Understanding Pupil Absenteeism and its Factors in Rural Primary Schools of Nyimba District of Zambia

by

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Abstract

This study examined the concept of pupil absentism and explored factors that perpetuate it in rural primary schools of Nyimba district. The objectives of the study were to: establish the causes of pupil absenteeism; identify ways in which pupil absenteeism affected teaching and learning process; ascertain home and school interventions to curb pupil absenteeism in rural primary schools in Nyimba district. A descriptive research design which was supported by qualitative methods of data collection was used in the study. Interview Guides and six Focus Group Discussions were used to collect data from a purposively sampled population of forty two (42) study participants comprising of six (6) guidance and counselling teachers and thirty six (36) pupils. The study used thematic analysis to analyze data, where common themes were identified, grouped for easy interpretation and presented using verbatim based on the research objectives. The study identified ways in which absenteeism affected the teaching and learning processes including poor performance, fostering indiscipline, insufficient comprehension of concepts and the difficulties experienced by teachers. Intervenetions to curb pupil absenteeism were ascertained calling for parents, teachers and all stakeholders in education to make firm decisions to stop absenteeism among the learners by avoiding early marriages, fostering collaboration and being flexible in time management. The study therefore, recommended that school administrators should take keen interest in providing careers talk to learners through invitation of significant people in

society to share experiences with learners. Schools should engage in constructive sensitization of parents on the importance of education to curtail absenteeism in primary schools, parents should utilise Parent Teacher Association (PTA) platforms to sensitize each other on the importance of education, promote traditional ceremonies like chinamwali during the holidays and week ends. The study also recommended that the Ministry of General Education should consider building more schools in rural areas to alleviate the problem of long distances learners cover daily. Harsh punishments should be given to men who marry or impregnant school going children.

Keywords: Pupil absenteeism, school attendance, academic performamce, economic development, Sustainable development Goals (SDGs), school dropout, teaching, learning, rural primary schools and Zambia.

1. Introduction

Education is the only way in which knowledge, skills, values and habits can be pass on from one generation to the other. Thus, the world today is more resolved in educating its citizens than never before in the history of evolution of man. This is evident through commitments by both the developing and developed countries to put measures to educate every child and educate them well. United Nations (UN) member states, Zambia inclusive met in New York in 2015 met as a universal call to action to end poverty, protect the planet and ensure that all people enjoy peace and prosperity by 2030. Education plays a critical role in creating poverty free societies and ensure that people leave in peace and harmony. This led to the development of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) 2030. Crucial to the SDGs was the goal for education, SDG 4 which is to 'ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all' (United Nations, 2016). During the formulation of the SDGs 2030 agenda, experts directed their energy towards educating the global citizens through deliberate and well planned policy framework to help member countries conduct self-monitoring and evaluation of programmes to ensure that the targets set are met with appropriate measures.

A premium was placed on education because it was viewed as one of the largest industries in any country that affected everyone in society (United Nations, 2016 and World Bank, 2014). It was borne in mind by global spectators of development that the problem of poverty and how to reduce it remained the most pressing issue in the international development agenda (World Bank, 2014) and that education was key to poverty eradication in the world. Education is the foundation for poverty alleviation and fostering national development. It plays a key role in every factor of the economy including health, environment, good governance, freedom and respect for human rights, and wealth. For example, according to Mulauzi et al (2013), sustainable socio-economic development in any country call for a healthy and educated populace. Education equips individuals with skills, knowledge and values necessary to take preventive measures against diseases and improve their health and quality of life. A healthy populace contributes effectively to poverty alleviation in terms of increase in productivity and wealth creation, disease prevention, access to safe drinking water, knowledge of proper disposal of wastes, hygiene and nutrition - "much more than clinics, doctors and drugs, which are costly curative solutions than prevention against diseases" (Mulauzi et al, 2013). Societies that are well-informed adjust promptly to varying social and economic situations; thus, they find ways in which to overcome developmental challenges such as poverty and ill-health (Mulauzi et al, 2013). Equips people with ability to absorb new ideas, new information and new data to resolve problems. It empowers individuals with knowledge of available options or opportunities and the risks involved in taking those options. It empower individuals to be self-confidence, lower the birth rate while decreasing child and maternal mortality rates, increase life expectancy and generate income.

Aditionally, education is an indispensable resource that raises awareness and changes people's attitudes towards their environment. It enables individuals to gain knowledge on how to effectively manage and conserve their natural resources, fight desertification and deforestation, avoid pollution and ensure the preservation of biodiversity among other things. Education promotes equitable participation, involvement and mobilization of all stakeholders. It is necessary for the design of policies and plans, which should

consider the needs of the people so that they can participate in the development process. Through education, people are empowered to gradually take charge of and influence the running of their daily lives. Education is a crucial component of the right to freedom of expression, and necessary for the protection of all other human rights. It equips people with skills to relate to and interact meaningfully with other individuals in the society. Consequently, it is fundamental to the attainment of a democratic society and to the inherent dignity and development of every human being. Moreover, education is a prerequisite for wealth creation. It is through education that people come to know available resources and the means to utilize them to create wealth, control exploitation, and make informed decisions. Education empower individuals to seek out opportunities to raise their income levels and also foster self-understanding and self-reliance.

It is in this spirit that Zambia has continued to domesticate and implement a long-standing educational goal that every child that enters grade one should be able to complete free and compulsory primary school without opportunity costs (Ministry of Education, 1996; 2003 and 2007). Attending school regularly is a vital factor in school success for both students and teachers. Unfortunately, some learners, yet for one reason or another miss a day of school. The general tendency to engage in such unwillingness to attend school is referred to as absenteeism. Pupil absenteeism is defined by Teasley (2004) and Shooba (2013) as a period of time when a pupil does not attend school.

