



*Effective Practices for Managing Teacher Absenteeism in
Public Secondary Schools: A Case Study of Mporokoso District; Zambia*

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ABSTRACT

The study investigated on effective practices of managing teacher absenteeism in public secondary schools in Mporokoso district. The study made use of a qualitative approach and case study design. Purposive and snowball sampling were used to selected participants. Research instruments used to collect data were documentary analysis, interview and observation. Data was analysed using thematic analysis method by coding emerging themes which came out during the findings. Findings established factors such as personal, school and environmental contribute much to teacher absenteeism. Furthermore, the study established that teacher absenteeism had deadly effects on learner academic performance because mostly there is no completion of the syllabus and pupils develop indiscipline behaviours. The study also revealed that teacher absenteeism has an effect towards low achievement of the pupils. It makes teachers not to complete the syllabus, causes differential performances among pupils and a decline in discipline is inevitable. In order to reduce the teacher absenteeism, the study recommended that there is a need to readdress the effects of school, personal and environment factors on teacher absenteeism by teachers themselves and the relevant public authorities. In addition, the study recommended that there is a need for regular supervision by the entrusted authorities to do the supervisory activities like the District Education Board Secretary (DEBS) office and heads of the schools.

Key words: *Absenteeism, teacher absenteeism, management, administration and practices*

Introduction

Teacher absenteeism is a continuing and growing concern both locally and internationally, and the high rate of teacher absenteeism suggests that there are gaps in the effective and strategic management of teacher attendance, despite institutional interventions to manage it. In India, one out of four school teachers who taught in public schools were absent and when the survey team visited these schools, they found that only half of the teachers were teaching (Mthombeni, 2010).

One aspect that contributes to the high teacher absenteeism rate is lack of proper supervision which makes it easy for teachers to miss classes without repercussions (Banerjee, King, Orazem & Paterno, 2012; Silwamba and Daka, 2021). This problem is prevalent in rural areas where external supervision usually requires extensive travel by standard officers from the DEBS and PEO, but teacher absenteeism can also become a grave issue in cities and peri-urban areas (Banerjee et al., 2012; Daka, Chilala, Hamatanga, Chirwa, Mumba, Kaoma and Chikopela, C. (2021; Kakupa, Tembo and Daka, 2015). Attending to other duties such as training, meetings with superiors, and administrative responsibilities (Mkhwanazi, 1997), also keeps teachers away from the classroom.

According to Hackett (2009:1), “teacher absenteeism affects the effectiveness of a school because school days that are lost have an adverse effect on learner achievement”. The school’s reputation is at stake and when it becomes tainted, this may eventually influence the learners to stay away from school. Akhmadi and Suryadarma (2007: 207) argue that “an absent teacher often means no schooling for the children”, which only serves to emphasise the effects of teacher absenteeism on learners and their performance. Children’s willingness to learn can be reduced by absent teachers (Jensen, 2007; Chiwoya and Daka, 2022). Public schools often struggle to find appropriate substitute/volunteer teachers and the learners’ learning is affected. The missed instruction time is massive and, in most instances, it cannot be made up for (Mampane, 2013). Effective teachers are committed to their learners (O’ Hanlon & Clifton, 2004).

Clotfelter (2009), Daka, Chipindi, Phiri, Mulenga, Mvula and Chirwa (2021) and Lungu and Daka (2022) in their studies revealed that school headteachers must foster a leadership ethos that will help to reduce teacher absenteeism. It is from this backdrop that this study investigated the effective practices of managing teacher absenteeism in Mporokoso district of Northern Province of Zambia. The absenteeism of the teachers damages the education of the learners

because when the teacher is absent from school, the teaching and learning suffer, and that affects the achievement of the learners. Chizyuka and Daka (2021) and Silwamba and Daka (2021) in their studies showed that the provision of control measures such as increased supervision and monitoring of teachers work records by the standards officers from both DEBS and PEO control the absenteeism of teachers in schools is a good attempt to make sure that the absenteeism of teachers is reduced. But the rate of absenteeism is increasing despite the control measures for dealing with the absenteeism of teachers. Additionally, not many studies have been conducted regarding practices for managing teacher absenteeism in public secondary schools in Mporokoso.

