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An Evaluation of the Factors that Promote Learner Absenteeism in Primary Schools

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KEYWORDS Migrant labourers, policy-makers, critical discourse analysis, qualitative.

ABSTRACT The aim of this paper was to evaluate factors that contributed to learner absenteeism in the selected primary schools. This paper was underpinned by a critical discourse analysis theory in which the researcher expressed his comments or judgements based on written or spoken communications, discussions or conversations with the participants. In this paper, the researcher applied a qualitative research approach in order to explore and analyse the fundamental factors that contribute to learner absenteeism. This approach also attempted to unravel the socio-economic circumstances under which absenteeism occurred. School-based factors were identified and were found to contribute to learner absenteeism in these primary schools, namely, truancy, late-coming, learner drop-out, bullying, overcrowding in classes, poor school facilities and corporal punishment. The researcher discovered that there is a close link between the above mentioned factors and learner absenteeism in the primary schools that participated in this research. It is imperative for teachers, principals and parents to know their children or learners' behavioural patterns. Schools should introduce the system of merits and demerits for learners who attend regularly and those who absent themselves respectively. Interventions such as good communication, code of conduct for learners should be introduced in order to reduce learner absenteeism.

INTRODUCTION

The schools that participated in this research are found in poverty stricken communities where most families live in appalling conditions. Most people in this area are unemployed. The few people who are working are employed on the nearby farms where they earn meagre wages. As a result, they can afford to travel daily; this makes them migrant labourers. This resulted in their inability to monitor the schooling and the education of their children. The schools are relatively large with high enrolment of learners. The infra-structures in these schools are old and made from mud. The mud structures do not accommodate all learners because some are still receiving their lessons under the trees. Unfavourable weather conditions coupled with poor school infrastructure was one of the contributory factors to the high level of learner absenteeism especially during winter and rainy seasons. Most of the learners in these schools depend on government social grants for a living. As primary schools, the ages of learners ranged from 7 to 14 years. Teachers' qualifications in these schools range from a Primary Teachers Diploma up to Honours level. The ages of teachers in these schools range from mid-35 up to late 50's. Due to the high level of poverty these schools have been classified as no fee schools; this implies that learners are exempted from paying school fees.

The researcher contends that the high failure rate of learners was greatly attributed to learner absenteeism, which is a frequent cause of drop out. This paper aimed at contributing to a reduction in learner drop-out which the researcher assumes emanates from learner absenteeism. According to Malcolm et al.(2011), learner absenteeism has received little attention compared to other educational studies. The research sought to conceptually and methodologically address problems pertaining to learner absenteeism to address this knowledge gap.

OBJECTIVES

The objective of the empirical evaluation was to share the research findings with the learners, teachers, parents, principals, national and provincial policy-makers to find ways to control, monitor and prevent learner absenteeism. The other objective of this paper was to evaluate factors that contributed to learner absenteeism in the selected schools and in the country in

general. This paper aimed to develop mechanisms to detect, control, monitor and decrease learner absenteeism significantly.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORKS

It is imperative to state the theories that influenced the research problem as well as the research methods that were used. This paper was underpinned by a critical discourse analysis theory in which the researcher expressed his comments or judgements based on written or spoken communications, discussions or conversations with the participants. Critical discourse analysis involves debating or communicating in either spoken or written form. Critical discourse analysis does not provide a tangible answer to problems based on scientific research but it enables access to the ontological and epistemological assumptions behind a project, a statement, a method of research, or a system of classification. According to Wodak (2010) critical means not taking things for granted, opening up complexity, challenging reductionism, dogmatism and dichotomies, being self-reflective in research, and through these processes, making opaque structures of power relations and ideologies manifest.

