



Absenteeism in Rural Primary Schools: A Case of Selected Primary Schools in Luwingu District of Northern Province, Zambia

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Abstract: Absenteeism refers to the practice of regularly staying away from school without good a reason. It can also refer to the habit of staying away from school without providing a genuine or any reason for not attending classes. It is a truant behavior that negatively affects the performance among pupils. Absenteeism can lead to depression and also result in poor quality of education as a result of time lost while being away from school. It could also lead to moral degradation that leads to drug abuse, early pregnancies and unruly behavior. Hence, the study aimed at analyzing the impact of absenteeism in rural primary schools in Luwingu district of Northern province, Zambia. The study was guided by the following specific objectives: (a) To identify factors influencing absenteeism in rural primary schools in Luwingu district, (b) To assess the effects of absenteeism on the academic performance of learners in primary schools in Luwingu district and (c) To determine measures that should be taken to rectify problems of absenteeism in rural primary schools in Luwingu district. Purposive sampling of the site was preferred to select the research area from which participants participated in this study with a sample size of 120. The study employed both the qualitative and quantitative methods that sampled head teachers, primary teachers and pupils from the selected schools. Interview guides were used to obtain qualitative data which was analyzed using thematic analysis while quantitative data were collected using questionnaires which were analyzed using descriptive statistics. The study found out that, learner's absenteeism was as a result of parental poverty, lack of parental care, punishment at school, ineffective Parent Teacher Association (P.T.A), pupil's attitude towards education and unconducive classrooms. The study therefore recommended that parents should try by all means provide their children especially those in early childhood with their basic school needs such as uniforms, books, pens,

school bags and all that is needed so that they can feel comfortable and enjoy school life. Teachers on the other hand should also motivate their learners to always be in school.

Keywords: Absenteeism, Academic Performance, Education, School dropout and Truant.

1.1 INTRODUCTION

Learner absenteeism in rural primary schools has become an issue of concern to researchers locally and internationally. According to UNESCO (2019) learner absenteeism is one of the major precursors to poor academic performance. If learners miss school, they do not learn and ultimately they fail or drop-out. Notwithstanding, this problem does not receive the attention it deserves. This chapter comprises of background information to the study which shows literature on the topic of the study: “the effect of absenteeism in rural primary schools: a case of selected primary schools in Luwingu district, Northern Province”. Absenteeism is referred to as being not in class specifically at school. This somehow has led to poor performance in class during mid-term assessments tests, end of tests, grade seven final examinations and grade nine final examinations. In addition, Kearny, (2018) defines absenteeism in school to be ‘the habit of staying away from school without providing a genuine or any reason for not attending classes. It is a truant behavior that negatively affects the performance among pupils. Absenteeism refers to a student being absent from school. Absences can be motivationally based such as poor relationships with other students, academic failure and structurally based such as having to work during school hours, taking care of a sick family member. Absenteeism has been documented to have various negative impacts on student’s academic outcomes. Every day many students are absent from school. The causes for absences are numerous and can arise both from within and outside of the school (Ludwig T & Bassi, 2019). Absenteeism can be motivationally based, where a student may not wish to attend; these absences are generally a voluntary and deliberate decision, whereas other absences are structurally based, where pupils must miss school due to their life conditions.

According to Gage et al (2020) absenteeism is a habit of failure to present himself or herself frequently in program or event without a reasonable excuse. According to Douglas & Ross (2017) absenteeism can be defined as a habitual pattern of absence from work or obligation. It is an indicator of poor individual performance as well as breach of the implicit contract between employer and employee; it is seen as management problem and informed in economic or quasi economic terms. Some scholars such as Gomleksiz & Ozdaş (2020) view learner absenteeism as the physical absence from school for an entire day. Despite the strictness in school attendance in education policies in primary schools, absenteeism is an important current issue among educators in primary education as it is believed to affect the performance of learners worldwide. According to Aaron (2020) absenteeism refers to the habitual non-presence of an employee at his or her job or a learner in schools. Habitual non-presence extends beyond what is deemed to be within an acceptable realm of days away from the usual expected place for legitimate causes such as scheduled vacations, occasional illness, and family emergencies. Absenteeism at school is either deliberate or not. It has seriously led to both poor class performance and school performance at

class and final examination level in all subjects. It has also greatly affected teachers' preparations.