As evidenced by the Ministry of General Education (MOE, 2015), 8,895 teachers were absent from their station in 2015 for various reasons while in 2016, MOE (2016) reports that 6,475 teachers absconded from their station. This shows that Zambia is one of the countries with the highest teacher absenteeism rate in the Southern African Development Community (SADC) region. It is for this reason that the researcher wanted to explore the effectiveness of the present management practices for dealing with teacher absenteeism in public secondary schools of Mporokoso. Therefore, it is in light of the aforementioned that the study on effective practices on managing of teachers' absenteeism was necessary considering the intricacy of the problem. In addition, this study was aimed at examining the best strategies or measures that could be taken to reduce levels of teachers' absenteeism in the selected schools. The selected were from rural as Mporokoso district is deemed.

Research Objectives

- 1) To identify education system factors that influence teacher absenteeism in selected public secondary schools of Mporokoso District.
- 2) To establish practices for managing teacher absenteeism that school administrators use to monitor teacher attendance in Mporokoso District.
- 3) To explore effective measures of managing teacher absenteeism in Mporokoso

Theoretical Framework

This study was informed by Christopher Hood's Cultural Theory. In this study, teacher absenteeism is considered as a public management problem, and therefore the researcher discusses the various public management responses that can be developed to deal with the problem. In this discussion, Christopher Hood's cultural-theory framework of doing public management is used. This framework distinguishes four different approaches of doing public management which should be described then how to apply them to the problem of teacher

absenteeism in secondary schools of Mporokoso district. Teacher absenteeism can be interpreted in different ways, and how these interpretations lead to different public management responses.

In his theory, Hood (1998) distinguishes the following ways of dealing with public management problems: the hierarchist, the egalitarian, the individualist, and the fatalist approach. All these approaches are about control and regulation, but they try to achieve this in different ways. Public management in the hierarchist way (Hood, 1998) is characterized by strict relations of authority. Organisations should have a clear hierarchical structure and a clear division of responsibilities. The assumption is that such organisations would provide the best guarantee that everybody will do his/her job – and that slackness or shirking can be controlled.

There is a strong belief in well-understood (not necessarily written down) rules and rule-like behaviour. When things go wrong, it is always clear who is to blame: the person(s) who did not follow the rules (ibid). Where management problems crop up, the normal course of action is to clarify the lines of authority and strengthen the role of the formal overseers. This is the traditional way in which public management problems have been tackled in many public bureaucracies.

Doing public management, the egalitarian way, on the other hand, is characterized by cooperation and participation (Hood, 1998). Unlike hierarchists, egalitarians believe in the desirability and possibility of self-organisation and self-steering processes. When things go wrong, egalitarians tend to see ‘the self-serving behaviour at the top’ as the root of the problem (ibid). The egalitarian mode of controlling organizations is through mutuality and ‘maximum face to face accountability’ (ibid). Based on the subsidiarity principle, decentralized local self-governing units are thought to be the best guarantee for meaningful bottom-up participatory management.

An individualist approach to public management (Hood, 1998) assumes that human beings are essentially ‘rational egoists’ (ibid). In principle, they pursue their own interests, but the way they do this and what their interests are can be influenced by an institutional context providing incentives and disincentives for particular behaviour. In the fatalist way of doing public management, the idea is that there are no effective checks on the actions of public officials (Hood, 1998).

This leads to a vicious circle: because there is no faith in effective checks on public office holders, no attempts are made to create a more stimulating incentive structure for them. They will perform poorly and be corrupt and unaccountable as long as they can get away with this behaviour. The result is widespread public cynicism about the motives and honesty of public

officials. The expectations are low, which leads to a lack of interest to organise collectively for better checks and control (ibid).

