

# Parental Involvement in Reducing Learner Absenteeism in Selected Primary Schools of Kazungula District in the Southern Province of Zambia

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**Abstract:** Parental involvement is an important component of children's early school success and is recognized as a significant ingredient in reducing learner absenteeism and improving the quality of children's education. To this effect, the aim of the study was to investigate the effects of parental involvement in reducing learner absenteeism in selected primary schools of Kazungula District. The objectives were to: establish ways through which parents are involved in reducing learner absenteeism, explore the benefits of parental involvement in reducing learner absenteeism, ascertain challenges that limit parental involvement in reducing learner absenteeism and establish interventions put in place by schools to improve parental involvement in reducing learner absenteeism in three selected primary schools. A sample of 15 learners, 15 parents, 03 grade teachers and 03 head teachers was purposively drawn from three selected primary schools in Kazungula district. A qualitative approach and a descriptive research design were employed for the study. Data were collected through face-to-face interviews and focus group discussions. The data were analysed through thematic analysis.

The findings of the study revealed that there was parental involvement in the sampled primary schools as parents participated in PTA meetings, helping children with home work, paying school fees, attending open days, volunteering at school, providing school requirements and food. With regard to the benefits of parental involvement in reducing learner absenteeism, the study revealed that parental involvement improved school attendance, brought about understanding of the importance of attendance and reduced teacher work load. It also increased parent contact with school, made parents become more supportive of schools and improved positive behaviour among learners.

The major barriers of parental involvement as revealed by the study were busy schedules among parent, non-parent invitation to involvement in school activities, poor relationships between schools and parents. Other barriers included long distance to school, negative attitudes towards partnership and poverty among parents.

The study found schools improving communication, becoming more welcoming to parents, encouraging parents to serve in school committees and inviting parent to volunteer in school activities and attend meetings as intervention measures to improve parental involvement in reducing learner absenteeism.

**Key words:** Parental involvement, Learner Absenteeism

## I. BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

Attempts to enhance parental involvement in education occupy educators across the world. Research has consistently shown that the role of parents in education has become one of the crucial issues in educational policy and has in the recent past become a major educational issue. Attendance issues which are a predictor of many school problems are not only a school but community problems as well. Learners are not only part of the school community, but the community outside the school grounds as well and schools do not exist in isolation but are integral parts of the communities surrounding them, hence the need to have strong parent and community support (Smink, 2005).

Weinberg, 1992 (as cited in Sheldon, 2007) observed that families are now being recognized as having important influence on student attendance and a resource for decreasing learner absenteeism. When educators make high-quality family and community involvement part of their overall school improvement strategy, students are more likely to attend school and there is an increase in their chances of succeeding academically. Additionally, children attend school regularly when parents are willing to work with school and are in agreement that they depend on each other to get children to school.

Henderson and Berla (1994), made an observation that it is not the income or social status of parents that determines the academic success of children through school attendance, but the ability of parents to become involved. Parents get involved with schools through a number of ways such as; setting

conducive home environment that supports learning, becoming involved in different activities at school and in the community and expressing their expectations for education of their children.

Epstein and Sheldon (2002) asserts that a lot of parental involvement strategies have resulted in lower absenteeism regardless of the age of the child, the family's experience or situation and parent education levels. Ongoing research equally shows that parental involvement not only reduce learner absenteeism but also helps low income and minority children transcend the educational barriers, improves academic performance, improves behavior and restores parents' confidence in their children's education. Learners with involved parents or caregivers are more likely to attend school regularly, less likely to engage in delinquent or destructive behavior and succeed academically (sheldon, 2007).

As much as a lot of researchers associate parental involvement with a lot of benefits, a survey conducted by MetLife, (2005) found that parental involvement despite being an important component of every school continues to challenge educators and causing stress in their jobs. Many schools continue struggling to find better ways to communicate and work with parents but yet their efforts seem not to be successful. Lontos (1992) stated that parents still perceive barriers to getting involvement with school among them lack of time, lack of understanding of each other's communication styles and teachers' misperceptions of parents' abilities. Limited family resources, tension in relationships between parents and teachers and teachers beliefs that parents did not respect them are all cited as barriers to involvement.