The incidence of school absenteeism among primary school pupils has been widely reported in Zambia and it still exist in public schools especially those in the rural areas. Discussions and interviews with both pupils and staff of some primary schools from other studies revealed that pupils exhibit different dimensions of school absenteeism which has caused some heartaches to some parents, teachers, school administrators and the pupils (Ministry of Education, 2018).

Government made education virtually free, provided some infrastructural facilities, some school through their alumni associations, Parents Teachers Associations (PTA) and philanthropists have organized house to house campaign, seminars and workshops for teachers, parents and pupils on the menace caused by school absenteeism. Some have developed and used several punitive measures on victims. Churches have not been left out in the campaign against absenteeism. All forms of absenteeism have some long term consequences on individuals and society at large. Despite all attempts by government, alumni associations, school, churches to minimize the situation, the problem still exist.

Reid (2019) explains that absenteeism is caused by many factors as such as; **Phobic Adolescence**-during this stage in the growth of a teen, there is a lot of fear developed as a result of physical changes of the body for example growth of pimples as well as turbulent emotions and this scares teens away from school. **Lack of Interest**-students could be lacking interest in the study, which could be as a result of content that is difficult for them to grasp hence pushing them away from school. **Teacher approach**-the approach used by teachers may not be understood by the student and this could lead them to lose interest in school. Punitive attendance policy plays a big role in absenteeism too. **Pamperness from the family**-pupils who get excessive pocket money from their families are most likely to absent themselves from school since they need time to spend the money. **Private Couching**-flexible private couching encouraged by some parents could drive a number of students away from the conventional school timetable. **Diseases**-some diseases like asthma which requires attention and care as well as an environment that is warm and not dusty could make students remain home. **School infrastructural facilities**-lack of libraries, sports facilities is a hindrance to attendance of school among students. **Entertainment**-accessibility of entertainment facilities like cinemas could divert attention of some students from school.

Absenteeism often begins in the lower grades and is exacerbated once a youth makes the transition to high school. An adolescent may feel alienated in the new school and have difficulty forming relationships with teachers and other students. If the school is overcrowded and/or in poor physical condition a student may not wish to attend. Other school based causes for absenteeism include: bullying, an unengaging curriculum, academic failure, and the perception of unfair behavioral punishments (Strand & Cedersund, 2019). The majority of these absences are largely motivationally based, where a student willingly chooses to avoid the school. Familial causes of absenteeism are often related to a student living in the lower strata of the socioeconomic scale. Having to work to supplement familial income and having to move frequently can interfere with a student's ability to be consistently present at school. Other factors such as a lack of money for food, clothing, transportation, and school supplies can also deter a pupil from attending. Some youths may have an unstable home life, may have to care for a

family member, or help raise younger siblings, and these life conditions can also negatively impact a pupil's attendance rate (Kombo, 2018). Most of these absences are beyond a student's control and are thus considered structural.

The last category of factors which cause absenteeism is student-centered. Masogo (2015) adds that student factors that impede attendance can arise at a young age, where a child may fear going to school and/or being separated from a parent. These absences are frequently referred to as school phobia and/or school anxiety. However, as youths enter high school, new triggers for absenteeism become apparent. Some adolescents may have mental health and/or psychological disorders that cause them to misbehave or miss school entirely; often resulting in detentions, suspensions and expulsions, thereby further straining the bonds between the student and the school. Psychological issues appear to play a significant role in absenteeism and the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-5) states that students who suffer from anxiety and/or conduct disorders are often absent from school. Other youth may have academic difficulties, and without receiving adequate supports they choose to disengage from school, which has become an environment they equate with failure. The final factors for student-centered causes of absenteeism are: negative peer relations, involvement in crime, and drug use. These absences are predominantly motivationally based, although it can be argued that the school's inability to accommodate the needs of its students is creating structural barriers to attendance (Mbiti, 2016). It is important to consider that the causes of absenteeism are not discrete categories. Rather these causes frequently overlap and aggravate one another. Quite often absentees will exhibit a number of these factors, demonstrating difficulties both in their personal lives and the school. Hence, the decision to undertake this study on school absenteeism among primary school pupils in Luwingu district.

