
PRIMARY PUPIL SCHOOL ABSENTEEISM AMONG TOBACCO AND NON-TOBACCO FARMING HOUSEHOLDS IN NKEYEMA DISTRICT IN ZAMBIA

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to ascertain the link between tobacco farming and the factors which contributed to learner absenteeism in selected primary schools of Nkeyema District. The study was qualitative with a sample of 44 participants (class teachers, learners from both tobacco and non-tobacco farming households, and tobacco and non-tobacco farming parents from the communities of the two selected schools) purposively selected from two primary schools. A case study design was employed and data were collected using semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions. Data were later analysed thematically. The findings revealed that tobacco farming had a negative effect on learner attendance at school. The study suggested sensitising both parents and their children on the importance of regular school attendance, increasing parents-teachers collaboration on matters affecting learners and that the tobacco farming companies operating in Nkeyema District should work together with the school administrators to introduce mobile education programmes for learners in the tobacco farming camps.

Keywords: Learner Absenteeism from School, Tobacco Farming Households, Non-tobacco Farming Households, Perceptions

Introduction

The purpose of this study was to ascertain the link between tobacco farming and the factors which contributed to learner absenteeism in selected primary schools of Nkeyema District. The declaration of education as a basic human right at the World Conference on Education for All at Jomtien in Thailand in 1990 and the World Education Forum in Dakar, Senegal in 2000 led to the growth of interest in improving the provision of education by most countries. Article 26 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child states that, every child has a right to education. Any nations' children are its future workers and leaders. Education remains the major tool by which people become economically and socially empowered. Zambia, like other countries, has put in place measures aimed at providing free primary education to every child. However, this drive to provide free primary education has faced a number of challenges such as learner absenteeism (Ministry of Education, 1996).

Keter (2013) describes absenteeism in school to be the habit of staying away from school without providing a genuine or any reason for doing so. When learners are absent from school, arrive late, or miss class, they reduce their opportunities to learn and miss on critical content planned for that time. A study by Kasanda and Sakala (2006) on the provision of quality education in Zambia revealed that school attendance was poorer in rural compared to urban areas. This has contributed to poor performance of children in rural schools during national examinations. Despite the various measures which the government of the Republic of Zambia has put in place, which are aimed at achieving universal access to quality primary education such as the implementation of the policy on free primary education (Daka, Chirwa, Hamatanga, Mumba, Chikopela, Chilala and Kaoma, 2021), learner absenteeism from school is still a challenge in most rural schools (Kabanga and Mulauzi, 2020; Shooba, 2013).

Zambia has put in place laws to help achieve the goal of providing quality education to all children. The *Zambian Education Act 434 No. 23 of 2011* (Ministry of Justice, 2011) provides that every child has the right to free basic education. Teasley (2004) is of the opinion that learners' poor attendance is associated with poverty and that learners tend to show first warning signs in the primary school phase of their education. Similarly, Wadesango and Machingambi (2011) and Zahafs, Kgobe, Napo and Parker (2005) attributed learner absenteeism to child labour. Education in rural areas faces a number of challenges, which require some finances if a child is to have access to quality education. The difficulty of raising such finances is what compelled some parents to involve their children in some form of cheap labour which, in turn, contributes to absenteeism.

If not reduced, absenteeism may make Zambia fail to achieve the 2030 Sustainable Development Goal of promoting a lifelong and equitable education for all. Poor school attendance is likely to lead to poor literacy and numeracy skills in school going children in rural areas of Zambia. As observed in the literature, school absenteeism negatively affects learner academic achievement (Klein, Sosu and Dare, 2022, Daka et al., 2021; Malcom, Wilson, Davidson and Kirk, 2003).