In Zambia, the Ministry of Education realised the importance of parental involvement in education and made a pronouncement on the establishment of new and revitalised partnership between education providers, local communities and families (MOE: 1996). The policy document emphasises partnership to increase levels of access, participation in education, retention and completion of school among children. The Ministry of Education equally initiated the introduction of Parents-Teachers Associations (PTAs) to foster increased involvement of parents in school activities (GRZ, 1976).

PTAs through which strong working relationships can be built among parents, educators and schools to accomplish great things for children and ensure overall success in education continue to be problematic. A study by STEP-Up Zambia (2012) on 'understanding the system' found that community and parent participation through structures such as PTAs was nonexistent in some schools. In schools where PTAs are in existence, the study made recommendations that there was need to strengthen and expand them beyond just having annual general meetings of PTAs. The study equally made suggestions that mechanisms needed to be put in place to ensure frequent participation and revealed that there were still high rates of learner absenteeism in many Districts of Zambia of which Kazungula District was not exceptional.

### *Statement of the problem and purpose of study*

The purpose of the study was to investigate parental involvement in reducing learner absenteeism in three selected primary schools of Kazungula District. Parental involvement in education is now becoming a global issue and is paramount in reducing learner absenteeism to ensure academic success of all children. In Zambia parental involvement has been embraced through the current National Education Policy, Educating Our Future 1996. In spite of the pronouncements and growing research on the importance of parental involvement and its social and academic benefits, learner absenteeism still appears rampant in some schools. Valley Districts such as Gweembe, Sinazongwe, Siavonga and Kazungula District still have high rates of learner absenteeism (MOE, 2012). There are however many other factors that may be associated with learner absenteeism besides non-parental involvement but are all subordinate to parental involvement in that they still require parents to intervene. Little seems to be known about the involvement of parents in reducing learner absenteeism in Kazungula. Therefore, this study aimed at investigating parental involvement in reducing learner absenteeism in selected primary schools in Kazungula District.

### *Specific Objectives*

The specific objectives of this study were to;

- i. To establish ways through which parents are involved in reducing learner absenteeism in Kazungula District.
- ii. To establish measures put in place by schools to improve parental involvement in reducing learner absenteeism in selected primary schools of Kazungula district.

### *Research Question*

- i. In what ways are parents involved in reducing learner absenteeism in selected primary schools in Kazungula District?
- ii. What measures have schools put in place to improve parental involvement in reducing learner absenteeism in selected primary schools in of Kazungula District?

### *Significance of the study*

This study may help educators come up with strategies on how to get parents involved in reducing learner absenteeism in primary schools. The study may contribute to existing knowledge and literature on parental involvement in reducing learner absenteeism in primary schools. Furthermore, the findings of the study may lead to finding a lasting solution on parental involvement in reducing learner absenteeism in the valley district of Southern Province.

## II. METHODOLOGY AND DESIGN

This study utilized a descriptive research design. The said design was used with the intention to conduct an in-depth

investigation aimed at getting peoples' views, attitudes and perceptions concerning certain phenomena under the natural setting. Since the study focused on parental involvement in reducing learners' absenteeism in primary schools, a descriptive design qualified to be utilized as it gives a detailed description of respondents' attitudes, views and opinions.

The study was purely qualitative in nature and took the form of a case study of three selected primary schools in Kazungula District. According to Kombo and Tromp (2006) a qualitative approach involves description; it seeks to describe and analyze the culture and behaviour of humans and their groups from the point of view of those being studied. It is often used as a means to collecting verbatim statements from respondents in view of the fact that open-ended questions allow respondents to offer responses within their unique context, and the value of the information provided can be exceptionally high.

Researchers who use qualitative methods seek deeper truth by aiming at collecting true feelings from the respondents in their natural setting thereby attempting to make sense of, or interpret phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them by using a holistic perspective which preserves the complexities of human behaviour (Black, 1994). This approach was appropriate for this study because it sought to solicit information and investigate the effects of parental involvement in reducing learner absenteeism in selected primary schools in Kazungula District.