Reviewed Literature

Teacher absenteeism refers to the failure of the teacher to report for duties as scheduled or expected irrespective of the reasons that have prompted the absence. Absenteeism reflects badly on the individual teachers' performance and if habitually done, it breaches the contract of employment between the employer and the teacher (Ejere, 2010). Teacher absenteeism is a very complex subject. The notion of absenteeism is twofold; authorized or unauthorized. Authorized absenteeism is whereby teachers' absence is granted by the authorities. The examples of authorized absenteeism are: Leave, health reason, administrative, in-service training, collecting salaries, and others. Conversely, unauthorized absenteeism includes absenteeism, tardiness, moonlighting, security, teacher strikes, abscondment, kickbacks, and fraud (Pitts, 2010).

The causes of teacher Absenteeism are not the same across different countries. Wambua, (2015) believes that absenteeism is caused by situational and personal factors. Situational factors are job-related factors such as the routine, repetitive, or boring nature of the job. Thus, a job that is not interesting may lead to stress and resentment by the employee. On the other hand, personal factors are employee-related factors such as personality, age, or gender of the employee. These may have an impact on how one behaves towards his or her job. Teacher absenteeism can be explained better based on Steers and Rhodes' Process Model of Employee Attendance (Strauss, 2015).

This model suggests that individual satisfaction towards a job is triggered by organization and personal factors. This means that the job itself and the environment in which it takes place have an influence on whether the individual will be satisfied or not. Other factors related to the job are the scope, opportunities for growth, and relationships with workmates. Similarly, Siu (2002) believes that there are several factors that are attributed to teacher absenteeism these are; job satisfaction, psychological fatigue by teachers, the type of school where they work, the nature of interaction between the teacher and the school or superiors, and the level of involvement of the teachers in terms of their participation in school processes. According to the research in Turkey on teacher absenteeism by Sezgin (2014), some of the factors that contribute to teacher absenteeism were the authoritarian type of administration by the principals or headmasters, the negative learners' behaviour, long distances between the school and homes of teachers, and a school environment that is not conducive for learning.

Van Keuren (2009) stated that ‘Moonlighting’ teachers, who hold multiple jobs, are more likely to engage in absenteeism compared with teachers who receive income exclusively from the teaching profession (20 per cent vs 16 per cent), as are volunteer teachers compared with non-volunteer teachers (28 per cent vs 16 per cent). In South Sudan, however, female teachers are far more likely (38 per cent) to report being absent compared with their male colleagues (23 per cent) (Chaudhury et al., 2005).

According to Kakupa, Tembo and Daka (2015) in primary schools in Zambia, pupils learning gains were correlated with teacher absence. Van Keuren (2009) believes that employees abuse their sick leave because absenteeism is poorly managed. In order for headteachers to effectively manage absenteeism, they need proper training and guidance (Mogobe, 2011). Pitts (2010) and Kaponda, Mweemba, Mukalula-Kalumbi, Lisulo and Daka (2021) agree with the fact that headteachers need to be committed and highly responsible for managing absenteeism at the workplace and that they should utilise wellstructured interventions.

An employee can only be effective and contribute significantly to the objective of an organization if he makes himself/herself available to work. The absence of the said employee is a recipe for lost productivity (Ejere, 2010). According to Chapman (1994), the decline in the quality of education and efficiency are the major challenges of the third world. Some of the issues affecting education quality is teacher absenteeism and turnover (Kajala and Daka, 2023). Teacher absenteeism robs learners of classroom instructional time and this affect formative assessment process also (Mulenga - Hagane, Daka, Msango, Mwelwa and Kakupa, 2019). In the third world countries, the growth of the education system has been alarming, and the demand for teachers due to an increase in enrolments and participation rates is very high and has put as train on national education budgets because many countries are facing economic turmoil. Publics have been forced to cut spending on instructional materials.

Teacher absenteeism may have adverse effects on an entire school system, from lowering learner achievement and attendance to tarnishing the school’s reputation to broader economic losses (Daka, et al, 2021). International sources indicate that low teacher attendance is linked to low learner attendance (Pitts, 2010), implying that there are mutually reinforcing implications of teacher absenteeism for overall learner performance (Banerjee, King, Orazem & Paterno, 2012).