In Nkeyema District, which houses one of the farming-blocks in Zambia, tobacco is a common cash crop which has seen the lives of the majority of the homesteads there revolving around tobacco either as farmers or as farm workers. In this district, tobacco farming is an important and common source of livelihood for most households. While a number of studies have been done on the causes and effects of pupil absenteeism from school (Kabanga and Mulauzi, 2020), little seems to be known about stakeholders' perceptions of the link between absenteeism from school among primary school learners from tobacco and non-tobacco farming homes in Nkeyema District of Zambia. The problem investigated in this study was that if not handled, absenteeism can affect the learning outcomes of primary school going pupils. It was, therefore, important to investigate the link between tobacco farming and learner absenteeism among primary school learners. To achieve the above purpose, the study was guided by the following research question: What factors contribute to school absenteeism among learners from tobacco farming homes?

In order to address these questions, the researchers adopted Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs Theory as the lens through which to interrogate the intersection between various factors in tobacco and non-tobacco farming homes and absenteeism. Maslow proposed a hierarchy of needs model featuring five levels to provide a better way of understanding how individual needs are met (Maslow, 1943). 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. In the context of the current study, socio-economic factors can cause learners to absent themselves from school. For instance, children cannot be expected to attend school when they are hungry, or lack adequate clothing. 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 themselves from school by unsatisfied needs. The next level, safety needs imply that without safety, pupils 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. 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 parents, there is a high likelihood of not attending school. The fourth level in Maslow's hierarchy of needs is self-esteem, which is the need for humans to be respected and valued by others. Pupils desire to be held in high self-esteem so as to have confidence. If they feel undervalued, labeled and made funny of, they will decide not to be in school all the time. According to Maslow, self-actualisation involves helping people become all that they are capable of becoming. This theory provided the framework to understand various connections through which tobacco farming affects primary school pupil absenteeism in Nkeyema District.

Methodology

The research design used was a case study design. Case studies were used in this study as they provided an easy to use design for the in-depth examination and discussion of learner absenteeism from school. This design was used with the intention of conducting an in-depth investigation aimed at getting peoples' (selected stakeholders in education) views, attitudes, and perceptions concerning absenteeism from school under a natural setting. The research used qualitative methods of data collection so as to have a deep insight in the research problem (learner absenteeism) through narrative and verbal data rather than by a scaled, calibrated measurement as would be the case with quantitative research designs (Leedy & Ormrod, 2005). These methods of data collection included interview guides and focus group discussion guides. Using this design, interviews and focus group discussions were conducted to collect primary data while secondary data was collected from school documents such as attendance registers. The qualitative approach helped the researcher to solicit views

and perceptions of participants about tobacco farming in relation to primary school learner absenteeism in Nkeyema District. The researcher used English and, in some interviews, used SiLozi, which was a common language spoken in the research sites. The researcher used purposive sampling to select the two primary schools, parents, class teachers and learners from the two primary schools. A sample of 44 participants enabled the researcher to gather participants who were able to provide information on the research topic. From each of the 2 selected schools, 16 learners (8 from each school) were selected with the help of the learner attendance registers and class teachers; 4 of these from each school were from tobacco farming homes and the other 4 were from non-tobacco farming homes. Twenty (20) parents of children attending the two schools (5, from tobacco farmers and 5 from non-tobacco farmers) were also selected. Lastly, 8 class teachers (4 from each school) were selected from the two primary schools. Considering that this was a purely qualitative study, the numbers of participants for the different subpopulations were conveniently determined.

To ensure the trustworthiness of the research findings, the credibility and authenticity were ensured through collection of verbatim statements from the participants. Further to this, the researchers triangulated the data collected through different methods from various participants thereby reducing the risk of a biased conclusion to the findings of the study. The first step in analysing the data was transcribing of the recorded views from both interviews and focus group discussions. The data was then edited and coded into categories and themes related to the research questions. Since the study was purely qualitative, the data were thematically analysed to make meaning out of the participants' responses to both one-on-one interviews and the focus group discussions. The researcher derived the themes from the original views of the participants.

