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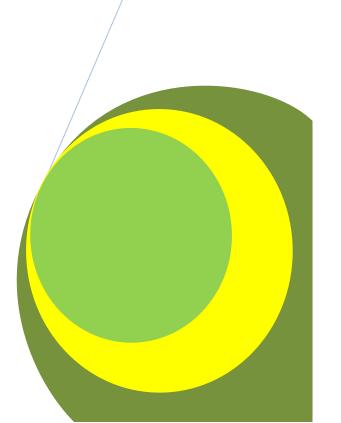
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Research Article

Strategies Employed by Primary School Teachers in Sadza Cluster in Managing Truancy

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ABSTRACT

This study looked at the strategies which were employed by primary school teachers in Sadza cluster in managing truancy in primary schools. A descriptive survey was carried out at five randomly sampled schools. Structured interviews were carried out with heads of schools and questionnaires were administered to randomly sampled teachers. Documents were analysed to establish the frequency of truancy in schools. The results of the study indicated that truancy was rampant in Sadza cluster. Some of the strategies used were collaborative and dialogical solutions to the problems, teacher-parent consultations and providing a motivating curriculum. The study recommended that the peer group and the community at large should be included in truancy management programmes.

Key terms; truancy, teachers, primary schools, strategies.

BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY

Sadza Cluster is in Chikomba district of Mashonaland East Province of Zimbabwe. It is made up of ten primary schools and five secondary schools. One of the most serious and pervasive problems which most primary school teachers in the cluster face, is poor attendance and poor performance by pupils, most of which could be attributed to truancy. Truancy is a strong predicator of juvenile problems, delinquent activity, social isolation, gang involvement, educational failure, substance abuse, teenage pregnancy and school dropouts (Trujillo, 2006). In addition D'Angelo et al. (as cited in Sheverbush et al., 2000) found that chronically truant children participate in risky behaviour such as drug and alcohol consumption, early pregnancy, criminal behaviour and increased incidence of depression and suicidal ideation. Most pupils who play truancy are the least capable academically (Malcolm et al., 1996). Pupils who miss lessons develop gaps of knowledge that become difficult to fill. Disengagement from school coupled with high rate of suspension or expulsion and academic failure due to extended absence result in high probability that a child will drop out of school prior to graduation (Daining, 2007).They miss instructions and directions for doing the required in order to do well (Cardyn et al., 1997).

There is also a strong association between school absenteeism and behaviour problems. Rohman in Garry (1996) sees truancy as early warning signs that youth are potentially heading for delinquent activities, social isolation or educational failure. Truancy can therefore be a predicate for future anti-social behaviour of pupils. Today's truant can be tomorrow's criminal. Every child in the school system matters. It is therefore important to control truancy in schools.

Review of related literature

So many authors have researched on truancy and it has been concluded that there is a relationship between truancy and behaviour problems. In a study carried out in South Wales Comprehensive school it was found out that one in three absentees had anti-social behaviour (Charlton and David, 1983).Schools with favourable attendance had fewer behaviour problems. It was also discovered that truancy is a reaction by psychologically normal children to institutions which do not fully use their talents. Schools were found guilty of concentrating on getting the truant to school rather than investigating the root cause of truancy. Teachers were encouraged to assess pupils' flair of talents and develop them so that they enjoy being at school (Charlton & David, 1983).

Reid (1984) asserts that there is need to explore beneath the surface behaviour of the truant. There is need to identify, understand and provide for underlying difficulties that the child can be experiencing. In addition Reid advocates for creation for an environment in which the child feels comfortable.

In his study to the problem of truancy, Axelrod (1983) highlighted the role played by head teachers in controlling truancy. When pupils did not come to school, the school head teacher telephoned their parents. The next day the pupils came to school. The head telephoned parents and praised them for the effort they made in ensuring that their children are at school. This improved the attendance of pupils who absconded some lessons.

This demonstrated that consultations between the school and the home and awarding of positive reinforcement, help in reducing truancy.

Geldof (2006) developed a "group call messenger "system to monitor truancy in some schools in Scotland. The system allowed schools to send short messages (sms) to mobile phones of parents, staff and other schools members to contact or voice call messages to land and mobile phone at low monthly subscriptions. The system was also made with multi-lingual versions to enable sending messages in many languages. The system helped to reduce truancy in schools by 27%.