Pupil absenteeism results in loss of quality teaching and learning time for teachers and pupils respectively, leading to untaught or unlearned academic skills and objectives, and subsequent reduction in pupil performance. Absenteeism by pupils may result in unlearned subject material because of fewer hours of instruction, and lead to disruption of class instruction for teachers who have to administer remediation for the absent pupil when he returns to school. Additionally, absenteeism by pupils may result in poor academic achievement because students will not be able to receive instruction on a consecutive basis. This problem also causes low scores because absent pupils are not present to learn key concepts and skills that are assessed on standardized tests and examinations. Absenteeism

can also have serious repercussions on the learner. It can lead to an increasing disinterest in school and academics in general. It further increases the chances of a learner eventually dropping out of school, which can lead to long term consequences for them such as lower average incomes, higher incidences of unemployment, and a higher likelihood of incarceration, early marriages and unwanted pregnancies. Moreover, pupils who drop out of school face a higher risk of poverty because of their inability to secure quality paying employment due to their lack of education and resources. And dropouts who lack education and resources are more likely to commit criminal activity leading to incarceration.

In this regard, there is an urgent need to investigate pupil absenteeism because it is a puzzle according to Weiss and García (2018), composed of multiple pieces that has a significant influence on education outcomes, including graduation and the probability of dropping out. Additionally, the factors that contribute to it are complex and multifaceted, and likely vary from one school setting, district, or nation to another. While research has linked missing school to elevated risk of dropping out and poorer completion rates, Weiss and García (2018) noted that there is need for policymakers and researchers to explore the factors driving learner or pupil absenteeism and how to reduce it. Therefore, the study sought to assess factors that perpetuated pupil absenteeism in rural primary schools of Nyimba district, Zambia.

1.1 Statement of the Problem

Despite, the government's effort to introduce motivational programmes and policies such as Home Grown School Feeding Programme (HGSFP) (Banda, 2017); squash primary school fees; deploy teachers in rural schools; provide infrastructure and instructional materials to rural schools, pupil absenteeism has continued to prove to be problematic in most rural schools (Shooba, 2013). If left unchecked, Zambia may fail to meet the 2030 agenda on the education SDGs where there is need for countries to strive to promote lifelong and equitable education for all. According to Weiss and García (2018), there is a lack of available evidence that allows researchers to examine absenteeism at an aggregate national level, or that offers a comparison across schools or regions and over time.

And while some schools or regions gather aggregate information on attendance (i.e. average attendance rate at the school or district level), very few consider student-level attendance metrics like the number of days each pupil misses or if a pupil is perpetually absent, and how this matter in as far as teaching and learning is concerned. These limitations according to Weiss and García (2018) reduce policymakers' ability to design interventions that may possibly enhance pupil performance on nontraditional indicators, and in turn, boost the positive influence of those indicators (or reduce their negative influence) on educational progress. While some studies have explored the effects of pupil absenteeism (Weiss and García, 2018), little is known on the factors that perpetuate pupil absenteeism particularly in Nyimba district of Zambia, hence the study to bridge this knowledge gap.

1.2 Objectives of the Study

The purpose of this study was to assess factors that perpetuated pupil absenteeism in rural primary schools of Nyimba district. The specific objectives were to:

(i)   Establish the causes of pupil absenteeism in rural primary schools of Nyimba district.

(ii)   Identify ways in which pupil absenteeism affected teaching and learning in rural primary schools of Nyimba district.

(iii)   Ascertain home and school interventions to curb pupil absenteeism in rural primary schools of Nyimba district.

1.3   Research Questions

The research questions that guided the study included the following:

(i)   What are the causes of pupil absenteeism in rural primary schools of Nyimba district?

(ii)   How does pupil absenteeism affect teaching and learning in rural primary schools of Nyimba district?

(iii)   Which home and school interventions are required to curb pupil absenteeism in rural primary schools in Nyimba district?

1.4 Significance of the Study

The findings of this study are important to the Government of Zambia, particularly the Ministry of General Education (MoGE) to come up with interventions to address the causes of pupil absenteeism in rural primary schools of Nyimba District. This study is also beneficial to other stakeholders in education like teachers and parents to develop interest to curb pupil absenteeism so that more learners can stay in school. Policy makers and educators through this study are likely to develop evidence-based decisions when dealing with pupil absenteeism in schools at district, provincial and national levels. Above all the study adds knowledge on pupil absenteeism to the existing body of literature.

2.0   Methodology

2.1   Philosophical Assumptions

The study was motivated by the views of interpretivism. According to this worldview, individuals seek understanding of the world in which they live and work, thus they develop subjective meaning of their experiences towards certain objects, events or things (Creswell, 2009). In this philosophical design, researchers rely on participants views over a given phenomenon to construct meaning through discussion and interaction. Open ended questions were used in order to give chance to the participant to explain the problem at hand in line with social, cultural and historical context. In supporting this worldview, Dilthey (1976:35) says "the study of social phenomena requires an understanding of the social worlds that people inhabit, which they have already interpreted by the meanings they produce and reproduce as a necessary part of their everyday activities together." Further, this worldview considers human beings as part of the social world, which exists due to the interaction and actions.

Interpretivism emphasises a search for meaning, understanding and social interaction as the basis for knowledge creation and this view was supported by Nkhata et al (2019) who observed that meaning and knowledge are socially constructed through social interaction. Crotty (2005:84) also says interpretivism aims to understand phenomena, to interpret meaning within particular social and cultural contexts, and to uncover beliefs and elicit meaning from action and intention

through dialogical interaction between researchers and participants. According to this worldview, the social world is open and changing by ways people go about their lives. Research methods therefore, must be capable of capturing the quality of people's interpretations and understanding the meaning to people's course of actions. The basic assumption is that there are multiple truths. According to Crotty (2005:85), "truth, or meaning, comes into existence in and out of our engagement with the realities in our world. In this understanding of knowledge, it is clear that different people may construct meaning in different ways, even in relation to the same phenomenon.

It is from this standpoint that the current study lays its pillars to guide the researcher to interact with the participants who were directly involved in handling primary school going pupils and helped construct and interpret meaning from their views in that society in line with their daily experiences to pupil absenteeism. As already noted, different people may construct meaning in different ways, even in relation to the same phenomenon. Therefore, assessing factors that perpetuate pupil absenteeism in rural primary schools in Nyimba using this worldview may help to obtain unique and peculiar information that government and stakeholders may need to help formulate policy in curbing pupil absenteeism. Further, the current study used interpretivism as a philosophical foundation because it is assumed that teachers and pupils play different roles and face different challenges that cannot be quantified. An in-depth study was therefore, preferred to help obtain the views of the study participants on persisting factors of pupil absenteeism in rural primary schools in Nyimba district.