Review of Literature

The leading cause to learner absenteeism from school cited in most literature can be grouped into three main categories. These categories are individual, home and school factors ((Daka et al., 2021; Cook and Ezenne, 2010; Malcom et al., 2003). Kabanga and Mulauzi (2020) in their study to understand pupil absenteeism and its related factors in rural primary schools of Nyimba District of Zambia found that individual factors included lack of motivation, peer pressure, lack of interest, and early marriages; home-related factors included poverty, farming, household chores, family business while school related factors included teacher punishment. Reid (2005) states that individual pupils with inadequate social and cognitive skills, emotional problems and low self-esteem are more likely not to attend school regularly. Hence, it is noted that the characteristics and qualities of individuals determines the rate at which they attend school.

A study by Moseki (2004), in Australia, found that age is the cause of pupil absenteeism from schools. Older learners are more likely to absent schools than younger ones because of many reasons such as peer pressure and joining of gang groups which do various devious activities during school hours. In most rural areas of Zambia, parents use their children to do most home activities for them. The older the children, the more home obligations they are expected to have hence, making it difficult for them to attend school regularly. Apart from the learners' age, Moseki (2004) and Kearney (2008), also found that personality factors such as lack of recognition of regular attendants can promote learner absenteeism. Learners need some acknowledgement for regular school attendance and when this is not given, some learners down play the importance of school attendance.

In Zambia, Banja (2002; 2013), has identified pupil absenteeism from school as one of the common forms of pupil indiscipline. Further, Kabungo conducted a study in 2018 on learner absenteeism in primary schools in Itezhi-tezhi District using a mixed method approach. The findings of his study were that poverty led to learners' absenteeism due to hunger in their homes. His study findings revealed that learners resorted to staying home than going to school on an empty stomach because it negatively affected their concentration.

In all societies, the family plays a major role in shaping the educational experiences and achievements of the children and transmission of status from one generation to the other. Throughout the world, children from parents with high socio-economic status are more likely to be enrolled in school than children from poor families (Buchman, 2002). Household characteristics are important determinants of schooling decisions and outcomes. The household production function approach developed by Becker (1965) is often used by researchers in economics of education to show that household characteristics such as income and levels of parental education determine whether a child attends school, stays in school, learns and makes progress to higher levels of education or not (Samarrai and Peasgood, 1998). It is also used in economics of education to model other household schooling decisions, such as the type of school that a child attends (Kingdon, 2007). Tobacco farming is an economic activity through which people raise their socio-economic status in NKeyema District. At the same time tobacco farming is said to be more labour-intensive, hence, the likelihood of parents involving their children in farming during school hours.

The International Labour Organisation (ILO, 2014) did a rapid assessment on child labour in tobacco growing communities of Kaoma District of Zambia in 2014 to investigate the problem of child labour in tobacco growing activities. The findings were that child labour in agriculture in general, and in tobacco-related activities in particular, Kaoma District was a serious problem and affected both boys and girls of all age-groups. Most children worked in tobacco farms as part of family labour with no remuneration for their work, while the much older children (from 15 to 17years)

would seek work for wages in other tobacco small-holder family-run farms. Children's work in agriculture is considered part of their domestic work just like any other, and as such, most families believed that children had a responsibility to work in the fields as a service to their households. Because of such a mindset, a large proportion of children interviewed saw nothing wrong with engaging in tobacco growing and other related activities. The ILO assessment further revealed that, the cultural belief system of the parents promotes child labour. This is made worse by the modest levels of education of parents of the working children. Parents with very little or no education at all, do not put a premium on their children's education thus, putting the future of children in jeopardy as such children will have very few alternatives in life.

Most studies on how farming affects learner school attendance have been done on farming in general and on other forms of child labour. The agriculture sector in Zambia has been growing, but the sector also continues to have the largest share of child labourers estimated at more than 90 per cent. This is according to findings of the ILO, which also indicated that the trend had not reduced since 2012 (ILO, 2012). The ILO Global Estimates of child labour results and trends focusing on the 2012 to 2016 interval also notes that a number of children are trapped in child labour worldwide, but the largest proportion of children in hazardous work is in the sub-Saharan Africa. According to ILO's 2012 study for child labour and modern slavery, which included human trafficking, child labour remained primarily concentrated in agriculture.