Electronic registration was also used to monitor lesson- by- lesson attendance by pupils. This was carried out with success at Test Bed Primary school. According to the Test Bed Project Annual Report (2006), the tracking quickly informed parents and guardians of truancy and action was taken immediately. This helped to improve truancy by 40%.

Gray et al (1994) proposed the use of rewards in order to improve attendance rather than punishing pupils for truancy. They argue that for the truant, it is not what goes on outside the school that contributes to truancy and absenteeism but what takes place in the school. The school should have activities which attract pupils to come to school.

The problem

Truancy is a significant problem in Zimbabwean schools. Many families, schools and communities are struggling to curb the high rate of truancy in schools. Pupils need to be at school in order to pass and increase their life chances. However, it has been observed that in Sadza Cluster, pupils absent themselves for no apparent reasons. The reasons for truancy need to be identified and solutions to the problem need to be proffered. It is important because persistent truancy may result in adverse effects to the families, schools and community at large. Communities with high levels of truancy have correspondingly high levels of crime (Barker et al., 2001).

Objectives of the study

The objectives of the study were to;

1. examine the reasons why students play truancy.
2. explore strategies which are used by the teachers in the cluster to manage truancy.
3. proffer suggestions for effective truancy management strategies.

Research questions

1 What are the major causes of truancy in Sadza cluster primary schools?
2. How do teachers manage truancy in schools?
3. How can truancy be mitigated in schools?

Significance of the study

The study is significant in several ways. The results of this study will hopefully be used in stimulating further research on truancies nationwide and to contribute to the existing body of knowledge.

Educational planners may find the information useful to understanding of current trends in the development of policies with regards to managing truancy in schools.

Finally, it is hoped that school administrators and teachers will understand the causes of truancy and how to manage truancy in schools.

METHODOLOGY

The research adopted a descriptive survey which sought to establish strategies used by teachers in Sadza cluster to manage truancy cases they encounter. The method ensures that the researcher's values and preferences do not influence the results under study (Bailey, 2012).

Population

The population in the study was made up of seventy-two teachers (72) and six (6) head teachers in Sadza clusters. This population is deemed to be necessary because the teachers experience truancy and they use

different strategies to manage it. A representative sample   head teachers and teachers were selected from the population.

Sampling

The teachers were selected using stratified random sampling to ensure representativeness of female and male teachers. Borg and Gall (1996) argue that randomization reduces the chances of research bias. Thirty-five (35) female teachers and thirty- seven (37) male teachers were put in a sampling frame according to their ratios in the population. Selection was made regardless of age, qualification, and experience. The sample was made up of thirteen (13) male and twelve (12) female teachers. Furthermore, five (5) head teachers of randomly selected schools were included in the sample as well.

Instruments

Open- ended questionnaires were used to collect data on causes of truancy and strategies used by teachers to manage truancy in the cluster. Each of the sampled teachers responded to questionnaires which had hundred percent response rate. Scheduled interviews were carried out with head teachers of five (5) schools to ascertain the strategies which were used by teachers to manage truancy cases experienced at the schools. Document analysis on registers, log books and class progress record books was carried out to triangulate data from questionnaires and individual interviews. Denzin and Lincoln (2000) stated that "the use of multiple methods or triangulation reflects and attempt to secure an in-depth understanding of phenomenon in question... [it] adds rigor, breath, complexity, richness and depth to an enquiry.
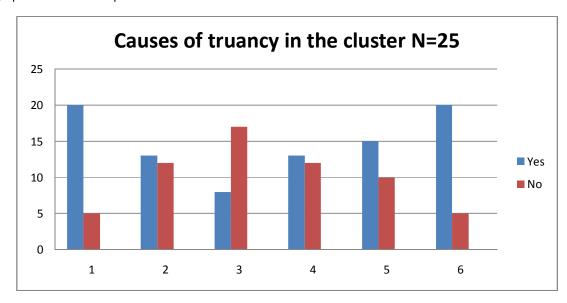
Data analysis

The data gathered were analysed quantitatively and qualitatively in tables, graphs and charts in order to provide answers to the research question.

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

Causes of truancy cases experienced by teachers in the cluster.