Being critical does not necessarily mean being negative, but critiques can also be positive. McGregor (2011) sees critical discourse analysis as tools to help members of the profession understand the messages they are sending to themselves and others and to understand the meanings of the words spoken and written by others. Lucke (2013), states that critical discourse analysis sets out to generate agency among students, teachers, and others by giving them tools to see how texts represent the social and natural world in particular interests and how texts position them and generate the very relations of institutional power at work in classrooms, staffrooms, and policy. Discourse analysis is a qualitative method that has been adopted and developed by social constructionists and the focus is any form of written or spoken language, such as a newspaper articles. Critical Discourse Analysis assisted in evaluating teachers' knowledge and understanding of the factors that promote learner absenteeism in primary schools. This then developed deeper and richer insights and exposed the researcher and other stakeholders in education to a broad spectrum of literature and knowledge of the factors that promote learner absenteeism in primary schools. According to Basely (2011) beginning a project by viewing what is already known on the subject is a well-established practice, as it reviews the implications of the relevant theories for the topic, and methods others have used to investigate it. Holy et al.

(2012), state that by reviewing literature, we synthesize multiple dimensions of the topic and deepen our understanding of the contents of our own research. According to Terre Blanch (2011) refining a research problem involves identifying a theoretical framework upon which to base the research.

RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODS

In this paper, the researcher applied a qualitative research approach in order to explore and analyse the fundamental factors that contribute to learner absenteeism. This approach also attempted to unravel the socio-economic circumstances under which absenteeism occurred. This was achieved by applying a holistic approach to the problem (Bryman 2012). A case study design was used because it emphasised detailed contextual analysis of limited number of events, conditions and their relationships as illustrated by Yin (2010). This design is used in investigations where the researcher has little control over events and when the focus is on a contemporary phenomenon within a real life context as is the case with learner absenteeism (Bryman2012).

The researcher used purposive sampling in order to identify knowledgeable participants (absent learners) who had in-depth knowledge about frequent absenteeism. Purposive sampling was suitable because this investigation aims to acquire in-depth information from those who were in the position to give it; these included learners, teachers, principals and parents (Leedy and Ormrod 2011). The participants included learners who were chronic absentees, their parents, class teachers from grade 4 to grade 7 in the selected schools and the school principals. Data collection strategies used in this paper included in depth interviews and focus group interviews. Structured questions determined biographical data of participants and unstructured questions to probe factors that contributed towards learner absenteeism in primary schools.

RESEARCH FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

In terms of the findings of this paper, school based factors are factors which emanated within the school context. These factors contributed to learner absenteeism in these primary schools. Learner absenteeism due to school based factors was either caused by learners, teachers or the

infrastructure of the school. The following school-based factors were identified and were found to contribute to learner absenteeism in these primary schools.

Relationship between truancy, late-coming and learner absenteeism

Moseki (2010) states that truancy could be defined as unauthorized absence from school. According to this explanation, the learner appears at school for a brief moment and disappears. This paper revealed a close link between learner absenteeism, truancy and late-coming. Teachers reported that late-coming was the first stage before learners became chronic absentees. Late-coming was mentioned by teachers as an underpinning reason for learner absenteeism. One learner stated that late-coming caused him to be a chronic absentee. He said, *“Once I realise that I’m late for school, I just decide to stay at home because, if you are late for school you will find that the gates are closed until 10 o’clock and there is no need for me to go school after 10h00”*.

Teachers reported no standard procedures and measures to deal with truancy and late-coming. Some teachers reiterated that lack of policy on controlling truancy and late-coming gave rise to learner absenteeism. One teacher said, *“It is easy for us to control learners who arrive late for school but there is nothing that we do to them as there is no policy in place to deal with late coming and truancy. These learners are also aware that even if they arrive late for school or bunk classes there is nothing that can be done to them especially because punishing learners as a way to instil discipline is disallowed. There are no alternative measures to instil discipline on the part of the learners.”*

Most parents were not aware that late-coming and truancy gave rise to absenteeism. Some parents claimed that they were not even aware that their children were arriving late for school. One parent confirmed their claim by saying the following:

“I never suspected that my child was frequently absent because I prepare him for school early and ensure that he leaves for school as early as possible. I was surprised to learn by a child next door that the school starts at 7:30 whereas my child told me that their lessons start at 8h00. I realised that my child was taking me for a ride by not telling me that he arrives late for school almost every day”.