Various measures for addressing learner absenteeism have been suggested in studies done in different parts of the world. In his study, Moseki (2004) established that one of the ways through which the problem of learner absenteeism can be curbed is through the improvement of their welfare both in school and at home. Katanga (2016), in his study found that, strategies most schools used to reduce learner absenteeism were; the promotion of extra-curricular activities, awarding and recognising good school attendance, improved school relationships with the community as well as the primary school feeding nutritional programme. Sianzala (2011), similarly, reports that the school feeding programme improved learner school attendance in all the schools where it was introduced in Namibia. Some pupils may fail to attend school regularly because of poverty, hence, when such pupils are exposed to meals at school it becomes a big motivation to attend school. In addition, Kratli and Dyer (2009) have suggested more innovative ways such as mobile schools to counter learner absenteeism among nomadic pastoralists in Kenya.

The above reviewed studies were conducted in different geographical locations with a socio-economic environment different from that of Nkeyema District where the current research was conducted. In addition, there were also no studies, which seemed to have provided data on whether tobacco farming contributed to learner absenteeism or reduced it. There is scarcity of statistical data on the nature and conditions of children from tobacco farming homes in relation to school absenteeism.

Findings and Discussion

The results below express the views of the selected participants. The researcher identified themes in relation to the research questions based on the opinions of the study participants. The findings have been presented descriptively; verbatim statements said by respondents were used as much as possible in the descriptions. Participant responses addressed issues that coalesced around how tobacco farming affected learner attendance at primary school.

Factors which Contributed to Absenteeism of Learners from both Tobacco Farming and Non-Tobacco Farming Homes

The responses from the participants of this study revealed that helping parents in tobacco growing and related activities was a contributing factor to learner absenteeism in Nkeyema District. In line with this, one class teacher (CT 5) from School B had this to say:

Because of the need to make more profit, most parents in this community do not employ enough workers in their tobacco fields for the fear of food expenses and end of contract payments. What they do, instead, is to use their own family members including young school going children as a cheap source of labour in their fields. Because of this, most of these children end up not attending school regularly. I feel sorry for these children because even when they come to school, they don't concentrate because of the hard work they may have done in the night or in the morning.

Participants further stated that tobacco farming was the most practiced agricultural activity in the district and that most parents involved their children in the farming activities as a source of cheap labour. The tobacco farming activities they were involved in were said to be very stressful and time-consuming, hence, they could not manage to attend school regularly. This finding is in line with Reid's (2005), that farm work and heading cattle contributed to the absenteeism of learners in rural schools. This study found that tobacco farming demanded more labour and that most farmers did not employ farm workers because of the unsustainable labour costs. Instead, they engaged their family members as a source of farm labour to save on labour expenses. The findings further revealed that tobacco farmers mostly, used the school-going children to do some farm activities when they were under pressure such as during the leaf collection, selection and grading stages. Most of the parents decided to use their children in tobacco farming activities to avoid the costs which come with employing farm workers. This finding is also similar to Kabanga and Mulauzi's (2020), research done in Nyimba District, which showed that some pupils were withdrawn from school even during the term to help their guardians during the farming season. In the process of doing so, many pupils ended up absenting or dropping out of school. This scenario

of parents keeping children away from school so that they work on subsistence farms is similar to the one established by Cook and Ezenne (2010) in Jamaica.

It was also noted that tobacco farming did not only contribute to the absenteeism of learners from tobacco farming homes but also from those coming from non-tobacco farming homes. Children from non-tobacco farming homes also worked on tobacco farms so as to raise money for their households. Their parents justified the involvement of the school going children in the farm works by stating that these children contributed in raising money to cover for their school requirements.