2.2 Research Design

A descriptive research design was employed in order to obtain extensive results on factors that perpetuated pupil absenteeism in rural primary schools in Nyimba district. The design was ideal for the researcher in the current study to bring out the participant's views and opinions on the subject in a more elaborate manner in order to establish the findings of the study. The study adopted qualitative research methods as a way of exploring attitudes, behavior and experiences through interviews in order to get an in-depth opinion from participants. In other words, the qualitative approach allowed the researcher to gather

in-depth views, ideas and knowledge from the participant's own perception and not researcher's fixed responses on pupil absenteeism.

2.3 Sampling and sample size

The target population comprised of forty two (42) respondents consisting of six (6) guidance and counselling teachers and thirty six (36) pupils in six (6) rural primary schools of Nyimba District. One teacher from each school was sampled. The study used purposive sampling to select all the six (6) primary schools in Nyimba district that included Unyanya, Mvuwa, Mombe, Nyimba, WalterHiebert and Siwalya Primary Schools. The study also used purposive sampling technique to select the teachers and the pupils who participated in the study. One guidance and counselling teacher and six perpetual absent pupils were selected from each school. These study participants were perceived to be reliable with the information pertaining to pupil absenteeism. Commenting on the use of this technique, Komb and Tromp (2006:82) stated that "Purposive sampling is when the researcher purposely targets a group of people believed to be reliable for the study." Thus the study carefully selected the teacher's in-charge of guidance and counselling services teaching at primary school because these teachers were the ones who took record of pupil absenteeism and offered guidance and counselling services. In terms of pupils, perpetual absentees at the school were sampled at the school authority's discretion as it was perceived that such pupils could help greatly in bringing out information that perpetuates pupil absenteeism.

2.4 Data collection instruments and procedures and data analysis

In-depth interviews and Focused Group Discussions were used to collect data. In-depth interviews were used to solicit information on causes of pupil absenteeism, roles of parents as well as measures put in place to help solve this problem from teachers. In-depth interviews   i.e. open-ended conversations with key participants (teachers) were conducted with the aid of a structured topic guide and interview meetings were held in a quiet place that were most convenient to participants. The interviews were carried out in English and local language (Cinyanja) to allow maximum participation depending on the participant's choice.

Six Focus Group Discussions, one in each school were conducted to collect information from pupils on their experiences in as far as absenteeism was concerned espcially as regards to what made them absent from school regularly. Focus Group Discussions were also done in Cinyanja with a bit of English because the pupils hardly expressed themselves in English. The study used thematic analysis to analyze data. The data was presented using verbatim.

3.0 Presentation of Findings

3.1 Respondents by Gender, Age and Grade

Table 1 shows the frequency distribution of study participants according to gender and status. There was a total of 42 study participants drawn from six selected primary schools comprising of thirteen (13) males and twenty nine (29) females. The study recruited two (2) male and four (4) female Guidance and Counselling teachers. Eleven (11) male and twenty five (25) female pupils from selected rural primary schools.

Table 1: Frequency distribution of participants according to gender and position

Position	Gender		Total
	Male	Female	
Guidance Teachers	2	4	6
Pupils	11	25	36
Totals	13	29	42

Table 2 shows the frequency distribution of pupils according to age. The table shows that pupils in the age category of 13 – 15 years were a majority in the sampled schools followed by those in the age range of 10-12, then 16 – 18 and lastly 7 – 9 years.

Table 2: Frequency distribution of pupils by age

Age	Male	Female	Totals
7-9 years	1	2	3
10-12years	3	9	12
13-15years	4	12	16
16-18years	3	2	5

*T*able 3 shows the frequency distribution of pupils according to grade. The table shows that pupils were sampled from all the primary school grades 1-7.

Table 3: Frequency distribution of pupils by grade

Age	Male	Female	Totals
1	2	4	6
2	1	2	3
3	2	6	8
4	3	7	10
5	1	3	4
6	1	1	2
7	1	2	3
Total	11	25	36

3.2   Pupil absenteeism statistics

Table 4 shows the total number of learners enrolled in six (6) rural primary schools of Nyimba district during the research visit. A total of 2,571 pupils were enrolled in the six schools targeted by the stufy. However, a total of 476 pupils were absent during the research visit of which 199 were boys and 277 were girls representing 18.3% absence during a school day.

Table 4: Pupil absenteeism statistics

Number of schools	Enrolment			Absent		
	Male	Female	Total	Male	Female	Total
6	1,229	1, 342	2571	199	277	476

3.3 Causes of Pupil Absenteeism as Reported by Teachers

Teachers were asked to explain the factors that perpertuated pupil absenteeism at their school. Distance was one of the problems that perpertuated pupil absenteeism as reported by one of the teachers from School A:

> *Distance affect a lot of children at this school. Many children come from farms which are sparsely located ... it is not a surprise to see children absent they get tired...*

A teacher from school B indicated that:

> *Absenteeism at this school is common because of puberty rites. You see children who reach puberty age are secluded from the community so that they perform cultural rites. This prevents them from attending school regularly. Secondly, children in this community are used for farm labour... thus during the farming season numbers are usually small in class.*

From school C, one teacher stated that:

> *The main problem at this school is the Nyimba river. Children do not cross the river at times during the rain season. This affects class attendance. Sometimes they try but often times miss class. This problem is reduced during dry seasons .... I think you have seen the river as you were coming to this school.. uh.*

At school D, one teacher mentioned that:

> *The economic activities of this place is selling bananas, you find that some parents send their children to sell bananas to travellers along Great East Road at the expense of school. This affects school attendance. Sometimes even after knocking off most children would go to either crush stones to sell or sell farm produce, they rarely have time for school work. This situation*

also creates pressure (peer pressure) on those children who attend school. Because of admiration of money and end up joining those who do business of selling bananas and mangoes.