The study employed semi-structured interview guide and focus group discussion to collect data. One to one interviews were used to collect data from head teachers, grade teachers and parents. Kombo and Tromp (2006) state that semi-structured interviews are based on the use of an interview guide which is a list of questions or topics to be covered by the interview. Semi-structured interviews are flexible because they consist of both open and closed-ended questions. For this study, they were utilised to gather in-depth information to give the researcher a complete and detailed understanding from both closed and open ended questions. Therefore using semi-structured interviews enabled the study to get first hand information on parental involvement in reducing learner absenteeism in primary schools. On the other hand, the FGD method was employed to obtain information on learner participants' beliefs, views, attitudes and perceptions on parental involvement in reducing learner absenteeism. According to Black (1994), a focus group discussion is a group discussion of 5-12 persons guided by a facilitator during which members talk freely and spontaneously about a certain topic. The purpose of focus group discussion is to obtain in-depth information on concepts and ideas of the group due to its open endedness that enables it to collect subjective views from participants. This study was conducted in Kazungula district and confined to only three selected primary schools and the focus was on parental involvement in reducing learner absenteeism.

In sampling procedure, the population sample targeted parents of absent learners, absent learners, grade teachers and head teachers. The sample size of the study was as stipulated in table 1 below.

Table 1: Composition of Participants

No	Categories	Number of participants
1	Learners	15
2	Grade teachers	3
3	Parents	15
4	Head teachers	3
Total		36

Fifteen Learners were subjected to Focus Group Discussions whilst 03 grade teachers, 03 head teachers and 15 parents were interviewed. The criteria used in sampling procedure were both inclusive and exclusive. Only children and parents of children who were perpetually absent from school were eligible to participate in the study whilst children and parents whose children were not absent were excluded to take part.

The study employed purposive sampling to select head teachers, grade teachers, parents and learners. Purposive sampling involves purposely handpicking individuals from the population based on the researcher's knowledge and judgment (Msabila and Nalaila, 2013). The study used typical sampling because the study sample involved potential head teachers, grade teachers, parents and learners who were familiar with parental involvement in reducing learner absenteeism in selected primary schools. Orodho and Kombo (2002) state that the power of purposive sampling lies in selecting information rich in cases for in-depth analysis related to the central issues being studied. Black (1994) observes that purposive sampling ensures that those people who are unsuitable for the study are already eliminated leaving only the most suitable respondents. This implies that the results from purposively sampled respondents are usually expected to be more accurate than those achieved with an alternative form of sampling (Orodho and Kombo, 2002). Furthermore, the researcher applied purposive sampling to select the three primary schools.

Permission to conduct research was sought from the District Education Board Secretary (DEBS) and the respective school managers of the three selected primary schools. Head teachers, grade teachers and parents were thereafter interviewed and focus group discussions conducted with learners after they signed the consent forms. This was done so as to triangulate data sources and increase the data quality of the data elicited.

The study employed qualitative technique to analyse data as the research typically relied on focus group discussion and semi-structured interview guide which are among tools used by qualitative technique. Responses from focus group discussions and semi-structured interviews were analysed qualitatively using thematic analysis. Valsiner (2006)

contends that thematic analysis involves categorization and narration of data collected from participants. The major themes were derived from the objectives of the study. Each theme was described, analysed and interpreted critically and objectively. Data were equally examined carefully to ensure that there was uniformity and completeness. Issues of Validity and Reliability were addressed through triangulation of data sources and a pilot study.

Ethical clearance was sought from the Ethics committee of the University of Zambia and an introductory letter from the Assistant Dean Post Graduate in the School of Education was given. Permission to conduct the study was given by District Education Board Secretary for Kazungula District and head teachers in selected schools where the study was conducted. Consent was sought from all respondents. The researcher upheld the confidentiality of non-disclosure of the identities of the participants and schools. The information gathered was also kept in high confidentiality and the findings of this study were strictly for academic purposes as clearly stated in the consent form.