Furthermore, it was noted that the activities involved in tobacco farming were more tiresome and continuous compared to other farming activities such as growing maize, hence, tobacco farming was mentioned as a contributing factor to absenteeism. In his theory, Maslow stated that human beings need to achieve physiological needs if they are to progress to the next level on the pyramid of basic needs. The findings of this study support Maslow's theory in that parents mentioned that the reason they involved their children in the farming activities was to raise money to help them sustain their household needs, which included food and proper clothing. Food and clothing are linked to the learners' ability to either attend or miss school. A learner is more likely to attend school when they have proper food and clothing.

Participants further stated that, learners whose parents were tobacco farmers absented themselves frequently from school because they were subjected to doing all the house chores when their parents were busy with the tobacco farm activities. To support this assertion, one tobacco farming parent (TFP 7) said:

TBZ (Tobacco Board of Zambia) does not allow the use of children in the tobacco fields hence, my children take up all the responsibility of doing house chores so that we the parents have enough time to meet our daily targets without having disturbances such as breaking for cooking.

Another parent (TFP 5) said:

My children help me a lot for me to have a successful season. I don't give them heavy jobs to do but mostly, they do house chores and take care of the home since me, my wife and the workers are preoccupied with various types of work throughout the day and even at night, sometimes. I don't know how I could have managed if not for the help of these children because sometimes, we work continuously so as to meet the daily targets hence, time to do house chores, especially food preparation is rarely available.

This study found that doing house chores was a contributing factor to absenteeism among learners from both tobacco farming and non-tobacco farming homes in Nkeyema District and at the same time, noted that tobacco farming increased the problem of house chores. Most tobacco farmers did not directly involve their children

in the farming activities but indirectly involved them by referring them to do all house chores, which included cooking for the entire family and workers in some cases, fetching water from distant places and doing the laundry. These findings are in line with those of Wadesango and Machingambi (2011), and Cook and Ezenne (2010), who reported that learner's attendance was sometimes, affected as they had to fulfil their home-related obligations since they were from poor family backgrounds. The study also revealed that learners whose parents were tobacco farmers were always occupied with house chores if not involved in the farm activities. Zahafs (2005) et al., stated that, learner absenteeism in rural areas may be due to the practice of child labour where families make their children work to subsidise the family income or perform extensive domestic chores when their parents are in the fields. Unlike the general part-time house chores done by the learners whose parents were not tobacco farmers, it was found that due to the continuous need to work in tobacco farms, parents of school going learners turned their children into full-time housekeepers for some period of time so that their parents could concentrate on working on the farms without having to break for food preparation, which they regarded as time wasting. It is very difficult for a child to refuse to do what the parents tell him or her to do. This, however, is at the expense of attending school because they need physiological needs as well as a sense of belonging in order for them to reach self-actualisation just as Maslow theory stipulates. Thus, these children ended up missing school because they have no option but to obey their parents.

The study further found that learners absented themselves from school frequently because of the long distances from homes to schools. Most participants stated that the problem of long distances from homes to schools was increased by tobacco camp farming settlements. One parent in School B reported that:

The long distance between homes and the school makes it difficult for a child to attend school every day. Some of these children need to cover more than 7 kilometers everyday on foot to attend school and in some cases, the roads are not clear because they pass through the bush, which makes the young ones get scared, hence miss school.

In line with this statement, one parent (NTPF 2) from School A said:

One of the reasons why learners coming from our friends who are involved in tobacco farming fail to attend school regularly is because of the long distances from the far farming camps they move to, especially during the harvesting season. Drying tobacco leaf demands continuous supply of firewood hence, these farmers prefer to go and camp in the bush for the farming purposes without considering how long the distance their children will need to cover if they are to attend school every day.