1.2. Statement of the Problem

Reports tabulated in 2018 by the Ministry of Education (MoE, 2018) indicated an absentee rate of 8.52% for primary schools in Northern province. According to Kombo (2018), an average of 3 pupils per class are always absent from school every day with and without known reasons from both teachers and parents, while others sneak lessons at and after break. Others give excuses of caring for the siblings when their parents are away. However, despite the importance of class attendance in schools, absenteeism in primary schools had not been taken into much consideration as compared to other classes like the grade seven and nine as they are said to be the examination classes (Moloi & Strauss, 2015). If the issue of absenteeism among the learners in non-examination classes is not treated with the seriousness it deserves and its increase curbed, opportunities that would have otherwise been available for pupils to advance academically will become foregone due to pupil absenteeism implications.

1.3. The Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to analyze the impact of absenteeism in rural primary schools of Luwingu district in Northern province, Zambia.

1.4. Research Objectives

The objectives of the study were to:

- Identify factors influencing absenteeism in rural primary schools in Luwingu district of Northern province in Zambia.
- Assess the effect of absenteeism on the academic performance of learners in primary schools in Luwingu district of Northern province in Zambia.
- Determine measures that should be taken to rectify problems of absenteeism in rural primary schools in Luwingu district of Northern province in Zambia

1.5. Conceptual Framework

According to Turkey Ministry of Education (MoE) 2015-2019 Strategic Plan, absenteeism is defined as the absence of schooling, with or without a valid reason (Vital & Jansen, 2016). Absenteeism and truancy are used interchangeably. But in fact they have different meanings. Truancy is used when students deliberately stay away from school without permission. Truancy is known amongst other things as 'skipping off', 'mitching', 'dodging', 'skiving', 'bunking-off' and 'going missing' (Reid, 2019). On the other hand, absenteeism is a more general concept that means regular absence from work or school without a good reason. In this study, the expression of absenteeism is defined in this way. There are various reasons for student absenteeism. In general, multiple factors play a role in the emergence and maintenance of absenteeism. These factors are; the lack of community support, school environment, the presence of various problems in family life, the inconvenience of school transportation, the emergence of health problems, bad weather and individual factors (Matsimoto, 2020). Despite similar results in the general research on student absences, there are some changes depending on factors such as culture, education level, legal requirements. Shute and Cooper (2015) point out that family and home environment, student and school give rise to school absenteeism. Similar results were obtained in the research conducted by Balfanz and Byrnes (2021) and the reasons of absenteeism were handled in seven dimensions as student-originated, family-based, teacher-originated, school and school-based, health-related, friend-environment and environment-based. In accordance with other researchers, in generally, the causes of absenteeism are generally grouped in seven groups as social factors, economic factors, family factors, environmental factors, psychological factors, school-based factors and personal factors.

1.6. Significance of the Study

It is hoped that the findings of this study would help in the provision of useful information about the factors influencing absenteeism in primary schools to the ministry of education, school managers, teachers and parents/guardians. In addition, it is anticipated that the findings would help to change the attitude of learners towards absenteeism. The study also revealed recommendations that may be very useful to policy makers such as the Ministry of Education. The study further revealed the utilization of information that would be made available to all the stake holders; such as NGOs, schools, libraries, colleges and universities. Therefore, the information provided would help in strategizing the approach and objectives to improve on how to reduce absenteeism in primary schools more especially in rural areas.

2. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

2.1. Study Design

A descriptive survey research design was used combining qualitative and quantitative methods of data collection in order to attain the comprehensive results. Qualitative methods were appropriate to this investigation as it produced detailed data from a small group of participants, while exploring feelings, impressions and judgments. On the other hand, quantitative method made the use of questionnaires, surveys and experiments to gather data that is revised and tabulated in numbers, which allows the data to be characterized by use of statistical analysis.

2.2. Research Site

The research was conducted at some selected primary schools in Luwingu district of Northern province in Zambia.