### III. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

#### *Ways through which parents are involved in reducing learner absenteeism*

In trying to determine if there was parental involvement in the selected primary schools, participants were first asked whether or not parents were involved in reducing learner absenteeism. Their responses are illustrated in table 2 below.

Table 2: Participants' responses

Head teachers, grade teachers, parents and learners		
Reponses	Frequency	%
Agreed	36	100
Disagreed	0	0
Total	36	100

(Source: Field work, 2021)

Table 6 above shows the responses of head teachers, grade teachers, parents and learners on whether or not parents were involvement in reducing learners' absenteeism in schools. All the 36 (thirty-six) sampled respondents at the three schools that participated representing 100% in the study agreed that parents were involved in reducing learners' absenteeism in schools.

To respond to the question which was addressing the first objective of the study, *"In what ways are parents involved in reducing learner absenteeism in selected primary schools in Kazungula District?"* The results of the study indicated that parents were involved in reducing learner absenteeism in different ways. Respondents stated that parents provided children with school requisites such as school uniforms and books needed in order for them to attend school and volunteered in different activities that promoted attendance

and served in different school committees such as the PTA. In addition to the above,

A teacher from school A said:

*Parents have a responsibility of assisting children with home work and attend open days to support children's learning (grade teacher, 2021).*

In the same vein, one parent had this to say:

*I make sure that my children get to school in time. I provide school requirements and ensure that my children eat before going to school or carry packed meals. I feel that is what is expected of me as a concerned parent (Parent, 2021).*

Learners also contributed their views regarding the involvement of parents in reducing learners' absenteeism in schools and indicted that parents got involved in ensuring that they attended school in different ways.

A learner from school A had this to say:

*Parents also get to school when they are summoned for non-payment of school fees or disciplinary matters involving their children (Learner, 2021).*

A learner at school C had this to say:

*Some parents are really serious with school attendance such that they always talk to their children about the impact of absenteeism on education and why it is important for them to get educated whilst some do not understand the importance of school. As such, some children attend school always because they receive encouragement from parents and understand the importance of school. Those with parents that do not understand the benefits of education are absent most of the times (learner, 2021).*

*Measures schools put in place to improve parental involvement in reducing learner absenteeism.*

Answering the research question that was addressing objective two that was,

*"What measures have schools put in place to improve parental involvement in reducing learner absenteeism in selected primary schools?"*

The head teachers and teachers indicated that schools put in place intervention measures which included; encouraging parents to attend general meetings and serve in school committees of which the most common one was PTA. A head teacher of school A had this to say:

*It would be good to see more parents getting involved in the education of their children. We as educators are trying our best to create welcoming school environments that will enable and encourage parents to participate in the education of their children (head teacher, 2021).*

Head teachers and teacher respondents equally indicated that schools were encouraging parents to take part in school activities that support children's learning by doing some work around school. They also reported that educators were improving communication between schools and home to motivate parents get involved in reducing learner absenteeism to ensure good attendance and academic success of their children.

#### *Parents' Responses*

Parents had their perceptions on measures schools are putting in place to improve parental involvement. They indicated that educators invited parents to work with schools when there were developmental projects in the school and to discuss about the attendance of those children that missed school for a long period of time.

One parent from School B said:

*The only time I visit school is when I am called because there is a meeting at school or when one of my children has committed a serious offense. I do not know if there are other roles I can play (Parent, 2021).*

#### *Learners' views*

Learners being the beneficiaries of parental involvement in reducing their absenteeism in school also had their own responses. Learners indicated that schools do inform parents about the absence of their children from school. Teachers also gave home work to learners and requested parents to take part in the education of their children and encouraged their children to attend school.

A learner from school C had this to say:

*Parents are called to attend PTA meetings and School Open Days. This could be one way of helping them understand what goes on in a school and take part in the education of their children (learner, 2021).*

Learners equally indicated that Parents were invited to attend open days where they interacted with teachers of their children.

#### IV. DISCUSSIONS

The findings of the study revealed that there was parental involvement in the sampled primary schools and that parents got involved in reducing learner absenteeism. However, reports made by this study clearly showed that parental involvement in reducing learner absenteeism was at a minimal level due to either the limitations both parents and educators encountered in working with each other. The revelations were in agreement with the report made by Epstein (2005) who stated that some parents were unable to get involved due to barriers that originate either from their home environment or those that are related to school policies and practices.