Responses from teachers reflected that there are many factors which promote truancy in the cluster. The following graph shows their responses.

Causes of truancy in the cluster N=25

Key
1 Guardian/ parentally condoned truancy
2 Fear of peers
3 Dislike of teachers
4 Dislike of some subjects
 5 Dislike of certain school activities
 6 Inability to meet school standards

The responses reflected that majority of the teachers (80%) felt that guardians and parents condoning of truancy and inability to meet school requirements, were major causes of truancy in the cluster. All the school head teachers who were interviewed concurred with this view. They pointed out that some parents or guardians could ask their children to be absent and look after the home stead while they attended funerals and village meetings. Sometimes they could ask children to leave lessons without consent of school authorities so that they assist them in ploughing, harvesting and heading cattle. These flimsy reasons for absenting a child from school were indicative of condoning truancy by these parents and guardians. All (100%) school head teachers also confirmed that some parents and guardians allowed their children to miss lessons soon after writing examinations. Most of the truants were the least capable and had behaviour problems in the schools. They felt that after writing examinations, teachers do not teach.
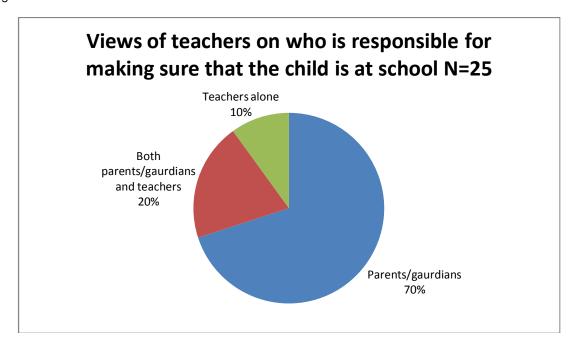
Inability to meet school requirements was cited by 80% of the teachers as the other major cause of truancy. All (100%) interviewed head teachers agreed with this view. They pointed out that most pupils who did not have adequate school requirements such as books, uniforms and money for fees and levies were habitual truants. Such children left their homes in the morning but did not get to school. The research also revealed that those who did not finish homework feared that teachers would punish them. They often hid in the bushes and joined others after dismissal. Those who did not have requisite stationary did the same. One teacher in the interview concurred with this view and echoed that,

> *"Some pupils do not have school uniforms and feel ashamed to join others at school. As a result they hide in the bushes until dismissal time. Payment of school levies is a prerequisite to attending classes. Parents and guardians send their children to school without levies. At school, School Development Committees send pupils back to fetch the levies or invite parents and guardians to discuss payment plans. When pupils realise that their levies are not being paid and they are often send away, they develop truancy habits even if the levies are later paid up".*

In addition, parents were found guilty of causing truancy. They should endeavour to make sure that their children do homework, and also to ensure that they provide stationary and pay levies for their children.

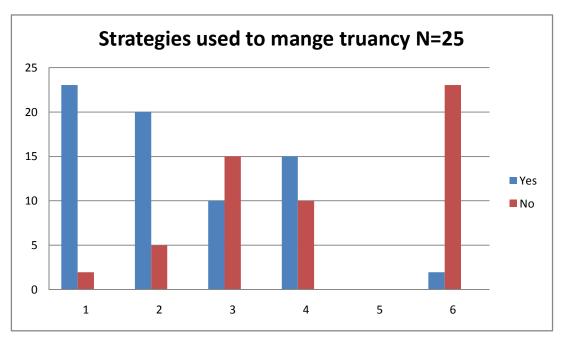**Who is responsible for ensuring that the child is at school?**

The teachers' mandate is to teach those pupils who come to the class. Those who do not make it are not their responsibility. They cannot leave the whole class to go and fetch one or two pupils who are missing. If they have to do it, where would they go and fetch them? What the teacher can only do is to make it known to the school head and later to the parent that the pupils are absent. Who then shoulders the responsibility of making sure that a child is at school? Reid (2007) argues that parents are responsible for ensuring that their children are at school particularly in the infancy stage. The following pie chart shows the teachers views on who is responsible for ensuring that the child is at school.