2.3. Population, Sample and Sampling Procedure

The population for the study comprised of head teachers, pupils and pupils. The target population was 1200. The sample size involved a total of 120 respondents which included four (4) head teachers, one from each selected school. Sixteen (16) primary teachers, four from each selected school. One-hundred (100) pupils, twenty-five from each selected school. The study employed both purposive and simple random sampling on different participants.

2.4. Data Analysis

Data was analyzed qualitatively as in-depth interviews, questionnaires and observation schedules were used as primary data collection instruments. Thematic approach was used, where data analysis started with categorizing themes from the structured interviews and questionnaires. Charts and graphs were used to analyze data. The data gathered was analyzed according to the themes of the study and per the order of the research objectives. Data generated from the questionnaires were analyzed manually with a combination of soft wares; MS Access, SPSS and MS Excel.

2.5. Ethical Issues

Permission letter from DEBS office for Luwingu district was sought in carrying out this study. The researchers avoided pressuring respondents to take part in the research. Alternatively, permission consents, assents were obtained from respondents involved in the research and the research topic was strategically selected to ensure that there was no harm whatsoever to the research respondents. Ethical considerations were strictly followed during the research to enable the effectiveness in the findings. This was to protect and respect the targeted people who were considered to be the respondents by virtue of their location, status, age and occupation.

3. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

The following findings and discussions were presented according to set research objectives:

3.1. Factors Influencing Absenteeism in Rural Primary Schools

In order to get the magnitude of the effects of learner absenteeism on the academic performance of the learners, the research sought to find out the causes of absenteeism in the selected school. The findings are presented in the table below:

Table 1: Factors Influencing Absenteeism in Rural Primary Schools According to Head teachers and Teachers. n=20

<i>Influencing factor</i>	<i>Frequency</i>	<i>Percentage</i>
<i>Poverty</i>	8	16.6%
<i>Lack of good infrastructure</i>	12	25%
<i>Peer pressure</i>	8	16.6%
<i>Climate and weather</i>	7	14.7%
<i>Attitudes subjects and teachers</i>	8	16.6%
<i>Cultural and social factors</i>	5	10.4%
<i>Total</i>	48	100%

Source: Author, 2023

The table above shows factors influencing absenteeism in rural primary schools according to respondents (head teachers and teachers), 16% indicated poverty as the possible factor, 25% indicated poor infrastructure, 16.6% indicated peer pressure as a possible factor, attitude towards subjects and teachers as another possible factor with 16.6%. Cultural and social factors 10.4% and Climate and weather 14.7%. From that data collected from the respondents within the schools and the community, it indicated that there are factors influencing absenteeism in Zambian school such as; parental poverty which was the major cause of absenteeism according to parents in this study. The researcher found that, the inability of parents to provide their children with the basic needs was as a result of poverty. This is in relation to what Douglas & Ross (2019) observed they state that sometimes children are absent because their parents do not have the funds for them to go to school. Mboweni (2014) also noted that learner's attitude towards school and education was another cause of absenteeism as identified in during the study. According to 15% of the respondents, some of the learners do not like going to school but rather they prefer stay home and play with peers. The result findings also revealed that as a result of long distance from home to school and difficult terrain, learners are tempted to be absent. It, is in consonance with the observations of Demir (2015) opined that wetland terrains where utilities and social amenities are epileptic or non-existent, children are easily tempted to miss school especially in the first grade of schooling. The study established that some learners miss school as a result of their teacher's attitude. Wragg (2016) say that attitudes toward those labeled learners are typically more negative than actions taken. In other words, disheartening responses to attitude and acceptability scales notwithstanding, non-labeled others may behave

more responsibly when action is required of them. the responses from teachers (10%) pointed out to infrastructure as a contributing factor of absenteeism among learners in primary schools. Hamaleka & Mphande (2020) in their study suggested that “infrastructure of the school with inadequate and improper classroom furniture, water and transport had some bearing to the teaching and learning process in school”, hence caused absenteeism.