At school E, it was pointed out by a teacher that:

Poverty in this community is extremely high, I have discovered that people are lazy here, they just love to marry and remarry thereby marrying school girls. It does affect class attendance… most of the girls I have known at this school started with absenteeism then pregnancy… to early marriages. Girls are forced to marry at a tender age to seek material support as I have already said that poverty here is something else …

Another teacher from School E believed that:

Most of the children do not come to school regularly due to prolonged sickness such as HIV related …… for example there is a girl in grade three… she misses class regulary, the school head teacher is aware because the guardian came to explain the medical conditions of the child.

A teacher from school F revealed that*:*

One problem we have is child headed households, for example we have a case of some children who do not regulary attend school because of the death of their parents. These children suffer to find ends meet. As a school we have identified them and support them in anyway we try. It looks the other family members in the community are nowhere to be seen to support these children… I only pray they should finish school that will be good news and a blessing. The other one is in grade 7 and the younger one in grade 5. They are doing well in class despite perpetual absence.

3.4 Causes of Pupil Absenteeism as Reported by Pupils

Six Focus Group Discussions, one from each school were conducted. Data from FGDs with pupils revealed a number of factors that perpetuated pupil absenteeism that were different from what teachers reported. For instance, one boy pupil narrated that:

I don't usually come to school after I lost my mother… my uncle tells me to heard cattle. If I refuse … they beat me and stingy me

food. My teacher is good but I don't like what my uncle does to me.

Another pupil said that:

I have'nt been coming to school regularly because I have a medical condition asthma, I fear coming to school during sports day because the teachers tell us to run … then my condition worsens… the teachers should be exempting us with asthma from doing sports.

One pupil also narrated that:

I abscond from school because teachers punish a lot for any misconduct. Insteady of just talking to you they like giving harsh punishment. I sometimes avoid to reach school if am late to avoid teacher punishments.

One pupil also explained that:

I don't usually come to school if am hungry, we do not have enough food at home … my father just came back from jail… so we eat once a day when Dad finds food … now you know when you are hungry you remember school …. (laughs….!).

Another pupil commented that:

My friends incite me to go with them to sell bananas and mangoes to the travellers at the Great East Road … them come to school with money … so we went last week and made K36 … we used the money during break time to buy flitters.

When asked whether the home environment contributed to pupil absenteeism, one pupil narrated as follows:

I have a lot of work which I do at home… I look after my mother's baby, clean the surrounding, clean plates and cook for the family because my parents go to the field early. If am not done taking care of household chores on time… I don't go to school…

One pupil also narrated that:

I feel shy to come to school without books and uniform. I told my aunt that my uniform was torn and that the books were finished but she said she will buy .. so I have nowhere to write…

3.5 Ways in which Pupil Absenteeism affect Teaching and Learning

Teachers were asked to state the the ways in which pupil absenteeism affected teaching and learning in their schools. One teacher had the following to say:

> *Pupil absenteeism is bad. It affects the running of the school and the children themselves. For example, children who do not come to school regulary perform low on class assessments, have insufficient comprehension of concepts due to inconsistencies in lesson attendance, and backwardness especially in mathematics and science. Those in lower grades find it difficulty to break through in reading and writing, poor handwriting ability, passivity and inattentiveness to classwork. Mostly absentees prefer to sit at the back in class as they have low self esteem due to failure to answer or participate in class. Mostly, if you check, they are the most indisciplined and rude.*

Another teacher explained that:

> *Pupil absenteeism at this school has been affecting learner performance. Despite good coverage of the syllabus by the teacher, absentees are a let down. Unfortunately tests analysis includes children who miss exams… this really affects the percentages.*

At another school, one teacher noted that:

> *Absenteeism is bad… just imagine children who come once or twice a week, how can they progress in terms of literacy. Children need previous information to connect to new information... we call it learning from known to unknown… now at this school, that principle is hard that is why you cannot compare most of the learners at this school with other schools in other zones. Results of performance shows, when we go for district debate or quiz activities. The problem really is as a result of absenteeism everyone at this school knows better….*

3.6 Interventions to Curb Pupil Absenteeism in Primary Schools

The study also sought to solicit for suggestions from teachers that can help curb pupil abstenteeism in schools. A number of suggestions came out from the respondents. In the first place, one teacher mentioned that:

> *There was need for coordinated parental support and guidance, introduction of sexuality education to bring awareness of*

dangers of early sex debut, pregnancy and early marriages, discouraging peer pressure, punishing erring parents by chiefs and government, providing necessary school requirements and monitoring actual school attendence by teachers.

Other respondents felt that monitoring pupils' play activities at home, and sensitizing parents so that they are made aware of the importance of education and in the process reduce household chores to pupils may drastically reduce absenteeism. Further, one teacher stated that;

Pupils need role models at school and at home, more especially girls. Each and every school should have female teachers as role models while at home there need for parents to encourage them on matters related to school achievements and careers and giving them motivational talks on the importance of education. I think as a school we can do more by inviting officers from other departments such as doctors, nurses, military personnel, police, politicians and others just to come and help motivate our learners on the importance of staying in school.. this may eventually help in reducing cases of pupil absenteeism.

Another teacher said that*:*

Absenteeism could be stopped by giving bicycles to pupils living more than 5km away from school as a way of motivition to them. The government should build high bridges on rivers to enable pupils with bicycles or those on foot to cross smoothly and this would be done in partnership with world bicycle relief programmes and Government to provide bursaries to the vulnerable pupils according to the childrens' needs. In addition, more schools needs to be built in rural areas to reduce the distances children cover daily to reach to a nearby school.

In addition, one teacher said that;

Primary schools should improve school health nutrition programmes to provide school meals that would attract children into school, such as giving them a well balaned diet of body buiding foods , protetive foods and energy giving foods not only the boiled maize as it is done in some schools. Of course this programme of school feeding is there but lacks consistency by the Ministry of General Education.