Views of teachers on who is responsible for making sure that the child is at school N=25

- Teachers alone 10%
- Both parents/gaurdians and teachers 20%
- Parents/gaurdians 70%

Majority of the teachers (70%) indicated that parents are responsible for ensuring that their children are at school. All (100%) the interviewed head teachers of schools also pointed out that guardians and parents are entirely responsible for ensuring that children are at school. They can ensure this by providing all school requirements such as uniforms, transport, stationary, levies, food and support for their children. By so doing, pupils found no excuse for being absent from school. Parents and guardians should not condone truancy. They should make sure that their children attend school every day of the school calendar. If need be, they should accompany them to school to make sure that they arrive at school. Parents and   guardians should create a positive relationship with teachers of their children. They should occasionally visit the school and consult with the teachers on the performance and attendance of their children.

Strategies used to manage truancy

Responses indicated that five strategies are used to manage truancy in the cluster. The following graph shows the strategies used.

Key

1 Invite the parents or guardians to discuss and solve the problem.
2 Invite the truant, try to find the problem and structure the solution in relation to the truants needs.
3 Immediately punish the truant as soon as he/ she returns to school.
4 Send the truant to the school head teacher.
5 Ignore.
6 Administer corporal punishment.

All (100%) the respondents indicated that they do not ignore truancy cases. They had to take some measures to ensure that the pupil attended all lessons. Eighty percent (86%) indicated that the solution to the problem of truancy lies on the parents or guardians of the pupils. As a result, it was necessary to invite them to school and make consultative discussions with them. Jay and Mary (2005) support the view that family engagement is very important in solving truancy. All the interviewed school head teachers admitted that solutions to the problem of truancy were successfully dealt with when parents and guardians were involved. During the discussions, both could find the root cause of truancy and find solutions together. Teachers got the opportunity to enlighten parents and guardians on the need for pupils to attend all lessons in order to pass. Awareness on the need to provide pupils with school requirements like stationary, levies and uniforms was made to parents and guardians. It is mutually that agreed plans on how to track truancy were made by the teachers, parents and guardians. Parents were also advised to work with teachers and to avoid condoning truancy.
        In cases where the parents and guardians did not come, eighty percent (80%) of the respondents indicated that they work with the truant. Some truants were orphans and their guardians did not want to come to school. Others stayed alone while parents were in towns. Such situations created suitable conditions for pupils to be truant. Teachers then invited the truant, investigated the cause of truancy and tried to find the solution which was suitable to the truant.

Head teachers of schools felt that it was important for teachers to attract truants to school. Effort should be made to find out that which attracts the truant outside the school environment. This included identifying the truants' interest, flairs and activities which they enjoyed most. For example, if a truant was found to be very good at leading and organising others, he or she could be given responsibilities like group leader, class captain or prefect. By so doing, the truant's positive self concept is developed. He or she would want to be always at school so that he or she carries the trusted duties they would have been given. One school head teacher testified that "*identifying truants skills and flairs plays a pivotal role in reducing truancy*". He gave an example of a boy at his school who was a habitual truant. He ran away from school so that he would play football with some dropouts. Teachers at the school decided to craft him in school football team. It emerged that he was one of the best strikers. He scored important goals for the team. He was appointed the team captain and his attendance was 100%.The boy was motivated by the fact that he was crafted in the team. Motivational stimuli play an important part in changing behaviour especially if it is reinforced (Enea and Dafinoiu, 2009).

Forty percent (40%) of the respondents indicated that they would immediately punish the truant as soon as he or she returns as a negative reinforcement to extinguish undesired behaviour. Head teachers of school did not support this strategy. They argued that some truants could be punished for cases which were beyond their control. It was therefore necessary to dig beyond the surface of the problem faced by the truant before taking action. Head teachers of schools were the only people endowed with authority to administer corporal punishment. Corporal punishment and any other forms of punishment were counterproductive as means to reduce truancy. When pupils realised that they would be punished for truancy, they might dislike schooling completely and end up as dropouts.

Teachers' role in causing and curbing truancy

All (100%) interviewed head teachers of schools agreed that teachers had a part to play in causing and controlling truancy in their classes. They pointed out that teachers who were often late and absent from their classes gave pupils opportunity to sneak away from class and miss lessons. Teachers should also use stimulating teaching methods and media in order to encourage pupils to remain in classes. Positive and encouraging comments should also be made on pupils in order to boast their confidents in learning.