Table 2: Factors Influencing Absenteeism in Rural Primary Schools According to Pupils. n=100

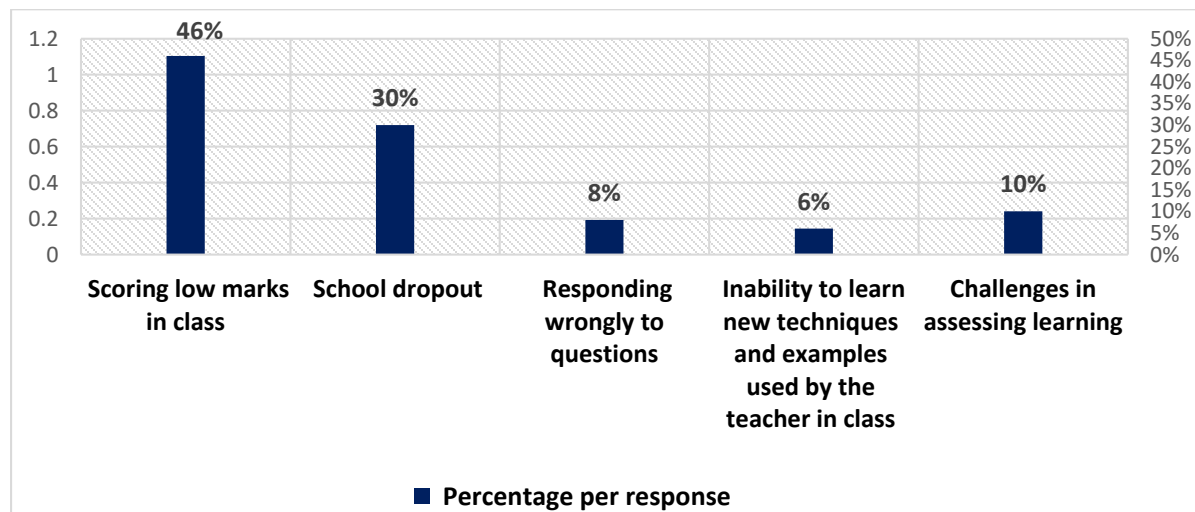
<i>Factor</i>	<i>Percentage</i>
<i>Peer bullying</i>	17%
<i>Sickness</i>	10%
<i>Lack of interest in school activities</i>	3%
<i>Long distance from home to school</i>	13%
<i>Punishment when late for school</i>	30%
<i>Teachers attitude towards pupils</i>	27%

Source: Author, 2023

The table above shows some of the identified causes of absenteeism from the pupil’s responses. According to the data, 30% indicated punishment when late for school. Teachers’ attitude towards learners 27%. Peer bullying 17%. 13% of the respondents indicated that the distance from school. Sickness was indicated by 10% of the respondents while 3% indicated lack interest in school activities.

3.2.Effects of Absenteeism on the Academic Performance of Pupils in Primary Schools.

Figure 1: Effects of Absenteeism on the Academic Performance of Pupils in Primary Schools According to Teachers. n=16.



Source: Author, 2023

The figure above shows effects of absenteeism on the academic performance of pupils in primary schools. According to the findings, scoring low marks in class was agreed by 46% of teachers who took part in the research. Learners responding wrongly to questions during class 8%. 30% of the teachers indicated that learners drop out of school while 6% of the teachers indicated that there is inability of the pupils to learn new techniques and examples used by the teachers during class. Lastly, 10% of the teachers stated that they face challenges in assessing learning. The respondents (teachers) indicated that absenteeism resulted into school dropout. According to them, learners who miss lessons usually do not perform well in class and at the end, they either dropout or are continuously repeated in one class. With regards to the researchers' investigations (Bess & Chola, 2020) agrees that dropping out of school was the end product of absenteeism. Further, Ali (2018) also quoted in his article in 2018, that continue absenteeism or poor academic achievement among students leads to drop out from school. This leads to the increase in absenteeism, teenage pregnancy and other social vices in the community and society at large later in life. According to Clark (2018) learners' absenteeism leads 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. Further, the findings indicated that absenteeism leads to scoring low marks in class and during exams. Therefore, it can be stated from the finding that scoring low marks in class is an effect of absenteeism on the pupil's performance. According to Hachuundu (2020) learners who attend school regularly have higher core on tests than their peers who frequently absent themselves. This is also supported by Brook & Broowing (2017) who states that, absenteeism affects students' learning, their test scores and social development. Responding wrongly to questions is one of the effects absenteeism has on the pupil's academic performance. Respondents attested that whenever learners miss a lesson for a particular day, the next day they are not able to answer question on the previous lesson well. 60% of the respondents (teachers) indicated that learners who absent themselves from school exhibit challenges with learning new techniques as well as examples used during the lesson the day they are present. Franklin (2021) indicated in his research that absenteeism affects teachers' ability to adopt the curriculum requirements and instructional activities both for the present and absent students. He argues that learners miss valuable information when they are absent from classes. They also miss the interaction between teachers and benefits of specific examples which are used to clarify the difficult concepts.