Potential solutions to chronic learner absenteeism include: (1) effective use of data to identify, monitor, and support the attendance and performance of teacher at risk of absenteeism; (3) acknowledge and reward teacher attendance and performance; (4) reevaluate policies and

procedures in regard to whether or not they mitigate or contribute to teacher absenteeism; and (5) invest in teachers' physical and emotional well-being and encourage collegial relationships among teachers and leaders.

Developing a tracking system to monitor teacher absenteeism allows each school to identify patterns of absenteeism, establish a form of accountability and take measures accordingly. Research has found that tracking systems must not rely solely on headteachers. For example, a study done in Ecuador highlighted how headteachers reported more than one-quarter of absent teachers as being present (Reid, 2012). Therefore, when possible, appointing an attendance improvement coordinator who establishes an information data system to track the teacher's attendance is key (Pitts, 2010).

Methodology

This research used a case study research design. According to Yin (2011), the case study research method as an empirical inquiry that investigates a current phenomenon within its actual setting when the boundaries between occurrence and context are not clearly distinguished and where multiple sources of evidence are used. This design is suitable for this study as the statistics for teacher absenteeism rates at public secondary schools have been hypothesised due to the lack of information that is available to the public. There was also not much information available on how teacher absenteeism is managed at these secondary schools.

The study used purposive and snowball sampling. This enabled the researcher to choose participants who were of value to the study based on their knowledge and background. Because the management of teacher absenteeism is a concern and the responsibility of Headteachers, Deputy Headteachers or Head of Departments or any person in authority with similar titles, involving them made it possible for a researcher to select relevant participants in the selected schools. The data collection strategy used was namely the interviews, document analysis and observations. The in-depth probing of any issue was used during the answering of the interview questions so that the researcher can get a complete understanding of effective practices of managing teacher absenteeism in selected public secondary schools in Mporokoso district. The officials that were interviewed were the following; Head Teachers, Deputy Head teachers and Heads of Departments. Data obtained from the interviews, document scrutiny and observations were coded through a process of separating the participants' responses into what is common and what is unique, and highlighting any themes that may have arisen.

Results Analysis and Discussion

The information that was needed for this research was collected by means of interviews, document analyses and observations. All the transcripts of the interviews were typed and coded.

Factors that influence teacher absenteeism

Table 1: The number of days absent for the teachers in Schools

Schools	Ill-Health	Family Responsibility	Study Leave
A	6	5	2
B	9	4	3
C	3	5	4
D	11	3	1

The information in table 1, was obtained by scrutinizing the attendance registers and leave forms of the different schools for a period of three (3) months. In schools A, B, C and D, the most common reason for teacher absent were ill-health. Similar number of days were lost due to family responsibility and study leave, but they did not amount that warranted by drastic action from the schools' management team.

Teachers were also granted leave to study and grow professionally and personally, as this would add value to the school's image. Teachers at all four schools were studying to enhance their teaching abilities but they only took time off to write the examinations and were granted a day's study leave before the examination, provided that the degree/qualification they were studying towards was linked to their current positions in the teaching profession, and would further enhance their growth and development. Teachers had to provide proof of registration at the institutions where they were studying, as well as, an official document from that university, detailing their examination dates and times. Once again, depending on the leave time needed, the school's management team derived a plan so that teaching and learning was not compromised at that particular school.

Teachers were absent from school when their children and sometimes even spouses fell ill but this was also well-managed at these public schools. The teachers who worked at these schools fully understood the importance of being at work every day so minimal days were lost due to teacher absence.

The effects of teacher absenteeism on teaching and learning

Responses showed that teacher absenteeism is greatly associated with incompleteness of the syllabus and also with differential performance of pupils. This affirms that there is a great connection between teacher absenteeism in secondary schools and the effect of teacher absenteeism among pupils in academic performance. From the interview with the one of the head teachers at school (B) it was revealed that teachers are curriculum implementers and interpreters minus which the syllabus of the given subject will not be accomplished due to teacher absenteeism and this will cause poor performance to pupils. But also, will force pupils' families who are financially strong to go for other assistance in order to compensate the lost subjects due to teacher absenteeism and those who are poor will not have a chance of compensating the lost subjects hence the performance will not be of the same level.