The findings of this study show that the long distance from homes to school was increased by tobacco farming. It was revealed by the tobacco farmers that they practiced some form of temporal camping to facilitate the conducive environmental demands for the farming process. In the first and early stages of tobacco farming, which is around October, farmers moved with their families to the water-logged areas for gardening purpose (tobacco nurseries). These water-logged areas may be far away from schools and it was due to this that once they shift from their usual residences, learners found it difficult to adapt to the new long distances between the school and the camp area resulting into their absenteeism from school. During the tobacco transplanting stage, farmers moved to other farming camps; this time in the bush where there was availability of trees to be used during the drying stage. The findings of this study revealed that, tobacco farmers could go and camp to far areas of about 20 kilometers from their usual residences during the tobacco drying stage. It is these long distances created by tobacco farming activities, which made learners from tobacco farming homes to absent themselves from school. As noted in Jamaica by Cook and Ezenne (2010), and Daka (2021) et al., in Zambia, long distances from home to school was seen as a common factor negatively influencing learner attendance at primary school level. This lends credence to the argument that long distances to school, especially in rural parts of the country, affects learner attendance at school.

In relation to long distance, the research findings also showed that lack of proper road network from some farming camps to schools was another challenge that made learners from tobacco farming homes abscond from school more than those from non-tobacco farming homes. Some farming camps where farmers went to were not well connected to the general community owing to the poor road network. During the rainy season when the bushes are thick, children got scared of moving alone to school and this really affected their school attendance negatively. This finding confirms their contents of the UNESCO report (2009), that suggests that, because learners may have to walk long distances to school in rural areas where there is no proper transport, it may cause learner absenteeism. The long distances between schools and farming settlements created as a result of tobacco farming have really led to an increase in school absenteeism of pupils whose parents were tobacco farmers. When connected to Maslow's' basic need theory, this finding hinders the safety needs which is the second group of needs in the hierarchy towards self-actualisation. Children were exposed to unsafe environments with poor road network and far away from schools, which hindered their ability to move towards self-actualisation and ended up as absentees at school.

Strategies for Enhancing Collaboration for Addressing the Problem of Primary School Learner Absenteeism in Nkeyema District

Given the arguments for the effect of tobacco farming on pupil absenteeism at school, and while there is a great need to ensure pupils attend school, there are also areas of likely conflicts as discussed in the preceding section. It is, therefore, imperative to

identify methods of overcoming such challenges, otherwise, the efforts of stakeholders would not produce any fruit. In probing what approaches would be ideal to exploit the benefits of collaboration, respondents were of the view that the solution to the problems of pupil absenteeism rests in having specific strategies to monitor the issue such as written agreements and well-defined strategies that stipulate the responsibilities, expectations and boundaries of the concerned parties. Some participants in this study suggested that for this collaboration to succeed, there was need to establish a central office to co-ordinate all the stakeholders. The officers in such an office should be pivotal in communicating mutual decisions of the stakeholders. Enhancing communication by creating regular contacts would be one of the strategies that can help to maximise the benefits of the collaboration. Another prominent view by education officials who participated in the study was that the envisaged collaboration must be anchored on mutual trust, honesty and commitment among stakeholders to ensure success of the collaboration. Finally, the progress of the collaboration has to be constantly monitored and evaluated to ensure that the challenges are addressed before they lead to failure.

It was found that there was need for parents to meet educational requirements of their children so as to encourage them to attend school regularly. To support this, a learner (L11) had this to say:

Absenteeism can end if only our parents can provide us with what we need for school such as books, uniforms, shoes and food for eating during break time. Other learners fail to attend school because they are afraid of being laughed at by others that they don't have shoes and uniforms.

Another learner (L16) added his voice by saying that:

The problem of absenteeism can be ended if all our parents provide us with basic school requirements. Most of us walk long distances to come to school and it makes us tired most times. If our parents could buy us bicycles, we are going to be motivated to attend school regularly because there will be no distance burden.