Table 3: Effects of Absenteeism According to Pupils n=100

<i>Effect</i>	<i>Response</i>	<i>Percentage</i>
<i>Difficult in acquiring reading skills</i>	Yes	83%
<i>Repetition of grades</i>	Yes	73%
<i>It is hard to master the lesson in school</i>	No	50%
<i>Missing opportunities to be identified for intervention and extra supports</i>	Yes	67%
<i>No participation in class</i>	Yes	100%

<i>Due to absenteeism learners can't raise questions about any confusion regarding topics</i>	No	40%
<i>Due to absenteeism learners miss the chance to clear their concepts by missing the value able information.</i>	Yes	70%

Source: Author, 2023

The table above shows the effects pupil absenteeism on the academic performance according to responses of the pupils. 83% of the respondents indicated that there are difficulties in acquiring reading skills. According to 73% of respondents indicated repeat of grades while 50% of the respondents indicated that it is hard to master the lesson. From the results, it was indicated by 67% of the learners that there are high chances of missing opportunities of being identified for intervention and extra support. On the other hand, all the respondents (100%) indicated that no participation in class while 70% of the respondents indicated that learners miss the chance to clear their concepts by missing the value able information.

Table 4: Effects of Absenteeism in Rural Primary Schools According to Head teachers and Teachers. n=20

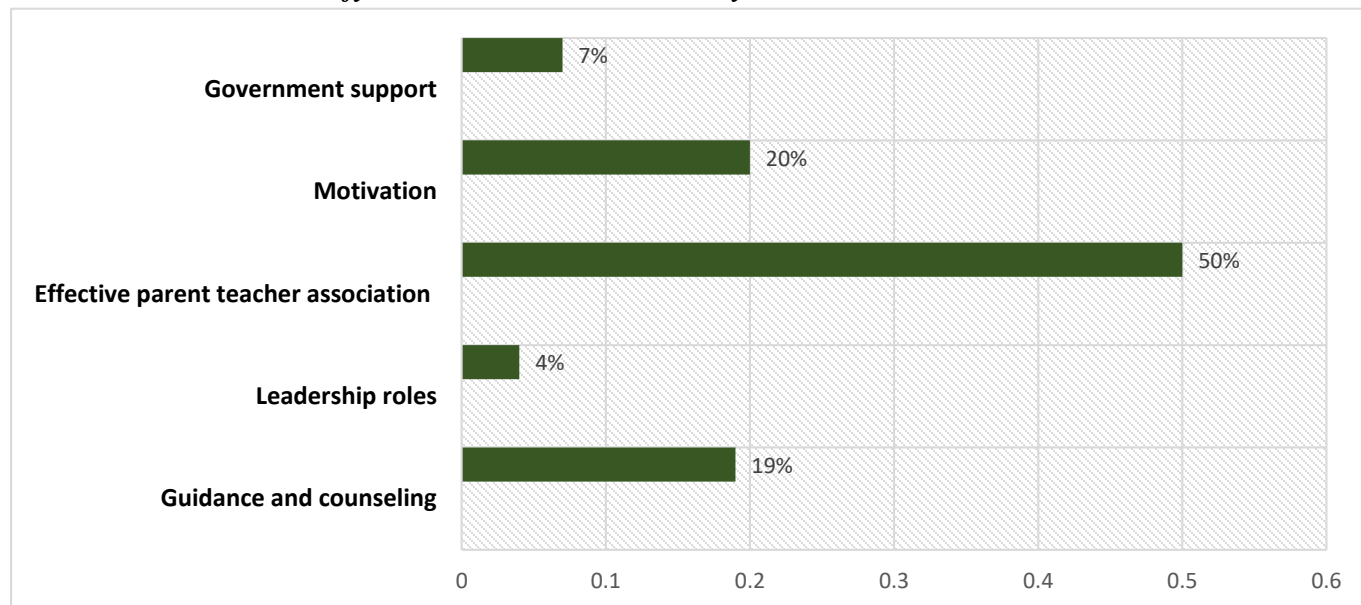
SN	Effect	Frequency	Percentage
1.	<i>Economic impact</i>	5	10.4%
2.	<i>Increased dropout rates</i>	16	33.3%
3.	<i>High levels illiteracy</i>	8	16.7%
4.	<i>Poor academic performance</i>	15	31.3%
	<i>Community disengagement</i>	4	8.3%