It was revealed by this paper that late-coming and truancy contributed to learner absenteeism. This finding was reiterated by some principals of these primary schools. The principals had the following to comment on late-coming and truancy in relation to learner absenteeism:

“It is very unlikely that learners who frequently arrive late for school and bunk classes will not be adversely affected by absenteeism. Late-coming plays a negative role in promoting learner attendance and unfortunately most parents are not aware that their children arrive late”.

Learner drop-out as an effect of learner absenteeism

According to Auditor General of Victoria (2011), learners who were frequently absent from school were at the risk of dropping out of school early and becoming unemployed in the long-term as it would be difficult to secure a decent job without proper educational background. Most teachers in these schools confirmed that learner absenteeism contributed greatly in promoting learner drop-out. One teacher had this to say on the relationship between absenteeism and dropping out of school:

“Between March and April, four learners in grade 6 dropped out of school. Before these learners could drop-out, they started by being chronically absent from school. This happened in spite of the interventions which I made by inviting the parents and even visiting the affected learner’s home to establish the problem. In the same grade, last year under the same period, five learners dropped out of school; there was decrease of drop-out by one learner this year”.

Learner drop-out was mentioned by all the participants in this investigation as a factor related to absenteeism. Teachers in these schools admitted that learners who were frequently absent from school did not perform to their optimum levels. According to the teachers interviewed, poor performance on the part of learners prompted them to be absent from school and ultimately drop-out of school. One teacher confirmed this finding by stating the following:

“More than 66 percent of learners who dropped out of school performed far below average, I’m fully convinced that their poor level of performance had everything to do with their absenteeism and their dropping out of school”.

Some drop-out learners interviewed confirmed that their poor performance contributed greatly in to their dropping out of school. One learner (drop-out) had this to say:

“I could not go to school any more as I saw no reason to because I did not pass even one subject, I thought I was not fit to go to school. I had to drop out of school as my friends were always making fun of me every time we receive test results”.

Dropping out of school was a common recurring factor mentioned in parent interviews. Parents admitted they were surprised to see their children ultimately dropping out of school. This was mentioned particularly by parents who work on the farms and are not at home on daily basis. One parent described the issue of dropping out and had the following to remark:

“I come home once a month. It is difficult for me to detect early signs of absenteeism as I’m seldom home. I have to believe what my children tell me that they are prompt with school attendance.

Another parent said, *“I trusted my child when he tells me that he had to leave school as some teachers dislike him. I was surprised and disgusted to note that my child dropped out of school because he spent many days absent from school and he was scared to go to school as he feared to be punished by teachers”.*

Learner drop-out was established by this paper as one of the fundamental effects of learner absenteeism. Learners who were frequently absent ended up dropping out of school. Learner drop-out, which is a product of learner absenteeism, was influenced by several factors. One principal mentioned the following factors:

“Learner drop-out is not just a single event or occurrence; I view it as a process which starts from late coming up to absenteeism, to avoid learner drop-out we need to detect its symptoms which are late coming and absenteeism. Learner drop-out is very costly on the part of the school as the funds allocated for the drop-out learner goes to a waste when such children leave school in the middle of the year”.

Bullying as a factor that contributes to learner absenteeism

Bullying was also a main cause of learner absenteeism. It is also the finding of this paper that bullying was closely related to domestic violence. In one school two boys who were notorious bullies were reported to be from family backgrounds where domestic violence was a daily norm. When the two boys were confronted about their unruly behaviour one of them had this to say:

“I am bullying other learners because I always feel angry. I see my daddy beat my mommy almost every day. When I beat or inflict pain to other children it makes me feel better. I do this so that other learners can see that I’m the boss.

In one school some boys also admitted that they came from a background where there was domestic violence. In another school some learners confirmed that they could not come to school as they were bullied notoriously.