There was general consensus among heads of the school that teacher absenteeism affects the motivation of other teachers who do not practice absenteeism and this will eventually lead to poor academic performance of the pupils since teachers will not teach effectively and efficiently. This puts the completion of the syllabus in a danger situation.

One of the heads had this to say: -

“When we teachers are absent, pupils will not come to school. Teachers have been given a responsibility to look after pupils, to ensure that they are learning and doing well in their exams both internally and externally. But if we teachers develop undesirable behaviours of being absent, then pupils also will be demoralized and will not attend their lessons. This in the long run will affect pupils' academic performance”.

From this comment one can see that academic performance greatly is influenced by the discipline of both pupils and their teachers. The study found that teacher absenteeism has affected learner performance as seen from the interviews held. Based on teacher-level data from a study conducted in North Carolina, Clotfelter et al. (2007) found that teacher absence is associated with lower learner achievement in secondary school.

Chaudhury et al. (2005) found that an increase in teacher absenteeism led to a decrease in learner test scores and in learner attendance. Daka, Mulenga-Hagane, Mukalula-Kalumbi and Lisulo (2021) also found that absenteeism by teachers affect the way learners perform in summative assessment. Whenever teachers were absent for 10 days and longer, the deterioration in their learners' performance was on par with having a novice teacher and one with only two- or three-years' teaching experience (Clotfelter et al., 2007). Teacher

absenteeism can have an adverse effect on the entire school system; there is a decline in learner achievement and attendance, and the school's image is being tarnished due to bigger economic liabilities (Foldesy, 1989).

Information derived from global studies also indicates that low teacher attendance results in low learner attendance (Black, Seder & Kekahio, 2014; Mulenga-Hagane, Daka and Mwelwa, 2022). Added to the decline in learner achievement and learner attendance, the school's resources are also affected when teachers are absent and more administrative time is spent on finding substitute teachers and managing attendance (Obeng-Denteh, Yeboah &, Monkah, 2011).

Effective Management approaches to control teacher absenteeism

In two sample, absenteeism rates were quite low and not at all problematic. In these schools the head teachers had this to say:

“When a teacher is absent and returns to school, I give him/her the cold shoulder treatment so much so that they think twice about getting absent. I make the teachers feel really guilty about the other teachers having to fill in for them by emphasizing that some teachers who were unwell came to school and then had to still substitute for those who were absent”.

Another headteacher from a different school added his voice on absenteeism.

“If I myself have not been absent for the past three years even though I have been sick, then why can't my staff do the same?”

This study explained the importance of strong management and leadership in schools as it helped to ensure that schools' function effectively and that teachers carry out their duties and responsibilities in a diligent manner. Attending school regularly was identified as one of these important strategies. The strategies that were implemented by the various headteachers, HoDs and D/headteachers were crucial as they set the tone for how the rest of their staff would conduct themselves. A key component of these strategies was the ability to manage teacher absenteeism to such an extent that it would not become a problem.

Public schools tend to keep their operational procedures a closely guarded secret, as the existence of these schools depend on public procedures learner intake. The schools that generally survive and succeed are the ones that earn and maintain a good reputation in terms of the quality of the teachers, the quality of the education they offer, the extra-mural programme and its successes, and so on.

Currently, public schools are over-populated and there are still children who have not yet found places in schools. The large number of learners, per class, in a public school, places enormous pressure on their teachers to teach the children, mark their work timeously and maintain discipline. This is a mammoth task that discourages most teachers and makes their jobs that more difficult.

Policies, directives and instruments that regulate teacher absenteeism

Teachers at the public schools in this research belong or are affiliated to different unions depending on teacher's choice, they are governed by the guidelines on ethics (conduct) from profession body Teaching Council of Zambia (TCZ) and the Zambian Education Act of 2011. When teachers are newly appointed in public schools, the guidelines and policies for taking leave are explained in great detail either by the Human Resource personnel from PEO's office during orientation and when reach the district the HR at DEBS office play critical role in educating new teachers on dos and don'ts. This issue is also covered thoroughly during staff meetings where the teachers are urged not to take leave unless absolutely necessary and to plan and prioritise so that their holidays can be effectively utilised to sort out what they need to.