It was noted that some children failed to attend school regularly because they did not have the necessary requirements such as a pair of shoes and uniforms. Such children were sometimes laughed at by others either for wearing a finished pair of shoes or for being barefooted and it is due to this fear of embarrassment that they decided to abscond from school. Other children stayed very far from school and needed to cover very long distances every day to school hence, an easy mode of transport such as a bicycle was needed. Providing food for them to carry as they went to school is also a necessary requirement because once they leave home in the morning, they can only get back home in the evening. This made it very difficult for pupils to stay at school. Other requirements which could motivate children to attend school include provision of umbrellas during the rain and hot sunny seasons. When parents strive to provide

such requirements, children will feel cared for and hence, be encouraged to attend school daily because their parents are concerned about their wellbeing. This finding is congruent to that of Shoba (2013), who noted that some pupils lacked appropriate clothing to attend school and sit for an examination. Some parents fail to provide the school requirements for their children hence, making it difficult for such children to have the morale of attending school as required. It is, therefore, important to always look at what children need in order to lighten the difficulties of attending school. It is through these gestures by parents that children will have the zeal to attend school as needed for their progress in education. This finding fits in with Maslow's needs theory, which states five levels of motivational needs, ranging from physiological needs to self-actualisation. Just like the theory states, this finding also requires the parents to provide their children with the necessary needs, which will take them towards self-actualisation, which, in this case, implies regular school attendance.

Participants further explained that there was need for serious sensitisation of both parents and learners themselves on the importance of regular school attendance in order to end the problem of learner absenteeism. In line with this, a class teacher (CT 7) said:

There is serious and urgent need for community sensitisation on the importance of regular school learner attendance. Most of the parents do not seem to know and understand the value of education on their children and that is the reason they cannot play a role of encouraging them to attend school always. These parents should be sensitised by either the Ministry of Education officials or the tobacco companies themselves so that they do not stop school going children from attending classes for their farming or home-based activities.

Some parents did not know the importance of their children's regular school attendance. They did not see anything wrong with their children missing school for a few days because they were not aware of the negative effects, which came along with it hence, the need to educate such parents. Malcom et al. (2003) and Cook and Ezenne (2010), reported that learner absenteeism was in existence partly because of parents putting a low value on education. Some parents did not value education as they saw nothing profitable in educating a child.

The study also revealed that children should also be sensitised on the importance of their regular school attendance because some of them did not value education as a result of peer pressure. This finding is in line with Lubeya (2012), who mentioned that, peer pressure contributed to pupil absenteeism during national practical examinations and that some pupils were not interested in school mostly due to peer pressure which, in turn, landed them into early marriages or early pregnancies due to poverty. Lubeya further stated that there was need to sensitise such pupils to make them aware of the importance of continued school attendance. The current study, therefore, suggested

that there is need for continued guidance and counselling of young ones on the importance of education and attending school regularly.

The study also notes that there was need for tobacco companies to work with school administrators and community leaders in order to help end the use of school going children as a source of labour in tobacco farming if the problem of learner school absenteeism in this community is to be reduced. The findings indicated that, since school administrators and community leaders live in the villages where the farming is taking place, they can monitor whatever is going on. One class teacher (CT 8) had this to say:

All the tobacco companies operating in this district should have a sense of social cooperate responsibility when it comes to issues affecting the education of the children of their farmers. They should have deliberate programmes in collaboration with the school administrators to ensure that all the farmers follow the school child protection policies. The school management should be reporting the farmers who do not let their children to attend school regularly to their company so that punitive measures can be taken.

In line with this, a parent (NTPF 8) had this to say:

What I have observed is that these tobacco companies do not care whether farmers follow the school child protection policy or not because they are never on the ground to check. Farmers cannot report each other, therefore, what is needed is for the companies to have representatives or work with the community leaders to help monitor what is happening closely. By doing this, farmers will stop using their school-going children as a source of labour and this shall reduce learner absenteeism.