One learner had this to say: *“I could not come to school when I don’t have money to give (X) (name withheld for ethical reasons) he beats me terribly if I give him little money and is worse when I don’t have it at all. I even think of killing myself than to go to school and face him. My parents expect me to go to school every day and X warned me that if I dare tell my parents or my teachers he will kill me”.*

Another learner said, *“I could not go to school because my friends make me strip off my trousers so that they can see my private parts as I’m not circumcised. They take me to the toilet every day and make fun of me”.*

Another learner said, *“I could not come to school because my friends think I’m smart as teachers like me because they claim I’m intelligent and beautiful, they make my life hell, they always ridicule me and isolate me. I feel bad and think staying at home will be better; I’m also reluctant to tell my teachers as I think it will make things worse”.*

A similar incident occurred to four learners in another school. Bullied learners admitted they sometimes had to steal money from their parents to please their bullies. It was also the finding of this paper that learners subjected to bullying were threatened with death if they reported to their teachers or parents. According to this finding, staying away from school was seen as the only option as confirmed by the victims above. In all these schools there were no policies on bullying. Learners reported that bullying ranged from beating, disrespect of privacy, taking one’s money or lunch box and ridicule. The paper further confirmed that bullies do this to vent their anger (as most of them confirmed that they are angry with themselves), to boost their low self-esteem and

to please their friends at the expense of the victim. One teacher had this to say about bullying and its relationship with learner absenteeism:

“Learners who are perpetrators of bullying those who come from disintegrated family units where there are no morals or such a family is dominantly characterised by violent behaviours. Learners who bully other learners usually perform far below average and they do this to regain their lost ego”.

This paper revealed that it was very unlikely that teachers, parents and the principals can associate learner absenteeism with bullying. The paper further confirmed that teachers and parents run away from responsibility when it comes to who should control and prevent bullying at school. One of the parents had the following to say about bullying in relation to learner absenteeism:

“Teachers must ensure that they maintain discipline at school so that our children can learn freely. I was nearly tempted to transfer my child to another school because he was ever-absent from school as he feared being bullied”.

Overcrowding in classes

Overcrowding in classes has been identified as one of the factors that contributed to learner absenteeism. Teachers revealed that it was difficult to control and manage an overcrowded class. This made it very difficult to detect, control and prevent learner absenteeism in such a class. It was also the finding of this paper that learner absenteeism was very rife in large classes. One teacher is a grade 7 class teacher in one school had this to say about overcrowding in classes:

“Grade 7 has 107 learners who are cramped in one class (but two registers are used to mark the class). In such a class it is impossible to study the individual behavioural patterns of an absent learner, as a teacher you will not detect the early signs of absenteeism like late-coming and truancy as there are more than enough learners in one class”.

Another teacher who is also a grade 7 class teacher in another school had this to say about overcrowding in classes in relation to learner absenteeism:

“Grade 7 has 93 learners, with a class this big; it is even difficult to know the names of your learners, let alone their behaviours in relation to absenteeism. Due to the huge size of the class

coupled with heavy work load, it is difficult to control and mark the daily attendance register promptly”.

Poor school facilities

Poor school facilities and unreliable infra-structure negatively influenced learner attendance. To illustrate the relationship between poor school facilities and learner absenteeism, one teacher had this to say:

“It is difficult for learners to attend school every day especially during unfavourable weather conditions because the roof is leaking and the windows do not have window panes, it makes learning and teaching very difficult, hence the high rate of learner absenteeism during very cold and rainy days.

During extreme weather conditions the rate of learner absenteeism was quite high and this was attributed to the fact that, on these days, learners from different grades were forced to share one classroom which made learning difficult. One learner 12 had the following to say about poor school facilities and learner absenteeism:

“It is useless to go to school on a very cold or rainy season because we will be forced to learn with other grades and in those days learning is not so effective, I think it’s better to stay at home because on extreme weather, we spend the better part of our time playing outside.

Another Learner had this to say about poor school facilities in relation to learner absenteeism:

“It is extremely difficult for me to go to school during those times of the month (referring to menstruation) as our school doesn’t have enough toilets for girls to relieve themselves when on periods. The available toilets are for teachers, one for males and one for females and the learners have to relieve themselves in the nearby bushes”.

The principals of one school and the other school respectively commented on overcrowding in classes:

“As a school we are aware of the problem of overcrowding and its impact on learner attendance but we rely on the department for large scale furniture purchase”.

“At school level we only identify the need for furniture and infra-structure and make requisitions to the department. Unfortunately the department will take time as they claim that they don’t work with our school only, they have a long list of schools to provide furniture and recommend building new structures”.