Strategies used to manage teacher absenteeism

Absenteeism was controlled by keeping of records (both manual and electronic) of the leave forms the teachers were required to fill in when they were absent from school. In public schools, the teachers would fill in the leave forms which would then be handed to the headteacher to or the DEBS sign off/approve the leave depending on the longevity of the leave. Teachers also had to notify the headteacher directly when they were staying away from work. This requirement was clearly listed in the school teacher's code of conduct.

On measures to control teacher absenteeism, some administrators talked from selected school gave the following responses on what they have done to control or minimize the trend of absenteeism among their members of staff;

In School A, the Deputy Headteacher said;

“We have created such a competitive environment amongst the teachers for working hard so the teachers work tirelessly to give of their best which includes not getting absent as they are aware that these features are high on our list of priorities”.

In School B, the Head Teacher said;

“Our public pay a lot amount of money to support children to our school therefore, when a teacher is absent even if it is not on a frequent basis, we address the issue on a one-to-one basis with that particular teacher by ensuring that he/she fully understands the impact his/her absenteeism is having on the school’s reputation. This silent but ever-present pressure we exert works for us, as the teachers stay away from school only in absolute emergencies”.

The Head Teacher of School C said;

“I talk about the taking of leave at every single staff meeting so that my staff realise what an important aspect this is. Even though I have DHs and HoDs, I make the staff report directly to me when they are not able to come to school. They have to call me directly on my personal phone by no later than 6:30 am and give me a reason for being unable to attend. This naturally puts pressure on them to attend school regularly”.

The school and its head teachers were solely responsible for fostering a positive culture of teaching and learning. This included rewarding and recognizing the teachers who worked hard, setting a positive example, and following through with the stipulated consequences when leave was abused. The school headteacher played a pivotal role in managing teacher absenteeism. The school headteacher set the tone by working hard and inspiring the rest of his/her staff to do so. Teaching and learning were the main priorities pursued, so anyone and everyone who added value to that vision was respected, admired and valued. This was the trend in all the schools that were studied – motivating, and hardworking head teachers inspired their staff to perform at a superior level.

The leadership styles of the head teachers played a key role in the manner in which the school was run. Through observations, this researcher was able to identify two dominant leadership styles namely, transformational and transactional. In School A, the headteacher displayed a transformational leadership style, he believed in creating a positive climate, and motivated his teachers to perform at their best while focusing on the individual needs of each teacher. This approach naturally encouraged the teachers to work extremely hard which included attending school on a regular basis. In Schools B, C, and D, the headteachers displayed a transactional leadership style. Here the headteachers believed in establishing a structure that had to be maintained by the teachers by following through with the plans that had been made for the school and by adhering to the stipulated work schedule. The teachers were either rewarded

when they contributed to the successful implementation of the schools' plans, or they were punished when they failed to do so.

Conclusion & Recommendations

Based on the objectives and the results of the findings several conclusions have been made. Teachers of secondary schools in Mporokoso district practice absenteeism due to related factors of school settings like bad leadership style, assigning teachers to other administrative roles and schools with poor infrastructures. On the other hand, the experience of teachers as a factor does not influence teacher absenteeism. This is due to the nature of the working class in the district of Mporokoso. Findings show that regular supervision by the heads and the DEBS also having the school teacher attendance, class attendance registers for teachers and permission books/files can mitigate the problem of teacher absenteeism.

Concerning how environmental factors influence teacher absenteeism, it was established that geographical location of the schools like to be in remote areas, being located far away from the educational offices also cause teacher absenteeism. In addition, findings revealed that during the rainy season the rate of teacher absenteeism is high. However, a teacher from poor background and schools that are located far away from the tarmac roads do not necessarily cause teacher absenteeism.

From the aforementioned conclusions the study is recommending the following: -

- i. In order to reduce the teacher absenteeism there is a need to readdress the effects of school, personal and environment factors on teacher absenteeism by teachers themselves and the relevant public authorities.
- ii. There is a need for regular supervision by the entrusted authorities to do the supervisory activities like the DEBS office and heads of the schools.

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