes help truant learners to be at the same level in learning with their peers.

4.2.5 Extracurricular activities

Concerning extracurricular activities, the participants said that they engage learners in sports and cultural activities to motivate them to attend school. Three schools in the study that involve truant learners in social activities such as soccer, netball, volleyball, choir, traditional dances and other activities have successfully reduced truancy. A class teacher from school H explained that:

> "*We try to involve truant learners in extracurricular activities.*"

In the same vein, the participants indicated that involving truant learners in sports and cultural activities promote good attendance. The finding is consistent with the previous findings of Nyika and Kurebwa (2015) and Dohho (2015), *who found out that "Truant learners or those at risk of becoming truants are given responsibilities such as football captain, choir and cheerleading at sports activities to improve school attendance.*" In addition, the finding is consistent with Parrish (2015), and Baker and Jansen (2000) who found out that the average number of disciplinary referrals decreased among truants exposed to social activities such as sports and field trips. In line with the concept of motivation, schools also award learners with excellent and improved attendance.

4.2.6 Sensitisation programmes

Lastly, the study established that schools hold sensitisation programmes to curb truancy. Teachers and peer educators sensitise learners on the adverse effects of truancy. Equally important are community sensitisation activities organised by schools in collaboration with Civil Society Organisations (CSO) such as the Young Women Christian Association (YWCA), Brethren in Christ Church - Choma Children Development Programme and Development Aid from People to People (DAPP). During an interview, a class teacher from school H explained that:

> *"From time to time, we sensitise learners about the importance of attending school regularly. Sometimes, we engage pupils to talk to their peers. Sensitisation meetings are usually held on Monday and Friday during a school assembly. We also hold separate sessions for boys and girls so that the pupils can freely share problems that affect them."*

Parrish (2015) supports the view that school-based and community-based sensitisation activities help to mitigate truant behaviour in schools. Thus, it is evident that awareness programmes may improve school attendance in primary schools.

4.3 Ways of strengthening truancy intervention programmes

From the findings, the study has identified several ways of strengthening truancy intervention programmes in primary schools, including active parental involvement in school matters, promoting teamwork and home visitation.

4.3.1 Parental involvement in school matters

The participants contended that collaboration between teachers and parents in truancy intervention programmes is critical for sustained access to education. The head teacher from school I said that:

> *"I think we should further the interaction between parents and the school so that the community will own the school and its programmes. Parents and teachers should meet regularly to discuss matters affecting their children's education."*

Echoing findings of a previous study (Parrish, 2015; Epstein & Sheldon, 2002), parents involved in their child's education, whether through checking books, monitoring homework, performance, or academic progression, are less likely to have a truant child. A similar trend has been observed among pupils from families where parents participate in the Parent Teachers committee meetings (PTAs), Annual General Meetings (AGMs), Open day, family pack and other activities organised by the school. Active parental involvement in school matters is of significant influence on a child's education outcome.

4.3.2 Intensifying sensitisation

The findings further suggest intensifying truancy sensitisation programmes. Evidence shows that schools that hold sensitisation programmes regularly have been successful in reducing learner truancy. A teacher from **School A** suggested that:

> "Teachers should talk to pupils about the importance of attending school regularly."

This finding is in line with that of Katanga (2017), who indicated that teachers organise motivational talks and peer-support systems to encourage school attendance. Sometimes, schools collaborate with civil society organisations to sensitise communities on the importance of education. Therefore, collaborative sensitisation between the school and community is crucial if the truancy problem is to be fully addressed.

4.3.3 Full-time counsellors
Finally, the research has demonstrated the need for a full-time trained counsellors in schools whose core business will be to counsel pupils with disciplinary issues such as truant behaviour. The participants contended that most of the guidance teachers in primary schools are not trained thus ill-equipped to offer effective counselling services. A class teacher from **School E** said that:

> "*Guidance teachers should possess a minimum requirement of a degree in guidance and counselling from a recognised university. This will help them to acquire the necessary knowledge and skills needed to become more effective counsellors.*"

Echoing the findings of Lubeya (2012), the MoGE should consider employing full-time trained counsellors in all the schools. In this way, pupils with attendance problems will be attended to promptly and effectively. In the same vein, Sinclair and Anderson (2003) found that schools with full-time counsellors have registered low truancy levels.

4.3.4 Home visitation
Finally, the findings showed that home visits promotedschool attendance. Some participants believed that visiting the child at home strengthens both teacher-parent partnership and teacher-pupil relationship. The head teacher from school B explained that:

"*When we observe that a pupil has been missing classes for a prolonged period, we visit the child at home to find out why he or she is not coming to school. The visit shows the child that we care for his/her education.*" Home visits strengthen the social bond between the child and school, which in turn improves school attendance.

5.   Conclusion and Recommendations

The study investigated the causes of truancy, intervention programmes available for truant learners in primary schools, effects of truancy intervention programmes on school attendance and ways of strengthening truancy intervention programmes. The study established that individual, family obligations, poverty, peer pressure, and lack of parental involvement in their children's education are the leading causes of truancy in primary schools in the Choma district. The study also revealed that truancy intervention programmes for learners in primary schools in the Choma district include feeding programmes, guidance and counselling, class registration, extracurricular activities, sensitisation and catch-up programmes. Lastly, the study found that truancy intervention programmes help to improve school attendance and can be strengthened by promoting

teamwork, parental involvement, intensifying sensitisation and formulating comprehensive national truancy.

From the findings of the study, the definition of truancy is inadequate in as far as it conceptualises truancy as inexcusable absence from school. Causes of truancy such as family obligations and poverty have far reaching consequences that cannot be considered inexcusable.

Based on the findings of the study, the researchers made the following recommendations:

1. The MoGE should allow the formulation of school based policies on learner truancy. A national policy provides a standard procedure of dealing with truant cases in all the schools without consideration of context.
2. Schools should ensure guidance and counselling units are given opportunities to interact with parents and guardians in order to create an interface between schools and homes for sustainable interventions for truancy.
3. School authorities can also introduce suggestion boxes. The boxes can help teachers get confidential information about pupils' concerns such as bullying, teacher absenteeism and truancy.

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