The current study indicates that parents got involved in reducing learner absenteeism by attending School Open Days

to get acquainted with school practices and how schools were running and their roles in reducing learner absenteeism. These findings are in line with those of Cotton and Wikelund (1989) whose findings revealed that parental involvement can take the form of parents simply fulfilling duties of attending School Open Days, monitoring children and encouraging them to always attend school in order to succeed in education.

Consequently, Findings of this study revealed that parents paid school fees and provided school requisites such as books, uniforms and pens for their children as a way of getting involved in reducing learner absenteeism. However, the study found that parents did not understand why they still needed to pay fees in form of PTA funds in spite of the pronouncement by the Government of Zambia that primary education from grades 1-7 was compulsory and free. The study revealed that the PTA funds could not be differentiated from school fees because non-payments of these funds led to children being sent away from school. Children whose parents did not make payments on time stayed out of school up to the time the money was paid, or dropped out of school eventually. This was said to be defeating the purpose of ensuring that Zambia achieves its pursuits on the EFA goal of achieving universal primary education.

The study also revealed that volunteering at school was another way parents were involved in reducing learner absenteeism. Parents volunteered in different activities in schools and the most pronounced ones were: taking part in infrastructure development projects and preparing meals for learners when organizations such as the World Food Programme provided food to schools. Another way parents got involved in reducing learner absenteeism as reported by study revealed was preparing children for school. This included ensuring that children were clean, put on appropriate attire and given food. The study found that preparing children motivated them to attend school regularly and sent a message that school was important and that parents wanted children to attend school every day.

The findings of the study also revealed that parents helped children with homework. The study found that parents helped children in home work by tutoring and reading with them. However, a study by Kohn (2012) conflicts the finding of the current study by stating that no research has ever found benefits to assigning home work of any kind in any amount to learners in primary school. The study stated that parental involvement in home work interferes with learning and confuses learners because the teaching techniques used by parents were usually totally different from those used in the classroom. Equally, non-completion of homework among learners whose parents were not able to complete school led to learner absenteeism and non-parental involvement. Besides that, the study reports that learners not able to complete homework were usually withdrawn out of embarrassment and fear of punished by teachers.

Concerns were however raised by the respondents that some parents did not help children with homework because they

were not educated and lacked knowledge of how they could assist. Others felt that teachers needed to train parents on how they could handle homework issues other than assuming that parents could help with homework regardless of their education levels. Teachers therefore need to acquire knowledge of parental involvement in home work through short trainings first and later on train parents to work with children at home.

The study established that parents talked to children about the importance of attending school as a way of involvement in reducing learner absenteeism. Sheldon and Epstein (2005) support these findings and state that discussing school attendance is the most common and powerful way of getting parents involved to reduce learner absenteeism. Findings of the study indicated that some parents in the selected school communities of Kazungula District were not enlightened on the importance getting involved with school to improve daily school attendance of children whilst others were just not interested. Therefore, the majority of respondents in this current study indicated that they were ignorant of their responsibility to get involved in reducing learner absenteeism by talking to children about the importance of school attendance.

Although the Ministry of Education realised the importance of parental involvement in education and made a pronouncement on the establishment of new and revitalised partnership between education providers, local communities, it was saddening to note that most of the parents still did not get involved in reducing learner absenteeism. Even with the introduction of Parents-Teachers Associations (PTAs) which are meant to foster increased involvement of parents in school activities, most parents still shunned away their involvement in reducing learner absenteeism. This is a clear indication that the government and schools have not put in place measures to ensure that barriers that stand in the way of parental involvement are eliminated. This implies that the barriers parents were facing in getting involved led to non-involvement of parents in reducing learner absenteeism in primary schools of Kazungula district.