Another teacher from one school explained that;

> *Sensitizing parents during PTA meetings should be taken seriously to prevent more girls from dropping out… we cannot allow this situation to continue like this. I know that schools should also give material support such as books to children in dire need …..This is good for practice as teachers.*

Another teacher said that*;*

> *Guidance and Counselling services should be improved to help sensitise girls on the importance of education as well as to interact with girls on the problems they face. This department seem to be active in secondary schools and less is seen happening in primary schools… then one wonders whether school administrators understand how important this innovation is to teaching and learning.*

Another teacher suggested that*;*

School head teachers should be calling parents when their children absent themselves or show signs of dropout… in doing that class teachers can also make home visitations to familiarise themselves with home environments were children come from. This may help to provide quick interventions to pupils at risk of dropping out…

3.6.1   School Related Measures

As regards school related challenges that perpetuated pupil absenteeism, teachers were asked to suggest measures that can be put in place to resolve the problems. Teachers reported the following school interventions to curb absenteeism among the school going children especially among girls and needy pupils. For example, one teacher said that:

> *The Ministry of General Education policy from internal circulars indicate that morning classes should start at 07:00 hours. This honestly is not applicable at this school. Because most children cover long distances every day there is need for the school to have a flexible schooling hours and system to ensure that children who come from distant places don't feel discouraged.*

One teacher suggested that;

> *Schools should consider automatic promotion of over aged*

children to the next grade… you find that children in this community start school very late due to cattle rearing… if such children show some signs of improvement in literacy, then schools may consider automatic promotion to the next grade….

Another teacher said that;

School administrators and class teachers should be on the look out to identify children who absent themselves from school and encourage them to come regularly or assist them with school materials such as text books and other incentives.

Another teacher stated that:

School authorities can on an annual basis invite people from different careers like doctors, politicians, musicians, police, military personnel to give career talks to children to help motivate learners to stay in school.

3.6.2   Home Related Measures

Furthermore, the study sought to establish from both teachers and students what could be done to curb student absenteeism as regard home challenges pupils find themselves in. One teacher said that:

Government should criminalise early marriages by punishing those who marry or impregnate school pupils…parents should also be sensitised on the importance of educating children.

Another teacher had this to say: "Parents should refrain from organising puberty rites during school days. This can be done during the holidays". However, pupils also made their own suggestions. For instance, one pupil said:

I was absent from school because I was sick and I lost my grandmother ... who used to pay for my school fees, uniform and books, but the school did not ask why I was absent…All I heard was that you were absent, work here or there (punishment). I think the school should be assisting us children in need.

Contrary to the above assertion, some pupils from the same school indicated that, they were at one time visited or called by the school authorities. For example, one pupil said:

The school called my parents. We went together with my

parents to the school and the school head teacher told me to be coming to school. She also promised to help me with whenever I have school related challenge...

Another pupil said:

The school called me and asked me why I was absent from school for three weeks, when I told them I had no one to pay fees for me they even promised to help me financially.

Other pupils further made suggestions as to how they can be motivated to attend school. One pupil suggested as follows:

Government should continue bringing dropouts back to school, especially girls. Most of our friends who have dropped out need encouragement because they think it's too late to get back to school when they see their friends they were with have moved to higher grades.

Another pupil said:

It is important for school authorities to call absentees to school with their parents and talk to them about the importance of school… help disadvantaged pupils financially or making education free...

In addition, one pupil said:

Education should be made free for all grades to help pupils who cannot afford fees to remain in school or they have to be assisted financially. They can also give them loans to enable them meet school requirements. Schools should counsel pupils in times when they face problems, sensitising them on the importance of education.

4.0 Discussion of Findings

4.1 Background information

From the findings presented, there were more females than males who participated in the study. This was because there were more female absentees than male at the time of the study. The other reason could be the fact that during the period of the study (i.e. August-September), most girls are not involved in active social

responsibilities hence most of them are sent to school. Additionally, there are usually more girls in attendance between the ages of 7 and 13. However as they ascend in upper classes the numbers for female begin to dwindle as most of them dropout due to cultural practices such as initiation ceremonies, early marriages, early pregnancies and vending along the great east road. In fact, more pupils begin to drop out or abscond school when they reach grade four especially girls and that the reason why more pupils in grade four participated in the study.

Before exploring the causes of absenteeism from participants, the researcher sought to establish if absenteeism was real in these schools by collecting statistics of those absent. The findings presented in table 4 of the current study confirm that absenteeism was a real problem in primary schools. This is affirmed by a study by Banda (2017) who found that 26% of the learners enrolled in primary schools during his research visit were absent from school. Consortium for Research on Educational Access, Transitions and Equity (CREATE) (2011) also found that on the day of the field visit, 22 percent of children were absent from one sampled school, 35 percent in the second school and 47 percent in the third school. The findings generally revealed that children from economically and educationally disadvantaged families had high levels of absenteeism and repetition.

4.2 Causes of pupil absenteeism

The study identified a number of causes for pupil absenteeism. These causes of abstenteeism can be summarised into five (5) categories: physical factors (e.g. rivers, long distances), health factors (e.g. sickness), personal factors (peer pressure, lack of interest, early marriages), home related factors (poverty, farming, household chores, family business), cultural factors (puberty rites), and school related factors (lack of motivation, teacher punishment). Similarly, a study by Weiss and García (2018) revealed that poor health, residential mobility, extensive family responsibilities (e.g. children looking after siblings) - along with inadequate supports for students within the educational system (e.g. lack of adequate transportation, unsafe conditions, lack of medical services, harsh disciplinary measures, etc.) - are all associated with a greater likelihood of being absent, and particularly with being persistently absent.

Physical Factors: Proximity of the school in relation to pupils attendence was identified by the study to be one of the physical factor that caused absenteesim. The study has revealed that long distance to a nearby school was a challenge among school going children in selected primary schools in Nyimba district as reported by both teachers and pupils. Most of the villages in Nyimba district were over 10km away from the nearest school and this had made the pupils to cover long distances to school on foot and those who were not strong enough often stopped on the way or gave up school all together. This finding is also reported in Kelly (1999) that children in rural areas did not regularly attend school due to the challenge of long distance. Because of long distance, most pupils were discouraged and the most affected were girls who were usually abused on the way. Sometimes pupils were scared of wild animals on the way to school. In relation to distance, the research findings further showed that another factor that caused pupils to be absent from school was lack of bridges during the rain season as crossing rivers was impossible. This finding is similar to Shooba (2013), who alluded to the same challenge when he investigated the causes of pupil absenteeism from grade 7 composite examination in Zambia. In the 21st century, this situation can not be allowed to continue but the reality is that this problem still persists. It is generally, accepted that education is the cornerstone of any meaningful development. Building schools closer to communities is a step towards achieving this developmental ambition.