The study also found that the tobacco companies operating in Nkeyema District could sponsor educational activities such as the sensitisation of parents on the need to stop the usage of children as a source of labour. In the same vein, some participants stated that the companies should promote less labour-intensive farming techniques and provide technologies to farmers to easy their farming activities which, in turn, shall reduce the usage of children in the farming activities. Through their social cooperate responsibilities, tobacco companies should work with the Ministry of Education to come up with mobile education activities to help address the distance barrier for learners in the tobacco farming camps. This is in line with what Kratli and Dyer (2009), suggested on the education of nomadic pastoralists in Kenya. There is need for alternative solutions (like mobile schools, alternative basic education and interactive radio instruction programmes) to be introduced at the periphery of the school system, on an ad hoc basis and in an ancillary position. The mode of delivery may be different but the fundamental understanding of teaching and learning behind these programmes

remains that of the classroom context. So far, this approach has taken many African countries substantially, closer to achieving the goal of universal primary education (Kratli and Dyer, 2009). This approach could help in taking learning closer to the children in the tobacco farming camps in Nkeyema District.

Conclusion and Recommendations

This section gives the conclusions of the study and then comes up with corresponding recommendations as follows:

The major findings of the study on the question of stakeholder perceptions on absenteeism among primary school learners from tobacco and non-tobacco farming homes in Nkeyema District show clearly the impact of socio-economic activities such as tobacco farming on primary school learners' school attendance. At the centre of this problem is the labour intensive nature of tobacco farming and the inability of the small-scale farmers to hire labour and still be able to make a profit from their farming activities. It is a question of survival for the families of these pupils. This study has shown that pupils of the children of tobacco farmers faced an untenable situation and were stuck between the rock and the hard place. The findings of this study, therefore, confirm the position of the theoretical framework, namely; Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs in relation to the need to satisfy physiological needs before other needs.

Arguably, collaboration serves as the best alternative to reducing absenteeism in Zambia. In a developing country like Zambia, denying pupils the opportunity to excel at school because of absenteeism could lead to perpetuation of poverty. This could ultimately hinder their development and contribution to the economic basket of the country. It is clear from the study that families face numerous challenges, which if not addressed are likely to result into the failure of these families on the education of their children. Without education, these children could become socio-economic liabilities.

Tobacco farming exacerbated pupil absenteeism beyond the normal levels. While understanding the causes of pupil absenteeism is important, even more important is parental ability to understand and interpret the consequences of learner absenteeism on the education of their children and coming up with sustainable solutions to this problem. Our argument is that there is need to relook the role of tobacco farming in promoting pupil absenteeism in primary schools. This entails revisiting the status quo.

Recommendations

In view of the findings of this study and the conclusions drawn, the following recommendations are made. Considering the huge impact of tobacco farming on pupil attendance in school in Nkeyema District, education authorities should urgently come up with appropriate strategies to curb learner absenteeism from school. This will help stem negative impact on drives towards attaining education for all.

To reduce the negative effects that tobacco farming has on learner school attendance, the government, through the child protection unit, the Ministry of Agriculture and the Ministry of Education, on the one hand, and the tobacco companies on the other, should come together, conduct an analysis of all causal factors and collaborate to mitigate the challenge of pupil absenteeism from school by promoting less labour-intensive farming techniques. Furthermore, education authorities should engage the tobacco farming companies on the necessity of mitigating the adverse effects of tobacco farming on the education of their children. School administrators and community leaders should work with tobacco farmers to help them better balance the need for financial sustainability and the need to educate their children and ensure that parents do not use their children as a source of labour for tobacco farming at the expense of their education. Tobacco companies should also work with the education administrators to introduce mobile education activities in form of outdoor class sessions to cater for learners who are in farming camps. The school guidance and counselling departments should sensitise parents and their children on the importance of regular school attendance in order to reduce absenteeism among learners. Further, school authorities should encourage schools to start awarding both pupils and their parents for good school learner attendance as a way of motivating and inspiring both regular attendees and those who regularly absent themselves.

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