Furthermore, the study made reports that schools were putting in place measures to improve parental involvement in reducing learner absenteeism. The revelation were in line with Epstein and Sheldon, (2010) that parental involvement in reducing learner absenteeism is more likely to improve if schools take a comprehensive approach by implementing activities that support good attendance, conducting effective home-school connections, and remaining focused on the goal of improving and maintaining partnership. The study revealed that schools became more welcoming and improved communication to families of children to get more parents involved in reducing learner absenteeism. However, the majority of participants made submissions that communication should not only be done when it is meant to benefit schools, but learners and their families as well.

The study found that parents were invited to serve in school committees as a way of improving their involvement in reducing learner absenteeism. Out of the many committees that were in existence, the most pronounced one was the PTA committee. It was revealed that serving in school committees and encouraging parents to attend meetings at school gave parents an opportunity to make decisions with regards to the education of their children. It equally enhanced the relationships of parents and teachers and enlightened parents of their responsibilities towards the education of their children. This finding is in line with (Kimu, 2012) who asserts that involving parents in school committees afford them an opportunity to take part in the governance of schools where they become part of the goal setting team. However, only a few parents could serve as members of PTA due to limited positions.

Encouraging parents to volunteer in different activities at school is one other way schools found useful to improving parental involvement. The study revealed that school created opportunities for parents to volunteer in different activities that promoted school attendance. This is in line with Epstein (2010) who states that volunteering at school is one way of supporting learners' activities and their effort. From the teachers' point of view, schools gave opportunities to parents to volunteer in different activities depending on how much time they had and their individual capabilities bearing in mind they are potential partners in education. However, some parents did not volunteer in school activities due to factors such as busy schedules, lacking confidence in their knowledge and skills, not having interest and having a belief that educators are supposed to do literary everything related to the running of schools. Other parents indicated that it was not necessary to volunteer at school when other parents were not doing it and yet it benefited all learners.

Volunteering at a child's school acted as a catalyst for parents to stay connected with teachers and share similar attendance and educational goals. Parents that could not volunteer in school related activities such as helping in classes and extracurricular activities because they did not attain any education could still take part in activities that did not require them to have an education back ground. Such activities included preparing meals for learners at school, taking part in school project and helping learners cross the busy roads when going and coming from school.

The study indicated that schools improved the involvement of parents in reducing learner absenteeism by assigning home work which required parental participation to learners. Unlike giving learners home work which only literate parents could assist children with, it was indicated that teachers also gave home work in form of school projects that only required skills that are commonly used in the local area to accord all parents an opportunity to participate in school work.

## V. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Parental involvement is extremely important to school attendance and success of any child. It is assumed that the educational success of children may not only be dependent on the quality of schools and what teachers can offer, but the extent parents are willing to get involved to carry out their responsibilities. Parents play key roles in the development of their children from early age to the time they become independent adults and are primary guides responsible of shaping lives and characters of children. The Ministry of General education realizes the need to work with parents in the provision of education in Zambia. To that effect, government through the current Education policy document 1996 made pronouncements to recognize partnership in the delivery of education. In spite of this pronouncement, it appears not much has been seen with regards to parents getting involved in reducing learner absenteeism in some valley schools. The findings of the study are in line with Epstein (1995) School-Family-Community partnership model which indicates that parental involvement could be viewed in line with the six types of education involvement which include; parenting, decision making, volunteering, communication, collaboration and learning at home. The findings of the study are in agreement with Epstein (1995) and Epstein and Sheldon (2010) that; schools cannot work in isolation but need to work with parents to ensure that children attend school and succeed academically.

This study highlighted ways through which parents got involved in reducing learner absenteeism and measures schools put in place to improve parental involvement in selected primary schools of Kazungula District. Though the results of this study may not be generalised to all the schools in Kazungula District and Zambia at large, it has brought out important observations that could help schools take a different approach in involving parents in reducing learner absenteeism.

### *Study Recommendations*

The study made the following recommendations:

1. Government should incorporate parental involvement issues in teacher training curriculum and workshops held on education matters.
2. Schools should be linking families of perpetual absent children to social services to ensure that they get required support.
3. Schools should have an open door policy that encourages parental involvement in school activities.
4. DEBS's office should initiate the training of teachers on how to work with parents through Continuing Professional Development.

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