Health Factors: From the research findings, another factor that contributed to pupil absenteeism was ill-health of a parent or guardian especially those with prolonged illnesses. Some pupils especiall girls are told to look after their sick parents or do household chores. Balfanz and Byrnes (2012) in Baltimore also found that illness was a major cause of student absenteeism. Annual colds, flu, and other childhood ailments contributed to school absenteeism. Bridgeland, et al. (2006) also found that caring for a family member promoted pupil absenteeism. Children who are ill may not attend class and if they do, they fail to maintain the alertness and concentration needed to learn. An urgent need to establish the kind of illnesses that detered children in rural primary schools from attending school was necessary. Critical deseases needed to be identified, and immunisation programmes as well as vaccines needed to be given

to help these children accelerate in taking adavantage of learning opportunities provided to them and eventually achieve their dreams.

In addition, the findings revealed that pupils missed school because of loss of the bread winner in the family. In worst situations, some pupils ended up heading the families or lived with old grandparents forcing them to take up the roles of parentage. According to Shooba (2013) many children in such situations end up dropping out of school or fail to attend school regularly because there is none to provide the school necessities or they become heads of families. There is need for such children to be supported through social welfare so that they can continue with school.

Personal factors: The finds revealed that the other cause of pupil absenteeism from actual school attendence was the pupils themselves. Pupils were not interested in school mostly due to peer pressure which in turn landed most learners into early marriages or early pregnances due to poverty. Similar findings were reported by Lubeya (2012) that peer pressure contributed to pupil absenteeism during national practical examinations. Wadesango and Machingambi (2011) also alluded that the motivation for pupil absenteeism was the need to be with their friends and peers. Reid, (2005) further adds that truant pupils were influenced by their peers not to attend school and encouraged peers to engage in activities outside of the school with them. Balfanz and Byrnes (2012) also mentioned that students choose not to attend school because of external influence because either they or their parents do not see the value in school but marriage.

Home Related Factors: The research findings revealed that pupil absenteeism as reported by teachers and pupils was caused by parents/guardians' negative attitude towards school. Some parents did not value education as they saw nothing profitable in educating a child. Hence, they sent their children to sell bananas and mangoes along the Great East Road to raise some income for the family. In most cases, pupils especially boys are sent till land in the field and herd cattle. While girls are mostly given responsibilities of cooking or cleaning or fetching water or firewood. The research further showed that some pupils were withdrawn from school even during the term to help their guardians with farming during the farming season and herding cattle. In the process of doing so, many pupils get tired and ended up absenting or dropping out of

school. Wadesango and Machingambi (2011) also reported that students' attendance were sometimes affected as pupils had to fulfil their home related obligations and provide for their personal and family needs since they were from poor family backgrounds. It is unfortunate that the education system today is still battling with parents who do not understand the importance of school for children. It is common knowledge that education is the future investment for a child. If not well handled children may live to regret the entire life of theirs. This is not good for a any country. Strides have to be made towards reducing inequality between urban population that seem to be informed and the rural dwellers. Parents should be sensitized to help their children with school requisites as it was their right.

Some parents failed to provide the needed school requirements such as uniforms and books to their children due to poverty. Shooba (2013) also noted that some pupils lacked appropriate clothing or were too worn or soiled to attend school and sit for an examination. This finding also agrees with Balfanz and Byrnes (2012) whose study also revealed that family financial concerns were all conditions that can cause a child not to attend school.

Cultural Factors: The study revealed that puberty rites also affected pupil attendance. According to Mulauzi, Nyambe and Mtanga (2014), initiation ceremonies like puberty rites are found in most parts of Zambia and are conducted nearly in every ethnic group in the country. Its continued presence in rural areas and its penetration into urban areas is a clear testimony of its tenacity. Girls especially who became of age were secluded durng puberty rites like cinamwali for a period of time and mainly during school calendar. To make matters worse, some learners opted to attend the same activities either for themselves or their friend on daily basis, weekly, monthly or yearly basis at the expense of school hours. This means that learners were mostly preoccupied and could hardly pay attention to school work such as homework. Even when they wanted to do so, their villages were polluted with noise of drums for puberty rites for most times. According to Raising (2007), initiation rites were an intrinsic part of traditional societies because express solidarity among men and women from generation to generation. During the initiation ceremony, norms and values concerning gender, production and reproduction as well as cosmological ideas

are passed on to the initiate. However, there is need for sensitization of parents on the importance of both the traditional values and indeed the acquisition of education and on the need to conduct these rites during holidays to enable children attend class during the academic year. This is of utmost importance during these puberty rites, boys and girls are taught how to behave as grown ups and also how to behave as future husbands or wives. Mulauzi, Nyambe and Mtanga (2014) confirms this particulalry for girls by stating that "during initiation ceremonies, the young woman is introduced for the first time in her life to a number of issues relating to sexual conduct which includes women therapeutically techniques for sexual enchantment, reproduction and ailments…young women are given instructions not only on how to enjoy sexual encounters and sexual intercourse but also how to keep their virginity, how to take care of their families once married and good behavior." The desire to practice or test what is being taught during while in seclusion results in early sex debut and pregnancies which in turn results in early marriages and eventually school drop out. So failing to sentitise parents may jeorpadise the future of the young ones as education is key to their success.

School Related Factors: The study revealed that pupils complained that some teachers did not give them an opportunity to explain their reasons for whenever they were late for school even if a student had genuine reasons but opted for corporal punishment. As a result, learners opted to stay away from school on days when they realised that they were very late. This finding rhythms well with Shahzada, et al (2011) who admitted that corporal punishment could cause absenteeism in school. Teasley, (2004) also found that students that have poor or conflicting relationships with teachers may avoid school in order to avoid their teachers. Balfanz and Byrnes (2012) mentioned that when schools have harsh or punitive discipline policies, students feel less connected to school. Teachers should observe government policies and avoid taking matters in their hands or using discretion. It is unfortunate to note that inspite of abolishing corporal punishment a decade ago, some teachers continued to administer it. Headteachers should play advisory role to inform, educate and warn erring teachers to safeguard and promote class attendance.