Source: Author, 2023

From the table above, 5 (10.4%) indicated economic impact , 16 (33.3%) indicated increased dropout rates, 8 (16.7%) sated that high levels illiteracy, 15 (31.3%) indicated poor academic performance while 4 (8.3%) indicated community disengagement.

3.3.Measures to Rectify Absenteeism in Rural Primary Schools

Table 5: Measures to Rectify Absenteeism in Rural Primary Schools



Source: Author, 2023

From the data above, guidance and counselling was suggested by 19% of the respondents. 4% of the respondents suggested that learners who miss classes should be given leadership roles as a way of preventing them from missing class. 50% of the respondents indicated that there should be effective parent – teacher association. 20% of the respondents suggested motivation of learners both at home and at school while 7% indicated government support. Considering the serious consequences of absenteeism, there have been a number of solutions proposed to reduce absences. Much like the causes of absenteeism, the solutions tend to revolve around the school, the absentee’s family, and the absentee. There have been proposals to make the course content more engaging and relevant to the students’ lives. The rationale is that teaching more interesting and practical material will encourage students to attend school. There have also been calls to create stronger relationships between pupils and teachers, where students would be motivated to attend because someone in the school cares for them. One of the ways of achieving closer bonds is through reducing the number of students in a classroom and creating smaller schools (Datta, 2017). In addition to having an empathetic staff, another recommendation is for schools to hire counsellors and social workers to help students navigate their often difficult life conditions. On the familial level there have been suggestions that the parents/guardians of absentees need to be encouraged to become more involved in their children’s schooling. By establishing contact between the school and the absentee’s family there can be a closer supervision of when and why a student is absent. However, there have also been recommendations that in order to create a deterrent to absenteeism, absentees and their families should be prosecuted for non-attendance, and some countries have truancy laws that criminalize absenteeism (Bhatnagar, 2016).

4. CONCLUSION

From the finding of the study, it was concluded that absenteeism existed in in rural primary schools in Luwingu district. The major factors behind absenteeism included; long distance to school, prolonged sickness, and poverty among families resulting in lacking of financial capability to provide for school demands, infrastructure, and teacher’s attitude towards learners

as well as learners towards education. In addition, the study concluded that absenteeism affected primary schools in several ways. It affected the performance of pupils in formative assessments and derails the learning process. Pupils who miss school perform poorly especially in mathematics and science as well as literacy. The study concluded that if the following measures were put in place absenteeism can be controlled; organizing guidance and counseling service for pupils, giving absentee's leadership roles, existence of an effective parent teacher association, motivation, government support and ensuring conducive teaching environment and attitudinal change of pupils. They therefore said as a way of helping in the reduction of absenteeism, they would ensure that their children always come to school and that they would do their best to provide their basic needs for them so that they may have a sound mind to study.

5. RECOMMENDATIONS

The following are actions that should be taken on the basis of the findings of this study:

- The government should consistently provide the school with teaching and learning materials to ensure effective teaching and learning in the school.
- Schools should intensify on providing guidance, counselling services and motivation to the affected learners so that they can complete their school unlike punishment as these are young children who need support and rely on the teachers.
- Parents should co-operate with schools in measures to eliminate absenteeism.
- Teachers should foster attitudinal change on the part of the pupils towards education and attendance.

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