All interviewed school head teachers also pointed out that teachers should also structure their work in such a manner that pupils achieve a measure of success. If some pupils fail to achieve success in their daily activities, they find no good reason for coming to school particularly if their friends laugh at them for failing to achieve something. Some pupils sometimes do not come to school because they fail (Gina and Hathaway, 2012). Head teachers also revealed that teachers should be patient with pupils and apply individuality as a didactic principal when teaching. They should treat each child as a unique individual who need individual rather than group approaches in teaching.

CONCLUSION

The study sought to find out the strategies employed by primary schools in Sadza cluster in managing truancy cases they experienced. Findings indicated that some parents or guardians condone truancy. When pupils were absent from lessons some parents or guardians did nothing. Sometimes parents or guardians of truants ask their children to miss lessons to attend to some tasks at home. Parents and guardians were found to play a key role in managing truancy. They should condone truancy and provide school requirements for their children so that they remain at school. Teachers indicated that they invited parents or guardians and discuss the problem and come up with solutions to the problem. This strategy proved to be quite helpful. Corporal punishment was found to be counter-productive in solving truancy. Pupils feared corporal punishment and if they knew that they would be subjected to it, they did not come to school. Findings also reflected that teachers should go beyond the surface of the problem. They should analyse the flairs and talents of the truants. Solutions should be made in relation to what the children enjoy at school. Teachers were found to play a role in curbing truancy. Punctuality, attendance, stimulating methods of lesson delivery and presenting manageable work are some of the aspects of teachers' roles which helped to reduce truancy.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Building a positive teacher – parent or guardian relationship plays a very important role in reducing truancy. Teachers appreciate knowing that parents or guardians are so much interested in their child's progress at school. It is therefore pertinent that parents constantly communicate with teachers. Communication should not be a one way process where only teachers communicate with parents or guardians. Contacts between the teachers and parents should not only be restricted to consultation days and scheduled school meetings. Parents and guardians can sign children's homework, write letters and visit the school when need arises. The teacher is the child's second important person (after the parent) (Matthew and Shaun , 2012) . When the two meet , they share

information on ways to monitor the pupil's attendance and progress. This opens lines of communication between the parent or guardian and the teacher. The teacher gets the opportunity to provide advice, and counselling on ways in which parents can support their children. Parents get enlightened on the negative effects of absenting children and not providing school requisites.

2. Peer group should also be included in truancy management strategies. Peers are very important in ensuring behaviour change. They are quick to notice that their friend is absent. They are also in a position to know where the truant could be. Incorporating them in truancy management programmes help to facilitate communication between teachers and parents or guardians of truants. This also helps to track the whereabouts of the truants. Pupils who attend lessons daily and do very well should also be rewarded so that truants emulate them.

3. Teachers should also have a "stand alone" record on truancy. The record should have the name of truant, strategy used to manage it, the time and date when truancy occurred and the effectiveness of strategy used. The record will be important for future reference by teachers and head teachers of schools. It will help them to identify certain periodical trends of truancy and absenteeism. For example, some truancy cases can be high during certain religious festivals. If this is discovered, the school can design an effective preventive strategy whenever such a festival is about to take place. The record can also help to identify habitual truants and strategies that demonstrated success in reducing truancy.

4. Head teachers of schools can also introduce suggestion boxes at their schools. The boxes can help them get confidential information about pupils concerns like abuse, bullying and truancy. Information on where truants can be found and what they may be doing can be made available through the suggestion boxes. By so doing, pupils can remain at school for fear of being reported through the suggestion box if they play truancy.

5. Schools and communities should establish an on-going truancy management network rather than on ad-hoc actions whenever truancy cases occur. All members of the community should collaborate in order to curb truancy in the community. The members should agree on the view that "any pupil who is not at school during learning hours is at the wrong place". The pupil should be apprehended and taken to school by any member of the community who finds the pupil loitering regardless of whether he or she is the parent or guardian of the pupil. Community members should know that if they do not take such an action, the truants will be social problems in their community. Jay and Mary (2005) support this view when they say attendance and truancy are not school problem but community problems. Such enlightenments can be made during parents meetings by the school head teachers.

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