4.3 Ways in which Pupil Absenteeism affect Teaching and Learning

The study revealed that pupil absenteeism in selected primary schools in Nyimba district had negative effects on the teaching and learning process. Since teaching and learning requires previous information to connect to new information, absenteeism created knowledge gaps that made pupils to under-perform in assessments as they had insufficient comprehension of concepts especially in mathematics and science compared to learners who regularly attended classes. Those who absent themselves miss a lot of formative assessments which help the teachers monitor the progressive performance of learners (Mukuka - Hagane, et al, 2019). According to Bbalo and Mulauzi (2019), a student who has a poor academic background from secondary school will most likely have difficulties in coping with advanced subjects at college. Thus, previous studies by Weiss and García (2018), Komakech (2015) and Lotz and Lee (1999) linking absenteeism with lowered academic performance was confirmed by our findings. Thse studies pointed out that missing school has a negative effect on performance regardless of how many days are missed. In fact, when one misses a single topic, it will affect his/her understanding of subsequent topics. However, the more days of school a pupil misses, the poorer his or her performance will be (Weiss and García, 2018). Early graders who absconded school had difficulties to breakthrough in reading and writing. As observed by Kelly (1999), a child must be physically present in school if he/she is to derive maximum benefit. Irregular attendance led to wastage of government resources and stagnation in a child's educational progess, and as a result it affects the government objectives of increasing access to quality education.

The study also established that pupil absenteeism may result in school dropout. Expounding on this problem, Komakech (2015) submit that students' absenteeism lead to an increased risk of dropping out because pupils who miss school are more likely to avoid school and less likely to want to go to school. Besides, when a pupil experience school failure, he/she becomes frustrated with lack of achievement and end up alienated and experience exclusion leading to eventual dropout. Pupil drop out is a wastage in the education system since it prevents the completion rate and has a negative impact on the socio-economic status of the community. Further, findings reveal that pupil absenteeism affected class attendance and

management of the system making it difficult for teachers to deliever lessons effectively. According to the findings, pupils that often missed classes were likely to be indiscplined and rude making it difficult for teachers to handle the class which later affected the rest of the pupils' performance. Thus, pupils who are chronically absent are note only at serious risk of falling behind in school and having lower grades and test scores but also are likely to have behavioral issues, and ultimately dropping out of school (Weiss and García, 2018).

According the study findings, another effect of pupil absenteeism was pupil passivity and inattentiveness to classwork which according to Komakech (2015) lead to graduation of half-baked pupils. Such pupils tend to have insufficient coverage of the syllabus leaving them with content/knowledge gaps and lack self-confidence, making them unable to express themselves properly. They are unable to answer or participate in class discussions. The current study in fact established that such pupils prefer to sit at the back in class as they have low self-esteem due to failure to answer or participate in class. These are pupils who in most cases engage in examination malpractices because of fear of failure and job protection on the side of the teachers. A recent study by Bbalo and Mulauzi (2019) confirmed that even in higher learning institutions, "there is a lot of student absenteeism from lectures [which] makes them miss out on very important data that would be useful in the exams. Some of [the students] don't even submit assignments and if they do, you can even tell that no serious effort was put in… lack of preparation or inadequate preparation for examinations and lack of effective study skills lead to examination malpractice among students…lack of confidence makes students get involved in examination malpractice."

The study also indicated that pupil absenteeism damages school reputation. This is so because schools with pupils that have low pass rates poorly perform at competitions such as district debates or quiz activities. According to Komakech (2015), the image of the school(s) is affected because the school will lose finances from students which have left for another school, lower the school national and international ranking level because of underperformance which will affect the leadership and education systems as a whole. Another effect of pupil absenteeism on teaching and learning revealed by the study is that of interruptions of lessons

which in most cases render the teacher unable to cover the syllabus adequately. This confirmed by Komakech (2015) who observed that not all teachers always manage to teach the full syllabus for a given term and yet the final examination takes into account all the topics within the syllabus. The incomplete teaching time is a decisive factor, which impacts negatively on students and school results.

4.5 Interventions to Curb Pupil Absenteeism

Pupil absenteeism as indicated is a reality in rural primary schools of Nyimba district and its causes should not be looked at lightly. Early interventions as regards to attendance are needed to make a difference for those pupils who are moving towards disengagement from school. Failure to apprehend this situation may result into practicing anti-social behaviours in the society such as stealing, prostitution, drug abuse and gambling which in turn may expose them to risk behaviours and diseases. Above all, the pupils that drop out normally become a burden and menace to the society due to unemployment. As such, it is imparative for policy makers, educators, parents and other stakeholders to accurately monitor pupils educational progress, identify pupil absenteeism factors and intervene early to stop it.

According to the current findings, strong parental support is required to curb absenteeism in primary schools. Parental involvement in education is key to a child's advancement in education. In fact, Musumpuka (2016) states that "parental involvement in education is key to stopping pupil absenteeism." One teacher suggested, guiding and counseling the pupils, providing teaching and learning materials and building more schools as interventions to halt pupil absenteeism. Parents need to show interest towards in the education of their children. They need to provide school requirements such as uniforms, books and even transportation inform of bycycles were possible. Furthermore, parents need to guide and counsel their children were necessary. They need to spend time with their own children and get interested to know the problems they encounter at school. When a child is provided adequate support, the interest, attentiveness and performance in school ehnances. Additionally, both teachers and parents need to establish the social networks of pupils so that those who are in the same group as absentees should be separated. This can aid individual pupils to be independent in

decision making and avoid peer pressure. Studies have shown that pupils in the same social network behave in a similar way

Schools also need to do more than guiding and counseling the pupils but also provide conducive environments for teaching and learning. It is important for teachers to make teaching interesting by continuously monitoring hwo they are delivering their lessons to pupils. Sometimes, as Kilpatrick (1996) puts it, "lack of challenging and interesting course work and curriculum are reasons for student non-attendance." On the other hand, Fleming (1995) added that the major reasons for students' non-attendance of lessons included poor teaching, poor timing of the lesson and poor quality of the lesson content. Teachers can make their lessons attractive by providing games and sports materials to children with a rich curriculum, meeting the needs, interests and attitudes of the absentees. Teachers should treat all the children equally irrespective of their background, sex or religion. In doing so, school administrators should work towards creating what is known as an 'inviting' school (Purkey, 1978).