Corporal punishment

Despite the fact that corporal punishment is disallowed in the South African schooling system, almost all the learners who reported chronic absenteeism confirmed that corporal punishment was still widely practiced in schools. One learner aptly described the issue of corporal punishment as follows:

“As learners we are aware that corporal punishment is prohibited in our school. Our teachers still beat us for no apparent reason. Teachers beat us when we arrive late for school that is why if I realise that I’m late for school I just stay at home to avoid being spanked. Teachers will beat us when we fail tests; in our class most learners will not come to school on the days when we are supposed to receive our test results. Learners who are found to have failed are beaten and made to stay at school until four o’clock in the afternoon”.

Teachers in all schools that participated also admitted that they still practice corporal punishment as a way to instil discipline. Teachers also argued that they had no alternative measure to instil discipline in the absence of corporal punishment. To support their argument, the following are some of their verbatim responses:

“As teachers we understand that corporal punishment is outlawed and very cruel. The government also did not provide an alternative in instilling discipline in the class and at school. What do you do when a learner deliberately speaks degrading or insults to a teacher? It is known to the learners that corporal punishment is outlawed and these learners do as they please”.

“We appeal to the government to provide alternative disciplinary measures to replace corporal punishment; the government did nothing to provide means to instil discipline in schools after taking away corporal punishment which acted as a regulator. Much as we acknowledge that corporal punishment is evil, we will be forced to use it even if we know is a criminal offence until the government come up with a proper disciplinary measure”.

CONCLUSIONS

The researcher revealed that there is a close link between late-coming, truancy and learner absenteeism. Truants and learners who arrived late were found to be absent for a specific period of time and they would arrive late or leave school before school closure. In terms of the researcher's investigations, dropping out of school was the end product of chronic learner absenteeism. Bullying is one of the main causes of learner absenteeism. Bullying creates a hostile school culture for learners who are victims. Lack of parental involvement in the learner's education played a negative role in academic achievement of such learners. Lack of transport was identified as a deterrent to regular school attendance.

RECOMMENDATIONS

It is very important for teachers, principals and parents to know their children or learner's behavioural patterns in order to detect early signs of truancy and late-coming. Learners who are frequently truant and arrive late for school should be assigned with classroom tasks which will keep them busy and make them feel important; for instance, those who arrive late can be assigned with a task of ringing the bell to notify learners and teachers how lessons follow each other. Truant learners can be assigned with the task of collecting learners' exercise books to submit to the teacher for marking. Teachers must recognise efforts and reward good behaviour displayed by learners who arrive late or who frequently truant when they improve in their behaviour.

Schools should introduce the system of merits and demerits for learners who attend regularly and those who absent themselves. Learners who attend regularly should earn points for attendance and lose points when they are absent. The points earned should be converted into rewards, such as certificates. As an intervention to combat bullying, teachers should be trained on how to resolve problems (problem solving skills) and be knowledgeable about where to get support and assistance if they struggle to deal with a particular incident of bullying. Teachers should be trained how to recognize bullying behaviour and to devise strategies to deal with the problem.

To overcome overcrowding in classes and poor school facilities the schools should consider employing multi grade classes whereby learners of different grades are placed in one class, particularly during very cold or rainy days.

The researcher suggests the following interventions to reduce learner absenteeism in relation to corporal punishment:

- ❖ Teachers should respect the dignity and rights of learners without prejudice
- ❖ Maintain good communication between teachers and learners, which will help in avoiding confrontations between teachers and learners.
- ❖ Teachers should strive to eliminate unprofessional behaviour, such as insults and derogative remarks towards learners.
- ❖ Develop a code of conduct for learners so that they adhere to the school rules.
- ❖ Learners must respect the legitimacy and authority of teachers.
- ❖ Learners must avoid anti-social behaviour like bullying, not doing their school work and other activities which may disrupt the learning process.
- ❖ Learners must be encouraged to report incidences of corporal punishment to the law enforcing authorities because corporal punishment is a criminal offence. By stopping corporal punishment, learner attendance will improve and performance of learners will be enhanced.

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