The study also revealed the need to introduce sexuality education to bring awareness of dangers of early sex debut, teenage pregnancy, early marriages and peer pressure. According to UNESCO (2018), as pupils make transition from childhood to adulthood, it is important that they receive reliable information, which prepares them for a safe, productive and fulfilling life. Sexuality education can empower young children to make informed decisions about relationships and sexuality and navigate a world where gender-based violence, gender inequality, early and unintended pregnancies, HIV and other sexually transmitted infections (STIs) still pose serious risks to their health and well-being. Schools should endavour to provide high-quality, age-appropriate sexuality and relationship education that leaves no room for children to engage in harmful sexual behaviours and sexual exploitation. Infact, from the community point of view, Mulauzi, Nyambe and Mtanga (2013) argued that initiation ceremonies and rites are powerful tools that should be used to communicate important information including HIV/AIDS, unwanted pregnancy, early marriages and unsafe abortion information to young people.

It was further recommended that punishing erring parents or summoning parents of pupils who abscond school can help to curb pupil absenteeism. According to Komakech (2015), this

helps to bring cooperative effort between students, parents and staff because when parents or staff members show concern about student's absence, it will increase student achievement level while reducing the dropout rate. The findings of the study also established that there was need to conduct career talks where people from various professions like doctors, nurses, military personnel, police, politicians can help motivate learners to develop interest in school and eventually reduce cases of pupil absenteeism. According to Career Industry Council of Australia (n.d), the decisions that young people make at school have a big impact on their lives – affecting not just their further education, training or employment, but also their social lives, finances and health outcomes. So it is important to prepare students to transition successfully toward a future career path through career talks. Career talks are also important channels of building students' general interest in school and capabilities, support students' interests and aspirations, and support them to make informed decisions about their subject choices and pathways.

One of the ways to boost attendance in rural schools as submitted in the study is by building more schools so that they are within peoples' reach. It is important to note that rural education is important in the fight against poverty. It is critical in improving student outcomes and reducing dropout rates. Of great importance was also the need to assist vulnerable pupils financially. This can play an important part in encouraging school attendance, attentiveness, participation and increase completion rates among pupils. Worries of how to finance a child's education can be reduced among parents. Moreover, it was proposed that Government should build bridges on rivers or streams that act as barriers during rainy season for pupils to cross to ensure safe passage of pupils. Additionally, constructing bridges will allow schools, teachers, and communities to better connect together, allowing better exchange of information and experiences. The Government also needed to be consistent with school feeding programme and provide well balanced meals that would attract children into school. It was also suggested that Government should consider adjusting the starting time for morning classes from 07:00 hours to 08:00 hours in order not to discourage children who cover long distances every day to abscond school on the basis that they would be late.

5.0 Conclusion

It can be concluded from the study findings that absenteeism exist in primary schools of Nyimba District in Zambia. The major drivers behind absenteeism included; physical factors such as long distance to school and flooding streams during rainy season; health factors such as prolonged sickness and death in the family and personal attitude arising from lack of interest in school, poverty and peer pressure. Other related issues included household factors which borders on parents and guardians having a negative attitude towards school, lack of financial capability to provide for school demands, as well as cultural and social factors like initiation ceremonies. The study also established that abseteeism affects teaching and learning in several ways. It affected the performance of pupils in formative assessments and derailed the learning process. Children who absconded school performed poorly especially in mathematics and science. They also had poor comprehension of reading and writing skills, hence difficulties to breakthrough to literacy. Additionally, it was established that pupil absenteeism increased the risk of pupils dropping out of school; led to indiscplined and rude pupils making it difficult for teachers to handle the class; resulted in pupil passivity and inattentiveness to classwork leading to graduation of half-baked pupils; resulted in pupil low self-esteem which increased pupils 'likelihood to engage in examination malpractices and finally damaged school reputation led to interruptions of lessons.

Proposed interventions included strong parental involvement in the education of their children; strengthening the guidance and counselling services in schools; creating a conducive envrionment for learning in schools; introducing sexuality education in schools and in communities to bring awareness of dangers of early sex debut, teenage pregnancy, early marriages and peer pressure; providing stiff punishment to erring parents or calling parents of pupils who abscond school; conducting career talks, assisting children who cover long distances with bicycles as a way of motivating them; constructing bridges on rivers for schools located across steams; providing financial assistance to

vulnerable pupils; building more schools in rural areas to reduce the distances children cover daily to reach to a nearby school; Government to be consistent with school feeding programme and provide well balanced meals that would attract children into school; and that Government should consider adjusting the starting time for morning classes from 07:00 hours to 08:00 hours in order not to discourage children who cover long distances every day to abscond school on the basis that they would be late. These interventions should be addresssed from a wider social, economic and political environment and must involve the three critical stakeholders: the Government, parents and the teachers.

6.0 Recommendations

In view of the foregoing findings, the following recommendations were made:

(i)   School managers should invite important people in society such as doctors, politicians, musicians, police and other military personnel to give career talks in schools to motivate learners to complete their education. This can be done annually or during school open and or careers' day.

(ii)   Government and school administrators should engage in constructive sensitization of parents on the importance of education especially for their children.

(iii) Ministry of General Education should consider building more schools in rural areas to alleviate the problem of long distances learners cover daily.

(iv) The government of the Republic of Zambia should also consider putting bridges in streams that lead to schools.

(v) Harsh punishments and measures should be given to those parents who marry off their early or to men who impregnant school going girls.

(vi) Schools should stop giving corporal punishment to absentees but should intensify on providing guidance, counselling services and motivation to the affected learners so that they can complete their school.

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